

# Actual professional development

In the second of a series of three articles on action learning, **Richard Hale** examines its role in delivering meaningful CPD

**T**he role of L&D specialists in supporting the continuing professional development of technical and professional specialists within their organisations has historically been marginalised or delegated to technical professionals to manage themselves.

Taking a hands-off approach has often suited the L&D or HRD specialist who prefers to focus on soft skills, management, leadership and talent development. So the lack-lustre approach of many professions to the CPD of their membership has remained unchallenged by those responsible for the development of people within organisations employing the same professionals.

The concept of CPD in professions first emerged in the 1960s, with the focus on producing evidence of a minimum number of hours training completed<sup>1</sup>. This has meant a preoccupation with inputs often at the expense of focus on meaningful work-based learning. Have you ever heard a lawyer or an accountant say *'I had better attend some training before the end of the month because I need the hours for my CPD'*? Implied in such a statement is less concern with outcomes of such training in terms of actual professional development and more concern with compliance with the regulatory system of the professional institute and retention of professional membership.

In more recent years, the fallibility of this approach has been recognised by many professions including, notably, accountancy, in which a number of professional associations have shown *intent* to move beyond the measurement of inputs to a focus on outputs and a recognition of varied methods of learning<sup>2</sup>. An output-based approach is where members demonstrate how CPD activity has affected their knowledge, behaviour or practice.

Over the past three years, I have had the privilege of being able to work with an emerging professional field, that of global outsourcing, in developing a system for CPD from scratch. This has led to the implementation of an innovative approach that, far from focusing on inputs and counting 'training hours', has helped professionals to develop through collaboration in tackling real work-based challenges, underpinned by an action learning ethos.

## What is a profession?

Dr Stan Lester notes the Latin roots of the word 'profiteor': to profess, or make an oath based on certain values. He differentiates between the following types of profession:

- **ancient professions** such as the priesthood, university teaching, law and physicianship

## References

- 1 Lester S *On Professions and Being Professional* (2007)



2 Orme J "A Route Map for the HR Profession" *People Management* 15 January 2009  
DeMont A "A Prescription for CPD" *Chemist & Druggist* February 2002  
Keats S "Continuing professional development – what's new?" *Chartered Accountants Journal* February 2009

3 Revans R W *ABC of Action Learning* Lemos & Crane (1998)

- **mediaeval trade occupations** including surgery, dentistry and architecture
- **industrial-era professions** typified by engineering
- **professions that emerged in the 20th century** including teachers, accountants and personnel managers
- **groups that might be considered as emerging** or 'professionalising'.

### Actual professional development through action learning

When the body of knowledge relating to a profession remains relatively static, and where there are certain 'truths' that need to be learned, the technical-rational approach to development may be seen as appropriate. There are tools, techniques and methods to learn and these may be tested by examination as part of initial professional development.

CPD might focus on incremental updates, such as new case law in the legal profession or new regulatory systems in financial accounting.

Lester differentiates between the traditional technical-rational approach to CPD and the more recent 'creative-interpretive' approach, which views professional development as linked to evolving practice and capability.

Recent developments have seen a shift in emphasis from the more scientific or academic and knowledge-based focus of professional development. More innovative approaches to professional development have recognised transferable skills, movement between professions, modular credit accumulation, multiple methods of study and assessment, different entry routes and the value of prior learning.

It seems that the organisational workplace is becoming increasingly diversified with new professional fields emerging and so a more flexible and relevant approach to CPD is called for. Just one such emerging professional field is that of global outsourcing, a \$6 trillion industry that has undergone significant growth since the 1990s. The National Outsourcing Association ([www.noa.co.uk](http://www.noa.co.uk)) was established in the UK in 1993 and it defines outsourcing as "the provision by a third party organisation of a bundle of business

processes that either were historically, or could have been, performed in-house by the service-receiving customer".

Throughout your day, like it or not, knowingly or unknowingly, you will be making use of products or services that have been brought to you through some process of outsourcing. This could include, for instance, banking, utilities, telecommunications, insurance or catering services.

Developments in how big business is done, with a focus on scale, globalisation, compliance and efficiencies, have created pressure to professionalise the field of global outsourcing. The thinking has moved beyond the simplicity of asking *where is the cheapest place to offshore so that we can benefit from labour arbitrage?* There has been an interest in how to gain more value from outsourcing relationships throughout the supply chain and how to create effective yet flexible partnerships.

In my research for the NOA, I concluded that outsourcing is not so much a profession, with an accepted ethical code, controlled membership and an existing body of knowledge, but more of an 'emerging professional field'.

Organisations, whether service providers, users or advisers in the outsourcing relationship, are all seeking competitive edge by working smarter and demonstrating professional knowledge and behaviour to their existing and prospective partners, clients and customers.

Outsourcing attracts members working either with service providers of outsourcing services, end-user organisations or consultants, who come from a variety of professional backgrounds in their own right, such as the law, accountancy or HR.

So how do you establish meaningful professional development in a 'professionalising' field?

