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## **Smart Ways To Use Your Brain**

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When I opened my keynote address, *You Must Remember This...* at the ONHA/ORCA convention in Toronto this past February, I asked those assembled to try as hard as they could to memorize a list of 20 simple words, preferably in the correct order. They didn't do very well! The average "score" was between 5 and 7 out of 20, or 25-35%.

When I retested their memories with a different list of words less than half an hour later, however, most of the participants achieved a perfect score! How is it that these people got so smart in such a short space of time? Well, it's no mystery, really. They just used their brains properly the second time, that's all, and exhibited what many memory experts say most of us are quite capable of — an excellent memory.

There are three main reasons that we forget things:

### **No interest**

We don't need special techniques to remember what we find interesting, but we must learn to "dress up" information that isn't memorable on its own.

### **No attention**

Because our brains are capable of processing information at incredible speeds (between 1000 and 25000 words per minute), it's no wonder that we so often forget what we read (at an average rate of 250 wpm) and hear (at an average rate of 150 wpm)! We read and listen so slowly that only a very small part of our brain activity is focused on the task at hand.

### **No effort**

Those people you know who remember names and dates and numbers do not, in fact, have better memories than you do. The difference is that they probably try harder to store the information when they are first presented with it. The simple act of preparing to remember has a lot to do with how strongly a memory will be stored.

We are blessed with two memory systems: short-term memory and long-term memory. The problems with short-term memory have to do with capacity and persistence; it doesn't store very much information and doesn't hang on to it for very long. The problems with long-term memory, on the other hand, have to do with input and access; it stores data very slowly and, if that information hasn't been placed in the system in an organized fashion, it causes confusion at a later date when we are searching for it.

If we are to overcome these natural limitations of memory, we must learn to use our brains in a much more active way. Many of our experiences (like reading and listening) are passive in nature; that's why we forget so much of what we read and hear. Research suggests that over 50% of what we store passively is lost within an hour! To engage our brains actively, we should get in the habit, then, of highlighting information by taking notes, writing brief summaries, organizing key ideas in chunks and repeating things aloud as soon after inputting it as possible.

Some researchers suggest that 95% of what we now know about how our brains actually function has been learned in only the last 20 years. Probably the most intriguing discovery has to do with the fact that scientists have discovered that the two halves of the brain have very special and distinct functions. While the left side processes language and logic, the right side deals with imagination and creativity.

Another way of thinking about the differences in the way the left and right sides of the brain function is to think of them as being boring (left) and fun (right). In your own past experiences, how would you say you have learned best? When you've been bored to tears or when you've enjoyed the experience?

The point is that, in order to learn and remember well, it's important that we use both sides of our brains together in a *balanced* way. We live in a very left-brain culture; for obvious reasons, we necessarily must use the left side of the brain to learn. But, it's unfortunate that — particularly as we age — we neglect the right side. This oversight actually prevents us from thinking, solving problems and remembering as well as we might. (I'm sure you've heard the expression: A picture is worth a thousand words. Guess which side of the brain processes the pictures?)

It's my opinion that, very early on in the educational process, we begin discouraging balanced-brain in favour of strictly left-brain learning. This has the unfortunate effect of stifling our ability to think! Compare, for instance, the creative environment in which we wisely place young children so that they will learn to the often lifeless environment in which we place adults in learning situations. Much as educators used to force left-handers to write with their wrong hand and cause them all kinds of grief, we have similarly compelled happily balanced-brain human beings to stop using the right side of the brain — the side which helps make learning easier!

### **Mental Gymnastics**

It's important to use your brain well. You will perform better on the job if you practise the following techniques:

- *Intention*: It's unlikely that we will do a good job of remembering unless we first prepare ourselves. In other words, get in the habit of *planning* to remember.
- *Repetition*: This is probably the most popular way that we try to remember things. It works for small amounts of information, but is too dull and too slow on its own for larger chunks of data.
- *Association*: Strange as it may seem, the mind has an easier time remembering two items linked together than separately. For instance, establishing some kind of link between a person's name (which is difficult to remember) and face (which is much easier) will improve your memory considerably the next time you meet that person.
- *Meaningfulness*: It's very difficult to store information that doesn't make sense to us. (That's why it took us so long to memorize multiplication tables and passages from Shakespeare when we were in school!) More effort should be made understanding ideas before we attempt to actually store them in our memory systems.
- *Visualization*: Our brains store pictures, shapes and colours much more easily than words and numbers. When we speak or write to others, then, we must do our best to present information in as visually stimulating a way as possible. Doing so will automatically increase memory power.
- *Chunking*: Dividing large amounts of data into "chunks" or separate categories will also make remembering much easier. We too often overload our memory systems by trying to cram in far too much all at once. Our brains prefer bite-size pieces!

Using these memory tricks will help you get your brain back on track. The next time you attend a seminar, in-service session or meeting and you want to remember what you learned, try applying all six of these techniques. You'll be surprised at the results — and how much better you are able to perform your job!