

Towards Career Fitness

Techniques to help you get ahead

Patrick Forsyth



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Towards Career Fitness: Techniques to help you get ahead

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The author

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world conducting training in all its forms: in-company courses, public seminars, individual tutorials and speaking at conferences. He is also the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focussed and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of “Your boss: sorted!”, “How to get a pay rise” and “Your job performance appraisal”. His writing extends beyond business and he has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full*) and three volumes of light-hearted travel writing: his latest travel book is about Thailand and is titled *Smile because it happened*.

He can be contacted via www.patrickforsyth.com

1 Introduction

It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.

John Wooden

Let's assume you want to get ahead. You want your job and career to go well, to be satisfying, even enjoyable, and you want it to give you suitable rewards. None of this can be left to chance. You need to work effectively and you need to handle a variety of matters effectively, for instance handling your job performance appraisal well (about which I have written separately in this series) and more.

Career management needs thought and an active approach; it need not be either difficult or time consuming, but it must be done regularly and systematically. At the end of the day adopting such an approach is worthwhile – after all it's your job, career and life. One key aspect of all this is development, activity that gives you the knowledge and skills to do both your current and future jobs well. This the theme here.

Appraisal relates very directly to development, though it is not the only prompt to making development take place. Development is an ongoing process. It is possible to regard development as something that the organization, or your boss, does *for you*, and to an extent this is true. Equally what is initiated for you may sometimes be no great help, sometimes useful and sometimes spot on. Almost always you need to take an initiative and do more than happens automatically.

So, it is best to regard development as a personal responsibility, something that *you* make happen, rather than something that is wished on you; this is especially true if you want what is then done to assist your career short and long term rather than simply focus on your current role and responsibilities.

Thus self-development, as we might call it, implies a process directed at improvement: to assist you work better now, but with an eye on the future too. In a job context this in turn implies the aim of improving specific job performance and thus incorporating or extending the skills that make that possible. Much that has already been said suggests why such a process is necessary, here we examine something of the detail of how it can be made to happen. It needs more than some kind of “good intention”. To be effective the process needs to be:

- Consciously entered into
- Well planned
- Systematically executed
- Focused on clear objectives and intended to make a real and tangible difference.

Having said that, it should be acknowledged immediately that alongside the specific objectives there are – should be – more personal and intangible ones. One result of good self-development is that it can make your job more interesting, satisfying and fun. And it can also help your longer-term career progress and help your overall advancement.

In a busy life an activity like self-development must not be a chore, especially not an impossible one, so approaches to it must make it manageable. Certainly in today's work environment spending time on self-development is not a nice option, something to do a little of if time permits: it is a necessity, and, as Lord Young of Graffham said *God helps those who train themselves*. Your success and future prosperity depends on it; the only question is how much activity is necessary and what should this be?

TIP: Resolve to make some self-development an ongoing thread to your work life. It need not take too long, but considered and regular attention to it pays dividends.

The answer to what is best to do comes, in part, from an understanding and utilisation of the development process.

2 The nature of the development process

Here we begin to examine the “what you do” and “how you do it” of self-development. There is no magic formula, many different things can contribute to successful self-development and it is in deciding on the mix of what you do that you first influence your ultimate success.

2.1 Just what does development do?

First, remember that development can only ever do three things:

- *Impart knowledge*: so you can learn about whatever is necessary in your job from background knowledge to how your company’s product works; both the span and depth of your knowledge matters
- *Develop skills*: introducing you to new skills, maintaining, improving or refining your abilities in everything from core techniques in something like negotiation to specialist computer skills you may need to deploy
- *Change attitudes*: study can change the way you think about things, although this may take longer than adopting some new skills. For example, something like managing your time effectively is as much a question of the attitude you take to it (and the habits this develops) as to slavishly following rules.

Next, if your development is going to change anything, two other things are key:

- You must set aside some *time* for self-development. This need not be excessive or unmanageable, but it needs to be there and it needs to be made available on a regular basis.
- *Application* is equally important. There is all the difference in the world between skimming through a book, to take a simple example, so that you can say that you have done so, and reading it carefully, studying it over a little longer period, making some notes and perhaps also resolving to take some action as a result.

In many jobs the evidence of results, whether good or bad, is clear. Though some development activity may stem from a more general “look ahead”, much of it will come from an examination of the current situation. Managers are charged with monitoring the performance of their staff, and the systematic way that they go about this can equally be applied to oneself.

2.2 The development process

Consider the formal process first (that is how your manager might approach it with you in mind); the following stages can be identified:

- *Examine your job description:* this allows you to review the levels of knowledge and skills that a particular *job* demands, and the attitudes required of the person who does it. This states the ideal and the current position and is not, at this stage, linked to the individual currently doing the job (you)
- *Examine the person:* this enables a look, alongside the ideal, at what the situation actually is currently. How do the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the individual stack up alongside what the job demands? This information comes from observation of the person, their performance and their results. Formal appraisal is a key part of this, as is other, less formal, evaluation
- *Implications for the future:* before reaching any conclusions from the process described so far, it is necessary also to think ahead, again focusing on the job rather than the individual. What will the job demand in future that will be different from the current situation? What developments – in the organisation, in technology, in the market (affecting competition or the expectation of customers, for instance) and more – are coming? Specifically what new skills, knowledge or attitudes will be necessary, and how will existing ones need to change?
- *Defining the gap:* together two factors coming from the above may define a gap: the combination of any shortfall in current levels of competence plus the need to add to this for the future. This is the so-called *development (or training) gap* and describes the area towards which development must be directed with the aim of creating an ideal situation.

Of course, the picture produced may be fine; no immediate action may be necessary. In so dynamic an environment, the reality at any particular moment is most likely that some action – major or minor – is, in fact, necessary. If so a plan of action is needed to deal with implementation. Again viewing this systematically provides a simple checklist approach as to what you need to do:

- *List what needs to be addressed:* whatever is identified, from minor matters that need only a small input to the development of new skills that must be approached from square one
- *Assign priorities to items on the list:* in most organisations resources, that is time (including yours), money and training resources and facilities, are finite. It is unlikely to be possible to do everything that might be desirable instantly, and impossible to select what comes first or should be postponed without some clear thinking through of priorities
- *Add some timing to it:* having established priorities you need to consider when things are to be done: what is urgent? What can be postponed without causing problems and what might be addressed in parts? (Perhaps with something being done early on, but action also planned to follow up and complete the training task later – an approach that might make it easier to sell to a manager)

- *Consider the most suitable method:* this factor needs to relate quite closely to timing. With a list of desirable development activities and priorities set, the next thing is to consider exactly how something will be approached (a course, a project, whatever)
- *Calculate costs:* this is always an important issue, and realistically may involve some compromise and a balancing of different approaches; when you are initiating things the question of who is to pay needs considering – you or the organisation
- *Link to an action plan:* the net result of these deliberations needs to be documented, and turned into a rolling plan that sets out what will be done, in what way, when and who will be involved.

In this kind of way training and development activities can be considered, worked out and scheduled on a basis that makes sense. Such consideration must:

- Relate closely to operational matters
- Link and liaise as necessary with any appropriate central department or manager (e.g. a training manager) – not least to draw on their experience and expertise
- And, always too, relate to your thoughts on career progression stemming from the analysis suggested earlier.

Something like this may happen to you, indeed the better your manager the more likely it is to happen.

TIP: The personal implications are clear, whatever management may do, you need to think things through in a similar way and you need a written plan – one that you can roll forward and fine-tune over time. Starting from scratch this may take a moment, keeping it up to date and monitoring progress need not take long (the plan might well be one sheet of paper, though make sure what you write is sufficient to make sense when looked at some months on). The process is manageable; certainly it is wholly worthwhile in terms of the results you will get from it.

3 Methods of development

A whole variety ways of undertaking some self-development activity are possible. They range from reading a book (so, you are under way already!) to studying for a qualification; more details anon. Here we first consider only the main approaches that you can take:

- *Activity that occurs:* a host of things go on day by day that are part of or link to the development process. These include regular activities such as liaison with your manager, meetings and various kinds of evaluation including the ubiquitous annual job performance appraisal already mentioned. They also include more ad hoc activity: for example, you may occasionally attend a formal course. Two things are important here:
 - First, that you get the most from what goes on and integrate this into the totality of your overall development
 - Secondly, you may want to take action to prompt your manager or organisation to take more such action, indeed to try to secure specific initiatives that you feel will help you now or in the future.
- *Your own initiated activity:* this means activity that you instigate, personally and often privately. It might take advantage of company systems, say a library or resource centre, or it might utilise outside resources or simply be something you can do on your own or informally with others.

