

Information on CPD (Continual Professional Development) and Competency

CPD

In today's working environment, anyone who values their career must be prepared to continually add to their skills, whether it be formally through a learning programme, or informally through experience and knowledge being passed down to them by colleagues and associates. Not surprisingly, in a profession based around technology and innovation Continuing Professional Development is vital to the careers of employees and, more importantly, to those companies and organisations that employ them and rely on their expertise.

Just as an employee increases their productivity and value through their continued development, your company can improve its marketability, efficiency and profitability by supporting and nurturing its most valued asset - your staff.

- Employers have a better skilled and more efficient work force
- Informed employers attract high calibre staff and keep them
- Good CPD policies can provide the most cost effective means of providing training, particularly if carried out in partnership with institutions
- Individuals will have the skills to react to a changing profession more readily
- Staff will be more adaptable aiding diversification opportunities
- CPD support from the employer as far as the employee's are concerned improves motivation and retention

The benefits of CPD are as great for employers as they are to the individual, and so it is vital that organisations play an active role in the development of their workforce. With a CPD policy, framework or scheme in place companies achieve greater success for themselves as well as access to a skilled and adaptable workforce.

The institutions role can vary to suit the particular needs of the employer, ranging from a formally structured accredited scheme to flexible frameworks and can aid with the access of members to resources such as mentoring, networking opportunities, and information services.

Some of the benefits to employers can be seen in the results of a survey carried out by CIPD, which showed that 40% of employees valued career development opportunities when assessing new employers. And over 55% of employees saw the ability to develop everyone's potential as something which a 'responsible' organisation would be particularly good at, while 81% of employees agree that responsible organisations are more likely to be creative and innovative.

Thinking about competence (this is you)

The concept of competence has been with us for a very long time. Many qualifications are now based around definitions of competence for specific roles, the most famous of which are NVQs. Using competence springs from the idea of that having a good grasp of the knowledge and theory behind a subject does not guarantee the ability to turn that into competent performance.

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Many organisations now use the concept of competence during their recruitment processes, and subsequently to measure and improve employee development. In fact, job descriptions are a basic definition of the knowledge, skills and attitude that are required for a given role. Competence is defined as being the mix of these three things.

It is easiest to define a competence as "the ability to perform activities to the standards required in employment, using an appropriate mix of knowledge, skill and attitude". All three aspects must be present if someone is to be effective in the workplace. To improve competence you need to increase not only your knowledge, but also your understanding of how that knowledge can be applied; your skill in applying it; and the attitude to apply it correctly.

To break this down further, knowledge can be considered as the underpinning principles or theory of a process or procedure. For example, at an extremely simple level, if you are repairing an item of electrical equipment, you may need to know what class of equipment it is and what tests should be performed. Increased knowledge might take the form of managing the test and maintenance programme.

To continue this example, skill could mean the ability to calibrate the test results. Greater skill may be required to immediately recognise that the component is damaged and, subsequently, to propose modifications.

Attitude, in this example, could be expressed as deciding whether it is safe to carry out the test. An extension of this would be ensuring that others, who also carry out the procedure, do so in a safe manner; and taking corrective action if this is not so. It could also mean reviewing the test procedure so that any unnecessary steps are eliminated or that further steps to enhance safety or efficiency are introduced.

Remember, overall competence is made up of competences in many different areas. All technical professionals need to consider the important question of how to develop competences in areas that are appropriate to their job, and these may be commercial as well as technical.

Defining competences

Before you can start to work with competences you need to define 4 things:

- what your role encompasses - i.e. what you need to be competent to do
- the knowledge, skills and attitude that make up that competence
- at what level you need to be competent - i.e. whether a basic knowledge of the subject is adequate, or do you need to be an expert?
- what you could do to prove that competence - e.g. what evidence you could provide.

Defining exactly what tasks you need to be competent at, and to what level, can be very difficult. Wherever possible you should always seek out existing competence frameworks, and your personnel department may be able to help you identify where these might exist for your particular industry or function. Indeed, many companies have already created their own frameworks, or there may be existing published standards you can use. If you are unable to

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find any existing frameworks you will need to create your own. Some organisations have very detailed job descriptions or person specifications, which can go a long way towards helping you create your own set of competences. To start with you should aim to assess yourself at this broad level, rather than trying to analyse the minute detail of every task you do.

You will need to identify the performance standards which apply to your work. Standards may be laid down at international, national or company level, and include quality, safety and environmental standards. Effectively, standards enable you to assess whether you have done the job properly.

Using the broad details of the tasks and standards that make up your work, you can then consider the combination of knowledge, skill and attitude that are needed to perform your work competently. Think about technical, business, managerial and personal skills. Very often, improving your personal skills will enhance the way you demonstrate your wider competences. For example, presentational or time-management skills can substantially raise overall performance and confidence.

