

Reading for CPD: How I overcame 'read and forget' syndrome

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Why a reading plan?

I want to share my recent use of reading as a CPD tool. Like most reading this – and ironically, a lot more who aren't, I struggle to find time to read, and as a result, I am not keeping as up to date, and am missing out on the treasure trove of ideas and wisdom out there if only the hours could be found to take it all in.

One of the many benefits of professional membership of CIPD is access to a huge range of articles, books, and reports that really can significantly and swiftly enhance our knowledge and broaden perspectives.

My focus has been on online journals, I just checked, and two I use most would cost £275 for a year's online access – that's significantly more than my annual CIPD membership.

Shamed by reading (!) that Barack Obama, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett amongst others follow the 'five hour rule', finding undistracted time to read for five hours a week, I decided to give it a go.

How – what worked for me?

My natural reaction is to rush out, read stuff and then forget it all in a week. So I needed a plan. Recognising the value of online journals, I had for some years regularly reviewed three of four of most relevance and interest, and had accumulated over 2000 in topic sets – over 350 for instance on leadership, and more than 200 on coaching.

After that I knew I had to accept the painful fact that my absence of reflection skills required me to structure and nail down the learning very explicitly.

So, I decided on a topic to read around rather than dodge about cherry picking articles on various topics. Next I chose specific texts to provide a balance of classics (Tannenbaum and Schmidt's 1958 first outing for their continuum for instance), with more contemporary thoughts.

Armed with this plan I braced myself for the really hard part, and for this I bought notebooks and packs of pens that meant my writing is at least part legible, because I knew I had to write down, yes I mean that, direct quotes from each article - otherwise ask me in a week what I remember and it would be vague fragments.

This for me, wasn't enough to make me believe it was going to stick, so I have got into a routine of reading and writing quotes, and a few notes of my own, then next day typing these up into a more permanent, flexible resource, that for instance can be shared with others, and uploaded to my website.

I decided to build each topic resource into at least 10,000 words – in the case of coaching and leadership I went on to 20,000. For the big ones I find this takes around six weeks.

Where do I find the time? Not during 'normal' hours that's for sure - this needs undistracted focused time, and an hour a day gets a lot done between 6 am and 7 – that's when I am writing this. It's important to recognise that unless you can shut the world out, any serious and meaningful CPD activity such as this needs time, and that extends the working day and week. Only you can decide whether or not that's a price worth paying.

Tangible value

This has prompted so far, three very full notebooks, and over 75,000 typed words of new learning and insight. In addition it has spawned over 150 slides capturing key points, lists and models.

Although as a 36 year learning and development man I felt I knew a lot around the subjects I have been reading, it has been humbling to realise that what I knew was but bits and pieces, disconnected generalities and themes not true retained learning.

I am already using the resources in my coaching; to add value before and after events, and primarily to evidence, and enhance my own professional development. I feel better informed. I am enjoying the experience, and that I believe is essential – this is something that cannot be done begrudgingly, through gritted teeth.

I believe from decades of direct observation that the ‘management and leadership classes’ in this country are not well read, and have little or no motivation to read and learn from that endlessly rich and needs-centred form of development. To make it easier, I email my resources extensively, and find that reading these in what I know is a single figure percentage of the time it took me to produce them prompts more reading and learning in others.

In short, this works for me, and maybe a structured reading plan will work for you. You won’t know unless you give it a go - remember, Barack Obama and Bill Gates find that time.