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TIP: it is useful to establish activity here as a regular habit, perhaps setting yourself a target, say to read a business book every month.

The task is to produce the best mix of activities you can that line up behind your own objectives. Some of these will certainly come in some way via your employer (if not are they the right employer? Realistically, this is something you need to consider. Sometimes one needs to make a decision that your long term future is not with your current employer). Other activities will come only after some liaison or persuasion – deploying some of your communication skill internally – and more may be necessary on your own initiative. The reality will always be a mix of some sort. Certainly you should avoid your development being short of what is needed because your only approach is to accept and undertake what the organisation makes available. It is your career and ultimately the responsibility for it going well is with you.

3.1 Positive results

Whatever activities you may undertake, and however they may be instigated, you want them to be useful. Overall there are four main ways in which development can help you, relating to:

- *Your current job:* the first level of benefit is in your current job. Development can provide help, for example by strengthening or adding skills to your armoury, so that you can do it better. It can help you achieve better results – bearing in mind that even the best performance can be improved – and that in turn can be important to your future
- *Future jobs:* success in your current job can, of course, help you towards new ones. In addition, development may look ahead, focusing for example on skills that, while not essential in the short term, are a prerequisite for promotion. Development helps fit you for promotion and puts you in a better position to make a career move when you want
- *Increasing your job rewards:* in some work (sales for example) rewards can be closely linked to success especially when success is not difficult to measure. In other jobs results may be more difficult to identify or tie down to an individual, though rewards may be linked to overall schemes such as profit sharing arrangements. Remuneration is always best viewed as a package: salary, commission, expenses, car, pension arrangements, bonuses, share schemes and so on. Progress in your job, driven by development, helps secure you the returns you want both in your current job and as you progress in your career
- *Enhancing your perception:* perception within an organisation is important. It may have intangible elements to it, but it is something real – are you seen as successful, as a high flyer, as someone having abilities beyond your current responsibilities? Because of what development can do, its results can improve the perception of you that exists within (and outside) the organisation. This is a not an insignificant benefit and one worth bearing in mind.

3.2 Job performance plus job satisfaction

Additionally, and of influence across the whole of your work and career, development influences job satisfaction. Whatever you want to do you probably want to enjoy it, to find it a challenge, to find it satisfying. However you define this for yourself, it is again worth bearing in mind. *You* make your career happen. Of course, many things influence it, but your job is to orchestrate the influences and make things go as far as possible the way you want. Aim high, and whatever else happens aim to avoid being in a position where, if you pause to consider progress to date, your first comment begins *If only I had...*

TIP: For you to maximise your job performance, foster a successful career and make the progress you want, development, including that aspect of it on which you must be self-sufficient, is a vital activity. It is something to which you must take an active approach. It must reflect real life and it must reflect an objective view of things. You may have, or find you have, weaknesses that you need to work to correct. You may have particular skills that you must add to your capabilities for the future and certainly, like most of us, you probably have a continuing job to do just to keep up with the changing environment in which you work.

A line from one of John Lennon's songs – *Life is what happens while you are making other plans* is worth bearing in mind. Time slips by all too fast and good intentions can remain just that. Development is not an option; it is a necessity. But it is something you can address and make successful and something also about which you should liaise with management (more of this later). It helps you go where you want to go. In the next chapter we review a variety of methods that can help you move ahead.

4 Stepping stones to success

Knowledge advances by steps, and not by leaps.

Lord Macauley

There is merit in having a written plan. It acts as a catalyst to improving or fine-tuning your competence, and hence benefiting your career, again; in this case it stems directly from your overall career intentions and sets out your development goals. To complete this you need to consider *how* any training input you plan for yourself can be delivered. Even including consideration of methodology, the plan need not be voluminous. It might only be a couple of sheets of (A4) paper, perhaps with these linked to a simple year planner (the sort of thing that comes with a Filofax-style loose leaf diary system is ideal). Alternatively it might be a screen or two on your computer, tablet or electronic personal organiser, though this is personal information and needs to be kept private and easy to move on with you if necessary.

Whatever form it takes, the plan can specify what you will do, when you will do it and the method(s) to be used.

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In some cases notes may be specific – *Attend presentation skills course 20/21 June* – on other occasions it may be only a guide, for example specifying that you will read a book on a particular subject – *during August*. For the first few months of the plan it should be more specific than it is likely to be further ahead; the planning process rolls on and things can be firmed up as time passes. You should use the plan to record the full implications involved. For instance, what do you want to do *after* attending a presentations skills course, make more presentations or get someone to critique the next one you make? Line up whatever sequence of events makes sense. If you ensure that when a moment is passed it records accurately what you did, then it will create a useful record.

Next, what are the options? What kind of things can you do and how do you decide what is best?

4.1 Options for action

Logically the first thing to address here is some guidelines on assessing the relative merits of different methods. Without thinking about this in the right way, there is a danger that you will always select whatever seems “easiest”, and this may not give you the best results.

Your choice of method must reflect, and sometimes be a compromise between, various criteria. These include what is most:

- *Effective* (and will be most likely to ensure that learning does take place)
- *Productive* (and will make the best use of time)
- *Convenient* (which includes what you are best set up to do, and how much something will disrupt operational matters – or not)
- *Interesting* (motivation is always an important side effect of development. It is something management should keep an eye on – certainly you will want to bear in mind making the process as stimulating as possible)
- *Timely* (in the sense of both when the development, or the result of it, is needed and in terms of fitting in with other operational considerations of timing – for instance consider the seasonality of what you do, are there quiet(er) times when a request to go on a course might be more likely to be agreed? Being seen to address something that will make for immediate improvement can usually do your profile no harm)
- *Fitting* (that is what fits best into the continuum of other, and ongoing, training and development either that you plan or that you are required to do)
- *Well-matched* (to what you want to achieve and the prevailing circumstances)
- *Financially suitable* (not necessarily the cheapest way of doing something, but always it must be possible to justify the costs – especially if you are financing it yourself).

TIP: If you regard what can be gained as sufficiently important, while you may always want to start by asking your employer to fund any training you want to undertake, remember there may be some things worth personal expenditure. If you do this remember to keep records and receipts, as you may well be able to claim such costs against your personal tax.

Alongside all of the above is a fit with the topic; the topic may demand more or less in terms of what can realistically get you to grips with it. Choice of method has the overall intention of making the process both effective and productive. Some methods are not mutually exclusive and you may want to do a number of things in combination or in sequence, coming at something from a variety of directions. Smaller examples (if you can have a “small” method) may act in their own right or be an inherent part of a larger event as, for example, reading a book may be useful before or after attending a course.

To reiterate, many ideas and approaches that qualify as methods are extremely simple. Others are more complex and time consuming, and realistically what is needed is a mix. Some examples follow; to start, we review the classic course – something that comes in a surprising variety of guises.

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4.2 Courses...and courses

Learning events come in a range of shapes and sizes and the terminology here is less than exact. There are courses, seminars, meetings, workshops, master classes, conferences and more. In considering what to use an assessment has to be made of the options.

Sometimes you may be sent on courses, but you may also want to request attendance. Any course you pick must reflect your overall intentions and objectives (for job and career), then – our concern here – the question is which course to select? Answering this question is not a science, and judgement and preference play a key part. Some juggling of disparate criteria may be necessary, and the following are designed to help cut through the plethora of alternatives with regard to the conventional course, and can assist sensible decision-making:

- *How long?* Usually this is a compromise between what the content demands, the level of participation and the realism of time away from your job
- *Internal or external?* Various factors are important here: would it be useful to get an outside perspective? To mix with others? What about timing? What internal resources exist? In a small organisation there may be no option other than something external
- *Which trainer?:* You may feel a “personality style” external event is best, or have preferences regarding which of a number of trainers or consultants you feel would be most useful
- *What format?* Here there are many options, from a short session of a few hours to long courses; not least you must be realistic about for how long you are likely to get agreement to be away from the job *How much participation?* This is not just a question of what would be most satisfying, but of what the topic needs, the number of participants and so on
- *The devil you know:* all things being equal, it may make sense to stick with a trainer or style of training that you have used in the past, and therefore know and like. This can lead to messages building progressively and logically one on another
- *Management preference:* here you need to consider what will be most likely to be approved – does the organisation (or your boss) only like things that have an entirely practical focus or are they inclined to experiment?

There is another factor, always important, and that is *cost*. While poor training may be worse than none at all, one has to be realistic and cost is a factor that dictates, at least in part, what decisions should be taken. Here again you need to be realistic; it might be better not ask to go on a month's training barely three months into a new appointment, for instance.

