

# Thriving in Your Career: Powerful plans for lifelong learning

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## OBJECTIVES

- To highlight practices for lifelong learning for talent development professionals
- To provide guidance on creating the kinds of self-development plans necessary for a diverse career in a rapidly evolving industry

How often do you stop to consider how much of a privilege and challenge it is to be a learning professional? Our work consistently puts us in the center of important changes in people's lives – starting a new job, upskilling to stay current, learning new tools and practices, and honing needed skill sets. Our organizations count on us to deliver the capabilities needed to successfully complete initiatives and meet important goals. Organizational leaders and employees both depend on us to enable them to be the best they can be.

To effectively support them, we need to be the best we can be. Our role is to be experts in the dynamics of learning and in the tools and techniques of our trade. Given that learning theory, tools, and techniques are constantly being advanced, mastering our trade is a lifelong process. Just like the people we aim to serve, we must learn every day in an environment that is often rather demanding.

We need to be exemplars in the techniques and activities of learning and lead the way in demonstrating how to manage a challenging personal learning agenda. To do that, we'll need to apply the learning expertise, design skills, and tools we employ in our work to the service of designing our own learning plans. This chapter will give you reminders and insight on how to do that.

## PRACTICES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

“Lifelong learning: the provision or use of both formal and informal learning opportunities throughout people's lives in order to foster the continuous development and improvement of the knowledge and skills needed for employment and personal fulfilment.” ~ Collins Dictionary [Note to editor: suggest this be formatted as a call out.]

The practices for lifelong learning combine to make you the expert you need to be. Not surprisingly, they are reflective of the overall arc of an effective learning and development project, starting with defining goals and ending with improved performance.

These are the practices you'll want to put into play, and they will be elaborated in the rest of the chapter:

- Committing to professional excellence. Making room for your own professional development requires deep motivation. You'll need to have a compelling vision of the kind of professional you wish to be, and you'll need to pledge your dedication toward achieving that level of practice.
- Identifying development goals. The skill set for an exceptional learning professional is widely varying, so you'll need to start by defining the development you need in your role and context. Making progress depends on focusing on specific knowledge or skill so that you can strengthen the most important areas for you.
- Designing learning plans. How you go about developing your skills depends on the nature of the targeted skill, your projects, your work environment, and your time commitment. There are several approaches you may find useful for different situations (described later in the chapter). Regardless of the overall approach, you'll want to research and curate the best resources and activities for your need and organize how you will tackle working your way through them.
- Applying learning skill. As you work through learning materials, you need to activate learning processes that help you to translate those inputs into guidance for future action. Successful self-directed learners exhibit a specific set of qualities and skills that you'll want to cultivate.
- Demonstrating mastery. In the end, your goal is to employ your skills to the work of helping others to succeed. As a professional, you should have some evidence of your mastery in the form of project artifacts, portfolios, and endorsements.

## **COMMITTING TO PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE**

Working in a profession means you have a calling that requires a specialized body of knowledge. While many professions require deep academic preparation for entry, our profession does not. Still, those who work in talent development need to make a commitment to developing a deep understanding of the underlying theory and the advanced techniques of the work. That's where lifelong learning comes in.

Most talent development professionals manage their own professional learning. They identify the knowledge and skill they need for their roles and seek out the training and development activities they need to ground their work. They also take pride in learning by doing, gathering experiences that allow them to claim certain skill sets. All that requires a certain dedication and pride. Your first step in your own development is envisioning the level of knowledge and skill you need to be effective – to be the expert that your clients, business partners, learners, and peers need you to be.

What does professional excellence look like in talent development? Professional organizations in our field have invested energy in cataloguing the necessary capabilities and they have created comprehensive competency lists and standards. These analyses make it clear that experts need both the technical skills of talent development and core professional and business skills to be successful.

You can use these capability lists to self-assess your current skill set and potentially define areas for development. While individual professionals likely need only a subset of these skills to competently perform, these competency lists set out aspirational goals for expertise in a variety of areas in our field.

