Why Most Learning Doesn't Stick — And What Actually Works

by **Akolade Oladipupo** *[May 2026]*

The Learning Transfer Flow *[Source: Generated with Perplexity AI (May 10 2026)]*

In a world overflowing with courses, webinars and information, the real challenge is no longer learning. It is retention, application and meaningful transformation.

The Age of Endless Learning and Endless Forgetting

Did you know that people can forget a significant portion of newly learned information within days if it is not revisited or applied? You have probably encountered some version of that claim before. Perhaps the figure was 70 per cent in a week, or 50 per cent in 24 hours, or some other variation. While these statistics are often oversimplifications of Hermann Ebbinghaus' 19th-century "Forgetting Curve" research, they point to something that most professionals recognise intuitively, even if the precise numbers remain debated.[1,2]

Most of us know what it feels like to attend a webinar, furiously take notes, feel genuinely energised by what we have encountered, and then struggle three weeks later to recall more than a vague impression of the speaker's slides.

We live in a paradox. Never in history have professionals had such extraordinary access to

[1] Ebbinghaus, H. (1913). *Memory: A contribution to experimental psychology*. Teachers College, Columbia University. (Original work published 1885)
[2] Murre, J. M. J., & Dros, J. (2015). Replication and analysis of Ebbinghaus' forgetting curve. *PLOS ONE*, *10*(7), e0120644.

knowledge. A manager anywhere on the continent can access a world-class course on organisational behaviour before a morning meeting. Similarly, a young graduate in Africa can work through a Harvard lecture series during their daily commute. Podcasts, YouTube channels, LinkedIn learning paths, industry newsletters and certification programmes have made information almost frictionless to obtain.

And yet, for all that abundance, something is quietly going wrong.

The problem is not that we are not learning. It is that we are learning in ways that do not last, do not transfer and, too often, do not change anything at all.

The Modern Learning Paradox

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that knowledge workers in African professional environments will recognise. It is not the exhaustion of ignorance. It is the exhaustion of too much — too many courses half-completed, too many certificates earned but rarely applied, too many frameworks encountered and forgotten before they could be used.

Across many African workplaces, a peculiar culture has taken root. Learning has, in many contexts, become performative. Professionals display certifications. Organisations run training programmes and report completion rates. LinkedIn profiles grow longer with each passing year.

Yet when one looks closely at whether any of this is visibly changing how people work, how decisions are made, or how institutions perform, the picture becomes considerably more complicated.

This is not a critique of ambition. The hunger for professional development across the continent is real, admirable and necessary. In environments where career advancement often requires demonstrating credentials, where formal education has historically been expensive and unevenly distributed, and where digital learning is only now beginning to close access gaps, the drive to accumulate qualifications carries genuine meaning.

But access was never the only problem. It was simply the most visible one.

The deeper, quieter problem is what happens after the course ends. Research on learning transfer has long shown that acquiring knowledge in a classroom or on a screen does not automatically translate into changed behaviour at work.[3,4] The gap between what people know and what they actually do, between information encountered and insight embodied, is wider and more stubborn than most learning cultures are willing to acknowledge.

Why Learning Fades So Quickly

Ebbinghaus' original work in the 1880s demonstrated something that should have reshaped how we design learning ever since: without reinforcement, review or application, memory decays rapidly and predictably. While his laboratory findings have been both replicated and nuanced by modern cognitive research, the essential pattern holds. Learning that is not revisited fades. Knowledge that is not used becomes inaccessible.[2,5]

What makes this especially consequential in the modern context is the sheer volume of content now competing for our attention. Cognitive overload is not a metaphor. When the brain encounters more information than it can meaningfully process and organise, retention suffers. We scroll through insight after insight, accumulating a kind of intellectual surface area without ever digging down.

There is also a subtler problem: the feeling of having learned something is not the same as having actually learned it. Reading an article about leadership makes leadership feel familiar. Watching a talk on strategy creates a pleasant sense of understanding. But familiarity is not mastery, and recognition is not recall. This phenomenon is described as the "illusion of knowing" — the gap between perceiving something as understood and being able to retrieve and apply it independently.[3]

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[3] Brown, P. C., Roediger, H. L., & McDaniel, M. A. (2014). *Make it stick: The science of successful learning*. Harvard University Press.
[4] McDowall, T. (2025). *The transfer problem*. Substack.
[5] Karpicke, J. D., & Roediger, H. L. (2008). The critical importance of retrieval for learning. *Science*, *319*(5865), 966–968.

In practice, this means that a great deal of professional development activity produces what might be called intellectual decoration: knowledge that sits on the surface, reassuring to have encountered, but unavailable when it is actually needed. The webinar is attended. The book is highlighted. The course is completed. The certificate is issued. And then the next opportunity arrives, and nothing has changed.

This is not a failure of intelligence. It is a failure of design.

The Opportunity Cost of Shallow Learning

Every learning decision is also a time decision. And time, unlike information, cannot be replenished.

When professionals invest hours in passive content consumption — attending webinars primarily to say they attended, completing courses for the certificate rather than the competence, scrolling through summaries of books they will never apply — they are not simply failing to learn. They are actively choosing not to do something else. That something else might have been deeper engagement with one critical concept, a conversation that changed a working relationship, or focused practice that actually moved a skill forward.