4.3 Making the most of course attendance

With any course selected, you want to maximise its usefulness. Two factors are important here:

- *Before attending:* whether you have been involved in the choice to attend a particular course or not, you need to be clear why you are attending and what should come from it. It is well worth the few minutes it takes to sit down with someone – your own manager or a central training person – to go through this in what we might call a pre-course briefing. You should be clear what the objectives of a course are, and its limitations – it may only address part of something you ultimately want to deal with comprehensively. Such a briefing will help you to go with clear and specific personal objectives in mind.

Such briefing and thinking sets up attendance so that its effectiveness is maximised. Most external consultants and training organisations are pleased to discuss pending or possible course attendance in this way, incidentally; if not maybe they are not the best choice.

- *How you conduct yourself on the programme:* these days it is unlikely you will find yourself on a course you regard as useless. Even if you approach a course positively however, you need to maximise the benefit of your attendance on it. After all, once it is over any action may be more difficult and, certainly on a short course, attention literally to the process of attending is worthwhile. So check out objectives, make a note of issues or problems you want to raise and generally think about how you can make attending a worthwhile experience (more about this follows).

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Some organisations issue guidelines for those attending formal courses, whether external or internal. These may be useful to you and are worth studying for a moment. As an example, the boxed paragraph that follows is one set of guidelines given to people attending public courses. This is adapted from my book *Improve your Coaching & Training Skills* (published by Kogan Page). It certainly addresses some of the key issues and sets the scene for getting the most from the experience of attending.

**NOTES FOR DELEGATES: an example of a document issued to delegates at the start of a course
(or ahead of attendance)**

1. This material contains all the basic details of this training programme. Further papers will be distributed progressively during the course so that a complete record will be available by the last session.
2. This is *your* seminar, and represents a chance to say what you think – so please do say it. Everyone can learn from the comments of others and the discussion it prompts.
3. Exchange of experience is as valuable as the formal lectures – but you need to *listen carefully* and try to understand other points of view if this is to work.
4. Do support your views with facts in discussion, use examples and stick to the point.
5. Keep questions and comments succinct – do not monopolise the proceedings, but let others have a say so that various viewpoints can be discussed.
6. Make points in context as they arise. Remember that participation is an attitude of mind. It includes listening as well as speaking, but also certainly includes constructive disagreement where appropriate.
7. Make notes as the meeting progresses. There is notepaper provided in this binder; also copies of slides, reproduced with room for notes. Formal notes will provide an aide memoir of the content and coverage, so any additional notes should primarily link to your job and to action on your return to work. Even a few action points noted per session can act as a catalyst and help ensure action follows attendance.
8. A meeting with colleagues, staff or your manager on your return to normal working can be valuable, it acts as a bridge between ideas discussed here and action in the workplace and can make change more likely.
9. It will help everyone present if you wear your name badge, respect the Chair and the timetable, and keep mobile telephones and pagers switched off during the sessions.
10. This is an opportunity to step back from day to day operations and consider issues that can help make your job more effective. Be sceptical of your own operation, challenge ideas, remain open minded throughout and actively seek new thinking that can help you prompt change and improve performance.

Whether your organisation produces something like this or not, these are sensible points and it is certainly always worth having such principles in mind when you attend any kind of formal session. There may be other matters included also, such as the obligatory request to be politically correct in posing questions or giving examples. If you get such documentation and feel it leaves questions unanswered, do ask before or at the start of the course.

TIP: Your attendance on courses demands more than passive acceptance. Think about what you may attend, what it will offer and how you will conduct yourself, make some notes and plan to get as much as possible from your involvement.

Now consider other forms of course and training.

4.4 Activity courses

This special form of course is also worth a mention. Imagine: it is cold and wet, moor land stretches away into the mist and you know the nearest cup of tea and warm bath is miles distant. You and assorted colleagues are huddled under the dripping branches of a tree. On the ground nearby are three old car tyres, some lengths of rope, six planks of wood and a pink cushion. How do you turn all that into something that floats, cross the river and...but where actually is the river? Perhaps I exaggerate; but the “outward bound” type of course is loved and hated in equal measure.

There are people who swear they are the ultimate developer of leadership skills or teamwork. Some just swear. Certainly their use needs care. Not every provider of such things is equally good; some are good at providing a physical challenge, but less good at relating it in any meaningful way to the work place. Not every group is suited to this sort of thing, and certainly someone less physically able or adept might find tagging along after their more athletic team mates taught them nothing but resentment.

All that said, they seem to suit the culture of some organisations and, if they do, they provide a different way of approaching certain training tasks. They are almost certain to get the undivided attention of the group for a while; it is pretty difficult to worry about immediate operational problems when you are high in the air dangling on the end of a rope over mud of indeterminate depth. They can be fun but, if you find yourself going on one, the question of briefing and exactly what management expect you to get from it is doubly important. If this is not clear in any way – always ask and ideally ask before you are wet, muddy and wondering what is going on!

4.5 Computer simulations

Virtually at the other end of the spectrum of training methods from activity courses, simulations focus attention very specifically on one area of activity. Their teaching is then through involvement, often with technology lending a hand. Typically a computer programme provides the basis to experiment with complex interactions.

For example there are simulations used in marketing training. They set up a market situation: products, prices, people, markets, competitors and more. Decision making can be input and not only recorded, but also recorded in such a way that the whole complex web of “given” factors changes. Thus a decision to raise a product’s price will see volume sold and profitability adjust accordingly; and competition take action in response also. Some such training devices are for individuals to use, others work – sometimes competitively – with a group of people participating together.

Such can provide considerable realism and considerable stimulation. They tend not to be suitable as a first exposure to a topic, relying as they do on the participants having some knowledge of the subject. They need clear briefing and sometimes preparatory work to set them up, but this is understandable given their role and purpose.

If you want to check out this sort of thing, a good example is a marketing training device called *Markstrat*. The organisation producing this, and it is one that has been around a while and is tried and tested, is Stratx Simulations; if you check their web site it will give you a flavour of how this sort of thing works: (www.stratxsimulations.com).

4.6 Training “packages”

This phrase is usually used to describe training resources with two characteristics. First, they use a variety of aids to package their training: such include audio and video material, programmed learning texts, and, of course, computer based training (often shortened to CBT) particularly using CDs, DVDs and so on. Secondly, they are designed to be worked on a, sometimes largely unsupervised, solo basis or, if with a group, through “facilitation” (someone to lead the way through, rather than a fully-fledged trainer).



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The simplest form will set participants off down a road involving a number of elements. For instance, you may work through a workbook, which leads the process. This will have you pause on occasion as you do so: to view video clips, listen to audio elements, and answer questions (which with programmed learning devices can redirect them, recapping if knowledge is not proven to be at a certain level) or, where group work is involved, to interact with others.

There are good things to be found in this sort of format; you may find them in libraries or be able to persuade your company to finance them (pointing out that they are then a permanent asset and that once you have used them other people can do so too). Much that is packaged is also now computerised.

4.7 Open learning

Here this phrase is used to encapsulate a number of techniques linking work done “at your desk” to a central point elsewhere (often now via the Internet) that co-ordinates the activity (hence the alternative description of distance learning. This has become a popular way of handling the load of studying for some sort of qualification – where exercises, projects and such like are set and marked by tutors at the body offering the course. Study may involve all sorts of mixtures of method, from reading to watching videos provided and, of course, computer work (some now on-line, some even able to be organised on a team basis).

The principle is also used for job based training and an open learning set up may exist in a large organisation where staff work in many widely spread locations.

4.8 Resource centres

Such are often the preserve of larger companies. The idea developed from the simple library and that element remains. Beyond that, however, the resource centre has a range of developmental materials and any equipment they demand. Here someone can go and watch a video, spend time at a dedicated computer learning station, engage in certain small group activities – or just find a helpful book or a word of advice.

There is no one definition of a resource centre. Different organisations configure them differently, and of course they change over time. Not only do they provide an aid to learning, their very existence contributes to the creation of a development culture, demonstrates that development is important and helps both managers and staff fit undertaking it into a busy life.

4.9 Job swapping (or rotation)

Many ways exist to incorporate development into the everyday work of the organisation. Sometimes this is simply a matter of change. People are intentionally moved into new jobs, rather different to what they were doing previously, for developmental reason. There is a domino effect as people move round and the effect can thus affect many people. I deal with some organisations where this is an established pattern: no one expects to stay in the same post for more than a short number of years. Not only is this seen as aiding the development of the individuals concerned, it is regarded as stimulating the new thinking and new ideas necessary to prevent the organisation becoming stuck in a rut. It also may benefit staff retention (people are less likely to leave through boredom). This may or may not be something your employer does as a routine (if it is you may want to aim to influence how it affects you) but there is no reason why you cannot make suggestions even about a one-off idea.