Here's where you can find comprehensive capability frameworks for talent development professionals:

- Talent Development Capability Model from the Association for Talent Development.  
This model defines 23 capabilities in three arenas: personal capability, professional capability, and organizational capability. The professional (specialty) capabilities are: learning sciences, instructional

design, training delivery and facilitation, technology application, knowledge management, career and leadership development, coaching, and evaluating impact. Each capability is further defined by a set of knowledge and skill statements to clarify what the capability entails. Available from: <https://tdcapability.org/#/>

- Learning and Performance Institute Capability Map.  
This map defines 25 capabilities in five practice areas: strategy and operations, design and development, learning facilitation, performance and impact, and learning support. Each capability is behaviorally anchored at four levels of expertise: foundational, proficient, advanced, and strategic. Available from: <https://www.thelpi.org/skills/capability-map/>
- Learning and Development Capability Framework from the Asia Pacific Institute for Learning and Performance.  
This framework defines key behaviors for 18 capabilities across six dimensions: professional attributes, strategy and planning, design and development, execution and delivery, evaluation and feedback, and business smarts. Available here: <https://www.apilp.org/capability-framework>
- International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (ibstpi®).  
Ibstpi offers role-based competencies and standards for instructional designers, instructors, training managers, and evaluators. Available from: <https://ibstpi.org/>

Some professionals may want to examine broader competency sets for human resource professionals:

- CIPD New Profession Map.  
This map defines six core knowledge areas, eight core behaviors, and nine areas of specialist knowledge. These specialties include learning and development, talent management, and organizational development and design, plus people analytics, diversity and inclusion, employee experience, employee relations, resourcing, and rewards. Each of the knowledge areas, behaviors, and specialist areas are further defined by standards at the foundation level, associate level, chartered member level and chartered fellow level. Available from: <https://peopleprofession.cipd.org/profession-map>
- SHRM Body of Competency and Knowledge.  
This competency set recognizes behavioral competencies in three domains (leadership, business, and interpersonal) along with technical competencies in fifteen HR functional areas, including learning and development, organization effectiveness and development, and diversity and inclusion. The body of knowledge identifies proficiency indicators at the core and advanced levels. Available from: <https://www.shrm.org/certification/>
- HR Certification Institute.  
These competency sets cover five functional areas with different weights and specifics depending on the kind of certification desired: business management and strategic leadership, talent planning and acquisition, learning and development, reward systems, and employee and labor relations and engagement. HRCI certifies professional and senior professionals in human resources, among other specialties. Available from: <https://www.hrci.org/>

## IDENTIFYING DEVELOPMENT GOALS

If you explore published capability lists, quality review checklists, and job descriptions, one of the first things you notice is that the skill set in talent development is incredibly varied – and virtually impossible

for one person to have. Your first task in managing your professional development, then, is to identify your personal development goals in alignment with your situation and career trajectory.

Your goal selection is influenced by many factors, and often through more than one of these lenses:

- **Career intentions.** Consider the role you want to play or the kind of work in which you want to engage. Review job descriptions for the role or talk to hiring managers or people in the role to get a sense of what you'll need to be successful. Evaluate yourself against that set of criteria and note what you need to strengthen.
- **Feedback.** Refer to your appraisals or seek more detailed feedback from your peers, supervisors, and clients. If you are being derailed by a specific lack, that may need to be a priority. Otherwise, look for areas that are solid but need to be enhanced to take you to the next level.
- **Strengths.** Marcus Buckingham's work has shown that people grow the most in the areas that are their strengths – with strengths defined as skill that make you feel strong, that put you into a flow state. Consider the activities that get your energy flowing and make goals that advance those skills so you can add more value when engaging in work activities.
- **Skill stacking.** One of the things that make you unique is your particular set of skills and experiences. Consider strengthening knowledge and skill in areas that might give you a niche practice area. It might be a combination of skills (e.g., consulting and elearning design) or it might be a skill practiced in a particular industry or role (e.g., training for nurses). Align your development goals to bolster these skills.
- **Competency development.** You can assess yourself against any of the competency frameworks cited in the previous section and select development goals based on that analysis. Your own organization, as well, may have a competency model to guide your evaluation.
- **Trend analysis.** Keep an eye on where the profession is going. Perhaps you want to develop skill in designing learning experiences that use virtual reality or augmented reality or any of the other up-and-coming specialties. The field is constantly changing and there is always opportunity to be on the leading edge.

