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# Do organizations manage continuing professional development?

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## Introduction

Recent discussion concerning continuing professional development (CPD) has tended to focus on either the needs of the individual professional or the interests of the professional bodies[1,2]. There are other stakeholders who could have a legitimate interest in the effective management of CPD. These include organizations which employ professional staff, non-professional employees, the Government, education and training providers and the clients of professionally qualified practitioners. Scant attention has been given to the perspective which any employing organization may have of CPD processes and activities, particularly in view of the support and assistance which many organizations provide to encourage the development of their staff. The purpose of this article is to focus on such an organizational perspective. In particular, we report on evidence pertaining to the ways in which organizations seek to manage the CPD of employees whom they support in development activities.

There has been an increasing recognition of the contribution which the effective management of human resources can make to the competitive advantage of organizations[3-6]. Within this context the contribution of training and development in general, and the professional development of managers in particular, have secured recognition[7-10]. There has been a consistent growth in both managerial and professional employment since the 1960s and this trend is expected to continue[11,12]. Many managers belong to professional bodies which seek to encourage or require members to demonstrate evidence of continuing professional development. Thus an investment of resources in the promotion and maintenance of CPD might be expected to assist an organization to retain its competitive position.

CPD has been defined by Madden and Mitchell[13, p.12] as:

the maintenance and enhancement of the knowledge, expertise and competence of professionals throughout their careers according to a plan formulated with regard to the needs of the professional, the employer, the professions and society.

The use of the word "competence" in the context of CPD implies an outcome in terms of performance. Further, it is worthy of note that this definition explicitly recognizes the employing organization as a stakeholder in the CPD process. By engaging in development activities, the professional is expected to demonstrate an ability to perform to acceptable standards over a period of time, having

regard to the changes and challenges which accompany all business and organizational activity.

The Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD) has suggested that "CPD is systematic, ongoing, self directed learning" [14, p.4]. The emphasis on systematic development suggests a framework within which formal and informal learning activities can be set. The expectation is that learning and development will become planned and organized. It has been noted already [1] that there could be a conflict about the ownership of CPD. One view argues that all professional development activities should be effectively managed in relation to the overall organizational business objectives. This is the focus which would be encouraged, for example, by the Investors in People framework; and it is a consideration such as this which may be used to justify the allocation of resources and general organizational support for CPD. All CPD then would be seen as assisting the organization to meet its business objectives. A second view is that CPD should be driven and owned by the individual professional employee [14]. Unless resources for development are unlimited, the potential conflict between these two perspectives may become a concern. An organization with only limited funds to support development will need a coherent framework in order to ensure that their resources are allocated in the best possible way. It may be necessary also to determine whether individual development needs accord with business imperatives. A third possibility would be an arrangement by which the management of CPD becomes a shared responsibility between the individual and the organization.

### **Methodology**

In order to establish an overview of how organizations in South-East Wales regard and manage CPD, management professionals in the local branches of two major professional bodies were invited to an open forum in order to discuss a range of emerging issues. Following the initial meeting, a general invitation was given to participants to attend a series of network-type meetings where it would be possible to consider in detail an agenda of items which might be associated with the identification of a suitable organizational perspective on CPD matters. Particular emphasis was placed on the desirability to involve organizations which consider CPD important and which therefore were likely to support CPD through the provision of finance and other resources. It was expected that such organizations would make every effort to manage CPD in a thorough and effective fashion.

Discussion at the initial forum meeting established as a concern the matter of how CPD was managed within organizations. The intention of the CPD network was to discuss and disseminate details of what appeared to be best management practice in the area. The development of a network afforded also the opportunity to explore organizational aspects of CPD through a series of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. A first questionnaire was circulated to explore the nature of CPD policy statements and management

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controls. A second questionnaire investigated how CPD is resourced and supported from an organizational point of view.

Altogether 22 organizations supported the formation of the network and these represented the base for collecting the CPD data. Of these organizations 32 per cent were manufacturing concerns, 45 per cent were to be found in either local or central government, 18 per cent in the professional services sector and 5 per cent in retail. Some of the network organizations were large, employing several thousand staff in total, with many hundreds being professionally qualified. At the other extreme there were the smaller enterprises in the professional services sector, employing several dozen employees of whom about half usually appeared to be professionally qualified.