4.10 Films

There are training films that cover a range of topics well, especially personal skills ranging from selling and negotiating to time management, and all the major providers have catalogues and web sites you can check out. Films do not offer complete training in a moment – that would be unrealistic – but they do offer good encapsulations of principles and illustrate matters in a memorable way (or the good ones do). They are quite expensive to buy or even to hire, but you can make suggestions about using them at meetings (so that costs can be spread over a number of people), view them in a Resource Centre if you have one, or attend the previews that seem to be regularly scheduled by their producers for assessment purposes. The manuals that accompany such films are usually useful too. Most are not too long, succinct and focussing on the key practical points is usually their brief (I know, I have written some!).

4.11 Secondment

In certain organisations a good, and convenient, way of developing people is to post them for longer or shorter periods away from their present location. This may simply be to a branch office (or from a branch to H.Q.). Or to a location where activity is specialised: a research facility perhaps.

For multinationals and others involved in business internationally, the tactic may typically involve overseas postings (or indeed job rotation). In such cases, the thinking is certainly that such moves will allow someone to acquire new experience and that this may jump them up the corporate hierarchy faster than continuing to work in their home base would do.

Some policy and guidelines for those seeking such opportunities may exist in a large organisation. In other circumstances it is again something to consider and suggest; though it may need a persuasive case to be made for it.

Many and varied opportunities exist here, not all limited to large multinationals. For example, secondment may be arranged:

- In a different division of an organisation
- In a subsidiary company
- With a customer (or supplier) organisation
- With the organisation of an agent or distributor
- With a professional body (some of which are supported by their member companies seconding staff to them for a while; usually where there is reciprocal benefit).

A suitable location could be round the corner, up three flights of stairs or thousands of miles away. You may well be able to think of, or use, other forms of secondment. Swaps – exchanges – are possible also, organised so that two people, and both organisational parties, benefit. This kind of arrangement might be essentially short term, say a week in the Paris office. Or, more relevant in this chapter, it might mean swapping roles and locations for a year or more.



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4.13 Sabbaticals

This is something that will perhaps be regarded as something of a luxury; however it can have real value, and be cost effective too. Sabbaticals can take various forms, but in one company I worked with, one category of senior people were allowed to take six months (paid) leave (in addition to normal holidays) after working with the company for fifteen years. In consultancy – a fee earning and time dependent business – this represented a significant cost. Equally it was a business in which many did not habitually take long holidays because of the nature of the business, so in some ways the time was, in part, a quid pro quo.

Certainly it was highly motivational, both to those in the prescribed category and to those who aspired to be. I cannot now remember whether it was compulsory to do so, but such extended periods of leave often included a project, something to which no time would otherwise be given. For example, travel was one thing people sometimes wanted to do, and this linked usefully to the international development of the business allowing more leisurely research and investigation than might otherwise have occurred. If this was coupled with some fee earning work it made good sense all round.

There are a number of variables here, certainly the:

- Duration selected
- Number and level of staff to be involved
- Purpose (or lack of it) given to the gap period
- Reporting back, if appropriate.

One can think of all sorts of things this system could be used for, and one is certainly development. This is something else to seek out or suggest, perhaps.

4.13 Method assessment

A comprehensive list of methods is neither possible here nor is it intended (though the next section adds other possibilities of a different nature). Indeed the inventive person will see any list they compile expanding as time goes by.

You will find it useful to put yourself in a position to check, quickly and regularly what is possible, what is new and what else you can do. Thus it may also be worthwhile to:

- Subscribe to various trade and business journals, and those specific to the function and role in which you work
- Subscribe also to relevant newsletters, e-zines and suchlike delivered automatically to your computer

- Allow your name to be added certain mailing lists (for instance to get news of the latest products produced by a training film company whose preview meetings you might attend)
- Occasionally (regularly?) attend relevant exhibitions (for example a trade show to improve competitor intelligence or a training exhibition to see what new development aids might be available and useful); ditto trade or functional conferences
- Cultivate a friend in the H.R. Department (or similar) especially if you are in a large organisation, or indeed anyone else for that matter who gives access to useful information.

All activity designed to make you more effective in your job and to boost your “career fitness” is an open-ended process.

TIP: You should consider the options here carefully. Some things can be adopted on a regular basis, undertaking them can become a positive habit. Other things are more occasional, or one-off, and everything must be assessed regularly to see if it is still useful or if your mix of development activity should contain something else instead.

Next we look at further details about methods, and illustrate more about how things work and what works best.

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5 Ensuring positive impact on your career

You grab a challenge, act on it, then honestly reflect on why your actions worked or didn't. You learn from it and then move on. That continuing process of lifelong learning helps enormously in a rapidly changing economic environment.

John Kotter

To date a plethora of development methods has now been highlighted, and the point was made that everything needs to be considered in light of clear intentions and objectives.

So, with that still in mind, we now look at how this sort of approach can work for you. The methods and examples selected are chosen, not to be comprehensive, rather to illustrate the mix of activities that can be used, either taken advantage of or prompted, and the manageability and effectiveness of such a mix.

5.1 Obtaining constructive feedback

Feedback is the first thing to concentrate on that allows regular and useful action and self-improvement. Where does this come from? Essentially there are four sources:

1. *Your line manager*: feedback will in all probability be offered from your manager and a formal and ongoing system of working practice needs to be developed between the two of you (see next main heading). Beyond that remember that it is as much for you to suggest things as wait for them to be offered and that even the simple principle of asking questions can provide a great deal of information. Suggest understates the matter. Realistically, you often have to sell ideas to a manager, and that means that you must find reasons why they will want to say yes (benefits to them) rather than just say something beginning with *I want...* Indeed, such an “I want” list of reasons is the worst possible way to try to persuade anyone
2. *Your colleagues*: this category includes your peers, those working at a similar level or in a similar way to you, or other people with whom you can share experience if your respective work means that you might learn something from each other. It also includes others around your organisation, some, like the training manager, have already been mentioned

3. *Other work contacts*: that is those with whom your work involves you – this might include people inside the organisation, in other departments or functions or outside, for example customers, suppliers or collaborators. Your experience with these should provide you with endless feedback just through observation. Ask yourself: *what did I say and do, how did I do it and what was the reaction?* Note – honestly – the facts and resolve to learn from them. But you can do more than this; you can ask them. Carefully, selecting those most likely to be prepared to welcome this kind of exchange, and without saying *Aren't I just the best person you have ever met?* The thing to test here is not how you work directly – *what did you think of the questions I asked in that meeting?* – but rather reactions. For example you can ask about your communicating skill. Did you make something clear? Were questions left unanswered? Were you suitably persuasive, if necessary? Did you negotiate the best deal? The answers to such question are always useful. Sometimes answers can be surprising. For example, I have regularly talked to sales people who have had to adapt their approach to take up less time with customers, though it only became clear as a result of specific questions; previously the customers had been polite enough to say nothing.

The two things to look for here are:

- *Signs of weakness*: what do you do that could in some way be done better? It pays to adopt a positive and constructive attitude to criticism. It is very easy to allow an instinctive defensive reaction to blind you to lessons that can be useful. In any case, most often you are not going to be told you are total rubbish, and may only need to make minor adjustments to ensure that something is significantly improved in future
- *Strengths*: it is just as important to discover what goes well. This is not simply so that you can pat yourself on the back (though a little self-motivation does no harm), it is again so that you can fine-tune your approach. Ask yourself how you can build on strengths, where you can use something more or in different ways. Again this kind of process is a sure path to improved performance.

5.2 Using feedback to create improvement

In order for any activity of this sort work you need a clear idea of the areas on which you should focus. At one level it is easy, for example consider the idea of formal presentations, which are necessary in so many jobs and not everybody's bag. When you have done one, ask:

- How did you start a presentation?
- How quickly did you establish a rapport?
- How clearly and thoroughly did you make its purpose clear?
- Was the case you made clear, attractive and credible?
- How well did you describe matters: was it understandable, even memorable?

Such a list only highlights the classic stages of a presentation, so you may want to focus more widely, for instance asking about:

- How well you prepared
- Your time management (finishing on time is always appreciated)
- Use of visual aids
- Pace and variety of delivery
- Management and direction of the overall talk
- Parting impression
- Follow up action
- Display of empathy.

