

It's time we learned to learn

Andrew Gibbons reflects on a personal journey and some real concerns

If you are like me, and for a lot of reasons I hope that isn't too true, you will flick through this journal, taking in the title of this article and deciding whether to invest a valuable few minutes in reading it properly. So I need to give you a good reason to do so – after all we have a lot of competing priorities.

Here are the key points I will address:

- truly managing our own development is not hard work, it's rewarding and virtually cost-free
- employers need to lead the way – but will they?
- professional bodies are not just clubs we belong to because we took their exams many years ago.

I hope you are still with me – I really do feel there are some useful thoughts to follow.

First three questions: what are you better at than, say, six months ago? What can you do now that you couldn't at all six months ago? What was the source of that learning, that new ability, that even apparently insignificant improvement in how you do important things?

Odds are you didn't learn those things on a training course, that virtually all of the improvements in our professional capability are rooted in the real world of what we do at work and beyond, not in occasional, non-needs-based, expensive training courses.

If, as I believe with a 30-year perspective in this learning business, our individual and specific real worlds are the true drivers of our continuous professional development, come on, wise up and do more to consciously and deliberately mine this priceless source, and don't allow your development to be an unplanned and haphazard process.



Truly managing our own development is not hard work, it's rewarding and virtually cost-free

First an admission: I haven't been on a training course for more years than I can remember.

Strangely enough, I am certain nonetheless that I have developed considerably as an L&D professional in that time. I can specify clearly and credibly, with behavioural evidence, that I am a more competent practitioner, and that is because I treat my CPD as a high priority; it is a constant and conscious process, and – horror of horrors – I keep a learning log to record this.

Incidentally, my handwritten learning log, started in February 1987, extends to more than a million words over 1,148 entries but I won't go on about that, other than to say I am not a diary writer and, as an extroverted, undisciplined person, it's been a very worthwhile 25-year struggle.

We all say the dreaded phrase 'you learn something new every day' so come on, what 29 things did you learn in February? It's not an unreasonable question. The fact is, L&D professionals should lead the way but I see little sign of it – we are as lazy at learning as any others. Employers haven't yet woken up to the fact that what they spend on formal training and education brings a very poor return but, when that happens, and there are signs as you know well, the learning will shoot ahead of the learned at a rate that will surprise all.

So, as I encourage the people I work with, watch *Coach Trip* – yes, I am serious. Brendan is a superbly interpersonally skilled individual, and I see few people with his repertoire of behavioural competences. He can be as firm or as sensitive as he needs to be, and gets things done in difficult circumstances while retaining respect and authority. This, to me, sounds like a teatime management development programme worth many times the typically expensive, syllabus-driven, time-soaking courses that offer a lot less real learning.

Once we become aware of the limitless development opportunities that our real world offers, it becomes an exciting, rewarding and endless journey – again, much like *Coach Trip*. Sometimes I explain that it is like standing under a waterfall with a colander, catching just the learning drips in a cascade of opportunities.

Learning is a skilled process and requires practise. Skilled learners – very often children, unhindered by adult baggage and inhibitions – have eight qualities¹.

In short, they:

I would like to see organisations seeking new recruits that are less training course-dependent

- anticipate and prepare for learning experiences that would otherwise be a surprise
- recognise and fully exploit a learning experience
- seek out new learning – they don't wait passively
- take risks and innovate – within reasonable boundaries
- look for, and appropriately accept, help and feedback
- are constructively and honestly self-critical
- filter new learning, making associations and connections
- overcome barriers and obstacles to their learning.

Many years ago, it was explained to me that learning is an iterative process. I didn't know what this meant, so I looked it up and, basically, an iterative process requires persistence, and the acceptance that small movements in the right direction have real value and can be built upon to achieve something really significant over a prolonged time. Our development is an iterative process, so we must be prepared to make more effort, to be more active and to look for outcomes in the longer term, not be tempted back to dependent, lazy ways if success is not immediate and easy.

So, critically observe those from whom you can learn; don't lose touch with people who can help your development; read and note your learning; if you haven't got a mentor, get one now; watch the TV and YouTube, and note your reflections, however briefly. Otherwise a potentially high-value learning experience will get washed away by other stuff.

Be able to convincingly answer the questions *what did you learn today?* and, more importantly, *what will you do as a result?*

The wonderfully eloquent Malcolm Knowles puts it far better than I ever could: "There is convincing evidence that people who take the

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initiative in learning learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers.”

Employers need to lead the way – but will they?

I will start with two quotes that, for me, crystallise the issues I want to briefly explore.

The first is from Nancy Dixon: “The viability of an organisation as a whole may rest on the ability of employees to learn.”

Note that this is about the ability of employees to learn – not be passive participants on training courses.

The second is from the profound-thinking Charles Handy: “It may be true that we learn more from our mistakes than our successes, but organisations have in the past been reluctant to put this theory into practice.”²

With regret, I agree with Handy. My observation of organisational realities is that, among many other imperfections, they are typically very poor at providing a supportive environment for risk taking and learning. The anxious, fearful, blame-heavy organisations we see too much of are not climates for managed risk, for innovation or for learning.

