

Unlearning: A new way of learning

Tripti Kumari

Research Scholar, University School of Business, Chandigarh University (India)

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary organizations face an uncertain and volatile environment. These uncertainties demand changes not only in the output but also in the input factors of organization. Companies today have understood that today learning alone will not be sufficient and that individuals will need to unlearn past practices and behavior. Even though there are many works on learning the concept of unlearning is still a neglected area. This paper aims to shed light on the concept of unlearning both at individual and organizational level.

1. Introduction

From time immemorial, the focus of human has always been on learning. Learning a new skill, a process or a technology is desired both by individual and organization. The advancement of civilization has always been due to advancement in technology. Be it development from Stone Age to Iron Age or change from nomadic lifestyle to establishment of kingdoms the role of technology can never be ignored. With the advancement of technology there has always been learning. In the era of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) which is marked by technology breakthroughs learning has become inevitable. But in the process of learning new skill something has often been ignored and that is Unlearning.

The concept of unlearning is related to destabilization in work environment. The destabilization of work environment not only demands up gradation and modification of previous knowledge but also reduction in amount of inappropriate knowledge. The concept of unlearning reduces the negative effects of inappropriate knowledge and combine prior knowledge to new knowledge. Lyndon suggests that unlearning does not advocate ignoring the previous knowledge rather it suggests to acknowledge and actively work on it to allow incorporation of new knowledge and behavior.

2. Review of Literature

There are a vast number of existing bodies of literature that provided some insight on the concept of unlearning, even if the specific term of unlearning is not used in those literatures. A wide variety of literature was scanned for the purpose. Predominantly unlearning at individual and organizational level have provided a focus for the research. In addition, bodies of literature such as innovation, performance management, organizational change have also provided different perspective on unlearning.

3. Research Methodology

The research paper is based on secondary research. This research is divided into following activities:

- Analyzing articles previously published

- Providing an understanding to concepts related to unlearning.

4. Importance of Unlearning

In this era innovation is occurring faster than ever. There is a productivity gap between labor and technological frontier. Inability of organizations to cope with the changing environment leads to failure. Francis, Bessant and Hobday (2003) argue that organizations facing transformational or radical change will need to be able to let go of old ways in order to remain sustainable. Unlearning is an important process in the field of research and development and product innovation. Buchen (2009) claim that innovation in any field cannot occur without unlearning. Unlearning enables organizations to identify mistakes, or prepare necessary groundworks to acquire and generate new knowledge (Wang, Lu, Zhao, Gong, and Bai, 2013).

As per a report of International Labor Organization sixty percent of employers globally are looking for different skill in employees than 3 years before. 53% of Indian employers face difficulty in recruiting employees with desired skill. By 2020 there will be global shortage of 38-40 million highly skilled employees. This shortage in employee market is not because the employees are not ready to learn but because they are unable to unlearn the previously acquired skills. Hedber (1981,p.18) suggests, "Unlearning makes way for new responses and mental maps".

5. Various Concepts related to Unlearning

Unlearning is a broad concept. It has often been mistaken with several other concepts. Unlearning has been very broadly defined as abandoning or giving up knowledge, ideas or behaviors. However this could not be considered as complete definition of unlearning. Abandonment of knowledge, ideas or behavior can be both intentional as well as unintentional. Unintentional abandonment refers to forgetting and the concept of forgetting is different from unlearning. Unlearning is a deliberate attempt to forget obsolete and misleading knowledge. In forgetting information is lost despite of its usefulness. Another concept to which unlearning is frequently been related is intentional forgetting. But the difference between the two exists. Intentional forgetting focuses more on

overt recall of specific knowledge rather than behavior. Unlearning is also used in psychological principles but that is not our area of concern because this paper focuses on management area.

6. Different Levels of Unlearning

The concept of unlearning has been used in two different contexts: individual unlearning and organizational unlearning. When an individual undergoes through a process of change and relinquishes old ways of doing things making place for new behaviors, actions, ideas it is known as individual unlearning. In an organization when old methods and approaches are given up to bring new systems and technologies in order to accommodate to changing macro and micro environments it is known as organizational unlearning. Organizational unlearning is incomplete without individual unlearning. Unlearning is done to improve organizational performance and as such simply replacing one discrete action or skill or process is insufficient. It requires a change in mindset as well as change in frames of reference.

7. Problems in Unlearning

Unlearning involves change and destabilization. The process of change is not simple and involves various barriers to it. Standard routine and operation process in organization forms an adoption barrier for the employees to learn new techniques and routine. Old dominant logics are hard to give up. Secondly, not all organizations promote unlearning in their work. This may be due to infrastructural barrier or mindset barrier. Alternative point of view in a group prevents members

of organization from interacting. In this the employees fail to capture the current realities necessary for interpreting change and this leads to failure in learning as well as unlearning.

8. Findings

With the changing technology change in skill sets are required. As such unlearning becomes an important topic of research still it is an under researched topic. This is due to the inconsistency and ambiguity underlying in this the topic. The concept of unlearning has been overlooked because of its resemblance to other topics such as forgetting and organizational learning. This paper attempts to explore the concept of unlearning and distinguish it from other topics related to it. The paper also points out the major barriers to the process of unlearning.

9. Conclusion

Innovation systems focus so much on the concept of learning that little attention is paid to the process of unlearning. This has led to oversimplification of the concept and thus not much attention is paid by the researchers on this subject. Unlearning is a new way of learning. Unlearning can be operationalised in three ways:

- i. Being aware of the old practices and outdates rules.
- ii. Relinquishing the habit of making the same mistakes again and again.
- iii. Relearning new things.

So to make learning better and efficient one needs to make space by unlearning.

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