You can doubtless extend and personalise this sort of list. For example, you may want to monitor your powers of description (I loved a description that I think I heard on BBC radio: someone described something as being as slippery as a freshly buttered ice rink. Now that really *is* slippery). Language can be a powerful tool. Or you may want to focus on how you encapsulate what you have to say within a specific amount of time; and more.



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TIP: A great deal of what needs to be done here is made easier by habit. Some people seem to emerge from every meeting they conduct, or project in which they are involved, having something to carry forward and which they can use to assist them in the future; it makes sense to work actively to establish such a habit.

With a little help from my friends says the song. Getting others to help you is useful too.

5.3 Maximising assistance from management

If you are reading this then you will, even in a small organisation, have a manager. Even if you have not read on and bear in mind what is said here later when we review mentoring. Three particular ways of interacting with your manager are worth thinking about:

- *Ongoing counselling (usually involving evaluation and a link to development of all sorts):* most managers will evaluate what any member of their team is doing and what results they are getting. While a bad manager may see this as just looking at the figures and shouting when targets are missed, many see this role more constructively. They take the view that even the best performance can be improved and act to do just that. This may involve simple discussion or observation (again making presentations is a good example). Observation can seem intrusive, but remember it is the *only* way in which they can observe and investigate *how* you do things (sitting at their desk they can only see the figures or second hand reports that emanate from what you do). So this is something to be approached constructively. Take on board what they say, ask questions, try things out on them and use them as a sounding board. Many tasks are carried out pretty much solo – make use of time spent to analyse and help take your approaches and skills forward. This is a specific form of what is more generally called “training-on-the-job”.

TIP: If you decide on and suggest the timing of such observation and exchanges it may avoid awkward moments being picked by chance and make such encounters more useful.

- *Meetings:* every so often a team will get together (I am thinking of departmental meetings and the like here); this may be weekly, monthly – whatever, with the frequency dependent on such factors as cost and geography as well as the kind of job the team does. However often this happens you want to get the most from it. Again a good manager will see this as an opportunity to inform, motivate, gather and exchange ideas – and undertake development activities. It is sometimes a problem to keep regular meetings fresh, indeed they can settle into a repetitive format and a bit of a rut. So do not be backward in making suggestions or volunteering to initiate action in this area (you might collaborate with colleagues in so doing – *a number of us think...*). A number of things are possible in meetings:

- *Training games and exercises*: these are designed to focus attention on one particular aspect of the job. This might include something as simple as a quiz to check knowledge, through to elaborate, often team based, exercises
- *Role playing*: this is a classic way of experimenting with an interactive skill like selling, interviewing, negotiating or conducting or participating in meetings. Simple versions of it can be used in just a few minutes in a meeting (see box).

Example – role playing

Formal role-play can be an inherent part of a training session or course. It may involve using audio or video equipment to record the role-play so that replaying it can form the basis of more detailed critique designed to lead to change. Equally, it can be used much less formally in any kind of group meeting. For example, at a sales meeting so-called carousel role-play might be used (where two people start a conversation – in this case between buyer and seller – and then two others take over the roles and run the conversation on; it can thus involve a whole group very quickly and create a complete conversation for analysis).

Although role-play is a tried and tested technique and there is no reason for it not to work well, it does need some care. Certainly there are things that can jeopardise its success. Be careful of potential dangers including:

- Over-awareness of the camera (where what happens is recorded for critique)
- Overacting to the camera, indeed a belief that role play demands “acting”
- The difficulty of being “on show” in front of peers
- Poor role play briefs (ask if you are not sure what you are trying to do)
- Incomplete or unconstructive feedback after the role play is complete (again ask)
- Those watching feeling excluded (ask for or suggest an observer role).

Such techniques can be used in many ways and areas of work. Viewed positively, role-play can be organised to avoid the above hazards and can achieve one or more of the following:

- Reproduce real life as closely as possible
- Allow practice of important, difficult or unusual situations
- Introduce and practice a skill new to people
- Develop confidence
- Experiment with new approaches
- Change negative habits or reinforce positive ones
- Reinforce knowledge and instil useful reflexes
- Utilise analytical skills (used in the feedback and critique).

All these are things you should recognise as being worthwhile. Role-play offers a safe environment. It may be a touch awkward to role-play in front of colleagues, but it is much better to practice and experiment with new ideas in this way before risking all in a real situation.

- *Brainstorming*: as a route to generating ideas this can work well (though it needs to be properly set up and carried out – see example – it can also be instigated informally amongst a group of like-minded colleagues)

Example: brainstorming: guidelines for success

Brainstorming is a group activity and can be used to provide an almost instant burst of idea generation. Working with a group of people (maybe three or four up to a dozen works most easily) it needs a prescribed approach, thus:

- Gather people around and explain the objectives (clearly everyone wants to know what exactly are ideas required about and why)
- Explain that there are to be *no comments* on ideas at this stage
- Allow a little time for thought (singly or, say, in pairs)
- Start taking contributions and noting them down (publicly on say a flipchart)
- When a good-sized list is established and recorded, then analysis can begin
- Grouping similar ideas together can make the list more manageable
- Open-minded discussion can then review the list
- Identify ideas that can be taken forward.

Such a session must exclude the word “impossible” from the conversation, at least initially (and especially when used in senses such as *It's impossible, we don't do things that way – why not?*; or *It's impossible, we tried it once and it didn't work – how long ago and in what form?*).

If you assiduously avoid any negative or censorious first responses, by allowing one idea to spark another and variations on a theme to refine a point (perhaps taking it from something wild to something practical), then a brainstorming session can produce genuinely new approaches.

Such a session can be fun to do, satisfying in outcome and time-efficient to undertake – and members of a group who brainstorm regularly get better at it, and quicker and more certain in their production of good, useable, ideas. It is something to suggest perhaps, as well as to participate in, however it occurs.

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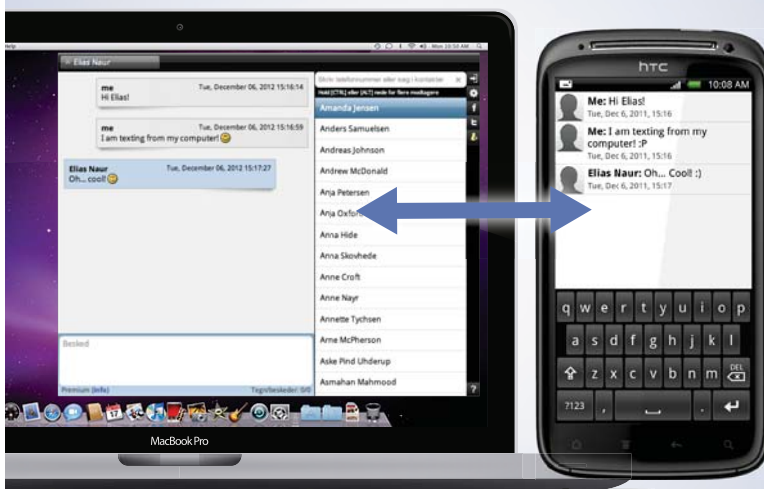
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- *Job performance appraisal* (the classic “annual” appraisal): The point has been made about taking a constructive approach to various systems and processes within the organisation. None has such wide-ranging influence as the (often annual) job appraisal. You have to resolve and act to get the most from it. A useful (rather than a “good”) appraisal:
 - o Focuses your thinking, and your subsequent development plan, on areas that need attention – that is both strengths and weaknesses
 - o Provides immediate feedback and counselling which can be useful
 - o Gives you the opportunity to make suggestions regarding company sponsored development activity
 - o Sets up actual development activities that can form the core of your own, perhaps, more extensive, plan.

These points focus on the development side of appraisal. It is also an opportunity to project the right image, consider long-term career development and, not least, to link to the specific job to be done over the coming year. A good manager will always take a constructive view of appraisal; realistically it is something that some companies organise less than perfectly and which some managers find awkward to do. It certainly warrants your taking a suitable initiative to help ensure it is as useful for you as possible. *Note: you may find my book in this series “Your job performance appraisal”, which shows how to maximise the benefit you can get from it, helpful.*

Remember too that an appraisal meeting is not a one off event, it may well – indeed should – link to other conversations of various sorts throughout the year, and you need to get the most from these too.

All in all, your manager (well, a good one) is the best resource you are likely to have regularly available to assist your development. Not only should they help in the way that they work with you, but they should also make possible other things that are then implemented on your own – for instance in the training they allow or instigate.

