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## Continuing professional development

The acquisition of professional skills used to be straightforward. First there was a period of learning and training, mixed with on-the-job experience and exams to secure qualifications.

Once equipped with the vital "licence to practice", the subsequent career path was clearly marked and visible for years ahead.

Not any more. Today this once familiar arrangement has been changed by change itself.

New technology, the speed of product innovation, changing working practices, evolving social habits and the ever-present risk of litigation have created growing demands for continuous career-related learning, or, to use the modern idiom, continuing professional development.

It is tempting to dismiss the idea of continuing development as a piece of jargon, one of those management-inspired fads for a fancy phrase where a single word would suffice.

But the catch-all word, "training", good enough for generations of employers, is no longer adequate for those who draw a distinction between the systematic tuition of skills and career-long learning that keeps abreast of changing work demands.

Mike Cannell, adviser on learning at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) says: "Training is what they do to you whereas CPD is something you do all the time for yourself."

The professions have been at the forefront of developing the concept. For it is their members who have the most to lose if they fail to refresh their expertise.

"The movement has been driven partly by a greater public awareness, on the back of a number of high profile medical cases, that a certificate on the wall can no longer be accepted as a guarantee of competence," says Mr Cannell.

He identifies the broadening use of office-based personal computers in the early 1980s as one of the most visible examples of a new technology requiring professionals to upgrade their skills.

Other changes are often specific to a profession : a new piece of equipment or software, new procedures, new drugs, new laws, new qualifications, the need to maintain public confidence - all create the need for professionals to update their skills.

Today, training and development is moving in to the front line of corporate competition as companies realise that the excellence of their employees can give them an edge in the marketplace.

Development opportunities are also moving up the agenda of graduates at the start of their careers.

According to several recent surveys, graduates seeking a job place the training and development offerings of prospective employers above all other factors.

But recent research, using HR management methods, questions the bottom line value of some development when applied in individual companies.

The latest annual survey of HR practices carried out by Watson Wyatt, human resources consultants, points to a negative impact on shareholder value from certain developmental training.

Evidence from a survey of 600 European employers suggests companies should buy rather than grow their talent. The thesis goes like this: if a company provides training for managers, they will seek either promotion or a pay increase at the end of it.

If there are limited promotion opportunities, some are likely to leave for a better job elsewhere. In these cases the training has been good for the employee but has been a poor investment for the employer.

Ruth Spellman, chief executive of Investors in People UK, describes such thinking as "short-sighted".

She says: "Many organisations have realised the benefits of helping, and even encouraging, employees in their professional development. The result is a virtuous circle, employees feel valued and motivated and employers enjoy the benefits of a highly skilled and loyal workforce." But Mary Phillips, of the Professional Associations Research Network, says it is important that professional bodies recognise that employers may have a different agenda to those of employees.

"Professional bodies need to be aware of the limitations of active employer participation in planning, providing and evaluating CPD," she says.

The point is emphasised by Philip Augar, co-author with Joy Palmer of *Player Manager*, a book that highlights the need for financial services employees to improve their management skills.

"One of the good things about the talent war in the late 1990s was that if you didn't develop your people then they walked out of the door. But after the downturn in the markets, some companies have cut their commitment."

Bottom-line pressures, coupled with increasingly sophisticated processes for measuring the outcomes of training investments, are being watched by companies that want to be sure their money is well spent.

Past experiences with skill shortages, bolstered by the belief that talented employees will continue to be in demand, should maintain training commitments in technical areas. But more individually focused areas of personal development are vulnerable to a squeeze on budgets.

Companies conscious of the movement away from the concept of a lifetime career are encouraging employees to become independently minded.

"The days of the paternalistic organisation that looks after the career development of its employees are over. Average managers today will have nine moves in their working lives," says Peter Thomson, of the UK's Chartered Management Institute.

This emphasis on individual responsibility for personal development means that professional bodies, rather than employers, have been at the forefront of the CPD movement.

The CIPD is planning to extend its newly chartered status to individual members who can meet and maintain certain professional standards.

The Chartered Management Institute has already begun to pilot a chartered management programme for its members that recognises practical experience.

Compulsory requirements for CPD are on the increase. The General Medical Council is developing a revalidation programme that will use evidence of CPD, gathered through appraisals, to renew doctors' licences to practice.

The Professional Associations Research Network estimates that more than 70 per cent of the 400 to 450 UK-based professional organisations have a CPD programme in place. Those that do not tend to be small associations that cannot meet the costs.

Until now, much CPD has been seen as voluntary. Some professions have made it obligatory, arguing it is a professional duty to maintain skills and competence.

But professional indemnity insurers increasingly expect evidence of professional development. And with scandals such as Enron creating a renewed focus on professional ethics, pressures for compulsory CPD, demanding evidence of newly acquired knowledge, is growing in a broader range of professions.

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