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## How To Learn

Almost 50 years ago, psychologist Herbert Gerjuoy said: "Tomorrow's illiterate will not be the one who cannot read, but the one who has not learned how to learn."

More recently, when the U.S. Committee for Economic Development was asked to determine the most critical elements for success in the 21st century, they came to pretty well the same conclusion. When their extensive study, administered to a broad range of organizations, agencies and institutions, was completed and the results were tabulated, the answer was very clear: 'Knowing how to learn' was a very solid #1 on the list.

And that sounds about right, doesn't it? After all, we're constantly being told that we're in the midst of an unprecedented data explosion that has no sign of dissipating anytime soon. And we surely don't need any more surveys to tell us we're being constantly inundated — both in our personal and professional lives — with this modern-day profusion of facts, figures, words, numbers and statistics. And the best way to meet this challenge is by developing and employing strong learning skills.

Some of us learned how to learn when we were students, and some of us somehow figured it out all on our own (often, in spite of how we were taught in school). But, no matter how we developed our own style of acquiring knowledge, there are a few particular obstacles that often prevent most of us from mastering new information: no interest, no attention, and no effort.

When we're not interested in a topic, our minds drift off to the little brain party that's going on in our heads, where we're easily distracted by all kinds of things that are personally appealing to us. It's important, then, to motivate ourselves to *want to* learn so we can block out that kind of interference. Our attention spans can be quite limited, especially when listening or reading, and it's essential that we figure out how to stay focused on the tasks at hand. So knowing how to apply specific techniques (rather than simply imagining that what we see and hear will somehow magically stick to our memory systems) can make a significant impact on developing successful learning strategies.

It's been proven over and over again that active learning works much better than passive learning. We can't always perform, or even simulate, real experiences as a way of absorbing new information, but there are plenty of other ways to be involved in more active ways. Our brains are visual, for instance, so studying graphic aids is a start. Watching demonstrations is even better, as it's an activity that involves both sight and sound. Participating in a discussion or preparing a talk to share with others is another excellent way to store information in our heads.

To be good learners, then, we must try our best to learn as actively as possible — by forgoing the often ineffective option of just *reading and listening* and, instead, doing as much *saying and doing* as possible!