6 Achievement not just activity

A wide range of developmental things can be done and made to work if you think constructively and broadly about fitting them into day to day work. For example:

- In one financial services organisation, certain jobs routinely involved making formal “on-your-feet” presentations. These were important and needed to be well executed. In addition to undergoing training people needed practice. At the suggestion of one team member certain internal meetings adopted a rule that anyone making a significant contribution had to stand up to do so. Effectively this increased the number of presentations people made, and provided an opportunity for comment and critique which assisted the way skills were developed
- In a publishing company one sales person told me that she made a point of observing certain competitive sales people (with much selling taking place in open areas of bookshops, a little judicious browsing made this easy to do). “Both what they do, and how buyers react, lead to good ideas and allows me to make positive adjustments to my approach” she said. Good idea and a number of industries and jobs work in a way which allows this sort of thing to be done
- In several companies I know there is a mandatory requirement for written documents going to customers (reports and proposals) to be read by someone other than the writer before they are sent. This is essentially a check, but people learn from it too.

6.1 Taking advantage of circumstances

Effectiveness and productivity are important, but so too is relaxation; all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy as the saying has it. So at this stage it should be recognised that the overall intention here is to put together an appropriate and manageable mix of development and career building activity, not to unreasonably utilise every waking moment. That said, you should at least consider the way you work and see what possibilities this suggests. Two linked examples may help to make the point:

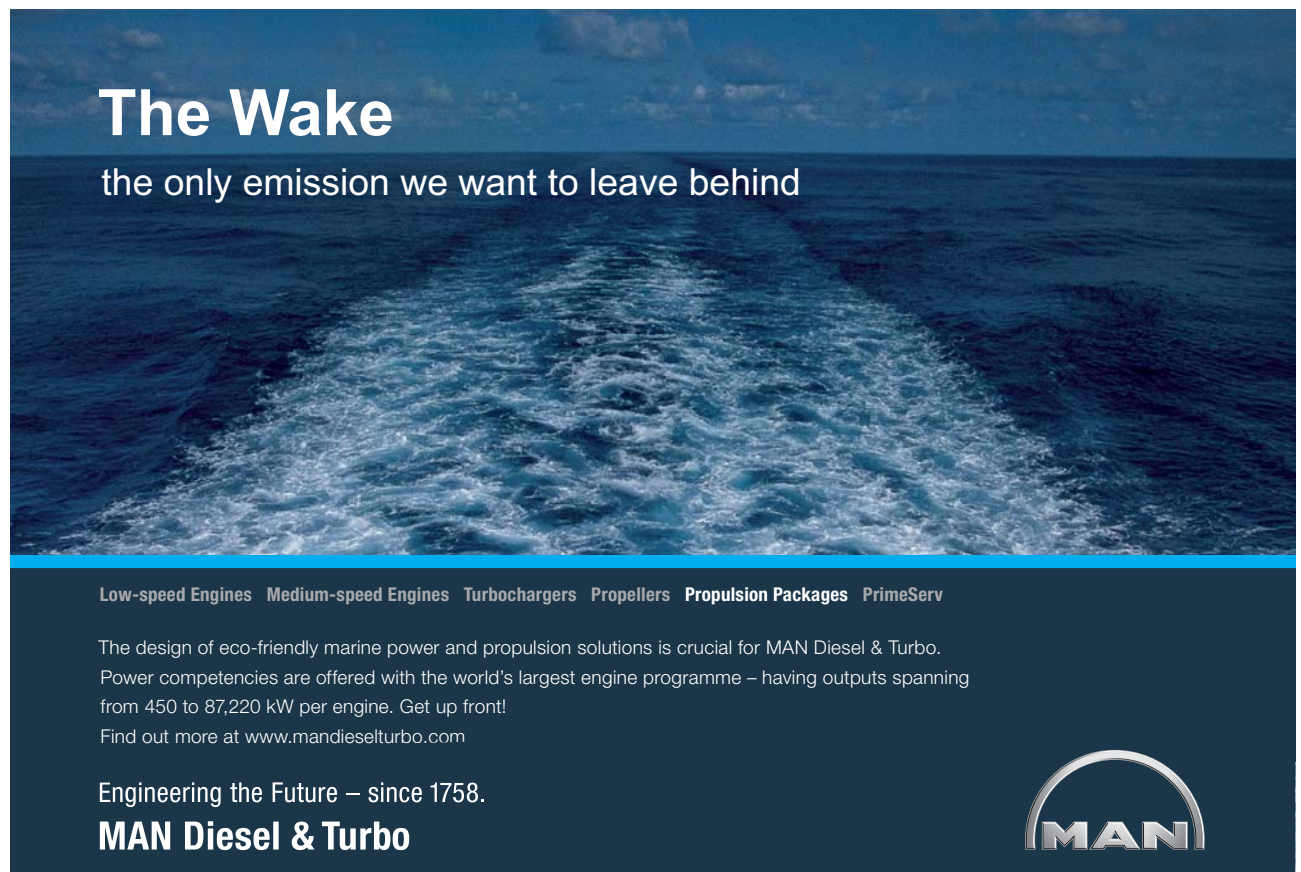
- *Car audio*: how far do you drive each year? More apposite still given today’s traffic conditions, how long do you spend in the car? Some of that time could be spent doing something useful (and be safer than talking illegally on a mobile phone). Virtually all cars have a CD player in them and a wealth of useful material is available in this form, many also allow linking an MP3 player directly into the car’s system. Specifically:
 - Some companies issue newsletters, product briefings or training in this form; a variety of training packages are available for purchase in this form too
 - A variety of business books, are available in audio form

Some time spent listening to such material can be useful, interesting and stress busting (making you forget that traffic jam about which you can do nothing) – it can provide a constructive moment or a long-term project (for example, you could learn a language).

- *Other journeys:* although the above is stated in terms of a car journey, if you commute by train or have regular flights you also have the opportunity to listen to something (other than music) on say an iPod or similar. Indeed the range of gadgets that make this sort of thing possible increases as you watch; maybe you are reading this book on an electronic device such as a tablet or Amazon's Kindle.

6.2 Development circles

A while ago the Japanese began using a technique, taken up around the world in various ways, called quality circles. The idea was that a continuous focus could be kept on quality (primarily in a factory and production context) and a flow of ideas generated, the best of which could be taken up, implemented and used to produce productivity increase. Circles, groups of people of a size enabling easy discussion, were set up. Over time they looked at a whole series of issues (e.g. something with a specific description such as reducing waste of raw materials in a particular phase of production) and essentially brainstormed the matter. Ideas were fed up the organisation, through a hierarchy of groups, the best and most practical being approved by management and implemented into operations. Communication was organised to be two-way so that everyone knew what was being achieved.



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The basic principle of a permanent, or semi-permanent, organisation of people focused on improvements has been copied and modified and made to work usefully in many different contexts since the idea of quality circles originated. Another area on which a similar approach has been used successfully is that of customer service, for example.

Something like this procedure can, like brainstorming on its own, produce learning in the area of creativity. Arranged with this sort of formality it can also direct people towards a whole range of other useful skills. For example:

- One individual has to chair the sessions
- People have to listen and contribute
- Matters have to be reported back up the line, reports written and presentations made. An element of competition and incentive can be used to add to peoples' concentration (a bonus payment for the team producing the most valuable idea, perhaps).

Thus such a scheme can be used overtly or otherwise to progress a variety of development aims with some of these skills in mind; it is a good example of development and operational activity being progressed usefully alongside each other so that both gain.

6.3 Useful people

Many different people may be able to help in your plans to become and stay career fit. We will start with comment about one resource everyone but the self-employed has and which can certainly assist development – your boss.

6.4 The learning manager

I think that if the term “learning organisation” can be used (it is: it means one that encourages ongoing learning and acts to make it possible), then the term learning manager makes similar sense. Surveys show that at the very top of the qualities that people look for in a boss are that they are “someone I learn from”. A good manager can be your single most important spur to development. (If yours is the very reverse then it needs thinking about: are you going to succeed in such a circumstance? It may affect your future). A good manager will consider development important, they will recognise that it serves a positive purpose (not just addressing weaknesses), and will work with their people to identify and close any development gap.

So realistically, you have two routes to obtaining assistance from your manager:

- Taking advantage of the things they offer
- Encouraging – and sometimes persuading – them to do more or let you do more.

Remember that your manager stands or falls on your performance, and those of others who report to them. They have a vested interest in your doing well and in helping you do just that. Whatever your role, there are certainly things that should happen and which you can use to your developmental advantage – both things that occur – or which you might prompt in some way.

However much you may learn from your own manager, there are other people who can help too. Some can do so on a regular basis, this creates an invaluable process called mentoring.

