

Development of human resources

Part 4: Career development—personal career management and planning

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This is the fourth in a series of articles to introduce methods addressing the development of individuals and organizations through the field of Human Resource Development.

There is an increasing need for individuals to take charge of the development of their own learning and careers for a variety of reasons. There is an increase in the rate of change in our organizations and in the knowledge and skills we need to perform our jobs. Career ladders are rapidly shrinking or disappearing as reorganizations lead to flatter structures. An ever-increasing need exists for us to keep up with the rapid growth in knowledge and the rate of change of our workplace environments. And, involvement in one's own development fosters greater commitment to the process than other-directed activities.

Learning is now our responsibility

Career development (CD) is now the primary responsibility of individuals in organizations. A recent survey of human resource development directors (1) indicates that they consider CD to be their least important function. This correlates with recent trends of disappearing corporate career paths and job security. Just as the responsibility for employee retirement planning is no longer a corporate function, the responsibility for learning and for the development of career paths has been downloaded to the individual employees.

Personal learning project management is a new skill for most people, one for which they have not been adequately prepared. The good news is that this responsibility also brings increased control over one's learning and career development and the opportunity for a more stimulating and motivating work life.

The purpose of this article is to help you develop plans for individual career development for yourself and for other employees in your organization. This process results in a document that has been referred to by such terms as an individual development plan, a learning contract, MBO (management by objectives) for personal learning, a personal "curriculum" for learning, and a plan for personal career advancement. The results may also be applied to the "development" section of most performance appraisal forms.

Examples of personal learning project management

These methods have been used recently in a variety of university and industrial settings:

- Industrial environments. At the Niagara Division of Consolidated Papers (2), employees draft individual development plans, both individually and in consultation with the training manager. This process occurs annually, much like a performance review. The individual development planning process is focused on personal development and career growth and is kept separate from other HR management functions such as reviews for salary, promotion, and retention purposes.

Individual development plans can, and often should, include formal training programs, but the focus is on the learning and the individual, not on the organization's curriculum and courses. If used correctly, a compilation of the learning needs from these individual learning plans (coupled with studies of organizational needs) can lead to more efficient planning of training efforts by the organization.

- University teaching and learning. At leading universities that focus on quality learning, education and training, learning contracts are often used in courses to shift the responsibility for learning from the instructor to the student (3). Individuals design, develop, and implement their own plans for learning in their courses, in a process similar to the use of the industrial individual development plans previously referred to. This works especially well with adult learners who bring a variety of skills, knowledge, and experiences to their studies and who also have a variety of needs for learning and development because of the diversity of their working environments. It also benefits more traditional students who learn *how* to learn and who need project management skills and experiences.
- Pulp and paper education. This process has been used very successfully in a senior course in pulp and paper process operations at the University of Minnesota (4). The students felt that their learning was more interesting and exciting because they had the ability to choose (actually, to propose and contract for) their learning projects. They also assigned themselves more work, and therefore learned more, than

with traditional methods of instruction. As a bonus, they developed their skills in engineering project management as applied to projects of direct interest and importance to themselves.

- Industrial and corporate internships. This works especially well for individualized learning experiences such as on-campus student R&D projects and for off-campus learning such as for corporate internships.

Steps to develop and implement an individual development plan

We use standard forms to help the learners follow a systematic process to prepare their learning contracts, individual development plans, or learning project management strategies. Here is what should be included in a personal learning plan:

- **Assessment.** First, identify your current skills, knowledge, abilities, and interests. A previous article in this series (5) described the needs assessment process.
- **Goals.** Identify the new skills, knowledge, and experiences you would like or need to acquire and have. Do these goals match your personal and career interests? Are your goals in agreement with your organization's goals, mission, and vision?
- **Learning purpose.** Identify the gap between the current situation and the desired outcome. This will produce a statement of purpose that should clarify why you want to learn something and what specific skills, knowledge, and abilities you wish to develop.
- **Learning objective(s).** Identify what skills, knowledge, and abilities are to be acquired or enhanced. Remember that this is only a plan, not a rigid promise; your plan can and should be revised as your goals change and as learning occurs.

For each objective, identify the following:

- **Target date.** Identify when you plan to complete the work for this part of your learning plan.
- **Learning strategies.** Describe how you plan to do it and what process you plan to follow to accomplish your objective. For example, strategies could include: reading and study, interviews and discussions with appropriate people, mill trials, networking and communication, reflecting on your own experiences, classroom study, literature review, synthesizing, and writing.
- **Learning resources.** Identify what resources you plan to use to help you with this learning process. These resources might include, for example: literature; mentors; coworkers; other professionals for networking; vendors or suppliers; classes; technical conferences; professional association involvement; equipment manuals; laboratory trials; production workers; teachers and instructors; field experience; your supervisors; and a variety of learning technologies including computers, the Internet, and perhaps even your mill's DCS (digital control system).

- **Outcomes and products.** List the evidence you will develop to show the accomplishment of your objectives. What deliverables will you have produced by this process? What objects can be used to validate your learning experience? This could include, for example, a log or journal of your studies or observations, a literature review and bibliography, written and oral reports, lists of questions, obtaining specific career objectives, and more.
- **Evaluation plan.** Describe the method you will use to validate your deliverables and to evaluate the success of your learning project. In other words, what criteria and means will you use to determine if you were successful in reaching your learning goals?
- **Initial feedback and revision.** Before starting to carry out your individual development plan, confer with your supervisor (instructor, mentor, or HRD manager if available) for feedback, for another view of your learning needs and strategies. This will help ensure that your learning will not only be based on your personal needs but will also be relevant to your organization's goals, results, and profitability. The more independent sources you can use, the better—seek additional feedback from your co-workers, colleagues, family, and friends.
- **Summary of results.** After completing the projects in your individual plan, you should evaluate the success of these activities. What insights have you gained? What new understandings do you have? What new skills, abilities, and knowledge have you acquired? What experiences did you have and what did you learn from them? How do you feel about this process?
- **Next steps.** You should review the accomplishments and successes of this project with your supervisor (and others, as appropriate). Then update your learning plan for the next cycle. Remember that learning and growth are processes that may, and should, continue indefinitely. ■

Literature cited

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