



Learning is important.

But *why* is learning important?

Education - both formal and informal - is essential to the development of considerate, compassionate, and cooperative societies, the success of organizations, and the personal pursuit of happiness.

[In this article](#), we unpack what [continuous learning](#) and education can mean to the life of each individual, to the organizations they are part of, and to their broader societies.

Looking at this issue from a different angle, we then reflect on some of the potential consequences of *not* practicing continuous learning—or at least of not prioritizing education in our day-to-day lives.

What Does Learning Even Mean?

Learning is essential to humanity. It's so embedded in our lives that we rarely consider what it *means*.

Learning is the process of gaining new skills, knowledge, understanding, and values. This is something people can do by themselves, although it's generally made easier with education: the process of helping someone or a group of others to learn.

With educational support, learning can happen more efficiently. Education is also how we collect and share all the skills and knowledge we learn individually. Benefitting from education instead of having to build new skills and knowledge by ourselves from scratch is part of what it means to live in a society instead of in isolation.

Learning and education impart more than just knowledge and skills. They also transmit the values, attitudes, and behaviors we have decided to share.

For example, education has helped us create and maintain the shared belief that when someone does something particularly harmful, they deserve a fair legal trial regardless of their crime.

In simple terms, learning and education help hold together human life and civilisation as we know it. They are what we use to make our societies better for ourselves, those around us, and those who come after us.

This is why the right to free elementary education is enshrined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), which states that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” and that “it shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.”

What Does Learning Mean for Us Today?

Learning is not unique to humans. Scientists have [observed](#) many different animals teaching their young skills, like how to find food and keep themselves safe.

Educational practices among humans can be traced back practically as far as human life goes. Evidence of teaching and learning has been found from remnants of human life dating back thousands of years BCE—and that’s just where we’ve found written evidence. Oral and practical education (for example, early humans physically teaching their children to hunt and forage for food) likely goes back even further.

Learning has continued worldwide throughout human history in more ways than we have time to discuss here. However, the Fourth Industrial Revolution will have a massive impact on how we as a global society approach education going forward.

The [Fourth Industrial Revolution](#) refers to the rapid rise of new technologies, including big data, artificial intelligence, automation, and the Internet of Things. Life in this new technological landscape demands that we change our approach to education in several ways.

One major shift we'll all have to make is the move from viewing education as something finite (something we do at school and university so we can go into the working world and then never have to study again) to something that keeps going throughout our lives as we gain new skill after new skill.

To face a future of constant technological change, we'll need to adapt to continuous learning as a new norm. In his book *Future Shock*, US writer and businessperson Alvin Toffler wrote that “the illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn and relearn.”

The future of education lies in integrating continuous learning into our everyday personal and professional lives even more than we already do.

This might be why the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra has [proposed](#) that compulsory, publicly funded education should cover not just elementary school—as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests—but continuous learning, too.

Sitra cites American biologist E.O. Wilson, who said, “We are drowning in information but yearn for wisdom. Therefore, the world will be led by those... who are able to compile the correct information at precisely the right moment while thinking critically and making important decisions wisely.”

How Learning Supports Our Wellbeing

We've talked about why education is important to society as a whole, but continuous learning also benefits the personal life of anyone who engages with it. Here's how.

Happiness

Research [suggests](#) that people who practice continuous or lifelong learning are happier on average. This may be because lifelong learning helps people to keep developing their passions and interests, which bring us happiness.

Learning about topics that interest us makes most of us feel happy, at least in the moment. Similarly, spending time honing hobbies we are passionate about (which is also an act of lifelong learning!). It stands to reason that building time for these things in your personal life would contribute to your overall happiness.

Continuous learning also helps us to keep pursuing our personal and professional development goals, and all the achievements along the way are a great source of happiness for many of us.

It also helps us keep boredom at bay, which is another way of increasing our happiness.

Longevity

Several scientific studies have shown that lifelong learning activities can help people maintain better brain function as they age.