There is a growing body of thinking, sometimes called "information obesity," that frames this pattern in terms of accumulation without metabolism. We consume content the way some people collect books: the gathering feels productive, the having feels good, but the reading remains deferred and the transformation never quite arrives.

In African professional contexts, this carries a particular weight. Certifications can be expensive relative to income. Time spent on professional development is often carved out of evenings and weekends, stolen from family and rest. When that investment yields credentials but not competence, the cost is not merely financial. It is the invisible toll of effort that could not convert into something useful.

The question worth sitting with is not "*how much am I learning?*" It is "*how much of what I am learning is actually sticking, and what is it enabling me to do differently?*"

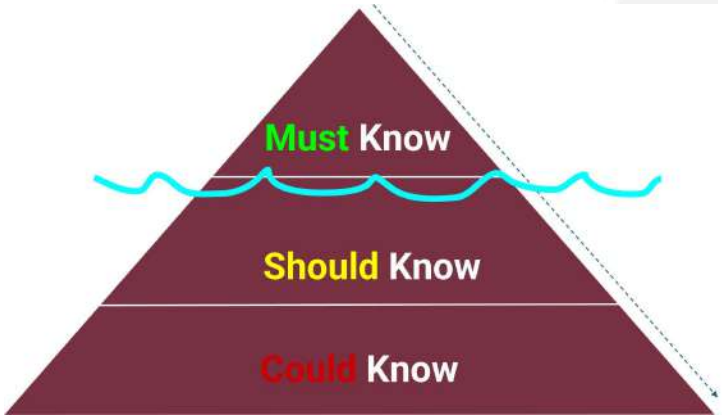
What Actually Helps Learning Stick

If the problem is not access but retention and application, then the solution is not more content.

It is more intentionality.

►*Before Learning: Choose With Purpose*

One of the most underrated learning skills is knowing what not to learn. Not everything deserves equal attention, and treating all information as equally worth pursuing is itself a kind of cognitive trap. A useful lens is the MoSCoW framework[6], adapted from project management and product development practices, which helps sort learning priorities into what you *must know* for your work to function, what you *should know* to deepen your effectiveness, and what you *could know* if time and energy allow. This honest triage prevents the spreading thinness that makes so much professional development ultimately forgettable.



Application of MoSCoW framework to learning scope and priority

The goal is not to learn less. It is to learn with more deliberate intention about what deserves real investment.

[6] Agile Business Consortium. (n.d.). Chapter 10: MoSCoW prioritisation. In *DSDM Project Framework*. Agile Business Consortium.

►*During Learning: Depth Over Volume*

Effective learning is not a passive act. It requires what cognitive scientists call "effortful processing" — the deliberate work of connecting new information to existing knowledge, questioning assumptions, generating examples and articulating understanding in your own words.[3]

This is where the concept of "Joy of Missing Out" becomes genuinely useful. In a culture obsessed with consuming everything, the most effective learners are often those willing to miss most of it in exchange for genuinely inhabiting a smaller portion. They ask questions of the material. They pause to reflect. They resist the temptation to move on before something has actually landed.

Active recall, the practice of testing yourself on what you have just encountered rather than simply re-reading it, is among the most robustly supported learning strategies in cognitive research.[5] The discomfort of trying to retrieve something you are not sure you can recall is precisely the mechanism through which memory consolidates. Difficulty, in this context, is not a sign that something is going wrong. It is the sign that something is going right.

►*After Learning: Application Is the Real Test*

This may be the part that most professional learning cultures neglect most completely. McDowall[4] describes the "transfer problem" with useful precision: the conditions under which people learn are usually quite different from the conditions under which they are expected to apply what they have learned. This gap does not close on its own.

Knowledge that is never applied slowly becomes intellectual decoration.

One practical method for bridging this gap is the One-Minute Paper[7], a deceptively simple reflection exercise used in learning and development contexts. At the end of any significant learning experience, pause and answer three questions honestly: *What did I actually learn, beyond what I already knew? Why does it matter for my work specifically?* And *what, concretely, will I do differently because of it?* This kind of structured reflection forces the shift from information encountered to intention formed.

Beyond reflection, teaching is among the most powerful retention tools available. Explaining a concept to a colleague, writing about it, or using it to frame a workplace problem forces the kind of deep retrieval and reconstruction that passive review rarely demands. The preparation required to teach something well is itself a learning process.

There is a version of professional development that is really about signalling. The certificate earned, the seminar attended, the podcast consumed — these carry social value in environments where learning is visible currency. There is nothing wrong with that, up to a point. Credentialing matters. Visibility matters.

But underneath the performance of learning, something more important is at stake. The workplaces, teams and institutions that actually improve over time are the ones where learning does not stop at the certificate. They are the ones where people take what they have encountered and run it against reality, test it against practice, share it with colleagues and allow it to disturb their existing assumptions.

Learning, at its best, is a process of becoming slightly different. Not smarter in a vague sense. Different in a specific sense: more capable, more precise, more able to see what you could not see before and do what you could not do before.

In the end, meaningful learning is less about how much information we encounter and more about what becomes part of how we think, decide and act. In a noisy world overflowing with content, perhaps the most important learning skill is not consuming more knowledge — but choosing, with real honesty, what truly deserves to stay.

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[7] Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Minute paper.* In *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers* (2nd ed., pp. 148–153). Jossey-Bass.