CPD: The Professional Helpsheat Series

TRAINING
WHEN IT CAN HELP AND WHEN IT CAN'T
Making the most of all of your learning opportunities

When most of us think of learning and professional development, we immediately think of formal training or teaching. Most of us are fully aware of other development activities, yet the conditioning of years in the classroom and lecture theatre during our formal education is not easily outgrown.

There is also a multibillion pound training industry, with providers clamouring for our attention, promoting their carefully packaged products and promising to meet our every learning need. It is easy to slip into “catalogue-browsing mode”, looking through the available options for the one that vaguely fits our perceived development need. We often do training because it is there and because information about it is readily available. That is not to say that all formal training is bad, but if you don’t choose carefully you may find that the returns are not worth the investment of time and money. See also our information sheet entitled How to Identify, Select and Brief a Training Provider.

Formal training may or may not be the most effective or appropriate means of meeting your development needs. It may be that other activities will help you to develop skills or knowledge more quickly and effectively. This will depend on what you are trying to develop and on your preferred learning style. To ensure that you make the best choice, it is worth spending some time clearly articulating your development needs and considering all of the possible methods for achieving your goals. Further help can be found in our information sheets Identifying Your Professional Needs and What is a PDP?

Development activities

There is a vast range of activities through which you can potentially gain new knowledge and skills. The list below is not comprehensive but should give you an idea of the types of learning opportunity that you could take advantage of.

Attending a course or workshop

If the trainer is suitably qualified and experienced, and the course is professionally planned with clear learning outcomes, then you should learn from the content. Be alert also to the possibility of learning from other participants. A really good trainer will encourage this interparticipant learning, because no one can be expected to know everything about a topic. Weigh up the benefits that you may derive from an interactive workshop rather than a lecture.

Undertaking e-learning or distance learning

There are an increasing number of online tutorials on a range of subjects (especially in IT skills). These are often cheaper than trainer-led courses, and you can do them at your own speed and in your own time. However, you need to be able to motivate yourself to work. You also need to consider what level of support is available if you have difficulties. For example, if you don’t understand the material, is there anyone with whom you can discuss it? It may not be necessary to enrol on a course. If you can get hold of a recommended reading list, you may be able to educate yourself. The Institute offers a range of subsidised e-learning courses, normally including one available free as a “taster” so that you can see what they involve.

Attending conferences

Aside from the knowledge gained from the main speakers, conferences can be useful for the activities that go on at the periphery. Here you may discover people with shared interests who are able to provide you with fresh insights into your work; and listen carefully during the Q&A sessions. However, conferences are often expensive and you need to weigh up the cost against the likelihood of meeting someone useful.

Finding a coach

A coach is someone with experience in a particular area who can guide the process of improving your performance by setting objectives for you and helping you to review your experiences. They are often used in various areas of business management, but there are general life coaches and career coaches. They will work with you as an individual, so their advice will often be tailored to your specific situation. However, this will come at a price in terms of level of commitment and, of course, money. It is important to evaluate the extent to which the coaching is helping you to develop rather than just serving as a comfort blanket. For more detailed information and advice, see our information sheet entitled Coaching.
Finding a mentor
Mentoring is like coaching but on a less formal basis — and it’s usually free. Some organisations have structured mentoring programmes whereby more experienced staff act as reference points for newer employees. In some professions the mentor may observe the individual in practice and give them feedback. Even if your organisation doesn’t have such a scheme, you may be able to develop your own supportive relationships with more experienced people, such as through the Institute’s online mentee/mentor matching service. Bear in mind that, as you are not paying them, you need to be wary of imposing on your mentor too much.

Organising peer forums
Many large organisations have “buddy schemes” where new employees are able to meet regularly to discuss issues of concern or exchange advice about each other’s work. You don’t have to be new to a job to benefit from sharing knowledge with your peers. If your organisation doesn’t have such a scheme in place, why not consider organising one yourself? Initiating something like this will look good on your CV as well as helping you to learn from others. Many professional bodies organise similar activities on a regional or national basis. This can be a useful option if you are in a small organisation with few colleagues.

Undertaking secondments or exchanges
You may be able to persuade your employer that, by working for a fixed period in another organisation or another department in the same organisation, you will be able to add value. You may gain a greater understanding of the needs of a client or gain a new perspective on the priorities of your own work. You may discover different practices and procedures. You will almost certainly have the opportunity to develop your skills by using them in a new context. However, secondments are often very difficult to arrange and you may have difficulty settling into the other work environment or settling back into your old one on your return.

Taking on extra responsibility
If you’re unable to arrange a formal secondment, you may be able to gain some of the benefits by taking on a colleague’s responsibilities during their absence. Alternatively, you may be able to discuss with your manager the possibility of taking on a new project or even helping out with some of his/her duties.