One study [found](#) that people with Alzheimer's who practice more learning throughout their lives start to display dementia symptoms later than those who have spent less time learning. In other words, lifelong learning might be able to slow the onset of Alzheimer's.

Another study [found](#) that spending time learning to play a new musical instrument can help delay cognitive decline. A third study [found](#) that spending time learning new skills, namely digital photography and quilting, helped elderly people to improve their memories.

How Learning Supports Our Work

Continuous learning—especially in the form of workplace learning—also offers a host of professional benefits for both employees and their organizations. These include:

Capacity

One key way that continuous learning helps both employees and their companies is by helping people upskill, which means improving their existing skill sets and broadening them with new skills.

Upskilling is good for employees because it equips them with the knowledge and skills they need to pursue their personal and professional development goals, for example, by upskilling toward a promotion.

Building a more highly skilled workforce through continuous learning is also beneficial to companies. More skilled employees can do their jobs better and faster, and research shows that companies with a strong learning culture are 52% more productive.

Employees learning new skills to pursue promotions also benefits companies because internal promotion is generally a more time-efficient and cost-effective solution than hiring externally.

Lastly, companies that support their employees' continuous learning boast demonstrably higher staff engagement, which in turn boosts productivity and profitability. This is also beneficial to individual employees because being engaged at work generally means enjoying your job and finding it meaningful.

Adaptability

As we mentioned earlier, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is pushing employees to pursue continuous learning throughout their lives. They will have to constantly adapt to new knowledge and technological changes, which keep appearing faster and faster.

Engaging in continuous learning means becoming accustomed to incorporating new knowledge all the time, and this is essential in order to keep adapting.

It's important to make learning continuous because this gives people the skills they need to adapt, empowering them to stay competitive in the job market, pursue promotions in their current jobs, and keep pace with knowledge and technological changes in their everyday lives.

Investing in an adaptable workforce by supporting continuous learning is also key to any company that wants to remain competitive and relevant in its industry.

Innovation

Learning also drives innovation, which describes the new ideas and technological and cultural developments that people come up with to solve problems and improve their societies.

Research [shows](#) that companies that have a strong learning culture are 92% more likely to innovate by developing new products and processes and 56% more likely to be first to market with these new developments.

Innovation is important for society as a whole because the benefits of these new developments can be shared to help improve all of our lives. Learning can also help people build the critical thinking skills they need to view problems in new, innovative ways.

What Happens If We Don't Prioritise Learning?

Another way to reflect on why learning is so important is to think about all the potential negative consequences of *not* prioritizing learning enough.

The flip side of everything we've said in this article is that a society that didn't prioritize learning would have a lack of shared knowledge and skills for people to benefit from. It would also have a lack of shared ideas and values, which could stoke conflict and war as people and their leaders might struggle more to find common goals on which they can agree.

Not prioritizing learning about other people and cultures would also diminish our ability to understand people who are different from us, and this too would contribute to increased conflict and violence.

People who don't prioritize continuous learning enough in their own lives are likely to be less happy or fulfilled, as they spend less time exploring their interests and working on personal development.

Elderly people who spend less time on learning are likely to experience faster cognitive degeneration than those who learn regularly.

Companies that don't prioritize their people's learning are less productive, less profitable, and have lower staff engagement rates than those that do. They're

also less likely to remain competitive in their industries or produce novel products or services.

People who don't get enough learning support at work are more likely to be disengaged and see their skills stagnate compared to those who work with companies that invest in their people's learning.

They will also struggle more with pursuing [career development](#), as they have little support for the upskilling they need to do to grow in their work.

Lastly, if we don't prioritize learning enough as we face an uncertain—but certainly technologically advancing—future, we will likely have a more difficult time adjusting to the changes ahead of us and making the most of future opportunities.

The Future is Continuous Learning

Continuous learning is important because it helps people feel happier and more fulfilled in their lives and careers and maintain stronger cognitive functioning as they age.

Making learning continuous helps companies boost their productivity, profitability, adaptability to change, and potential to innovate in their industries.

Learning is important to society as a whole because it helps different groups of people share knowledge, agree on mutual values, and better understand one another.