Traditionally, organizational learning and development interventions have focused on the visible, concrete, “main event” components of learning: virtual or face-to-face programs or workshops that introduce new concepts, skills, tools, and behaviors. However, a significant component of the learning intervention—the ongoing sustainment and reinforcement of the new knowledge and behaviors—is often neglected or overlooked. Failing to sustain and reinforce desired behavior changes is like neglecting to provide appropriate nourishment and support to a food crop. The neglect results in a less-than-full yield—a marginal return on the original investment. In terms of learning, this means that participants won’t retain the knowledge learned, will fail to act in new ways, and ultimately will not master and apply new behaviors.

Forum has partnered with many clients to implement targeted sustainment plans designed to help improve the uptake of new behaviors and processes in the workplace. Our experience shows that for these plans to be successful, they need to fit with the learning environment, with the nature of the work, and with the work styles and capabilities of the target audience. This document outlines our sustainment approach: how we’ve worked with clients to move from a mind-set of “spray and pray” event-based learning to one of “sustain to attain.” Our approach includes assessment of the learning environment, identification of ownership levels, and choosing sustainment activities that fit the learning environment and the ownership level.

Assessing the Learning Environment

A farmer looking for a rich yield examines the environment (weather patterns, temperatures, soil) before planning how to nourish and sustain a new crop. Similarly, organizations should think about the environment for learning whenever they embark on an initiative that requires changing behaviors in the workforce. There’s a significant range of conditions in organizations that can impact choices about how to support/improve adoption and mastery of new knowledge, skills, and tools.
Case in Point: Transforming Sales Behaviors

One year into a significant change program to improve its sales force effectiveness, a leading U.S. beverages company took stock of its situation. The initial phases of the initiative had included alignment work, rollout of skills development workshops to all salespeople, and the restructuring/revising of sales processes. The company was committed to helping salespeople change their behaviors and deliver a more consultative approach to working with customers. Sales leaders knew they were facing a possible stall in the initiative, specifically the danger of “flavor of the day,” in which people pay attention to the initiative in the early stages of rollout but then slip back to old habits and ways of working. To address this, the company executed a sustainment plan to support people in applying the new behaviors and skill sets. The plan consisted of a variety of simple, hands-on activities to reinforce and support salespeople as they applied new skills and tools back on the job.

Six months into the sustainment phase, one tenure manager described the impact and uplift as follows: “These sustainment activities have helped us to move from obligation and ‘We have to do this’ to commitment and ‘I get it! This stuff does work!’” Change happens over time, and people need support and sustainment activities to help them change behaviors. A “sustain to attain” approach improves the application of new knowledge and skills back on the job.

To better understand the conditions, Forum uses a Learning Environment Assessment (LEA) to diagnose the current actions to support learning on the job that are prevalent in an organization. This assessment identifies what learning practices, processes, and tools currently exist in the workplace and then evaluates them at three levels: organizational, work group, and individual.

Picking the Right Owners

In the “spray and pray” world of performance improvement initiatives, organizations fail to define who specifically they expect to drive the behavior change and application of new skills and tools. It’s assumed that everybody has a role, with the manager population implicitly central in supporting individual learners back on the job. As usual, in the case of “everybody” owning it, “nobody” owns it.

In the “sustain to attain” approach, Forum uses the learning environment assessment to define the primary- and secondary-level ownership of sustainment activities. These owners are selected from the following three levels (see Figure 2):

Figure 2: Three Ownership Levels

- **Organization drives:** The learning and development organization invests in centrally driven reinforcement activities and events.
- **Leaders lead:** The ownership and responsibility for sustainment and reinforcement work lies primarily in the hands of managers of participants.
- **Learners seek:** Sustainment efforts are in the hands of the individual learners. They select what they will do and how to sustain what they are learning.

Once the primary and secondary owners have been identified, the appropriate sustainment activities can be chosen to fit with the ownership.

