

Unlearning in a Global Information Economy

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The Greek philosopher Antisthenes stated, *the most useful piece of learning for the uses of life is to unlearn what is not true*. This statement is even more useful now than it was at the end of 400BC. The amount of learning, and therefore unlearning, is exponentially larger in our modern and global information economy. This area of study is not new, but it is a largely unexplored catalyst for change and growth in the field of information science. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of unlearning and in that effort provide an additional thread of research in our field.

UNLEARNING

Bonchek (2016) discussed unlearning as a priority for individuals and organizations, which included how mental models constrain us through examples of obsolete approaches in strategy and marketing. The workplace is multidimensional, non-linear, and very complex, thus requiring a conscious effort to challenge organizations to explore alternative models.

Becker (2010) studied 189 employees in an Australian government-owned corporation to determine factors that impact the unlearning process during times of change. Those factors included: understanding the need for change, the level of organizational support and training, assessment of the change, positive experience and informal support, the organization's history of change, individual's prior outlooks, and individuals' feelings and expectations.

Although myriad social scientists have focused on the realm and importance of organizational learning in the areas of economics (Lafleur, & Burtak, 2018), social work (Fook, 2016), and management studies (Brown & Duguid, 1991), the intervention of organizational unlearning has been largely relegated to the social science fields of knowledge management (e.g., Zhao, Lu, & Wang, 2013), psychology (e.g., Akgün, Byrne, Lynn, & Keskin, 2007), and change management (e.g., Hislop, Bosley, Coombs, & Holland, 2014). Unlearning, “the intentional displacement of well-established patterns of action and understanding due to an exogenous disruption” (Fiol and O'Connor, 2017, p. 18), is contingent primarily upon two broad overarching catalysts: intentionality and subject-oriented components (Akhshik, 2014). As such, we contend that unlearning must be a purposeful act, and is not confined to subject-oriented factors such as organizational hierarchy, tenure, or business units. Moreover, “unlearning...appears most relevant when directly and intimately tied to relearning or new learning” (Visser, 2017, p.50).

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND UNLEARNING

Akhshik (2014) detailed three dimensions of organizational unlearning: cognitive, behavioral, and contextual. The cognitive dimension refers to the disassembling of prior mental models. Thus, unlearning can be a deeply transformative process (Brook et al., 2016). The behavioral component is related to the intentionality of unlearning, and the subsequent behavior associated with the action of learning new conceptual frameworks that involve targeted self-reflection and

inquisitiveness (cf. Hislop, 2013; Martin de Holan & Phillips, 2011; Mehrizi & Lashkarbolouki, 2016). The contextual aspect concerns the relationship that an individual has within their situational environment that facilitates or detracts from the unlearning process. Viewed holistically, unlearning is a vital phenomenon needed for organizational growth.

“Unlearning calls attention to the pain and anxiety inherent in major interruptions and concomitant attempts toward recovery, which are not always acknowledged by organizational learning theorists” (Visser, 2017, p.54). Kotter (1995), argued that creating a sense of urgency is the primary step of all change initiatives. Whether referred to as a “melting iceberg” (Kotter & Rathberger, 2006) or a “burning platform” (Ash, 2009), the image is clear to those undertaking change processes- the old way of doing things is no longer an option.

What has previously been glossed over as informing individuals that there is no other alternative but change, now incorporates the deeper mechanism of breaking down resistance as the old ways are unlearned. The intentional focus of unlearning produces a psychological awakening within the change participant: not only is the old way no longer an option, but it is also no longer relevant.

Positive Disruptor as a Change Agent

Fernandez and Sune (2009) differentiated between accidental learning that could occur as a result of data loss, and intentional unlearning as a process signifying a gap between the current state and the desired state. Thus, intentional learning is championed by individuals. The role of positive disruptors has gained traction in recent literature (c.f. Adams, 2016; Baraniuk, Finkbeiner, Harris, Nicholson, & Williamson, 2017). Goldsmith (2010) described positive disruptors as those individuals “who leapfrog over well-intentioned tinkering at the margins in order to propel daring yet measurable progress” (p. 29). Positive disruptors provide a unique catalyst for the change required to undergo organizational unlearning. If organizational unlearning requires a disruption of prior organizational knowledge in order to create transformational change, then a positive disruptor is precisely the change agent for the job.

Just as a change agent is needed to enact organizational change, a positive disruptor is needed to facilitate the unlearning component that is necessary for change to occur, and the positive disruptor and change agent may well be one and the same. As such, we need not overhaul the change process entirely, we merely must incorporate a new practical emphasis on the critical stage of unlearning to better enable the success and durability of organizational change initiatives.

This premise somewhat challenges the more revolutionary stance supported in organizational research where unlearning has been described as “changing the organizational beliefs, norms, values, procedures, behavioral routines, and physical artifacts” (Akgun et al., 2003, p. 847) of an organization. Instead, unlearning is not an entirely new action within the learning process, it is but the fulcrum catalyst of the learning process. Therefore, a change agent, or positive disruptor, is needed to emphasize the fundamental step of organizational unlearning that is so often overlooked in change initiatives.

SUMMARY

The growing demographic diversity in the global workforce necessitates adapting existing theories and models or constructing new ones to explain organizational phenomena. In this context, it is essential to unlearn previously held models, theories and beliefs in the field of

information science to devise models that address the challenges of integrating the workforce and facilitating change.

It is evident that scholars and scholar-practitioners are recognizing the importance of unlearning with respect to the global information workforce and are thus introducing and testing new models that could better assist us in establishing a collaborative workplace environment by changing organizational policies, practices, and norms.

As stated in the opening, this area of study is not new, but it is a largely unexplored catalyst for change and growth in the field of information science. This call to research provides an overview of the topic of unlearning to facilitate an acceleration of research in this important topic. Therefore, we submit that this is a prime stage in introducing the emphasis of unlearning within change initiatives of information organizations.

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