6.5 Volunteering

It was once a famous military expression that one should “never volunteer for nothing”. In context here it can be useful; though sensibly used with care. Given what you are trying to achieve, work out what actions and involvements might be helpful, either to learning and accelerating experience or to actually help jump you ahead. With that in mind maybe you should volunteer to:

- Join a committee
- Take on a project
- Acquire external duties (attending a trade function of some sort, perhaps)
- Get something delegated from your manager (maybe even something tedious: writing a report for them if you need the practice or if it will usefully put your name on it)
- Help induct or brief newcomers
- Investigate some possible new opportunity or methodology.

Much must be considered here, and while you do not want to collect a long list of things that take time away from priorities, some may well help both in terms of what you will do and who you will meet. Being prepared to take on some things may put you in a good light as well, however avoid what I call “black hole” jobs that are ridiculously time consuming and will always upset someone (like planning the company’s anniversary celebrations, perhaps).

6.6 Mentoring

This is often neglected, but can be immensely valuable. Let’s be clear: a mentor is someone who exercises a low key and informal developmental role. More than one person can be involved in the mentoring of a single individual and, while what they do is akin to some of the things a line manager should do, more typically in terms of how the word is used a mentor is specifically *not* your line manager. It might be someone more senior, someone on the same level or from elsewhere in the organisation. An effective mentor can be a powerful force in your development. So how do you get yourself a mentor?

There are some organisations where this is a regular part of ongoing development. You may be allocated one or able to request one. Equally you may need to act to create a mentoring relationship for yourself (something else that may demand persuasion). You can suggest it to your manager, or direct to someone you think might undertake the role, and take the initiative.

What makes a good mentor? The person must:

- Have authority (this might mean they are senior, or just that they are capable and confident)
- Have suitable knowledge and experience, counselling skills and appropriate clout
- Be willing to spend some time with you (their doing this with others may be a positive sign).

The need to find that time may be a challenge. One way to minimise that problem is to organise mentoring on a swap basis: someone agrees to help you and you line up your own manager (or you for that matter) to help them, or one of their people.

Then a series of informal meetings can result, together creating a thread of activity through the operational activity. These meetings need an agenda (or at least an informal one), but more important they need to be constructive. If they are, then one thing will naturally lead to another and a variety of occasions can be utilised to maintain the dialogue. A meeting – followed by a brief encounter as people pass on the stairs – a project and a promise to spend a moment on feedback – an e-mail or two passing in different directions – all may contribute. What makes this process useful is the commitment and quality of the mentor. Where such relationships can be set up, and where they work well, they add a powerful dimension to the ongoing cycle of development, one that it is difficult to imagine being bettered in any other way.

Overall, what you learn from the ongoing interactions and communications you have with your line manager and others can be invaluable. It may leave some matters to be coped with in other ways, but it can prove the best way to cope with many matters and also to add useful reinforcement in areas of development that also need a more formal approach. As both parties become familiar with the arrangement, and with each other, it can become highly productive. Having been lucky enough to have someone in this role myself for many years I well know that often just a few minutes spent together can crack a problem or lead to a new initiative.

TIP: A mentor is usually taken to be someone senior to the person to whom they act as mentor. But a similar relationship is possible with a colleague (for example, other members of your team or department). There is no reason why you cannot forge a number of useful and reciprocal alliances, perhaps each designed to help in rather different ways.

Mentoring is, as was said, often an underrated methodology and well worth investigating, experimenting with and using. The example (in the boxed paragraph) that follows is particularly relevant to career change.

Mentoring in action

As an example of informal mentoring, unconnected to any organization structure, enhancing a career, let me introduce you to another consultant, Frances Kay. Frances contacted me a few years ago saying in effect “You’ve written lots of books, can you show me how to get published?” Fair question, books not only generate revenue for an author, but in the business area if the author does allied work then the visibility they can also create can produce requests for other things, training and so on. We scheduled a kind of tutorial session; indeed I think I was paid for doing this. In this I reviewed the process, ways of working with publishers and more. Subsequently, after more discussion and liaison, I was able to match her to a publisher, and in due course Frances’s first book was published.

Because we got on well we have met since on a regular basis. To begin with this was primarily to extend the opportunity for Frances to pick my brains, but mentoring, particular if, as in this case, those involved become friends, works best in the long term when it becomes two way. Now what we do is probably better described as networking and involves some tangible collaboration too: in 2009 we co-authored the book *Tough Tactics for Tough Times* (Kogan Page), about surviving the recession, indeed we have worked together in a number of ways that have been interesting, profitable and – this matters too – fun.

The point of quoting this is that it is an example of classic career management and development. Frances wanted to add book writing to her consulting portfolio of work, in part, as I have said, because of the visibility it can afford. It could, she believed, change her work pattern, producing more income from work done at home and reducing the amount of time she spent with clients and in traveling. It could also be useful promotionally. She recognized that some assistance might get her started in this new, though allied, field more easily than going it alone. Indeed she recognized that a learning curve was involved. The action she took was designed to accelerate her experience and move her change of work portfolio forward promptly.

Some time on this has been very successful. At the last count she has had twenty titles published, worked with a number of publishers, and continued to collaborate with both me and others. She has produced what for me is certainly the best book around on networking, *Successful Networking*, and, working with Nielsen Kite has also produced what is the only book on Neuro-Linguistic Programming that has ever made sense to me, the very practical *Understanding NLP: strategies for better workplace communication without the jargon* (Kogan Page).

This seems to me to demonstrate the process of moving forward in a career very well. New skills and processes were involved here and getting to grips with them had to precede getting into a new area of work and make it possible. Whatever the circumstances – you may want to take on new tasks, new responsibilities whether to enhance your existing job or better fit you for another involving an upward step – such action may be necessary. Whatever that involves, and mentoring or training are just two possible actions, setting things up right makes sense and makes success both more likely and likely to be possible sooner than would an ad hoc approach.

Certainly it worked for Frances and me; I have learned a good deal from the interaction too and have enjoyed the experience. What is more I have no hesitation in recommending what she has done to those seeking guidance on the topics about which she writes. Keep her name in mind when you choose a business book.

6.7 Networking

In recent years networking is a well-established process. Indeed, as the old saying has it “It is not what you know, it is who you know that matters”. Networking can assist business directly, it can assist career progress – and it can assist learning. All of which seems to make it a must in context here.

Your line manager and anyone in a mentoring role are obviously prime contacts. Beyond that you should keep in touch with people, other than your manager, who may be able to assist your development. There may be a variety of them. Such may include: your manager's manager, a company training manager and others in Human Resources (HR), the Personnel Manager, Technical people (if you work in an organisation with technical products your product knowledge may be improved simply by meeting regularly and informally with a contact in a technical role), and whoever may run any Resource Centre the company may maintain.

Another key liaison to run is with colleagues. If you work in a large organisation people may be separated geographically, however contact may still be possible, if only by email, and may well be useful, extending the network of people who can help. Networking may be useful simply at the level of having a sounding board, and a companion for lunch. Differences of experience, skill or outlook could make it much more creative and see it result in very direct career boosting. As an example of the wide range of possibilities here, the boxed paragraph that follows looks at an international dimension.

In context here we are concerned about the international dimension of self-development. You may well want to organise, and interact with, an international network of contacts. Ask questions – *Do you have anyone in the office there that knows about X?* – work from one person to the next and keep in touch with those that seem, or prove, useful.

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Networking example: international possibilities

If you have an international element to your job this may act to direct what you might do here. Even if not, there may still be merit in looking further afield. Start at home as it were and work your way out. Make use of links that exist even if you are not involved in them. If your company has an office, a distributor or other contacts or arrangements in a foreign city get the contact name. This may not be the one you ultimately want but they may lead you to it.

Perhaps I can illustrate this principle with a personal example. I work regularly in South East Asia. One contact I have established in Singapore is a local consultant called Gary Lim, and this relationship provides a classic example of long-distance networking. Of course, we meet occasionally (not least, he's an excellent guide to local eating!), but more often contact is via e-mail and the occasional posted item.

Through him I can:

- Obtain support and assistance of many sorts (for example he once got a prompt cheque from what looked like being a bad debtor in Singapore by making a single phone call)
- Extend my range of contacts by linking to others he knows
- Check the local view on something (economic, cultural or whatever)
- Find a sounding board for ideas or to check something factual
- Discover other sources of information and advice (from a local library to a web site in China).

And more besides; and many of these contacts I learn from. It is also an interesting and pleasant contact – he's a nice guy! As I said to another colleague the other day "Everyone should have a Gary in every overseas location that's important to them". I hope he finds his link with me useful also.

