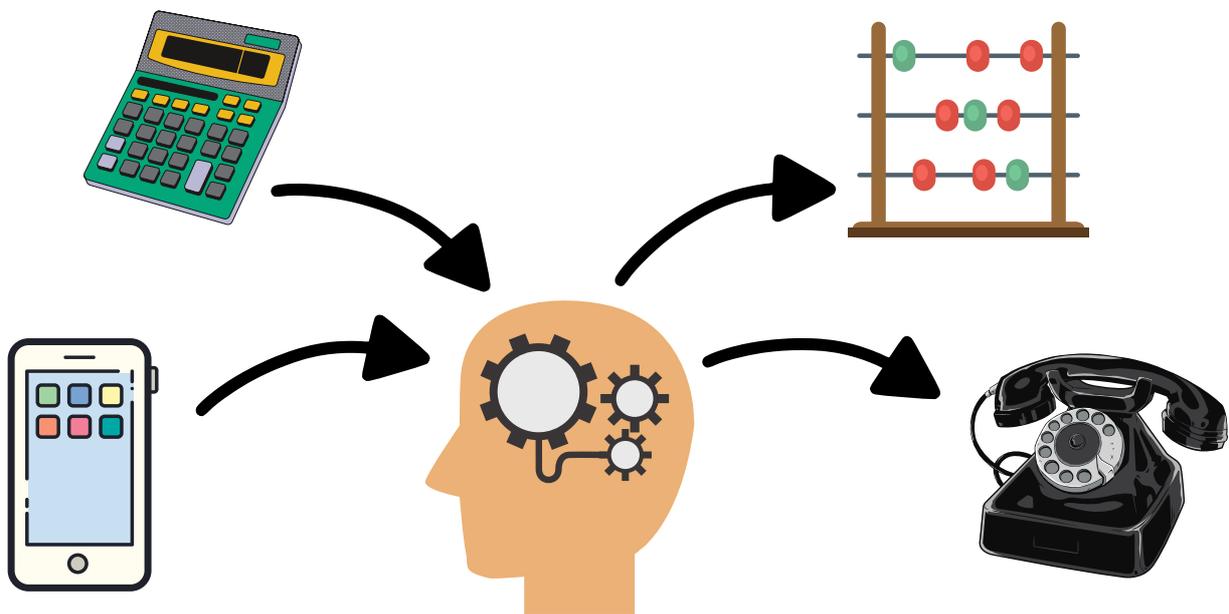


The importance of unlearning

Learning and unlearning

Very often in our working and professional lives we focus on learning - acquiring new skills and knowledge. What we don't necessarily think about so much is *unlearning* - how we forget the skills and knowledge we've acquired over the years but no longer need. e.g. a process we have used for many years but perhaps technology or a new way of doing things supersedes it.



Trust and consent

Old knowledge and new knowledge exist side by side. Workers do not immediately forget old knowledge the moment management ask them to.

Because workers don't immediately forget, new innovations and processes need to be negotiated with them. The workers need to trust in the new innovation and they need to consent to them. They need to consent to not forget, but to unlearn existing practices.



Working with the UK Fire and Rescue Service

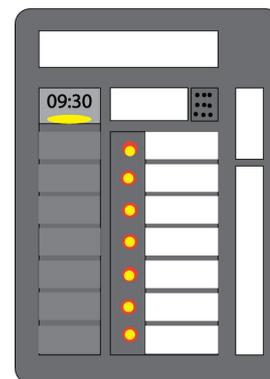
Continuing our research with the UK Fire and Rescue Service and how they learn and share skills and knowledge, we also looked at how they *unlearn* skills and knowledge.

Practices were easier to unlearn when the team could easily see how an old process was no longer safe and there was a collective trust and agreement to engage with new, safer practices. (As an example from an older practice book - shovelling powdered asbestos onto a metal fire to put it out.)



On the other hand, practices are less easy to unlearn when trust in the new practice is not given, and consent to unlearning the old practice was more difficult to achieve. For example, the introduction of new breathing apparatus. Previously, firefighters would go into a burning building with a tank of oxygen. Knowing how long the tank would last, their colleagues would use a timer and know when to pull them out when the air was running out.

A new practice was introduced that used telemetry boards to control the times at which a firefighter should be brought out of the burning building. However, as is with the case with a lot of new technology, there were problems with it. Problems with the new technology meant the firefighters refused to consent to this new practice and retained the old.



How can I find out more?

Listen to our podcast episode: "[The importance of unlearning](#)". (Search for Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Podcast.)



Read the paper: "[Unlearning and consent in the UK Fire and Rescue Service](#)", Human Relations, volume 75, issue 12.



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