### **Management of CPD**

Early models of management emphasized a range of interrelated activities which were thought to provide a suitable framework for the analysis of management actions. Hence, managers were seen as concerned with such activities as planning, organizing, controlling, co-ordinating and leading. Reference to this emphasis can still be seen in some recent management texts [see e.g.15-17]. Birchall[18, p. 77] observed recently that "the general principles of management espoused by the early thinkers still seem remarkably robust". It is worth noting also that the classical management functions are identified throughout the Management Charter Initiative specifications[19] for units and elements of competence. They continue to be visible in the recently published *Senior Management Standards*[20].

An alternative focus in management research has emphasized how managers actually spend their time. This has highlighted the difficulties associated with categorizing management activity on a classical basis [21,22] Another recent contribution [see 23] has stressed a difference between old-style management and new-style management with an associated emphasis on the skills which are required to sustain the new style.

Whichever approach is adopted, effective management will ultimately depend on decisions and actions which can push an organization towards its business objectives. Such a focus legitimizes management activity. With the expansion of professional employment and the insistence of many professional bodies on CPD becoming mandatory, organizational support through funding and time may require justification. Any evidence which links CPD with strategic business planning could be a valuable justification for devoting resources to training and development. It is against this background that the researcher can enquire how far CPD activities are managed effectively having regard to the legitimate interest of an employing organization.

The evidence about links between business planning and the planning of human resource activities is mixed. Jarrell[24], for example, argues that "human resource planning can be completely successful only if it is fully integrated with business planning". However, others, for example Gunnigle and Moore[25],

have found the links between business strategy and human resource management to be intermittent.

The overwhelming majority (86 per cent) of organizations represented in this local network had declarations of strategic business values and objectives. Most of these contained some suitable human resource statement in general terms. Frequently, a statement was supported by a more detailed human resource document. These documents contained greater guidance about the intended human resource activities (including training and development) against the framework of general business planning considerations.

There are some indications[26,27] that the Investors in People initiative is encouraging organizations to think more along these lines. For example one network organization specified a requirement to achieve "individual staff development needs in line with the objectives in the corporate plan". Nevertheless, the questionnaires established that some two-thirds of the network organizations did not have a CPD policy statement as such. The preference of these organizations was to consider professional development as a part of an overall staff development policy. Again, only 9 per cent of the organizations were able to confirm the existence of specific CPD objectives. Therefore, the overall picture was one of generalized human resource development statements linked with the business plan, but without specific CPD policy statements or objectives.

### **Organizing and resourcing of CPD**

The nature of professional employment has been examined recently by Herriot and Pemberton[28]. They argued that "Professionals are members of more or less powerful occupations which have annexed areas of work activity for themselves (p. 27)". The network organizations were asked whether their support for development would be limited to members of professional bodies. Many indicated that this would not be the case. Support would be extended to staff who were not members of professional associations but who were expected nevertheless to act in an expert and professional manner. For example, some managers would not be members of a professional body with an outlook focused on professional knowledge and standards on the one hand and entry regulation and control on the other. Nonetheless, any such manager would be expected still to behave in a professional fashion, and his or her development was seen as having potential to enhance organizational performance. Thus, the employer often was willing to extend financial support and other resources beyond the category of managers who were members of established professional bodies to those managers who were not professionally qualified. Given this outlook, perhaps it is not surprising that most organizations did not create separate CPD policy statements or CPD objectives. For most organizations it made sense to view CPD as a component of an overall training and development strategy.

Two large public sector organizations indicated that there had been a change recently in the extent to which they would offer support for the development of

staff who were members of professional bodies. It used to be the case that these professional employees would receive a great deal of help to secure initial qualifications and that such assistance could take the form of time allocation for study or of financial aid, or of both. However, the development of staff beyond this initial level was seen as a personal responsibility which would not attract any further organizational support. Both these organizations reported a revised policy so that, in each, the current position is that staff pursuing continuing development now are encouraged to apply for additional support. Such requests, however, would be judged together with requests for development by staff who do not belong to professional bodies. This change in practice has resulted in each case from an organizational review of training and development objectives.

