

# Finding Time for Professional Development

## Making Learning a Lifelong Activity

We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.  
– *Pete Drucker, management consultant and writer.*

How often do you set aside time to learn new skills? Chances are, not as often as you'd like!

If you're like many people, you're keen to learn, but you struggle to find the time. So, how can you make this time, develop your knowledge, and increase your value, both to your organization and to future employers?

## Why Make Time for Professional Development?

If you're a manager, you'll know how important it is to ensure that your team members are given plenty of training and development opportunities. However, it's just as important to focus on your own learning and development. To do this, it's essential to set aside enough time.

There are several reasons why you might not make learning a priority. Volume of work is the most obvious reason: with work and personal responsibilities competing for your attention, it can feel impossible to find room in your schedule for learning.

As well as this, you may feel guilty about taking time out for personal and professional development; after all, this could be used to work on urgent or important tasks, or even to be with your family.

It can also be difficult to make learning part of your routine. In the course of a busy, hectic day, tasks like "Read leadership book" and "Complete online course" can easily slip to the bottom of your To-Do List.

This can lead you to feel disappointed about not living up to your own expectations, which can affect your self-confidence and make you feel less positive about your career. You can also suffer if you don't stay up-to-date with changes to your industry or profession. For instance, you might miss opportunities to make a greater contribution to your team or organization, and other people may become more effective than you in the workplace.

However, when you make learning a priority, you increase your value to your organization. You're more marketable as a professional, and you're in a better position when you apply for a challenging project or seek a promotion.

Continuous learning can also help you develop expert power. If your boss, team members, or clients see you as an expert, they're far more willing to respect your opinion and follow your lead. This can make it easier to win support for your projects, negotiate a contract, or manage change.

## **Personal Learning Strategies**

There's no doubt that it's important to make your own professional development a priority. But how do you find time to do it?

### **1. Set Learning Goals**

If you don't recognize the importance of what you're doing, it will be easy to give self-development up whenever you're pressed for time or lacking energy and motivation.

So, your first step is to identify your learning objectives, and visualize how these will help you achieve the other professional goals that you've set. So, what do you want to get from your learning? And why are you making time to learn?

It's important to set realistic goals from the beginning, and to break these down into long- and short-term goals that you can add to your daily to-do list or action plan.

Then, use visualization techniques to create vivid mental images of how these learning activities are going to make your life better. Write these visualizations down to remind yourself why you are devoting time to this activity.

### **2. Identify Obstacles**

Next, identify possible obstacles that might make it difficult to stick to a learning schedule, and come up with strategies to overcome them.

For instance, imagine that, over the coming week, you've committed to spending half an hour reading a book when you get home. One possible obstacle is that your kids may want to play with you as soon as you walk in the door. To overcome this, you'll need to explain to them why you need time to study alone. Promise them time as soon as you're finished, and then sit in a quiet room, so you won't be disturbed.

Go through the possible obstacles that might prevent you from spending time on your learning, and write down the strategies that you'll use to overcome each one.

### **3. Think Small**

Many of us assume that we'll need large chunks of time to devote to learning. However, short blocks of time can be just as effective, if you focus.

The key to learning effectively is to maximize the impact of every moment that you have available. Look at your To-Do List, and see what you can achieve in the time available. Make sure that you minimize distractions, even if you only have just 10 minutes free, and concentrate on what you're reading or learning.

#### **Tip:**

Think about how you can use your mobile device to learn when you're on the move – by using appropriate apps, by listening to podcasts, or by storing information that you want to memorize on the device's notepad.

Also, learn strategies such as speed reading, and efficient note-taking techniques like mind mapping, to make the most of your learning time.

### **4. Learn at Your Best**

Many people schedule their learning for a time when they've completed everything else. However tempting this may be, think about how you feel when you've accomplished everything on your to-do list. You're usually exhausted, right?

Everyone has different peaks and valleys in their energy levels. It's important not to schedule learning, which requires a fresh, open mind, for the time of day when you have the smallest amount of energy.

Identify your peak time of day and consider how you can better schedule learning to take advantage of the changes in your energy throughout the day.

### **5. Make Learning a Habit**

You'll only be able to sustain your learning if you make it a habit. Developing any habit takes work and self-discipline.

To build a habit, look at your schedule and see how you can work time for learning in every day. Could you get up an hour earlier, or learn on your lunch break? Could you study after everyone else has gone to bed? Take into account the energy levels we mentioned earlier.

Think of a reward that you can use to motivate yourself through, say, the next two weeks. This will help to keep you going when you don't feel like studying, or when you're tempted to skip a day because you want to do something else instead.

Once you've made it through the first two weeks, take time to congratulate yourself! That first step is always the hardest. Next, commit to spending the next 30 days learning every day. Reassess the time slots you've carved out for yourself: are they working? If not, what tasks could you move around to make learning more practical?

Remember, habits start out as little daily activities that you force yourself to do. They only become habits with time and persistence.

## **6. Choose the Right Learning Style**

Do you know how you learn best? For instance, some people learn and retain information best when they can read and take notes. Others are active learners; they need to learn by doing something themselves. Still others learn best when they're presented only with the facts and with none of the theory.

It's important to identify your personal learning style so that you can tailor your learning to fit what works best for you.

## **7. Collaborate**

It's often easiest to learn in collaboration with others; after all, if you know that there are people who are always available if you need help or advice, you're more likely to turn to them instead of giving up. When you join a community that makes learning a priority, these people can also hold you accountable for your learning goals.

One of the best ways to do this is by joining a class or doing a course with others. However, you can also network on LinkedIn and Twitter to find other professionals in your industry who are interested in learning.

You can also talk to colleagues to see if they routinely devote time to learning. If so, perhaps you could form a study group, or simply spend time reading or learning together?

## **8. Delegate Tasks**

Your day is likely full of tasks that you're responsible for. So, how are you going to fit learning in?

Look at your professional and personal responsibilities to see if you can delegate any tasks to someone else, for example by giving new tasks to team members, or by hiring someone to clean your house. If you can clear even a half hour from your schedule, you can use this time to work on your learning goals.

## **Key Points**

Lifelong learning is essential if you want to stay "in demand" in a changing business world. However, many of us feel that we don't have time to devote to regular learning, in spite of the many benefits it offers.

Start by setting small goals with your learning; commit to devoting time daily for the next two weeks. Identify your learning goals, so that you know why and what you want to learn.

Delegate activities to open up your schedule, if you can. And consider forming a support group with others who are also interested in learning.