

Leeds University Business School: Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 55 – The importance of unlearning

Speakers: Dr James Brooks, Professor Irena Grugulis and Dr Hugh Cook.

James: [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm James Brooks, and today I'm delighted to be joined by Irena Grugulis.

Irena: Hello.

James: And Hugh Cook.

Hugh: Hi and welcome.

James: This is our second episode where we explore the concept of unlearning, and we're going to explore together today how organisations and workers learn, but we are going to focus on unlearning. So in other words, how they let go of perhaps outdated or antiquated practices in the workplace.

And if we think about that and reflect about it, all of us very often in our working and professional lives focus on learning. So we think about learning new stuff, acquiring new skills, and acquiring new knowledge that we can apply in the workplace. What we don't necessarily think about so often or so much [00:01:00] is unlearning. In other words, how we forget things or knowledge that we've acquired over the years.

So it might be a practice or a process that we have used for many, many years, but perhaps technology or a new way of doing things supersedes that and it makes it anachronistic. It doesn't make it as efficient or as useful as perhaps it could be.

And Irena and Hugh and I were interested in this concept because the dominant focus in a lot of the academic and practitioner literature is all about learning - acquiring new knowledge, acquiring new skills - but less so in relation to unlearning.

But if we stop there and reflect on that point, unlearning is arguably just as important as learning. Because if we want to make ourselves efficient, if we want to make our workplaces efficient, sometimes we have to let go of, and discard, old ways of doing [00:02:00] things.

So if I'm working in a warehouse or on the factory floor and a new piece of technology comes into play, then I need to forget the old way of doing something.

And that's something that has really fascinated us and something that we wanted to explore. Now our research looked at firefighters in the front line and in the emergency control rooms and driving fire engines and doing all the types of functions that you would expect within a busy fire service.

And we were really keen to understand how firefighters unlearn. Many of the firefighters that we studied and many of the fire stations that we visited had firefighters who had worked there for incredibly long periods of time. And they developed a lot of experiential knowledge. And what we

were really, really fascinated about was thinking about and considering how they unlearn and let go of some of that knowledge, where applicable.

Now my colleague Hugh is going to take us through some of [00:03:00] the really interesting and rich, practical examples of how firefighters unlearn. But before we do that, I'm going to pass over to my colleague, Irena, who is going to talk to us about some of the theory and the theoretical concepts that wrap around unlearning.

So I'll pass across to Irena.

Irena: Thank you James. Now, one of the really interesting things we found in the unlearning literature is that so much of it tends to ignore the people who are actually doing the unlearning. The creation capture, capture and transfer of knowledge is incredibly important, but of course, it is all done by people in the workplace.

It's fairly good at distinguishing between "forgetting", which is inadvertent and accidental, and a lot of the forgetting literature is seen [00:04:00] as a result of personnel turnover or a lack of human capital by workers. So effectively, we have the absence of workers being very well theorized, but not their presence.

Unlearning in the literature is seen as planned, premeditated, and driven by management. And in unlearning, old knowledge is driven out and replaced by new knowledge routines, and practices. Unlearning is presented as a necessary antecedent to any form of learning, and as new skills and new practices are learned, old ones are entirely forgotten.

Of course, when you are dealing with [00:05:00] people, it's difficult to justify that approach. It's a very good description of a warehouse, or a retail outlet, or a supply chain, where in order to create space for new items, you need to ship old items out. It's a less good description of the way people learn and people operate.

And indeed, the few empirical studies that do exist show that actually when you look at real workplaces, they don't do what the literature suggests they should. So Baumard and Starbuck did a 2005 study in which they noted that organisations which should learn from their failures, quite simply don't. So what we are doing in this paper is actually centering the [00:06:00] firefighters who were doing the unlearning and what we found was that, as Klein suggests, that unlearning is actually parenthetical. In other words, old knowledge and new knowledge exists side by side. Workers do not immediately forget old knowledge the moment management asks them to; they remember it.

This has certain implications. Because workers don't immediately forget. It means that new innovations need to be negotiated with them. They need to trust in the new innovations and they need to consent to them. And I'll pass over to Hugh for the next section.

