

# Synapse

## How to Tackle Unconscious Incompetence in the Workforce Through Training Solutions<sup>1</sup>

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- Blog



“We don’t know what we don’t know” or “fake it till you make it” are oft-used phrases to describe knowledge that we might need—but don’t currently have—in order to do our jobs. This phenomenon is also known as unconscious incompetence, and it’s hurting organizations in ways you might not even realize.

Not possessing critical knowledge can have far-reaching consequences. It might be something small, such as a content creator taking extra time to recreate a document because she did not know that a template already exists. This lack of knowledge now adds extra hours to a project, perhaps slowing down the launch of a marketing campaign.

However, this lack of knowledge can have much more dramatic effects. For example, a salesperson might not know about certain features or capabilities of a product, and after

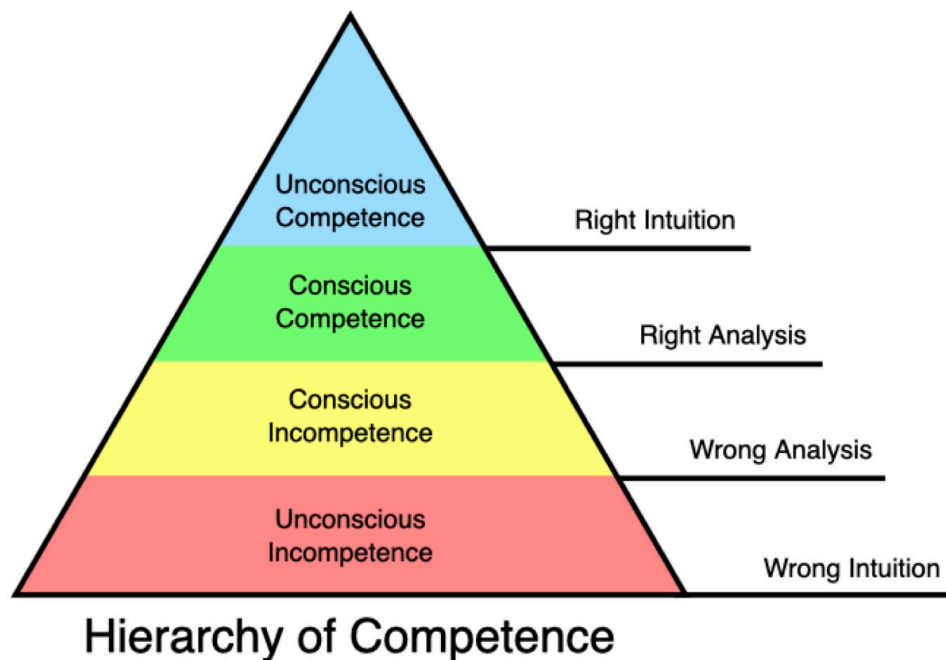
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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved 1.24.21 from <https://getsynapse.com/blog/how-to-tackle-unconscious-incompetence-in-the-workforce-through-training-solutions/>

demo'ing the product to a prospect, loses the sale because the customer thought that the product was not robust enough.

These small situations can multiply rapidly, and at scale, across larger organizations, can have a negative impact on the bottom line.

This pain point is known as unconscious incompetence and it negatively affects most companies across all industries. Unconscious incompetence is one of the four stages of competence, a learning model mapping the stages of skill acquisition



Source: [Wikipedia](#)

According to Area9 Lyceum, employees are 15-40% unconsciously incompetent about critical competencies they must master in order to perform their jobs.

One global technology company discovered that, on average, its sales employees didn't understand or know about 22% of its product features, even though they believed they did, according to Harvard Business Review.

How can learning leaders and talent developers address this gap? Let's have a look at some strategies that can be put into practice.

## 1. Continuous assessments

Assessments usually mean tests, but we are not necessarily advocating that managers test their employees regularly.

Employees would most likely wince at the thought of being formally tested. However, managers can be more creative—and strategic—about understanding the knowledge that their employees know and do not know.

Managers can devise short “pop quizzes” that can be sent to employees, that do not take up too much time. Much in the same way that YouTube presents a screen takeover with one question that must be answered before a video can be played, find a clever way to build and deliver short assessments to employees that make sense and that would not be met with an eye-roll.

Multiple choice and select all-that-apply work well. Further, provide the answers and explanations immediately after, so that knowledge can be processed in the moment.

Further, these quizzes should not carry the threat of wrong answers. Explain that this is for their benefit and for the benefit of the department and the organization as a whole.



## 2. Learning “in the flow of work”

As we’ve covered several times in this blog, employees are time-starved, burned out, and mobile, and most likely, do not have the time or patience to sit through formal training or courses.

Learning “in the flow of work,” in which instructions, tutorials, videos, and other interactive content are presented alongside the employee’s daily work, produces the best results. This is because there is no significant time commitment on the part of the employee and when done properly, seems natural and unobtrusive.

Indeed, the pop quizzes mentioned in #1 are an example of this learning in the flow of work.

The more training that's delivered and completed, the more learning and hopefully knowledge, the employee obtains.

Listen to one of our recent webinars about how to address the challenges of delivering experiences that not only engage learners but also help them retain knowledge.

### 3. Adaptive learning

Another strategy for delivering training that does not take up too much of the employee's time is adaptive learning.

"Instead of wasting time re-reading what they already know, learners spend that time more meaningfully by learning what they don't know—including the things they are unconsciously incompetent (what they don't know) about, and anything they learned recently but may have forgotten," according to Area9 Lyceum.

Much like designing the skip-logic of a survey form, adaptive learning includes these If-Then scenarios that deliver different modules to different learners based on their knowledge and performance. This reduces frustration for more advanced or experienced professionals, but delivers the right-fit content for those in need of the extra instruction.

Learning designers can lean on subject matter experts to build this logic into courses. No doubt, this will require extra effort, but the results will be more tailored to learners, increasing engagement and outcomes.



## 4. Be aware of ‘conscious incompetence’

Incompetence—and being aware of it—is not so cut and dry.

While we’re discussing unconscious incompetence, there is another related situation: conscious incompetence. This is the next level up in the competence hierarchy pyramid displayed above and it describes the stage in which employees are aware of what they don’t know.

However, while they might be aware of what they don’t know, they might be stuck as to what they can do to close this gap.

There is an old saying, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” This is applicable to the consciously incompetent employee because the employee is self-aware and can be encouraged to seek training on the skills or knowledge that they lack.

Rather than waiting for the moment when critical knowledge is needed, the employee can take initiative and ask her manager or the L&D team what resources are available to address any gaps.

However, it’s important for the manager and by extension, L&D, to understand that there are still going to be employees who cannot know everything and not all at once. Some members of a team or department are responsible for certain tasks that others are not. Further, others on a team or project only need a “light” knowledge of something that others need to know deeper.

As such, incompetence—whether unconscious or conscious—may be difficult to quantify and a training solution may need to be modified in order to fit these distinct scenarios.

Business managers and L&D can work together to find the perfect suite of modules that are presented to employees in the moment, for continuous assessment and feedback.

“I think unconscious incompetence is the biggest overlooked thing in L&D today,” explains Nick Howe, Chief Learning Officer of Area9 Lyceum in a recent webinar, “and has the biggest potential to massively improve the outcomes for learners. It’s the next frontier of where we need to go as an industry.” You can hear more about what Nick had to say on the subject of unconscious incompetence in the full on-demand webinar recording [here](#).

*Beating unconscious incompetence means making training readily available in the flow of work. Learn how one company managed to do just that and increase learner engagement by 80%*