

Take Charge of Your Professional Development

It's easy to get complacent about professional development when you're employed. If you already have a job, why should you go above and beyond to improve your skills, especially if it's not required by your company?

But making an effort to help yourself grow professionally will help you succeed, both in the short term and in the long term. And if you don't learn new skills and acquire new knowledge and experience, you're likely to fall behind your peers, which could be detrimental when you look to change positions.

"If you don't [focus on professional development], you won't be marketable in your field in five years," Alexandra Levit, author of *New Job, New You: A Guide to Reinventing Yourself in a Bright New Career*, wrote in an email. "In this [employment] climate, you always have to be looking ahead to what is going to be required in your potential next role."

Levit recommends focusing on transferable skills that are relevant across a variety of industries and positions. That way, even if you can't use them now, they'll likely come in handy later.

Taking charge of your professional development has become even more important since the recession, because some companies no longer have the funds to help employees grow beyond their basic duties. And since employees tend to have shorter stays with companies than they did years ago, companies may not see the value in training an employee they could lose. Of course, employee-retention experts say that's exactly why companies should offer professional development: because it helps them keep and cultivate their best talent.

"Companies have less resources to do professional development because as they've cut back, everybody's down to muscle and bone," says Rusty Rueff, career and workplace expert at Glassdoor.com, a website that offers insight into careers and companies. "You have to take control of your own development ... and find ways to make it happen."

Here are 10 ways to help yourself grow professionally even without the support of your company:

1. Take a class. Just because you're no longer in school doesn't mean the classroom is off-limits. Plenty of universities offer classes for adults, often in the evening so you can attend around your job schedule. Online classes are another convenient option. Take a

class on a topic that's relevant for your job, or learn about something that's totally unrelated for a change of pace. Either way, you're growing, which is the over-arching goal.

2. Teach yourself a skill. You don't always need structure or a class to learn something new. Pinpoint skills that are desirable in your line of work, and start practicing. Website-building or social-media skills are a perfect example, and they're desirable across the board. Jump into a project, and learn the ropes as you go.

3. Volunteer. "Because [nonprofit] organizations are so hungry for hands," Levit says, "you'll get the opportunity to master leadership skills you might not have the chance to practice otherwise." And, she adds, "you'll be doing it in a real-world environment, which makes the experience better than if you, for example, took coursework or training seminars."

4. Master an online tool. Even those of us who organize our lives via digital tools don't always make the most of them. The Web is full of free video tutorials on how to use networks like LinkedIn and Google+, as well as tips on organizing your Gmail life. Think about how you can increase your efficiency, and scour the Internet for resources to help you accomplish that.

5. Seek out people who are on the career path you aspire to. Ask them how they got to where they are. With a little effort on social media, Rueff says, you can easily find out who holds a certain position—or who used to hold it—and reach out to them. Especially if you stroke their ego a bit, people are often happy to talk about the path they took in their career, as well as what worked and what didn't. Learn from their successes and mistakes.

6. Shadow a colleague. Find workers within your company who do something you want to learn, and stop by their office occasionally to ask questions, Rueff suggests. You don't need an official shadowing program to accomplish this, just your own initiative. "You will learn a lot by listening and watching, and a little bit by osmosis," he says.

7. Find a mentor. Take that find-a-successful-person goal one step further and identify someone who's willing to give you guidance and advice. Even if you don't feel comfortable calling that person a mentor, having someone to run ideas by who has more experience than you can go a long way toward helping you make the right decisions. The key here is that they have to have an interest in helping you.

8. Read. Devour books and articles and blogs within your niche, but also pick reads that are outside of your normal professional box, Rueff says. "Read things that are outside of your own industry and experience, and then stop and think about, how can I relate that and apply it to my business?" he says.

9. Attend a conference. Figure out which conference is most worthwhile for people who work in your target industry and go, even if it means using vacation time. Not only will

you learn new skills, you'll also make new contacts. Emily Bennington, who helps new college graduates transition from the classroom to the workplace, advises researching who's going and connecting with those people on social media before the event, so you can arrange an in-person meeting and facilitate a stronger connection.

10. Don't neglect your "soft skills." Most of us know our weaknesses, whether we need to be more organized or do a better job of meeting deadlines or simply prioritizing in a smarter way. Putting effort into improving those skills will make you more marketable no matter what field you're in, says Joseph Grenny, an organizational-development expert and co-author of *Change Anything: The New Science of Personal Success*.

"Don't do it for your boss," Grenny says. "You're doing this for you."

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The banner features a collage of images related to leadership, including people in business settings, charts, and various text boxes with terms like 'Mission', 'Conflict', 'Leadership', 'Notice', 'Problems Next Office', 'What to Do', 'Social Skills', 'Communication', 'Team', 'Creativity', 'Productivity', 'Managing Change', 'Managing Performance', 'Productivity', and 'Building My Team'. The central text reads 'Bishop House Leadwell Knowledge Base'.

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