Once you have a sense of the topic you want to pursue, it's useful to put together a short list of guiding questions for your learning project. You don't need to create formal learning objectives; in all likelihood, you won't have enough background in the topic to know what those formal objectives might be. Instead, decide what you want to explore so that you have something to guide your selection of learning materials and activities.

When you are pursuing a complex or long-term goal, there are two additional points to consider. One is to articulate *why* you are embarking on this journey – what you hope to be able to do with the knowledge base or skill, or what the driving motivation is. To manage your own development, you'll need to have a compelling *why* to fuel your persistence. The other point is to put some markers down so you'll be able to track your progress; imagine a long novice-to-expert continuum with a scale from 0 (no knowledge or skill at all) to 10 (expert), then make note of where you are currently and where you want to be to feel like you've completed this project, which does not need to be all the way to expert level. Whenever it's time to reassess, you can use this scale to gauge your progress.

## DESIGNING LEARNING PLANS

Once you know where your learning journey is heading, you can make a plan for exploring the arena you chose. The nature of the plan you need depends on the nature of the learning project. In general, there are three types:

- Reskilling / upskilling plan – an intense, focused effort for developing a new skill or substantially deepening a skill you have. The process of addressing a skilling need encompasses identifying a learning need, curating materials and activities, making a learning plan, learning, applying, and self-assessing progress.
- Continuous professional development plan – a longer-term, consistent pursuit that helps you to keep a finger on the pulse of those areas of L&D that are important to you. Planning for continuous professional development involves first isolating a knowledge base or skill that you want to deliberately develop over time, then curating sources (who's putting out high quality content in this arena) and setting up feeds (journals, social media, internet alerts), and finally, taking note of news and advances that enrich your perspective (continuous learning). This kind of plan usually contains more ongoing activities than a skilling plan – heavy on continuous learning sources, social learning, regular participation in professional gatherings, and consistent reflection and application activities.
- Spot learning plan – a quick search for resources that can be immediately applied to those in-the-flow-of-work learning needs and curiosities. Spot learning is relatively simple process of searching for material, vetting for credibility, learning from your found sources, and applying that learning to the work. This approach generally requires just a few well-chosen resources.

In truth, many professionals often wind up running these different plans simultaneously. You can imagine, for example, that a designer may want to upskill for elearning design while still keeping core instructional design skills sharp and one day needing a quick refresher on a functionality of an elearning course development tool.

The elements of these plans are similar: you'll need set of resources from which to learn, activities to process your learning and practice new knowledge and skill, social supports in the form of co-learners, discussion partners, teachers, and feedback-providers, and strategies for applying your learning and verifying that you're indeed grasping the concepts and skills. All the while you keep re-evaluating whether you are getting what you need so you can redirect your efforts if necessary.

### Curating learning resources

When you go looking for learning resources and people with whom to network, look beyond the first few pages of your internet search. Seek specific kinds of resources so you diversify and deepen your inputs and activities. It's important to have both inputs (readings, videos, courses) and activities (people with whom to engage, assignments, application projects).

When selecting resources and activities, consider where you are on the novice-to-expert continuum on the specific knowledge base or skill you are targeting. People on the novice-to-competent end are more likely to benefit from formal training or education, while people at the competent-to-expert end generally need more social and experiential learning. You should have diversity of inputs and activities to be sure, but keep in mind what you hope to gain from each so you can prioritize finding the right kinds of resources.

Take the time to research options, and then evaluate and curate the ones in which you want to invest your time. (A worksheet is available at (INSERT TOOL LOCATION).) Your research into available materials and activities will likely turn up substantially more than you will be able to complete; so curation is necessary. To curate, evaluate the quality of the material, its depth, its relevance to your context, and the credibility of its sources. (Even if you are executing a spot learning plan, be sure to vet your sources! The internet is, unfortunately, full of bad advice, too.) Use your professional network to get recommendations and to help assess your options.