Choosing Sustainment Activities to Fit the Learning Environment and the Ownership Approach

Our experience and work with clients who take the “sustain to attain” approach to performance improvement reveal four categories for sustainment activities (see Figure 3):

**Figure 3: Categories of Sustainment Activities**

- **Assessments (“I Need It”):**
  - Rating of current effectiveness
  - Monitoring of improvements
  - Identification of specific goals for ongoing improvement
  - Active reflection on cause-and-effect relationships

- **Examples (“I See It”):**
  - Line of sight between actions and impact
  - Models of what “great” looks like
  - Stories that illustrate how to get to “great”
  - Refreshers on knowledge, skills, behaviors, tools for great performers

- **Opportunities (“I Do It”):**
  - Deliberate practice as part of existing job
  - Stretch assignments as part of existing job
  - Temporary assignments (inside or outside workplace)
  - Coaching/teaching others

- **Supports (“I Live It”):**
  - Recognition and acknowledgment that build confidence
  - Future-focused feedback that builds competence
  - Discussions that challenge, inspire, and validate
  - Coaching that drives continuous improvement

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**CASE STUDY**

**Leaders Lead**

Leaders/managers of participants model, coach, and support learning for their employees

**Benefits:** Active modeling and coaching

**Drawbacks:** Relies on expertise of managers and on managers’ prioritizing development of their people

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**Learners Seek**

Individuals find opportunities and support to sustain the learning, based on their own initiative and network

**Benefits:** Fit to individual needs

**Drawbacks:** Variable interpretation—participants may not prioritize their own development

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**Organization Drives**

Centralized approach which creates a “push” out to users: multiple elements centrally executed

**Benefits:** Consistent, reliable, aligned

**Drawbacks:** Requires dedicated support resources and investment; assumes “message sent is message received”

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**Examples (“I See It”):** Activities in this group help learners see and know what they should be applying back on the job. These activities demonstrate and show people what successful application of the behaviors looks like. They provide relevant and regular examples, in a structured way, over time, to help learners see clearly what it looks and feels like to successfully master the new behaviors and tools.

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**Assessments (“I Need It”):** Assessment activities uncover gaps in performance and opportunities for improvement. These activities allow the learner, line manager, coach, and organization to rate current performance and then use the feedback to establish and/or update improvement goals.
■ Opportunities ("I Do It"): Deliberate practice is at the heart of behavior change. Opportunities for application of new skills and tools don’t have to amount to “10,000 hours” but they do need to be more significant than a couple of notes in an action plan at the end of a formal workshop or e-learning event. The nature of the work determines to what extent deliberate practice needs to be in a safe or simulated environment or whether practice drills can be done on the job.

■ Supports ("I Live It"): Activities in this group include significant catalysts for change. Affirmation and encouragement are often underrated but have been shown to be highly significant in helping people to make a change in behavior and move through any short-term performance dip on the way to lasting performance improvement.

The four categories of sustainment activities can be defined more specifically by mapping them against the three levels of ownership. The resulting matrix (Figure 4) defines a menu of sustainment activities available.

Figure 4: Specific Sustainment Activities by Ownership Level

The communication plan should define what the targeted message will be over time and identify the optimal method or technology to drive communication (for example, communities of practice, learning groups, coaching the coaches, e-mail communication, or the use of an internal portal or intranet). The communication plan ensures that there are deliberate “touches” to people a number of times so that the messages stick. It also creates clarity so everyone understands his or her role and what resources are available to support and reinforce learning.

Where appropriate and realistic, Forum has assisted clients in connecting learning initiatives to broader Human Resources systems. These include performance management, talent assessment, reward and recognition, and talent development processes related to job assignments and job rotations.

Seeking Expert Help

On the surface, the idea of transforming learning events into learning systems that include deliberate and broad sustainment plans may not seem too complicated. A variety of externally developed tools and processes can help companies migrate from traditional event-based learning to “sustain to attain” approaches. Forum has developed a six-step process for building targeted sustainment plans (Figure 5).

Using this process, we work with clients, typically in a 1-day workshop, to define their sustainment plans. We work with key sponsors and stakeholders to complete the learning environment assessment, select ideas for sustainment, and identify best-fit activities for the sustainment plan. The outcome is an approach that ensures that additional yields can be obtained for the individual and for the organization.

Figure 5: Developing a Targeted Sustainment Plan

The activities that are in the primary ownership column should be the focus of the sustainment plan.

Going the Distance: Communication Planning and Systems Integration

While the sustainment activities strengthen application of new behaviors and tools on the job, companies can also close the gap with a comprehensive communication plan and a strategy for linking performance/behavioral expectations to other Human Resources systems.
The Execution Edge

While many L&D departments consider sustainment an optional investment, it is important to understand that for the individual learners, sustainment activities back on the job are the real activators for change. They can close the “knowing/doing” gap that exists between knowing the value of skills and behaviors and doing something real to apply these on the job.

Sustainment is the phase in which the learning translates into new, improved behaviors and performance. Without nurturing, kernels of knowledge and rough skills won’t translate into insight and mastered behaviors. Organizations need to put the focus on reinforcement and sustainment activities that get behaviors to stick, drive performance improvements, and yield individual and organizational returns on learning investments.