



Personal development plans

Introduction

Effective organisations are 'learning' organisations. They make every effort to support the continuing development of every member of staff. They share learning between staff. They capture and store knowledge so that the whole organisation can benefit. The objective is to ensure that all staff possess the knowledge, skills and competences required to perform well in their job now – and in the job as it will be in the future.

Organisations increasingly recognise that it is the quality and ability of their people that sets them apart and understand the benefits of targeted development. In the words of Peter Drucker, "If you think training is expensive, try ignorance".

Identifying training needs

You might think that the easiest way to identify development needs would be just to ask, "What training do you require?" Rather than identifying the training required in order that the individual might perform better in the workplace and develop the job role to its full potential, you will instead most likely be faced with a "wish list" which might or might not be relevant or appropriate. Alternatively, as people are afraid to expose their weaknesses, you may get little or no feedback at all.

It is sensible therefore to take a more systematic approach – by undertaking a training needs analysis – to identify the gap between the current and the required level of knowledge, skills and ability. Some training needs are obvious; if someone is new to a job or an industry, they will need some training; if new practices are introduced to existing staff, they will need some training. Once identified, these training needs can be agreed and prioritised and written up as a personal development plan. The benefit of this approach is that training will be specifically tailored to each individual's needs. This can be highly motivational.

Setting the standard

The starting point is to establish the norm against which current performance levels should be measured. One way to do this is to conduct a job analysis, which sets out the ideal performance. This is best undertaken by the immediate manager of the jobholder, with some input from the jobholder. There are a number of questions that should be asked, including:

- What is the purpose of the job?
- What are the targets and objectives?
- What are the main duties and responsibilities?
- What specific tasks must be performed?
- What is the required level of knowledge?
- What is the required skill level?
- What are the required abilities?
- What changes are planned within the organisation?
- How does the jobholder see the role developing?

The information gathered should be written up in a short report.

The next step is to decide if the suggestion for job development is appropriate and, if it is, then the requirements should be added to the job analysis.

Measuring the gap

The process of measuring the gap between the requirements of the job and the actual job performance requires a logical and dispassionate assessment. The starting point is having agreed standards of performance. You can then assess how members of staff compare to the standard, through:

- personal interviews (to identify aspects of the job which are more difficult; to identify tasks that have been hard to handle; to identify performance which has fallen short of the standard – all of which may indicate a development need);
- questionnaires (which may ask similar questions to the personal interviews – except that they lack the ability to ask follow-up, probing questions);
- observations (which have the advantage of providing a third party assessment of possible development needs, though people often perform differently if the observation is formal);
- assessments and tests;
- quality control (for example, of research papers or policy position papers); and,
- monitoring
 - staff conflict;
 - complaints from staff/customers;
 - absenteeism;
 - staff turnover/exit interviews.

Self-assessment

Using self-assessment to analyse training needs can be both empowering and motivational. Encouraging and allowing people to take responsibility for their own development makes them stakeholders in the future of the organisation. Self-assessment is not a soft option allowing management to abdicate responsibility for developing people; rather it is a partnership forged between managers and staff which requires regular discussion in order that the relationship and the process do not break down.

The first step in the process is to conduct a job analysis. Once you have completed that to your satisfaction, look again at the knowledge, skills and abilities requirements. Write each main point on a card, listing the sub-points below. Keep the cards in their separate knowledge, skills and abilities sets. Now make two other cards with the wording “Most like me” and “Least like me”.

The jobholder places the cards “Least like me” and “Most like me” to the right and left respectively, and then takes the knowledge cards first of all and sorts them into order between these two cards. This requires some thought so that the cards are sorted by priority – what is your strong suit (most like me) and at what are you perhaps less good (least like me).

Now make a list of positive and negative examples of knowledge, aiming for around five of each for each card. Once this process has been completed review the order of the cards. Do you know more or less than you thought you did about something? If so, re-order the cards between “least...” and “most like me” to reflect the information on the positive /negative example sheets. When you are happy with the order, list the cards on a sheet headed “knowledge training needs” starting at “least like me” and you have an order for personal development in this area.

