

Managing your personal development

Does your heart sink just a little when you read this heading? If it does, it is almost certainly because personal development never quite makes it to the top of your list. You know it is important, you want to do it, but it is simply a question of “getting round to it”.

This article is written with the self-employed consultant in mind, though many of its principles apply to all consultants.

The business need

Here are some techniques to make it happen – ensuring that you “get round to it.” The first is to view it as a business need, and not as a personal benefit. You sell your expertise and yourself to clients. Developing both of these is about developing the business.

The second is to think of yourself, and your expertise as products which need updating and refreshing, like a car or a camera. Depending on what field you are in, that updating process may happen more or less frequently, but it should always be at least an annual process. You may not wish to be seen as hopping onto every new bandwagon, but you certainly do not want to appear outdated in your thinking, or out of touch with new techniques.

The third is to recognise your own personal change, and the impact that can have on the way you deliver. If you get bored with doing the same old thing, this can communicate itself to your clients. Your expertise has not changed, but you have, and they therefore get a different message from you, essentially a different product, and not one that you intend to deliver. In managing your personal development, you are actively managing your service.

Finding time

Given that you now have some solid business reasons to do some personal development, will it happen now? Some of you may say a resounding yes, but others may still be doubtful. The main reason for that is likely to be time management. You are much too busy delivering to do anything else at all, or when you are not delivering, you are selling, and there is never enough time for that, so how.....

Eating the elephant

The answer is that whilst personal development remains a huge elephant-sized lump of effort, it will never fit into your busy schedule. It needs breaking down into manageable pieces, and then those pieces can be fitted into your diary without too much disruption. Set them at least a week apart – this is important not only to ease time management, but also because you will benefit from a “thinking interval” between each step.

The key stages are:

- Plan - deciding what to do
- Method – deciding how to do it
- Analysis - researching the options
- Evaluation – choosing the best options
- Implementation – actually doing it!

The Plan

If you decide that your personal development aim for this month is to make a plan, and nothing more, then that becomes more manageable. You have bitten off a piece you can chew! So how do you plan?

Start with business needs – what do you need to deliver? Something more or something different to the business? Not sure? Then how clear are the business needs? Where is the business going? If the answer is no change, then the development question becomes how to improve or update what you are doing now. If you want to take the business in a different direction, then what development do you need to help you to get there?

The focus at this stage is on the what, not the how. You may need a new skill, a knowledge update, an understanding of a new market – just note down the needs, and make the list as long as you can. Later you can categorise the desirables and the essentials.

Ian is a marketing consultant specialising in the IT field. He offers a general service and likes the variety, but it gives him a continuing development challenge, as the clients and products change very rapidly. Marketing techniques are more stable, but still the Internet has had a huge impact, and keeping up to date with all the e-marketing trends is not something he is good at. He is not even sure that he knows what there is to know. His business aim is to continue as he is, and win just a few more clients.

His development list looks like this:

Knowledge updates on:

- CRM marketplace

- New trends in e-marketing – whatever they are

- Latest technology trends in IT

Improve selling skills

Get paperwork better organised so I can find things!

As he writes the list, it feels like it is going to be hard work, but he has only to make the list, he will worry about the next step later, so he continues.

Method

The next step you take is to look at all the different ways to make the development happen. This may well involve a little research. At this stage you do not have to think about decisions or costs, just find out what options are available to you.

Ian reviews his list:

CRM marketplace – he could:

- Get the information from the Internet

- Talk to an expert

- Talk to CRM companies

- Get information from CRM companies

New trends in e-marketing – he could:

- Get the information from the Internet

- Talk to an expert/colleague/friend/client

- Go on a course (find on Internet)

- Ask the Institute of Marketing

- Read current magazines

Latest technology trends in IT

Ian has no clue what these are, and needs only the highest-level understanding, so he could:

- Skim current IT magazines or e-zines
- Talk to an expert/colleague/friend/client

Improve selling skills. He could:

- Read a book
- Go on a course
- Do an e-learning program
- Find a coach/expert

Get paperwork organised He could:

- Go on a personal efficiency course
- Read a book
- Find someone to do it for him
- Find a coach to help him work it out for himself

Analysis

This is where you find out what is available. There are a million books on selling, how do you choose one? There may be a course on some aspect of e-marketing, how do you find out about it?

If you have a great deal of research to do, break it down into sections. Research selling today, CRM tomorrow, etc. Start with your network. Who do you know who knows about CRM, or e-marketing or selling? Or who do you know who might know someone who knows....etc. You might want to go through your list of contacts, as you can sometimes forget that your friend Ken, who is an accountant, actually worked for a CRM company.....

When you have your contacts listed, talk to them first, because they may immediately recommend a book or magazine or contact, and save you lots of research time. Similarly, if there is some central body which is core to your subject, such as the Institute of Marketing, in Ian's case, this is a very good place to start. Business Link may be a useful source of general information too.

This stage is about identifying specifics, not about doing the development. Ian may find just the information on CRM he needs on the Internet, so now he bookmarks it, or prints it off, to read at the implementation stage.

Evaluation

You have identified all the options – now which one is best? A key factor here is your learning style. If you want to assess it formally, got to www.peterhoney.com and click on learning styles. If you have a good idea already, you will know that you hate reading magazines, and never get round to a book, but will happily surf for hours. Or you may be the kind of person who only learns by doing, and cannot bear theory. Knowing your style will be a great help in evaluating options. Be realistic when you ask yourself if you will really read that book on time management, or get round to that heap of information papers on your desk.

Ian has a fairly flexible learning style, but he likes personal contact, and does not enjoy learning alone. A mentor or coach will be ideal for Ian. He has little evaluation to do on CRM. He has found something short but packed with information on the subject, and he will have no difficulty in studying it.

Selling is a different matter. His colleague Jonathon, is a brilliant salesman, but thinks that selling is like breathing and has no idea how to teach it. He has recommended a course, but it is very expensive, and Ian is not sure that Jonathon is in a good position to judge it, being such a “natural”. He had hoped that Jonathon could be his sales mentor, but that is obviously not a role he could play.

Ian cannot find anyone to recommend a book. He thinks e-learning is going to be the equivalent of an expensive book, and neither really suits his learning style. He goes back to his list, and sees the word “coach”. He realises that coaches do not need to be experts, and decides to ask his friend Ned to do some coaching with him on selling. He coached Ned on marketing basics a while ago, so he is sure Ned will be happy to reciprocate. Ned is not a salesman, but he is quite a good coach. This may not produce a final solution, but at least it will help to identify his needs more specifically.

This approach also provides his solution to the organisation problem. He will ask his friend Sheila, “the world’s best-organised person”, to help him with this. Making an appointment with Sheila will also make sure that something happens. Ian is not too good at self-discipline – particularly where administration is concerned, so this is an excellent strategy.

Implementation

This will now flow from the other stages – the elephant has almost disappeared! Ian has no trouble with this at all, as he has everything all lined up, and simply phases it to fit his work schedule. As he successfully completed each stage, he was encouraged to go on to the next one. Now that implementation is proving so easy, Ian will have no difficulty in starting the process again next year.

Summary

- Personal development means business development
- Identify business needs, then development needs
- Recognise that even if you do nothing, you are changing

- Break the process down into manageable stages
- Make formal diary commitments to development
- Allow time between each stage

- Understand your own learning style
- Choose the methods that will work for you
- Build up a pattern of small successes on your development plan