### Action learning for outsourcing professionals

Senior-level outsourcing professionals have the discretion to choose what they work on, to decide what methods to use and to decide who to involve. Having such choice in one's role may sound attractive but it presents intellectual and political challenges, dilemmas and ambiguities. At some point, the outsourcing professional has to take action, and the better-informed activities are more likely to result in success.

There is no one recognised body of knowledge relating to the practice of outsourcing. Such knowledge is widely dispersed amongst diverse professional and academic literature and accounts of practice. Much of the research relating to outsourcing has tended to be survey-based, seeking to find answers to questions such as where is the

*Tackling these questions provides opportunities for personal development*



next best place to offshore to? or what is the trend in the use of the latest technology?

However, in setting up the professional development programmes for the NOA, I found that senior-level professionals were often more concerned with professional work-based challenges relating to their own organisational context. These were real problems that were messy, involved organisational politics and for which there were no prescribed solutions.

So the professional development process that was introduced was based on the action learning question approach I had applied to management and leadership development (see last month's article "Bright Horizons for action learning"). This enabled participants on NOA professional development programmes to take their own work-based problems and frame them as what are known as outsourcing questions.

### Example outsourcing questions

- What are the criteria we should adopt to support the measurement of the productivity of outsourced services?
- How can we ensure we embed a continuous improvement culture while enhancing the end customer's experience?
- How effective are service levels as a method of managing an outsourcing contract?
- Corporate social responsibility in the global supply chain and the impact on corporate brand equity: how can we build true partnership and added value for all parties?
- How can we more effectively define value for money in outsourcing rather than relying solely on old techniques of measurement and evaluation?

Outsourcing professionals define questions of relevance to the strategy of their organisation. Tackling these questions provides opportunities

for personal development. They work in action learning sets to support each other in the crafting of the questions and then provide support in guiding the subsequent research and activities. Significantly, the learning set provides a safe haven for discussing the challenges, which may be difficult ordinarily to discuss openly with others, such as how to address politics, how to overcome organisational blocks or how to manage naysayers.

Success on this programme leads to the award of a professional qualification from the NOA as a professional body and the programme is accredited by Middlesex University so graduates achieve nationally-recognised higher education credits.

Reg Revans, founder of the action learning approach, observed that the breakthrough thinking achieved by Nobel prizewinning scientists occurred when they took a position as "comrades in adversity" focusing on asking insightful questions and accepting they were "united in their ignorance"<sup>3</sup>. Creating such a climate of openness and trust in a status-conscious sector, with professionals working in competitive business fields, does require some skilled facilitation and may take time to achieve. There is a need for a degree of unlearning before members of a learning set can learn effectively together; for instance, accepting that everyone should have an equal voice, that no question is a dumb question and learning not to be overly directive.

This approach has enabled professional learning to transcend single organisations and has created learning across corporates that are both the users and providers of outsourcing services, as well as among professional advisers such as lawyers and consultants. In effect, we have been able to facilitate learning across communities of practice as defined by Wenger<sup>4</sup>.

Wenger describes key characteristics of communities of practice as an organisational form in which groups of people are bound

<sup>4</sup> Wenger E, Snyder W "Communities of Practice" *The Organizational Frontier Harvard Business Review* January-February 2000  
Wenger E "Knowledge management as a doughnut: Shaping your knowledge strategy through communities of practice" *Ivey Business Journal* January-February 2004



together by shared expertise, with a passion for joint enterprise, where their primary output is knowledge and where questioning is a key behaviour of participants. Significant learning occurs at the boundaries.

With the outsourcing question-based professional qualifications, there is evidence of participants gaining real value from being able to learn from others who may be on the other side of the contractual relationship, ie end users or suppliers of services. Being part of a learning set that surmounts these barriers is empowering and enriching. However, to achieve a deeper level of learning and trust within such a group, members do have to move their thinking beyond the defensive positions taken by viewing the relationships primarily through the eyes of their roles as say a 'buyer' or 'seller' of services.

**Growing a body of professional knowledge**

It has been fascinating to see a body of knowledge emerging based on real work-based practice and research in a professionalising field.

Participants in these programmes come to realise that they are actually working, researching and learning at the cutting edge. The fact that there is no book or guru to go to who holds the answer to their work-based outsourcing question has led them to see that they are actually creating the knowledge. While this is primarily to address a localised issue, fellow professionals have been able to learn from such research, which is written up in postgraduate-level papers.

Outsourcing practitioners come to resist the temptation to idealise the gurus or seek the answer from a consultant as they develop their capability to learn, in the words of Revans, "with and from others". The fact that some are subsequently invited to have their papers published, or to speak at a conference, is simply icing on the cake.

**Key questions for L&D professionals**

- What are the emerging professional roles in your organisation or sector?
- How effective is CPD for professionals within your organisation?
- Is CPD input- or outcome-focused?
- How can you link organisational strategies with CPD for your people?
- How might action learning help?
- Which professional institutions do you need to consult or influence?
- What skills do you need to develop as an L&D professional yourself?
- What about your own CPD? **TJ**

**Dr Richard Hale**

is managing consultant of Value Improvement Projects and an associate lecturer at Middlesex University. He facilitates the Action Learning Forum group on LinkedIn and can be contacted via [www.linkedin.com/rhale](http://www.linkedin.com/rhale)