The process should be repeated with the skills cards and then with the ability cards, giving a full personal development needs assessment.

The benefit of this approach is that providing positive and negative examples focuses the mind and turns what could be a subjective analysis into an objective one. There is no requirement for a jobholder ever to say "I can't do that"; there will always be a "most like me" and "least like me" order to the self-assessment. (Which also means that there will always be room for improvement.)

The final step is for the jobholder and line-manager to meet and discuss the analysis, writing up the needs as a personal training and development plan.

Personal development plans

Having a written plan helps to concentrate the mind and it can also act as a timetable.

The ideal plan has three components:

- objectives;
- proposed actions; and,
- schedule of progress review.

It may help, however, to split the preparation of a personal development plan into two. First, set out the objectives and tasks set for the individual by the organisation for say, the next six months. Then set out personal development objectives that arise from the work objectives. It may help to look further ahead since medium term organisational objectives may require development objectives to be completed before the work can be started. A member of staff required to undertake internal audits for a quality assurance scheme, for example, needs to complete the training before they can start.

| Organisational objectives | Personal development plan | |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| | Objectives | Review |
| Short term (0-6 months) | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▼ Complete preparation of IT strategy ▼ Install network ▼ Set up staff training programme ▼ Transfer existing systems | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▼ Be able to reconfigure computer network to use Windows NT ▼ Be able to provide appropriate support to rest of staff ▼ Be able to manage additional staff | February April February |
| Medium term (6-12 months) | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▼ Set up network for use as intranet | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▼ Understand requirements of HTML and to be able to use MS Front Page and MS Internet Explorer | March |

If this is done properly, it should ensure that each member of staff:

- has clear work objectives;
- can see how their job is likely to develop;
- understands what development work is required to help achieve their work objectives; and,
- undertakes training that is relevant to their job and avoids participating in programmes just for the sake of it.

The organisation objectives should be reflected in the personal objectives of each member of staff.

The second stage of the process is to determine the most appropriate action to achieve their development objectives. For most people, development is likely to come about through:

- work based, on the job, observation and work experience; and,
- participation in formal training courses.

Development may also come about through:

- informal activities, including reading of relevant books, professional journals etc; and,
- attendance at conferences or meetings of professional institutions, etc.

Consider the list of identified training needs you have created, and ask yourself, what is the best way to address each need? Is a formal course appropriate? Does the jobholder need to spend time with others within the organisation to appreciate fully what they do and how job roles interact? Do they need to do some reading to increase knowledge?

If a formal course is the best option, then the training objectives may be developed from the requirements identified by the job analysis. How many other people have the same training need? How many other people's needs are sufficiently similar that they may be incorporated into the same session? (Don't forget that as well as addressing specific personal needs, training must be cost-effective, and one to one training can be expensive.)

Now you have decided how needs should be addressed, ask:

- what is the most urgent need?
- how long should action take?
- when will I review progress?

Once you have included the most urgent training need in your plan, ask the questions again of those that are left. Repeat the process until all needs have been dealt with and set it all out in a personal development plan.

| Development objectives | Proposed action | | | Review |
|--|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|----------|
| | Work based | Formal | Informal | |
| Be able to reconfigure computer network to use Windows NT | Reconfigure computers one by one | Attend NT training course | | February |
| Be able to provide appropriate support to rest of staff | | | Prepare briefing materials for other staff | April |
| Be able to manage additional staff | Seek guidance from line manager | Attend course on managing staff | | February |
| Understand requirements of HTML and to be able to use MS Front Page and MS Internet Explorer | Set up HTML pages on a trial basis | Attend Front Page training course | | March |

It is a good idea to review progress regularly against the personal development plan and to keep the plan up to date. Remember that training needs analysis is the first step on the path to continuous improvement; it is not an end in itself, but a beginning.

Conclusion

Identifying training needs in such detail for each individual may seem like a waste of time, but look at it this way: it is only by knowing specifically what the problem is with your car that the garage can fix it properly. They can't treat all cars in exactly the same way and expect the same fix to be right for every one. If you can't do it with cars, then how could it possibly work with people, who are infinitely more complex?