



The environment in which you deliver your training has a big impact on learners. Marian Diamond's seminal research in the 1980s showed that animals kept in an “enriched” environment (lit cages, coloured panels, music, attention, opportunities for play) showed significantly increased cortical growth, cell branching and neural connections than those in an “impoverished” environment (dark cages, isolated, no opportunity to engage in play.) All subsequent research has corroborated the fact that **enriched learning environments generate better learning.**

You can enrich the environment using posters, props, toys and other materials, but if you start off with a venue which is “brain friendly”, your learners will have an even more powerful learning experience. Here are our **top 6 questions** to ask when choosing a brain friendly training venue:

1. Does it generate positive emotions?

Look for a venue which makes you feel good. Positive emotions are essential for good learning. Ask yourself “What does this space make me feel like?” Does it make me feel relaxed, curious, energised or comfortable? Or does it make me feel bored, anxious, uncomfortable or negative? The chances are it will make others feel a similar way. Some factors which influence how a room makes people feel are:

Lighting: Fluorescent lights trigger the release of the stress hormone cortisol which inhibits learning whereas soft lighting induces a calm state.

Materials: A recent study showed that wooden furniture and fittings improve people’s emotional states, and natural materials (including wood) have been shown to improve people’s health and wellbeing.

Windows: Natural daylight is proven to increase attention, alertness, memory and recall and windows that open allow stagnant energy out as well as enabling a connection to nature and the outdoors.

Ionisers: Ionised air increases wellbeing, alertness and energy levels.

Associations: People may associate a board room with long meetings and endless PowerPoint, or a colourful room full of beanbags with play and creativity. Look for a space with positive associations.

2. Can learners see or access nature?

Look for a venue with outdoor space and plenty of windows with views of nature. Extensive research shows that spending time in nature reduces stress and anxiety, promotes happiness and empathy, increases physical and mental energy, and improves the ability and capacity to learn. Being outside in a natural environment improves memory and attention span by up to 20%, being able to see nature through

a window increases productivity and reduces sickness rates, and hearing birdsong through open windows promotes a sense of wellbeing and happiness.

The venue should also bring nature indoors with plants, flowers, natural materials (such as wood or wicker), and images of nature on the walls. Indoor plants have been shown to increase concentration and accuracy, and flowers in the work environment reduce stress levels and make people feel more relaxed, secure, and happy.

Some indoor plants (such as Spider Plants, Christmas Cacti, and Mother-in-Laws Tongue) are particularly useful as they neutralise the electro-magnetic fields caused by computers and other electrical equipment which inhibit cognitive performance.

3. Does it have a variety of spaces?

Look for a venue where you can use different spaces which have a different style, décor and ambience from each other. Different learners respond better to different types of space, depending on their learning styles and personal preferences. Some learners need activity and stimulation while others need peace and calm. Some perform better in comfortable relaxed seating and others in more upright seating. Some need it cooler and others need it warmer.

Similarly, some spaces are more suitable for certain types of learning activity than others. A stimulating environment with primary colours will generate lots of energy and enthusiasm and will work well for creative thinking, generating ideas and problem-solving, whilst a room with pale, soft colours is better for quiet, reflective activities.

4. Does it stimulate the senses?

Look for a venue which stimulates the senses with colours, images, textures, sounds, smells and tastes. Stimulating all the senses has a profound effect on learning, helping learners to form long lasting memories and to recall and use what they've learnt quickly and easily.

Colours provide strong visual stimuli, and can improve visual processing, reduce stress, and promote brain rewiring. Bright colours increase respiration rate, heart rate, blood pressure and brain activity and cool colours generate relaxation and calmness. Look for venue with a balance of colours so that learners are relaxed yet alert, calm yet stimulated. Beige/grey and yellow have been shown to be optimal colours for learning and splashes of brighter colours provide valuable visual stimulation, but beware of too many colours (more than six) which will distract learners and interfere with learning.

