

Different types of learning curves

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The phrase "learning curve" has become a common colloquial phrase to describe how a skill isn't easily acquired. Typically, most learners experience a learning curve at the beginning of a new experience, and that incline tapers off as they gradually learn more about the subject matter.

However, it's more than just a common phrase. The learning curve theory is a well-known concept still used today by learning and development teams to drive knowledge retention and skill development. The learning curve mathematical formula provides organizations with a measurable way to understand how long it takes to acquire a skill or master a task. It may also be described as the "experience curve", "cost curve", "efficiency curve", or "productivity curve".

In this article, we'll explore the Learning Curve Theory, its history, advantages and disadvantages, types of learning curves, how to calculate it, and its application for modern learning and development strategies.

The learning curve is the correlation between a learner's performance on a task or activity and the number of attempts or time required to complete the activity.

The learning curve has both a general definition and a defined quantitative application.

The idea of the learning curve theory has been dated back to the 1880s and has evolved through the decades. Here is a brief overview of the learning curve model's history:

The idea of a learning curve was first proposed by Dr. Hermann Ebbinghaus in 1885 when developing his forgetting curve theory. His theory was designed to understand how people retain and lose information. It helps organizations understand when and why we lose information and how we can fight this knowledge loss.

Fast-forward to 1934, Arthur Bills explores the idea of a learning curve in his paper General Experimental Psychology, describing it as a graphical representation of understanding efficiency improvement rates on a given task or practice. Bills presented two types of learning curve graphs: one that represented an increase in productivity as time progressed and the second a declining curve showing the time needed to perform a task.

In 1936, T.P. Wright developed the basis for the modern learning curve formula, which he termed the "Cumulative Average Model" (also known as "Wright's Model") in his paper Factors Affecting the Cost of Airplanes. Wright noted that the cost of building airplanes decreased as production performance and efficiency increased. While many variations of the learning curve model exist today, this is the original formula's foundation.

The learning curve theory is based on the concept that there is an initial period where the amount invested in

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learners is more significant than the return. However, after overcoming the learning curve, the return is much greater than the investment.

The idea here is that the more an employee practices a task, the better they become at it, which translates to a lower cost of training and higher output over time. The learning curve model helps track training progress, improve productivity, and predict learners' performance and improvement over time.

The original learning curve theory formula is: $Y = aX^b$

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