

How to learn anything for free and in your pyjamas

With the ever increasing amount of information now freely available on the internet, learning should be easier than it has ever been. Yet many people still seem reticent to take the plunge. This is a quick guide into how to expand your personal knowledge base and skill set. We will start with the easy stuff, the things that you know you can be better at, or as Donald Rumsfeld called them, "the known unknowns"



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KNOWN UNKNOWNNS - DISCOVERY

Whether you want to be able to use pivot tables in Microsoft Excel, calculate Net Present Value (NPV) or learn how to plait hair or knit, your first port of call should be a search engine. But before you start typing in the "little white box of hope", have you considered learning how to search better?

When you type a search query into Google, Yahoo, MSN or any other mainstream engine you are probably used to the experience of being offered hundreds of thousands of page links accompanied by lists of adverts, none of which seem to contain what you were looking for. So my first piece of advice is:

1. Type "**How to use Google**" into the search bar and follow the brief tutorial available.
But search engines are not your only source of free information.
2. I often start with **YouTube**. Fortunately for you, there are thousands of people around the world who are happy to share their knowledge and experience for free. It may come as a surprise but there are 1,750 videos on how to knit on YouTube as well as how to wire a plug, change the oil filter in your car or build a discounted cash flow model.
The cynics among you will question the quality of all these free sources of information and so should you. You must be prepared to question and validate what you find before rushing off and applying it.
3. You can also combine the power of a search tool with a reference you trust. If you have completed the tutorial listed above on Google, you will already know this. Say for example you trust Harvard Business School in all things business and you want to learn how to calculate NPV. If you type, "calculate NPV site:www.hbs.edu" your search will return only pages from within the HBS site.
4. Equally you can go direct to an expert using a business networking site. If you are not already a member of **LinkedIn**, you should consider it. Once you have established a network go to Tony Karrer's blog for a **brilliant concise guide for using networks** to find answers to difficult questions.

UNKNOWN UNKNOWNNS

Finding out something you know that you need to know is relatively easy. The secret is in the question. If you ask the right question of the right person you will get your answer. But how do you unearth the things you should know but aren't aware of; the unknown unknowns?

Well you've got to put yourself in a position where someone or something will tell you. The easiest of these is to ask someone you trust. All too often in life and work we wait to be told that we are not doing something as well as we could and then discount the advice because we don't want to hear it, or because the format in which it was given made us feel defensive. It hurts much less if you go out looking for it.

1. Ask someone you trust (not your spouse, family member or boss - too much baggage there) what are the top three things you could do to be a better person. Then ask them how you could go about achieving these three things.
2. Get into widgets. If you have your internet home page set to the BBC or eBay you may be missing a trick. Go and get yourself an **iGoogle account**. This is a customisable home page where you can choose the content you want to be presented with each day from world news, stock market and weather to Twitter feeds, horoscopes and sports. If you are interested in learning, go beyond the obvious celebrity gossip widgets and add a word of the day widget or a brain teaser on top of your daily diet of news and views.
3. Feed your brain with RSS. Having grasped the idea of choosing your daily consumption of information rather than letting a web page choose for you, the next logical step is mastering RSS feeds. **Really Simple Syndication** (RSS) is the way in which you can subscribe to precisely focused areas of interest without having to wade through all the rubbish that doesn't interest you.
4. Random walk - finally, put aside a little time each week to find out more on a particular topic that interests you. Look up an item on Wikipedia and just follow some of the links to see where they take you. You will be amazed what you can pick up.