Using competences for professional development

Once you are aware of your current position, defining where you want to be and deciding which competences are your priority for development will be much easier tasks. This will then enable you to produce your development action plan. I would suggest that you work to develop only a few new skills or areas of competence at any given time.

If your goal is to perform a particular aspect of your current job better, use your job specification to determine which aspects of knowledge or skills you need to work on. Similarly, you do not have to limit yourself to using specifications that have been created for your current job. You may find it useful to make an assessment of your competence against a framework for a higher level of responsibility or different job, particularly if you are aiming for a promotion or to move into a different role. This will enable you to complete a gap analysis, showing you where you need to take development action in order to achieve your target level of competence - and therefore your goal.

Many of your goals are likely to be concerned with technical areas. However, do not forget your interpersonal skills. Very often improving your interpersonal skills, such as your ability to influence people, can bring considerable benefit.

Assessing competence

Having defined your set of competences, the next step is to assess yourself against these. This will give you an indication of your ability to perform your current role. You will need to examine yourself against each competence statement and decide what level you think you are operating at. Comparing yourself to others may help here, using respected colleagues as a benchmark of good practice.

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Of course, you will not always be able to do this for yourself: you may need help from another professional such as your manager or mentor. Arrange a time to talk over your performance with them, but be prepared to accept their feedback!

Levels of competence

It takes time to develop competences, and you will realise that you will have different competences, at varying levels of expertise, in different areas. You may wish to develop some to a very high level, while to advance in others may not be so important or relevant. Remember that it takes time to develop competence and, in order to remain competent in a particular area, you will need to use the knowledge and associated skills regularly, or you will slowly lose your proficiency.

Confirming your attainments

In general, providing you are as honest with yourself as possible, you should feel comfortable with assessing your own level of competence. However, you may find it valuable to use a third party, such as those listed below, to question your thoughts and give an independent view:

- your manager
- your mentor
- your colleagues
- your clients

You should, however, be aware of conflicts of interest, which may bias any third party's viewpoint, especially when talking to line managers, clients or colleagues.

Basics

If you are to maximise your potential for lifetime employability, it is essential that you maintain high levels of professional competence by continually improving your knowledge and skills.

By taking ownership of your career and focusing your professional development you will:

- be better able to recognise opportunity
- be more aware of the trends and directions in engineering and society
- become increasingly effective in the workplace
- be able to help, influence and lead others by your example
- be confident of your future employability
- have a fulfilling and rewarding career

Taking a structured approach to your professional development will enable you to demonstrate continuing commitment to your profession. What's more, the good practice of regularly reviewing your needs, and selecting appropriate learning activities to help you fulfil them, will give your career focus and meaning.

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Planning

Step 1 - Think about your goals. Jot down where you want to be and the things you want to achieve next year (short term), in two-five years (medium term), and in ten years (long term).

Step 2 - Starting with your short term list, think about what actual things you will need to do in order to make those goals happen. It might be that you need to learn a new skill, gain some experience of a different area/role, take on more responsibility, or many other things.

You might also like to look at your medium term plan, to see if there are any things which you could include in your short term plan, to form the first steps in realising those goals too.

You will end up with a list of things to do over the next year or so.

Step 3 - Prioritise. Look at your list and consider which things need to be done before you can start on others, or which items are more important or time-bound (i.e. the opportunities will only arise at certain times). You can then put your list in order of importance, and it might help you establish some time-frames.

Step 4 - Set objectives. Look at the first 3-4 items on your list (you will work on these first). Examine them thoroughly so that you can turn them into SMART objectives. To do this each one must have a Specific target, be Measureable (you must be able to recognise when you have achieved it), be Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound (have a deadline).

Step 5 - Write it down. Committing your plan to paper will make you more committed to making it happen. Finish by setting a date when you will review your plan - and putting it in your diary!

TIP: Rather than starting from scratch why not use the notes from your last appraisal, any preparation you may have done for your last job interview, your CV, or current job description as the basis for this stage.

Doing

Step 1 - Look at the items on your plan and consider how they might be achieved. Do they require formal learning (such as a training course) or will you need to access some materials (e.g. books or CDs)? Will you need to rely on someone else to help you - for example asking a colleague to teach you new skills? For each of your goals work out a plan of action.

Step 2 - Know thyself! If you can, try to learn in ways that suit you. Some people like to understand the theory before attempting something - so they would read a book, and then try it out. Others like to experiment and learn in a more practical way. These people might learn better from watching someone else and then trying it themselves. If you adopt an approach that suits the way you learn, then you are more likely to pick it up quickly.

