

Styles guide

An understanding of learning styles will help you manage information to remain competitive, says Jane Wiggins

Information is estimated to be doubling every four years, and we all need to be able to absorb it more rapidly and adapt more quickly. Yet many of us have limited knowledge of learning strategies or thinking skills and few have considered their preferred learning style. How comfortable you are with learning will be a function of your knowledge and skills about learning, your work situation, and your attitudes and emotions about learning. This can be summed up as, 'what you can do + what you want to do = what you actually do'. For learning to be effective we need to:

- Know about the learning process
- Have the skills to learn
- Have the appropriate supporting environment
- Have right attitude and approach
- Be emotionally strong to try new experiences and learn new skills

Preferred senses

Learning styles are simply different approaches or ways of learning. One way of classifying the different learning styles is through the senses used to obtain information: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic or tactile. We will learn best if we use our preferred senses – that is seeing, listening, doing or touching.

Visual learners learn through seeing the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson. They prefer sitting at the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions. They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays including diagrams, illustrated textbooks, overhead transparencies, videos, flipcharts and handouts. During a lecture or classroom discussion, visual learners prefer to take detailed notes to absorb the information. They will recognise words by sight, use lists to organise their thoughts and recall information by remembering how it was set out on a page.

Auditory learners learn through lectures, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed and other nuances. Written information

may have little meaning until it is heard. These learners often benefit from reading text aloud and using a tape recorder. They will solve problems by talking about them and use rhythm and sound as memory aids.

Tactile and kinesthetic learners learn through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted by their need for activity and exploration. They learn well with hands-on activities like projects and demonstrations. They use writing and drawing as memory aids.

Another classification gives yet another four styles of learning: innovative, analytic, common

style preferences: activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists. Activists like to be involved in new experiences. They are open minded and enthusiastic about new ideas but get bored with implementation. They enjoy doing things and tend to act first and consider the implications afterwards. They like working with others but tend to hog the limelight.

Reflectors like to stand back and look at a situation from different perspectives. They like to collect data and think about it carefully before coming to any conclusions. They enjoy observing others and will listen to their views before offering their own. Theorists adapt and integrate observations into complex and logically

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sense or dynamic. Innovative learners are described as looking for personal meaning while learning. They draw on their values while learning and enjoy social interaction with others; they want to make the world a better place. Analytic learners want to develop intellectually while learning. They draw on facts while learning; are patient and reflective. They want to know 'important things' and to add to the world's knowledge.

Dynamic

Common-sense learners want to find solutions, they value things if they are useful. They are practical and straightforward and want to make things happen. Dynamic learners will look for hidden possibilities, judge things by gut reactions, synthesise information from different sources and are enthusiastic and adventurous in their learning goals.

Perhaps the most widely known theory of learning styles identifies four main learning-

sound theories. They think problems through step-by-step. They tend to be perfectionists who like to fit things into a rational scheme. They tend to be detached and analytical in their thinking. Pragmatists are keen to try things out. They want concepts that can be applied to their job. They tend to be impatient with lengthy discussions and are practical and down to earth.

Most of us have elements of more than one learning style. By thinking about your preferred style, you can try to apply this to learning new things. If you're able to use your natural style, you're likely to find learning easier and quicker.

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Further information

London workshops – next induction workshop is 2 March 2006
Part 2 Modules 2 and 4 start in June 2006
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