

What is a Professional Learning Plan (PLP)

How to put together a personal development plan

A personal learning plan (PLP) is a way to record your personal and professional developmental goals and the means by which you are going to achieve them. It is a structured way of improving your competence in your current job and gaining skills for future roles. This may include enhancing your scientific knowledge or developing other professional competencies, such as managerial skills, time management or commercial awareness.

Rather than just reacting to whatever developmental opportunities you happen to be offered, a PLP allows you to recognise your developmental needs and proactively identify ways of meeting them. Your training and other learning needs will change over time. As you achieve your developmental goals by acquiring and enhancing knowledge and skills, you will identify opportunities for further development. Therefore you will need to update your PLP continuously.

In some organisations PLPs are created in discussion with your manager, possibly during the appraisal process. Therefore, although your PLP is linked primarily to your training and developmental needs, it may need to take into account the needs of your organisation, such as ensuring that certain key activities are performed well. Even if it is not an established practice, it may be beneficial for you to generate your own PLP.

In its simplest form a PLP allows you to:

- Assess your current level of professional knowledge in terms of a list of competences relevant to your specific professional job (for example those on the TOPRA List of Competences), your level of experience and training, and the work that the company does;
- Compare these with what competences might be needed to complete current and future tasks or for a future job successfully;
- Identify any gaps between what you have and what is required;
- Set objectives and a timescale to fill these gaps;
- Plan ways of meeting these objectives.

Why write a PLP?

It may seem that creating a PLP is a lot of effort and unproductive activity that could easily distract you from actually getting on with your job. However, if you are actively engaged in a process of increasing your strengths and overcoming your weaknesses, you are likely to increase your ability to do the job, so you will be getting on with it more effectively.

You may be trying to get to grips with a new role or new responsibilities. You may be aiming to improve your performance in an existing role or trying to address possible shortcomings that are preventing you from making progress. You may want to prepare yourself for promotion or a transition to a new career. In all of these situations the process of creating a PLP can be beneficial.

Creating a PLP

The planning process is based on a continuous cycle of learning in which you need to answer three questions:

Where am I now?

Assess your current professional skills, knowledge and experience. Use the TOPRA List of Competences as an aide-memoire to help you do this. Evaluate your effectiveness in previous activities. Identify any areas that may need improvement, or where you need experience and training in new competences.

Where do I want to be (in one year's time, 5 year's time)?

Decide which competences, and the level of each competence that you need to attain to fulfil your current and/or future responsibilities and aspirations. Establish measurable objectives for reaching these in one year's time or for a longer period and methods of assessing your progress.

How can I get there?

Investigate alternative methods of acquiring the skills, knowledge or experience that you need. The TOPRA Lifelong Learning programme includes the following which you might consider as means of increasing the level of your existing competences and adding new ones:

- Attending a specific training course, conference or workshop
- Being mentored by a more senior colleague
- Consulting the internet for new or existing information, guidelines etc
- Consulting the internet for regulatory intelligence on precedents on other companies products
- Reading technical and professional publications
- Reading books and articles about management and other soft skills
- Preparing to give a presentation (in-house or for a professional group)
- Writing for publication on a particular topic
- E-learning
- Work-based project
- Short-term attachment to another department or group
- Attending an industry or professional body working party
- Being coached (for example via the TOPRA scheme)

Identify what is the most appropriate methods for your situation. Plan and implement the steps involved. There are a number of different methods of analysing and assessing your current skills. SWOT analysis can be a systematic way of starting the process of evaluating your current situation and identifying important issues.

Doing a SWOT analysis

Although often used as a business tool, SWOT analysis can be used to assess your personal situation, looking at:

Strengths

What do you do well? What competences do you have confidence in? What things have you found easy? What do others see as your strengths?

Weaknesses

Which of your key regulatory and other competences do you find more difficult? Which elements of your performance disappoint you? Where are the gaps that you need to work on? What tasks do you have less confidence in?

Opportunities

What possibilities are there for increasing your competences further? Are there any ways in which you can gain further useful skills or experience? What forthcoming projects promise interesting ways to develop your skills? What help or support might be available to you? What training or e-learning would you benefit from?

Threats

Will your weaknesses have any impact on your ability to complete future tasks successfully? Might gaps in your abilities disadvantage you in any future career goals or undermine other people's confidence in you? Are there external factors that might affect your ability to make progress?