Work shadowing
Spending a certain amount of time watching someone else do their job can be very informative. If this is a job that you’re considering moving into, it can give you a clear insight into the skills required. Alternatively, you may gain an understanding of how to work more effectively with a colleague. Sometimes this can be arranged formally in an organisation or you may have to arrange it for yourself and undertake it in your spare time if it is for your own career development. Even if you cannot arrange a formal work shadowing, you can often learn by taking a more active interest in the work of your colleagues.

Running training yourself
Committing yourself to run training for other people can be a stimulus to motivate you to learn more about a topic. In preparing and delivering training you will often have to think very carefully about the topic from a number of different angles, conduct background reading and research, and find answers to interesting questions. All of this will be developmental for you. You don’t need to know everything about a subject in order to run training on one aspect of it. If you are wary of undertaking such a task on your own, you could consider working alongside a more experienced trainer.

Getting involved in committees and consultative groups
Many large organisations have staff committees or employee forums to discuss important issues. Similarly, many professional bodies (including the Institute) have regional branches organising local events or committees dealing with special issues, such as diversity, and it may be possible to join one of these.

Writing articles
Those working in academic research will regularly have to write and publish peer-reviewed papers. In other areas it may be possible to develop your written communication skills by writing articles for newsletters produced by your organisation or professional body. As with delivering training, such a commitment is a useful spur to conduct further reading and research for yourself.
Finding external developmental activities

If there are limited opportunities for gaining useful experience in your job or if you want to gain experience that will get you out of your job, you may need to undertake developmental activities in your spare time. You may be able to choose volunteering opportunities in which you can exercise your less-developed skills.

To get the most from any learning activity, including formal training, it is important to reflect on the experience and to find opportunities to implement your newly acquired knowledge, skills or understanding. See our information sheet entitled *Reflecting on Development Experiences* for more advice on this.

Working out what is best for you

With such a range of potential developmental opportunities to choose from, it is important to be clear about what you need to learn, how and why. Before embarking on any developmental activity, especially one that costs money, ask yourself the following questions.

**What do you need to develop?**
- more information?
- greater know-how?
- improved skills?
- increased awareness?
- deeper understanding?
- a wider perspective?
- alternative approaches?
- more refined techniques?
- a recognised qualification?

**Why do you need to develop it?**
- to improve your performance in particular aspects of your current role?
- to put a seal of approval on your existing skills?
- to develop competencies that will prepare you for future career opportunities?
- to indulge a desire for learning new things in order to maintain motivation?
- to change direction?

**What measures will you use to determine what you have learned?**
- What will you be able to do after this experience that you could not do before?
- How much progress do you want to make?
- How will you know when to give up on an activity if it is no longer giving you what you need?
- How will you evaluate the worth of the learning in terms of cost, effort or inconvenience?

**How will you make use of the learning?**
- What opportunities will you have to apply the learning?
- How soon after the learning will you be able to put it into practice?
- Do you need to practise regularly in order to keep improving?
- How will other people know that the learning has been beneficial?
How do you learn best?
Kolb (1983) defined four main types of learning style:

- **Accommodative learners** like to experiment by doing things. Through trial and error they learn from their direct experiences. They tend to ask: “What will happen if I do this?”

- **Divergent learners** like to reflect on things that they have observed or experienced, and generate a variety of possible explanations. They tend to ask: “Why does this happen?”

- **Assimilative learners** like to develop a clear theoretical understanding as a basis for learning. They tend to ask: “Does this explanation fit the facts?”

- **Convergent learners** are interested in finding practical solutions to problems and ideas that can be applied directly to real situations. They tend to ask: “How will this be useful?”

The combination of learning activities that you choose should fit in with your preferred learning style but should also stretch you to learn in different ways.

What learning method is most suited to your needs?

- Do you need something individually tailored or will something off the shelf be sufficient?

- Do you need to get hands-on experience or will a theoretical understanding be enough?

- Are you confident in your ability to motivate yourself or do you need some external stimulus?

- Do you need to gain a lot of learning all in one go or would you benefit from an ongoing process of development?

- Which do you need most: the learning or the qualification?

- Whose input will you respect more: that of a trainer or of an experienced practitioner?

So, when can training help and when can’t it?

As a rule of thumb, formal training is useful if you need an introduction to a new area or a refresher. If you want to broaden your skills or acquire new ones, an introductory training course may be helpful, but you would be wise to combine it with some hands-on learning experiences. If you need to acquire a qualification, formal training may be appropriate, but you may be able to use experience-based portfolio building as an alternative method. If you need to gain skills or knowledge specific to a particular aspect of your job, you may benefit more from informal learning through mentoring or peer feedback.

By being aware of the range of possible learning opportunities and by asking a range of probing questions about your learning needs and preferences, you should be able to make more informed choices about the combination of developmental activities that is best for you.

Further reading

Ian Cunningham, Graham Dawes and Ben Bennett 2004 *The Handbook of Work Based Learning* (Gower) ISBN 978 0 5660 8541 3.


Information about the Institute of Physics and the opportunities that it provides to get involved in some of these activities can be found on its website at www.iop.org.

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