Look into options in all of these areas:

Type	Description	Advice
Learning materials	Books, articles, videos	Seek out compelling <b>long form</b> resources that provide nuance and detail; check credibility of authors
Continuous learning sources	Podcasts, professional journals, academic journals, social media	Look for those that are frequently talking about your topic of interest; check credibility of authors; build a professional learning network
Social learning	Peers, co-learners, collaborators, subject matter experts, role models, coaches, supervisors, teachers, feedback-providers, mentors, etc.	Engage with people with whom you can have extensive, candid conversations and from whom you can learn a great deal; consider the kind of social learning you need in this project and align people accordingly; secure their support, arrange meetings, and follow their work on social channels; be sure to have an accountability partner – someone who will urge you to stay on track
Professional gatherings	Conferences, local professional meetings, vendor webinars	Look for topics of interest, quality of speakers, and depth of content; network to learn from others' experiences in those venues so you can select and engage in these gatherings wisely; be sensitive to potential source bias (people focused more on positioning their products or services than on educating professionals)
Certifications and training	Workshops and extended development programs, some of which certify mastery of a specific knowledge base or skill	Check professional organizations and offerings from well-known experts; investigate reviews, credibility of instructors, and market value of credentials offered
Education	Academic degrees and certificate programs	Network to learn the best academic programs for your needs; check Coursera and other MOOC platforms for content you can access for free (you will likely need to pay for a certificate of completion from a MOOC).

Reflection and meaning-making activities	Actions you take to process your learning and prepare to apply it, e.g., discussion, journaling, coaching, making checklists and job aids	Recognize that this is a critical part of the learning process, and make a habit of pausing for reflection!
Application Activities	Projects or tasks you perform in context that use the knowledge and skill you are developing	Start with small projects or specific tasks; arrange for feedback if possible and/or develop quality criteria to check yourself

### **Making a plan**

Once you have an idea of all you want to include in your plan, you'll want to treat it like any other project and give yourself assignments and deadlines. Organize the activities into a general flow that stems from typical organizing principles (e.g., moving from general materials to specific, weaving activities between various learning inputs).

Decide when and how much time you'll invest in these studies on a weekly basis and set goals and assignments for the reserved blocks of time. That will keep you from wasting time on just deciding what to do. Share your plan with your accountability partner to get any additional advice, and consider sharing it with your supervisor as well to gather support.

You'll know you have a good plan if you've described a clear goal, curated high quality learning materials, identified dynamic social learning companions, integrated deep reflection and consolidation activities, and defined challenging, authentic practice and application opportunities.

### **APPLYING LEARNING SKILL**

The most important part of the project is to execute the plan. Keep your driving goal and guiding questions in mind as you engage in all the activities you have mapped out. Keep notes and notice progress at every step.

Your ability to navigate a self-directed learning plan requires a certain skill set and attitude. Research in self-directed learning consistently calls out the qualities below (Lombardozi, 2020).

- **Motivation.** Planning for and attending to your own learning project in the midst of other demands requires dedication and commitment. The strongest motivations are internal, from your own desires and sense of self. You'll need this motivation to maintain persistence in the face of obstacles.
- **Self-efficacy.** The belief that you can learn is context- and resource-specific. You'll need your generalized growth mindset as a foundation, but then you'll want to nurture your conviction that your efforts will pay off and give you the outcomes you desire.
- **Self-assessment.** Managing your own learning requires candor and strength in assessing your own competency. You use that skill in defining your goal, and you'll use it again to assess progress. Note, however, that humans are particularly ineffective in judging their own performance, so be sure to request feedback and listen carefully to others' inputs.
- **Resourcefulness.** Regardless of the ease of an internet search and the accessibility of a network of people you may have cultivated, finding and vetting resources and activities is a tough job. You'll want to cultivate digital savviness and interpersonal networking skills in order to find and engage

with the best resources. Hone your internet search skills; develop techniques for building your network; always look for a window when a door closes.