Step 3 - Make time to make it happen. If you are really committed to developing yourself then you will have no problem finding the time to learn. Once you know how you are going

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to tackle each goal, make time in your diary to do it. If you need the help of others, ring them now and make an appointment to go and explain what it is you need.

Step 4 - Gain support. It is always nice to be asked for help, and people are usually more than willing to help. When asking for support, be concise about what you want, and give feedback on the results.

Recording

Step 1 - Keep a log book of your learning. Jot down things that you learn - not just from formal occasions, but from everyday events and on-the-job experiences.

Step 2 - Review your learning to aid consolidation and implementation. When you learn something new think about how that knowledge will affect your performance. How can you use it to make you better at your job? What behaviours will you change in light of what you now know? Talking to your manager or mentor can help you with this.

If you are using competences -

Step 3 - Decide which competence each piece of your learning is linked to. As your learning leads to increased and improved performance (competence) you can record your new level (see section on Competences) and chart your progress.

Step 4 - Collect evidence to prove your levels of competence. Make sure it is cross-referenced and indexed so you can easily find each piece. Update your portfolio with new evidence as your competence increases further, and you will always have an excellent record of your abilities.

Note: Whatever system you adopt for your recording it is important that you keep it updated regularly. Don't put it off with the belief that you will remember it later - you won't!

Reviewing

Step 1 - Your diary tells you it's time to review (or it will do if you did the planning bit correctly!). Take out your action plan and your learning log and set aside an hour.

Step 2 - Consider each item on your plan. Have you achieved it? If so, then tick it off. If not, then consider why - the answer you come up with will help you to decide whether to remove the item (because it's not realistic now), forward it onto your plan for the next period, or change the goal (because it was not appropriate or realistic). Looking back over your learning log will help you to see where your learning has contributed to you meeting your goals. You'll probably be amazed at how much you have achieved!

Step 3 - Overall, consider how well you have got on, and what has helped or hindered you. This will inform your planning for the next period. If you are continually sticking for the same reason, then maybe you need to consider your approach. Perhaps a complete change in the way you tackle things will improve your success rate. Be honest - if you're not, the only person you will let down is yourself.

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Step 4 - Make sure you review both your short and medium term goals regularly (if you have more than one) - and your long term goals every 5 years or so. Over time you will find that items from your longer term plans will slide down into your short term plans and get ticked off as you progress.

Step 5 - Get planning again! Bring items down from your medium term plan to become part of your short term plan for the next period.

Good luck and remember that WHT Ltd can aid you in this process for Legionella Control. See below some FAQ's

Frequently Asked Questions

What counts as Professional Development?

Everything that contributes to your learning is professional development. Whether you are gaining increased knowledge, developing a new skill, or improving your performance or attitude, it all counts. It is also important to remember that sometimes you need to practice your skills, as well as developing new ones, in order to maintain your professionalism.

How much PD do I need to do?

Only you can decide what is the right amount and type of PD for you. Every engineer will have different goals and requirements, dictated by their individual roles and ambitions. The amount you do will vary at different times in your career, as your needs change, but should be sufficient to maintain your professional competence at the least.

Who should take responsibility for my development?

Ultimately, you are responsible for your own learning and development. However, your employer will obviously benefit from any growth in your professional competence, and it will be in their best interest to guide and support you. Organisations vary greatly in the provision they make for employee development, from those who have an institution accredited or approved professional development scheme to those who make no effort at all.

If your employer does not have any form of development scheme, but will support your development informally and provide training and support when required, then you will "self-manage" your own professional development to some extent.

Whatever the case, you should drive the process yourself, using guidance advice provided by your institution when you need it, to ensure that your career takes the shape that you want.

What happens if I change employer?

Changing employer will never be a barrier to your professional development, and is often a mark of your successful career planning. All your development to date will transfer with you and, providing you keep your records current and up to date, you should not have to retrace your steps later to find evidence or obtain verification. However, it is important to be sure

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that evidence you have collected is signed off, that you have sample signatures where necessary, and to have a final 'tidying up' meeting with your mentor, if you will not be able to continue working with them.

Once you join your new employer, you will need to build relationships with a new network of supporters, and possibly a new mentor. If you need a new mentor and are unable to gain one through your new employer, you should approach your institution for help.

What happens if I am self-employed?

As a self-employed person you will not have easy access to assessors, a sponsor or a mentor.

Clients may be willing to help you by acting as assessor. However, where this is not possible you will have to self-assess yourself, maintaining records of this, and seek verification later.

What happens if I am not getting the development I need?

You are responsible for your own development so if you feel that you are not getting the right opportunities to develop appropriate competences, you need to take action. Your first step should be to arrange to discuss your concerns with your mentor or line manager. They may be able to help you to identify how your current tasks are contributing to your development, or facilitate a move into a different role with better scope.