Of course the people you link up with need to be tailored to your situation and your needs. Remember networking is a two way process, you get out what you put in, but it is also a very constructive one and should be part of anyone's career building and self-development activity.

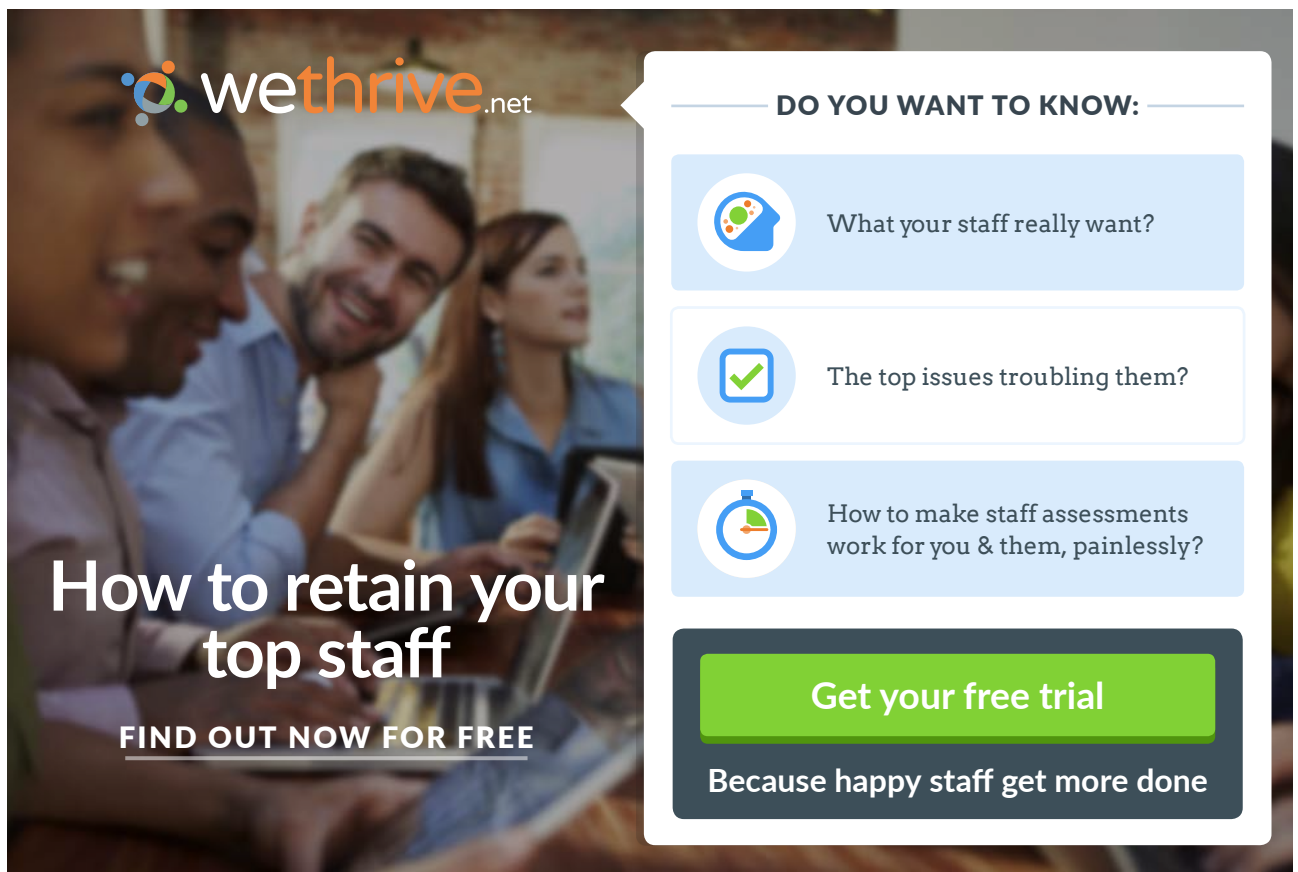
6.8 Qualifications

It would be remiss not to mention this. Whatever your age or stage in your career and whatever your existing level of qualifications, consideration of your circumstances could indicate that further qualifications are worth acquiring and could assist your future career. There exist routes to a variety of qualifications that may act to assist different careers. Their advantages are essentially threefold. First, study can include content that directly assists with what you need to know and be able to do in order to do either your current, or some future, job. Secondly, they may not just be useful in enabling you to do a job well, but instrumental in allowing you to qualify for, and be appointed to, a new job. In the second case the fact of studying for, or having passed, some qualification is as important to the situation as the actual practical value of what is learnt. Indeed, the way in which such things enhance your image is certainly a specific consideration. Thirdly, there is the process of undertaking such things. Study may be in a variety of forms, including part time courses and distance learning. But most represent an opportunity to meet others of like mind. These may include people whose brains you can pick or who represent other networking opportunities that are career enhancing in some way.

Some routes, like a course in say a language, may be wholly relevant if that is something you need. Consider two overall categories first:

- *Technical*: a plethora of technical degrees and qualifications may be relevant for you depending upon the field in which you work. Such may range from engineering to topics of much greater complexity.
- *Business*: these also include a wide range of things, from the now ubiquitous MBA to specialist degrees and diplomas with a more direct link to particular functional areas: sales, marketing, management, I.T., human resources and so on.

Both categories are too wide to go into here, but whether you want to obtain a post-graduate MBA or a qualification linked more specifically to a business function (often professional bodies are the place to investigate this) there may be some checking out to be done here. As a reminder that a qualification is not a *guarantee* of either extra competence or reward, I would mention the old quip that the perfect high margin business would be buying MBAs for what they are worth and selling them for what they *think* they are worth!



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6.9 CPD: Continuing professional development

In recent years the concept of continuing professional development has spread widely in response to the kind of changes going on in the world and the increased need for professionalism in many jobs. Initially limited to the professions (areas such as accountancy and law) CPD, as it is referred to, is now a regular feature of many peoples' lives; certainly it exists in marketing (my main area of work for many years) and it is not so long ago that would have seemed unlikely.

CPD defined: essentially CPD is a programme of ongoing development undertaken as a mandatory part of someone's membership of a professional group. Activity is specified in broad detail, a set amount of time must be dedicated to it and records kept of exactly what has been done.

Aside from the requirements of professional bodies, such a scheme provides both added discipline to foster a commitment to ongoing self-development and a mechanism to create the necessary continuity. Of course, what is done must be selected to make it genuinely useful (not just to clock up the necessary number of CPD points), but if that is the case then such schemes are very valuable.

Of course, certain people are involved by virtue of their speciality. For example, some people will automatically be part of such a scheme (for example that run by the Institute of Chartered Accountants), others will opt to be (for example, by registering to be a Chartered Marketer as part of their membership of the Chartered Institute of Marketing).

TIP: while touching on professional bodies I would suggest checking their programmes thoroughly to see what they usefully offer: for example The Chartered Institute of Marketing to which I belong have useful (and economical) informative events at a local branch level.

Furthermore, after much talk of careers, an additional point is worth making – sometimes several careers in fact run in parallel. I am referring here to what is called a *portfolio career*. This is a term for working in a way that allows you to do more than one thing. It is predominantly used in context of those who are self-employed or in small businesses (for example, I operate in training and consultancy as well as writing books and articles), but is increasingly possible in larger organisations as well; indeed it may be a useful first step to a career change. The wider the scope of what you do, or will do in the future, the greater the number of areas that development must address becomes.

7 Summary

The best-trained man is the self-trained man.

J. Ogden Armour

To summarise: career development, and specifically getting career fit must be on your mind regularly; don't let times when all is going well – for the moment – blind you to the need for it. It must also be a regular part of your activity, as thinking about it is not enough. Both individual actions and/or the continuum of what you do can jump you ahead, particularly when linked to an awareness of opportunities and a considered view of what you see as constituting career progress and success.

TIP: There is potentially much to be done here, and such things can be easy to put aside “for later”; some thinking, identification of desirable action and then resolve (which means making lists, deciding timing and keeping track) can pay dividends.

Let me end by linking to another word that fits here: change. Perhaps it is, above all, the dynamic nature of markets, economies and the workplace that makes all this necessary. Writing in another business book Robert Kriegal and David Brant put it well: *When you are though changing, you're through. Change is a process, not a goal; a journey, not a destination.* Surely only too true.

The whole process of self-development described here is designed to keep you moving forward. It is an area to embrace, work with and make a regular part of your thinking and activity.