Hugh: Thanks Irena. So, I'm just going to take us through some of the key findings and examples of where trust and [00:07:00] consent was given and also not given to unlearning old practice and learning new practice.

So this was part of a multi-stage case-based research. It is ongoing research. So it started in 2015 and we had multiple stages of collecting this data on one of the country's major Fire and Rescue Services.

So, harking back to our first podcast where we looked at the concept of communities of practice, where knowledge is transferred from more experienced members of the community to novices and of course vice versa. Communities of practice are important in terms of how firefighters remember knowledge and then subsequently potentially unlearn existing practice in favour of new practice.

So, just as a reminder, if you listen to our previous podcast, watches are a group of [00:08:00] between four and 10 firefighters, and they spend a lot of time together. They train together. They, they work in the same groups day in, day out, and discuss their practices. They tell stories of previous experiences and this is how they remember or how the organisation remembers existing practice.

So Irena referred to the idea of trust and consent. Trust in a new practice and consent to not forget, but unlearn existing practices. So just to give you an example of where existing practice was easily unlearned. So for example existing practice or older practice on putting out metal fires, and in one of the old practice books suggested, well, the best way of doing this is to shovel powdered asbestos onto the fire and they would talk about this and, and, you know, [00:09:00] joke about it in a way and saying, "Well, this is obviously very, you know, very dangerous to health, et cetera". A collective trust was easily given to the new practice and that practice was very easily forgotten.

On the other hand, the practices are less easy to unlearn because trust in the new practice is not a given and consent to unlearning the old practice was more difficult to achieve. So an example of this is the introduction of new breathing apparatus. So the old practice was when a firefighter goes into a burning building, they have a tank of oxygen. And we know roughly how long that oxygen will last, so their colleagues have them on a timer and know when to pull them out because their air is running out.

This is very important for their health and safety at work, for obvious reasons. A new practice was introduced that brought in [00:10:00] telemetry boards to control the times at which firefighters should be brought out of the building. And this was more advanced. It measured pulse rate, breathing rate the varying amount of oxygen that would be used. So it provided a more accurate measure.

However, there were problems with this technology, as there often is with introducing new technology at work, and that was not trusted. So firefighters refused to give consent to this new practice and retained that old practice. So, this is actually developed into the existing practice now has retained the old methods of counting and timing the minutes which firefighters have to remain in a burning building.

Okay. So those are a couple of examples of our data. I'll just pass back to James to discuss some of the implications of these finding.

James: Thank you so much Hugh. And thank you Irena for explaining the theory and the theoretical [00:11:00] concept behind unlearning as well. I suppose what we're trying to do in this Research and Innovation podcast is for you to think about and reflect on how you might unlearn in your own workplace.

So I'm sure all of you can think of examples where you have done something, maybe you've done it for many, many years and you've become very efficient and very, very good at it. But you've got to

let go of that. And part of that process is, as Hugh and Irena have alluded to, is giving consent and trusting in the new thing that you are being asked to do.

And what's really fascinating about our research was just the importance of belief and trust in a new way of doing something, before it became accepted and before it became embedded and also consent, giving consent to a new way of doing something, a new way of working. And I'm sure all of you can remember and think about how you might apply that to your own workplace.

[00:12:00] Now, we are continuing our research in the UK Fire and Rescue Service, and we are really excited to share with you our ongoing research. And one particular thread of that is thinking about how we can reflect and learn from the very poignant and awful circumstances of the recent Grenfell tragedy that occurred in 2017 and whether, where there is an ongoing public inquiry into those awful events.

And one of the things that we are really excited and pleased and very privileged to be involved in is working with the Fire and Rescue Service, the same Fire and Rescue Service that we conducted our previous two empirical studies.

And thinking about how firefighters can learn and share the knowledge that they have gained from Grenfell. And part of that process will be thinking about unlearning. And we look forward to sharing with you that in a future podcast in a not too distant future. And as Hugh said, we'll tag a [00:13:00] link below to our previous podcast for those of you who may have missed it on communities of practice. So thank you very much for everyone for listening to our podcast, and we really hope to see you again soon. Thank you.