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Why there is no 'expiry age' on learning

Learning new skills is essential in today's volatile job market. With the right attitude, direction and tools, old dogs can learn new tricks writes *Karen Gately*



THE EXPERT

Karen Gately, founder of Corporate Dojo, is a leadership and people-management specialist. Karen works with leaders and HR teams to drive business results through the talent and energy of people. She is the author of *The People Manager's Toolkit: A Practical guide to getting the best from people* (Wiley) and *The Corporate Dojo: Driving extraordinary results through spirited people*.

How often have you heard someone say "I'm too old to start that now"? Have you yourself avoided going down paths that require learning, because you felt your age is an obstacle? All too often I observe people make assumptions and decisions based on age that are fundamentally flawed.

Limiting beliefs and unconscious bias regarding age are common. Believing for example, that 'older people are stuck in their ways and don't want to learn' leads some employers to limit the opportunities they give people over a certain age. Equally some people choose to believe these things about themselves and undermine their own potential. With an aging population, Australia needs to leverage the wisdom and experience of the older members of our community. With fewer people working, skill shortages are likely to impact many industries. With a higher average age in the workforce, comes depth of experience employers are wise to leverage.

Choose belief

Among the most inspiring people I have met is a man named Jim. At the age of 75 Jim decided he wanted to learn karate and so, he did. A teenager at the time, I was blown away by his capacity to choose to believe in himself. While somewhat limited by his physical capabilities, Jim's heart and mind were stronger than much younger people I had met before, or indeed since.

The truth is old dogs can learn new tricks, and typically need to. As research and history show, the ability to learn has less to do with age, and far more to do with desire. It's true to say that with age typically comes a decline in cognitive abilities that are important for learning new skills; however, with effort and confidence many of these obstacles can be overcome. Regardless of our age, it's important that we all continue to keep learning for these four reasons.

Achieve your goals

Whether your goal is to earn a promotion, change career direction altogether or ensure greater job security, continuing to learn is essential. Keeping pace with the demands of your role, profession or your industry requires you to take deliberate steps to learn the skills and gain the experience needed

not only today, but also in the future.

As an EA, enabling the success of the leaders you support is core to your role. Understanding their objectives, the challenges they face and how you can help, demands constant learning. The more you understand about what they do and how they need to go about it, the better positioned you are to influence an executive's priorities, decision making and actions.

Maintain purpose

So many people choose to slog through the final years of their career doing a job that lacks meaning. Some believe they have little choice, in most part due to their age and ability to learn something new. The reality is these people have many options if they choose to not only see, but also take them. Finding purpose in our work often requires making courageous choices and stepping outside of our comfort zone.

It's important to understand that each of us is unique and therefore energised, or drained by different things. However, in many ways we are alike. Common among most of us is the need for a sense of purpose and meaning in our life. Our values, interests, capabilities and experiences all influence our ability to do meaningful work.

The strength of our spirit is ultimately influenced by the extent to which we believe the work we do truly matters. One person for example may be energised by an altruistic purpose, such as working for a not for profit organisation tackling social issues. Another may find purpose and meaning in providing advice that allows people to achieve financial security.

Learning is essential to both our ability to make a positive difference in whatever career path we choose, and change direction to secure roles we'd rather play. No matter how far along in your career, it's never too late to change direction if that's what you really want to do.

Keep giving

Some people choose to contribute to their profession or community well beyond retirement; whether that be through volunteer work or mentoring. For many, the ability to keep sharing their knowledge, skills and experience with others is essential to their happiness in later life.

Learning is important to our ability to play these roles well and gain a sense of achievement through the experience. It's unfortunate that some people hesitate to volunteer their services due to a lack of confidence in their ability to add value. Let other people decide if there is a role for you to play and step up with confidence to the challenge of learning new skills or ways of working. 🍀

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How to keep learning

Some of the most important steps you can take to keep learning throughout your career and life include these:

Know what you want and why

Most people are more likely to invest in learning when they have a clear goal in mind. Understanding precisely what you want to achieve will allow you to see what you need to learn. Understanding why you want to achieve what you do, will make a big difference to your ability to find the strength to keep going if things get challenging.

Ask for help

If unsure of your options, seek the guidance of a coach or mentor. A coach will help you to think through the issue and reach decisions that work best for you. A mentor will share their lessons learned along a similar journey. Talk to friends and family who have experiences they can share or observations of you that may help you to gain greater clarity.

Don't wait for other people to extend an offer of help. If you can benefit from the wisdom or experience of another person, have the courage to ask for their guidance. Worst case scenario they'll say no.

Reflect on experience

Look back on past circumstances or events and understand what worked well and what didn't. Reflect on whether you would do things differently if you had your time again. Reflect regularly on how your strengths are enabling your success and ways in which you still need to learn and grow.

Listen to understand

All too often people focus on justifying their position over listening to what others can offer. Have you ever tried to teach someone who was frustrated and more interested in arguing than listening? If you have you'll probably appreciate the obstacle their emotions place in the way of their learning.

We can all learn from other people if we are willing to listen and seek to understand. That is, understand not only what they are saying, but also why. Equally important is your ability to listen to the conversations happening in your mind. Recognise, for example, when you are talking yourself out of putting your hand up to learn a new skill because you fear failure.

Learn with others

Spend time with people who share your interests and are willing to learn together. Look for peers across your industry or profession that you believe will challenge your thinking and deepen your insights. The ways in which you learn together can vary depending on your preferences. For example, some people choose to join professional associations or groups, while others prefer to work alongside someone and bounce ideas off them as they arise.