- **Planning skill.** When putting together your schedule, use what you know about the dynamics of your own learning (and adult learning in general) to design an impactful flow of activities. It's critical that you reserve time and plan for how to use it. To ensure you don't waste time, you need to invest in making a plan before you begin. But you'll also want to be ready to make adjustments to that plan as things come up, all the while keeping an eye on self-imposed deadlines.
- **Learning skill.** Learning under your own direction will require your full array of learning skills: discourse, annotating, note-taking, reflection, retention, critical thinking, problem-solving, synthesizing and more. The most critical skill is your ability to translate what you've learned into guidance for future action.

As a parallel effort, then, you'll want to evaluate the degree to which you have these qualities and skills for your project. If you assess that some of these may be weak, then include activities in your plan that will shore these up along the way. For example, define behaviorally anchored criteria for self-evaluation. Or make up reflection questions for a book or long article you plan to read, and take the time to write down your thoughts. Or quickly review recommended practices for making a checklist (a spot learning project) as you set about creating one based on the information you've gathered.

While you are in the process of learning and taking notes, consider how you want to change your behavior going forward. It's useful to plan to make these new practices a habit if you can. Habituation requires that you clearly identify what you want to do and why, that you set up a reminder about your commitment to that behavior, that you make it as easy as possible to implement the behavior, and that there be a positive outcome to the action (possibly rewarding yourself). It's important to define exactly how you will integrate new knowledge and skill into your way of working to ensure that your learning is not simply tucked away and never used.

The beauty of managing your own plan is you have the luxury of rethinking it at any time. Regularly assess whether you are making progress. Notice potential side journeys and figure out where they fall in your list of priorities. If your curated resources and activities don't live up to your expectations, revise them so that you are getting the kind of depth and challenge you need.

If (when) your plan goes off track, evaluate causes. Shore up supports and mitigate barriers that ensure you can stay on plan. Get back into the flow as quickly as possible and evaluate how the delay impacts the plan going forward.

## **DEMONSTRATING MASTERY**

Most adult learning projects are initiated to enable you to do something. The ultimate measure of success, then, is the degree to which you are able to demonstrate mastery of the knowledge and skill you've been pursuing. And the real proof of that is application in the real world.

As noted above, your plan should include application projects. To start out, you might plan to take on small parts of a project or specific tasks of a process, or you might get yourself assigned to a team of people who are sharing the work. If you aren't in a position to do the work, create mock projects that can flesh out your portfolio. When you are practicing or applying, it's useful to get feedback from a knowledgeable party rather than rely on your own imperfect judgement of your performance.



As a professional, you should have a portfolio that demonstrates what you are able to do, and its elements can include exhibits beyond the obvious. Of course you will want to include project artifacts and endorsements. These can include in-depth practice or demonstration projects as proof of concept for what you know how to do. You can also consider keeping a public blog or in some way working out loud. These serve the dual purpose of contributing to our common knowledge base and showcasing your growing expertise. Contributions to professional conferences and journals do the same. Overall, it's wise to have a digital presence that serves as a resume or calling card of sorts so that people can easily see what you have to offer.

## **A CAREER IN TALENT DEVELOPMENT**

Our profession puts primary value on outcomes and performance, too often glossing over the deep learning that enables exceptional work. As learning professionals, though, we should be expert learners and exemplars for our colleagues in other roles. We should apply what we know about adult learning, learning strategy, design, and quality learning products to the task of designing and executing our own learning projects.

The work of talent development breeds a huge array of roles and work products. Your specialization may change many times over the course of a career. The tools and techniques of the talent development field and the challenges we're encountering in our work are both constantly evolving, and that changing kaleidoscope of needs requires us to evolve our own capabilities as well.

Learning enables human flourishing, and it is no doubt a lifelong process. You can find inspiration and energy in the reinforcing cycle wherein your learning improves the learning and performance strategies you recommend to clients, which improves talent development initiatives that feed capabilities organizations need to succeed. Learning starts with you, and it never ends.

## **FOR FURTHER READING**

Biech, E. (2011). *Skills for Career Success: Maximizing your potential at work*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

McLagan, P.A. (2017). *Unstoppable You: Adopt the new learning 4.0 mindset and change your life*. Alexandria, VA: ATD Press

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## **TOOL**

Self-Directed Learning Project Planning Worksheet  
(separate document)