

Development on a zero budget: twenty ideas for action

Developing your skills, knowledge and capabilities can become more difficult when budgets are tight or your time is limited. Yet you have to find a way. In the first of a series of articles discussing aspects of people and organisations, Dr Tony McNulty suggests twenty practical ways you can obtain development at little or no cost:

Some people want development so that they can perform better in their current roles. Others are more concerned about preparing for the next rung on the ladder. Whatever their motivation, most people understand the importance of developing their knowledge and skills. If you become out of date, or your skills stagnate, your performance will tend to tail off.

Unfortunately, in the last few years, many development activities in organisations have been cut back. Development seminars have been fewer, and not everyone has had the budget for an external coach. Whilst your manager, as a representative of the organisation, *should* be interested in your development, if nothing happens then it is your problem and you need to attend to it.

The good news is that most development is free, and takes place while actually doing the work. We tend to acquire our professional skills and expertise through practice. We learn the most by doing, by reviewing what we have done, and by applying the lessons we have learned.

Against this background, the following are twenty tried and tested ideas for your consideration.

Twenty ideas for action

1. Conduct a personal review

- Set a specific time (daily, weekly, monthly) to review your own performance
- Write down any lessons learned, and discuss your conclusions with others

2. Keep a logbook/journal (many professionals do so)

- Note any experiences, ideas
- Review lessons learned and set targets you will pursue

3. Do a time log

- What patterns are there?
- Are you allocating your time to your priorities?

4. Ask for feedback

- From supervisor, colleagues, subordinates, external parties

- In person
 - Through a structured 360-degree process (for a detailed explanation, examples of a questionnaire, and some sample outputs, see: <http://www.mcnultymanagementconsultants.com/360info> and <http://www.mcnultymanagementconsultants.com/pdf/360output>)
- 5. Interview/meet experts**
 - Identify an individual who does something very well
 - Ask them how they do it
 - 6. Learn from/shadow an expert**
 - Identify a skill or competency you wish to develop (e.g. cross selling)
 - Select a “role model” and try to observe this person in action
 - Discuss the issues beforehand, note key points and review afterwards
 - 7. Undertake special assignments e.g. for difficult or demanding clients**
 - Forces you to apply “best practice” standards
 - Client questions and demands help ensure quality outcomes
 - 8. Consider job rotation/temporary placements/secondments**
 - Exchange posts with a colleague for a specific period
 - Provide mutual support during the temporary change
 - 9. Increase exposure to other functions/activities**
 - Represent your function at meetings you would not normally attend
 - 10. Undertake study/reading/computer-based programmes**
 - Read autobiographies (an underrated source of ideas)
 - 11. Obtain an internal or external coach/mentor**
 - An internal “co-coach” also improves communications and networking
 - Meet, phone, “plan, do, and then review”; share experiences and advice
 - 12. Volunteer for leadership/membership of task forces**
 - 13. Coach/mentor others**
 - 14. Run or host conferences and seminars on relevant topics**
 - Deliver presentations internally and externally
 - Invite external speakers and learn from their experiences
 - 15. Organise benchmarking visits**
 - How do we compare against others?
 - 16. Restructure your job to add further or unfamiliar responsibilities**
 - Lead a meeting you would not normally lead
 - Deputise or act as an understudy
 - Volunteer to take on extra responsibilities
 - 17. Get involved part-time in other organisations**
 - Join relevant institutions
 - Work with charities, schools
 - Undertake non executive postings
 - 18. Set up local/international networks for information exchange**
 - 19. Get exposure to the media and your professional network**
 - Publish articles or papers
 - Press, academic journals, radio, TV, Internet
 - Join LinkedIn and other such networks
 - 20. Consider a short-term sabbatical to develop different perspectives/skills.**