An example of a professional SWOT analysis

Strengths

- high level of technical knowledge in particular competences
- good people skills
- read and speak a foreign language
- resilient
- optimistic

Opportunities

- senior post has become available which will broaden experience
- external training available with opportunity to learn new skills, network with colleagues from other companies, regulators
- new project team being called for with wider role as a project manager
- secondment to another department
- gain some coaching from resident IT expert

Weaknesses

- gaps in technical knowledge
- lacking good IT skills
- poor time-management skills
- impatient
- disorganised

Threats

- effects of new legislation
- reorganisation of the company
- competitors
- financial difficulties in the organisation with possible threat of redundancy

To gain maximum benefit from the SWOT analysis, you need to be totally objective and honest when completing it. Sometimes it is useful to engage the opinion of another: a good friend, a partner, a life-long professional colleague — in other words, someone who knows you well and whose opinion you trust. As there is a reflective element to a SWOT analysis it is well worth giving yourself plenty of time to think it through, draft it and modify it, before coming up with a final version.

Done thoroughly and thoughtfully, a SWOT analysis can help you to obtain a clear and concrete overview of your current situation. Forcing yourself to articulate your self-awareness or simply seeing something written down in black-and-white can bring it into clearer focus, making it more real or definite.

Completing the SWOT analysis can help you to recognise your developmental goals and enable you to identify opportunities for fulfilling them. The planning process now moves on to developing concrete objectives and action plans in order to implement these goals.

Setting SMART objectives

For each of the developmental goals you have identified formulate a specific plan of action for attaining them. It is very easy to set yourself vague targets which are hard to fulfil. Instead set yourself SMART objectives, which are:

Specific

Are my objectives in terms of competences too vague? For example “develop my communication skills” needs to be broken down into learning goals related to specific aspects of communication, such as “learn how to chair meetings effectively”, “get training on delivering presentations”, “learn how to structure written reports effectively”, etc.

Measurable

How will I know when I have achieved my goal? How will I prove it to other people? What will I be able to do at the end of this process that I find difficult now?

Achievable

Are the targets that I’m setting myself too demanding? Do I have the time? Am I trying to achieve too much too soon in this area and could I try to build my learning over a longer period?

Resourced

How much will it cost? What will my organisation pay for? What support will I need? Will I have the opportunity to put my learning into practice? Do I need to negotiate for study leave? Will I need to buy materials?

Timed

When will this objective be completed by? Do I need to break up a long-term goal into short- and medium-term interim goals? How well do I work to a deadline?

Development activities

Development is not just about attending training courses. When you are identifying objectives that will enable you to fill the gaps in your professional competences, you should consider a range of possible activities and bear in mind your own preferred learning style. Think what help and guidance you can get from your manager, your colleagues in your company and your professional body

Developmental activities could include:

- taking on a small project;
- work shadowing someone;
- conducting a fact finding visit;
- attending conferences;
- conducting structured literature reviews;
- being seconded to a client organisation;
- undertaking to deliver training or give presentations;
- getting feedback from a mentor;
- using teach yourself guides and online tutorials, etc.

Writing your PLP

You should now have all of the information that you need to draw up your own PLP. If your organisation doesn't have a standard template for recording it then you may want to design one for yourself along the lines of the example downloadable here.

There will always be opportunities to learn and develop that aren't in your original plan. A PLP should therefore be flexible enough to take advantage of any unanticipated development opportunity. However, adopting a structured approach to your development will ensure that you demonstrate your continuing commitment to your profession, and develop the good practice of regularly reviewing your competences and selecting relevant learning activities to help you to develop them.

Reviewing and evaluating

Establish a period of time after which you will assess what progress has been made towards achieving your objectives (perhaps every three months). During that period you should consult your plan frequently to remind yourself what you are trying to achieve, otherwise it is very easy to get sucked into your day-to-day responsibilities and neglect your developmental goals.

Evaluation of your plan is a key stage in the professional development planning cycle because it enables you to discover whether the development activity was worthwhile and if and how your skills improved as a result. You may want to reflect on what you are better able to do or how you might have gained more from an activity. It is almost certain that the experience has thrown up further development needs. Your goals may change and new tasks emerge. Be sure to set a date to review and update frequently to respond to changing needs.

Further reading

Chris Sangster 2000 *Planning and Organizing Personal and Professional Development* (Gower Publishing).

Peter Honey 2007 *Continuing Personal Development* (Peter Honey Publications).