Then there is the Dixon issue, which I hold to be absolutely true and is the reason so many of the above-characterised organisations fail. The organisational paradox is that, when learning is required most, the conditions prevail that inhibit and kill the motivation of those with the capacity to develop themselves and, by collective effort, the organisations themselves.

Other things must change in corporate life to encourage real development – for instance, the tragic lack of correlation between success and effectiveness. By this I mean that those who strive to be more effective, to achieve their potential and to enhance their worth to the organisation that employs them are often

thwarted in this, and that the upper echelons are too often populated by a regenerating set of successful ‘ineffectives’. The net result is that the truly effective leave to go where they will be appreciated and given opportunity, and the organisation declines as the ineffective prove their lack of ability to manage it when demands are greatest.

It is rare but not unknown for those that lead an organisation to model the value of managing their own learning. These leaders know the value of the words Warren Bennis attributes to John Sculley of Apple: “If you aren’t making mistakes, you aren’t trying hard enough.”³ Only in organisations led by those that create a climate of support and reward for innovation and growth will the benefits of self-directed learning be realised.

Personally, I would like to see organisations seeking new recruits that are less training course-dependent and more able to accept the challenge of managing their professional development. In addition, I long for the day when it is a key and monitored part of every manager’s job to coach and support the learning of their direct reports.

In my own practice, I get huge satisfaction from supporting those I work with to present very significantly valued savings or revenue generation from perfectly possible changes to existing procedures. All too often their enthusiasm and motivation evaporates as institutional inertia kills serious and lasting organisational effects. Lord Allen Sheppard, then chairman of Grand Metropolitan, labelled this as “acceptable under-performance”. In other words, the lack of ambition to be better, even best, the coasting along and the creation of a climate of low achievement that drives out talent.

Peter Senge knows this well, and tells us that “there is nothing more important to an individual committed to his or her own growth than a supportive environment”⁴.

The pockets of corporate life run by supportive, nurturing managers need to grow and take hold if would-be self-driven learners are to emerge and flourish in the numbers required to make a difference to their own and their organisation’s development.

Professional bodies should not be clubs we belong to because we took their exams many years ago

Why be a member of a professional body? Well, for most of us, pre-professional qualification, it’s an easy enough question to answer because we need to pass exams or convince by other routes

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that what we have previously passed, and what we can show we can do, is enough to earn the badge. In my own case, I passed IPM in 1985 and have stayed on board the now Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development ever since.

All professional bodies for whom membership is not a licence to practice have got a big problem with encouraging, and especially enforcing, CPD.

Essentially they must balance the entirely reasonable expectation (and, indeed, if we look in our codes of professional practice, the requirement) to keep a record of our professional development with the likelihood of mass defections if that is done in a way that causes a revolt among the lazy learner masses.

The ironies run deeper still. Many former members of professional bodies quit because they feel they don't get enough for their subs. Ask these same people what they ever did for themselves to get value from them and you get

a blank look. Surprise, surprise, they didn't go to branch meetings; they have a stack of still-wrapped monthly magazines in a pile or binned unopened, and they certainly had no time to use the often-superlative electronic library and learning facilities. Net result, a waste of money – yes, because you never made the effort to make it otherwise!

Professional bodies can do a lot more to promote the value of taking true responsibility for our own (professional) development. I believe →

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the upgrade process for most is laughably lax and little more than a wave-through to make the membership demographics look better.

For me, the carrot approach is far better than the stick – so incentivise those who have tangible evidence of their professional development. I would love to see an electronic register of those who have voluntarily submitted their CPD records for the benefit of employers and prospective clients. This would differentiate the active from the lazy learners and be a real reason to do more to develop ourselves.

By the way, I don't believe you need to be a member of a professional body to be an L&D professional. Behaving professionally is more important than hanging a 30-year-old certificate on the wall and paying your dues or umpteen years as a totally inactive member. The fact is that a huge number of very competent and successful people populate the L&D world without a relevant qualification to their names. In my experience, this is often particularly true in very senior positions. So our professional bodies must give us a reason and, I feel, a reward for our discretionary membership – a good enough

reason to part with money for which we can find other uses and, for me, CPD can, if managed well, be that reason.

In conclusion

Just about the best advice I ever got was a throwaway line during a management programme I was running in Cambridge. Ann Smith (I always acknowledge my sources) said: "Don't become like the people you criticise." Wonderfully powerful for just seven words, and well worth reflecting upon.

Another great seven words are 'if only we knew what we know'. It is sometimes a good start to unpack the knowledge we have acquired and, more significantly, how we have used it.

So I encourage you to learn from Smith's wise words and avoid the tendency too many fall into of becoming dependent, passive learners, unprepared to make the effort to genuinely graft at your own personal development.

Read what others do not, watch and learn from what others can't be bothered to watch, record learning in less time than those less bothered take telling you they haven't the time! **TJ**

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