A good training venue should enable you to use visuals, textures, sounds, tastes and smells to enhance learning. (See our free resource [72 Ways to Make Learning Multi-Sensory](#)). Some factors to consider are:

- Can you hang up lots of posters, images, quotes, flipcharts etc.
- Can you play music or make lots of noise without disturbing other groups?
- Can you change room layouts, adjust lighting levels, remove furniture etc.
- Do the audio-visual facilities meet your needs?
- Are candles/oil-burners allowed?
- Is there enough space for physical activities?

5. Is there room to move around?

Look for a venue that has plenty of room to stand up and move around within the training rooms themselves as well as access to other spaces for more extensive movement and physical activities. Standing up is shown to boost blood flow to the brain and increase the activity of the central nervous system. Likewise, physical movement and exercise significantly improve brain plasticity, memory and recall. Activities which involve moving around create stronger neural pathways and deeper learning, so find a venue with lots of space and make the most of it.

Lunches and coffees should also be served in a different room from the training, to encourage movement and provide different sensory stimuli for learners.

6. Does it serve brain friendly food?

Look for a venue that serves light meals based on fresh fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and fish. What people eat affects their ability to learn and whilst you can't control what people eat before or after training, you can ensure that during training, learners eat food that boosts their concentration, alertness, brain function and memory. (See our free resource [Food For Learning](#)).

Foods that inhibit learning are:

- ✗ Refined wheat products such as white bread, cakes, pastry
- ✗ Refined sugars in cakes, biscuits and desserts
- ✗ Saturated fats and fried food
- ✗ Artificial food additives such as sweeteners, colouring, and preservatives

Foods that aid learning are:

- ✓ Oily Fish such as salmon, tuna, mackerel, and sardines
- ✓ Leafy Green vegetables including spinach, kale, and cabbage
- ✓ Brightly coloured vegetables such as carrots and red peppers
- ✓ Beans, lentils and pulses
- ✓ Fruits including grapes, Pomegranates, oranges, bananas
- ✓ Berries - especially blueberries and strawberries
- ✓ Avocados
- ✓ Whole grains such as oats and brown rice
- ✓ Nuts including almonds and walnuts, cashews, hazelnuts, brazil nuts and peanuts
- ✓ Seeds including pumpkin, sunflower, flax, and sesame seeds
- ✓ Nut butters such as peanut or almond butter or tahini
- ✓ Dark (70% cocoa solids) chocolate
- ✓ Herbal teas that are designed to boost alertness

A good venue will also provide healthy snacks and nibbles such as nuts, seeds, dried fruit, fresh fruit and small amounts of dark chocolate (rather than the usual sugary sweets and biscuits) for people to pick at throughout the day. These help maintain blood sugar levels and stimulate the taste buds to improve attention and learning.



This guide has been compiled by [Saltbox Training & Events](#) because we believe that too many training venues inhibit rather than promote good learning. We run a training venue, [The Salthouse](#), in beautiful rural Somerset, which we strive to make as brain friendly as possible and we want to raise awareness of the impact of the environment on learning.

[Click here to find out about using *The Salthouse* for your training](#)

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Brain Friendly Training Venue Checklist

- A relaxed, welcoming, friendly feel
- Triggers positive associations
- Soft, non-fluorescent lighting
- Windows that can be opened
- Natural daylight
- Ionisers
- Natural materials in furnishings and décor
- Access to a variety of different spaces each with a different décor and ambience
- Appropriate colours (eg muted beige/grey/yellow tones with splashes of colour)
- Facility to put posters, flipcharts etc on the walls
- Sound and video equipment
- Movable furniture
- Variable lighting levels
- Access to outdoor space
- Facility to be outside in nature
- Views of nature from windows
- Plants, flowers and/or natural images indoors
- Plants which neutralise electromagnetic fields
- Room to move freely within the main training space
- Access to areas large enough for physical, moving around activities
- Coffee/lunches served in a separate room
- Brain friendly food and snacks