A small number of the responding organizations relied on an appraisal process to assist with the construction of personal development plans. In total, three organizations were able to offer examples of personal development planning which, in turn, reflected appraisal discussions. In these organizations the appraisal process had been used also as a means of linking individual objectives and general business objectives. However, the majority of organizations reported that, although appraisal interviews took place and led to some development outcomes, such processes did not give rise to the construction of a formalized development plan for employees. Those organizations which did link business and individual objectives with personal development plans argued the significance of the Investors in People programme in providing a suitable framework for managing all training and development activities, including professional development.

The network organizations were questioned also about the extent of the provisions they had made concerning the allocation of resources to sustain professional development activity. They were asked to indicate the extent to which CPD involved time away from the workplace, the degree of financial support and any supportive guidance offered to their professional employees. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they supported staff CPD activity through the provision of study leave. Over 90 per cent of the responding organizations made time available for this particular purpose. In spite of what appeared to be consistent decisions to allocate time in this way only two organizations could indicate or suggest how much time in total had been allocated to this sort of development activity during the previous 12 months. Both reported that a monitoring of time allocation did have a beneficial impact in respect of quality assurance procedures and also on the likelihood of securing additional funding from a local Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

Somewhat paradoxically, when organizations were asked if time allocated for CPD was recorded, over 68 per cent responded in the affirmative. It appears to be the case that although most organizations claimed to record time allocation in some form, few were able to produce useful data from their records and it seems that very little was done with any information which would assist

the overall management of CPD activities. When pressed to indicate if time allocation was monitored for specific purpose, less than 10 per cent of the organizations reported that it was. Hence, it appears that although the majority of organizations claimed to record time allocated to CPD, in most cases that information did not form the basis of management action.

In order to discover the extent to which organizations provide financial support for CPD, organizations were asked if they retained a separate budget for this purpose. Their replies indicated a variety of practice. One-third of the organizations stated that they did maintain a separate CPD budget, and the remaining two-thirds indicated that their CPD funding was drawn from a general training budget. When asked to define the percentage of employment costs which was represented by expenditure to support professional development, few respondents were able to quote or estimate a figure. Furthermore, of those organizations which had an identifiable CPD budget, five were unable to specify how much had actually been invested in the professional development of their staff in the preceding 12 months. In these cases, it is questionable whether and to what extent the creation of a separate budget for professional development had assisted the effective management of resources devoted to this purpose.

The senior management of any organization is likely to be concerned with the identification of costs and resources associated with management actions. Such an interest could be assisted by the availability of suitable data. It would appear that on the matter of CPD, even where organizations are in a position to identify such information to improve decision taking, little effort is expended to ensure that the best use is made of the data.

Some of the organizations, the employment structure of which showed a dominance of professionally qualified staff, mentioned a conflict that can arise between funding the development of professionally qualified staff on the one hand and non-professionally qualified employees with their own developmental needs, on the other. These organizations stated that often it was difficult to avoid developing professional employees at the expense of other staff. Two organizations in particular suggested that a distinct CPD budget would assist an organization to appreciate the nature of this potential conflict and facilitate a consideration of what steps or actions were required to manage the situation. This was seen as the key reason for identifying a CPD budget separately from general training funds.

The network organizations were asked if they placed any financial limitations on the amount which could be invested in any one employee. The responses indicated that 70 per cent did not specify a limit of funds. It was stated that this could lead, occasionally, to charges by other employees that financial support for development purposes was being unfairly allocated, with certain groups or individuals being favoured.

The questionnaire sought also to establish particular CPD activities that were likely to be supported financially. The most frequent response referred to the use of funds for sending staff on external training courses. These courses

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were perceived to have substantial benefits for staff in the professional services sector[29]. About one-third of the organizations in this survey indicated that the external course was a high-value activity. A similar number of respondents stated that support would be given also to the purchase of books or journals which were deemed necessary to assist professional development and performance. A rather smaller percentage (4 per cent) mentioned the use of funds to pay for professional subscriptions and other professionally based activities.

The organizations in the network were asked if they offered any form of guidance or advice to their staff to facilitate professional development. Such advice and guidance was acknowledged as being available by 90 per cent of the respondents, usually through the provision of some form of mentoring. Generally, mentors would be expected to offer counselling and advice on CPD matters across a range of individual interests. Frequently, the mentor was a line manager but occasionally personnel staff were expected to offer a mentoring service. Other support mentioned included the appointment of CPD representatives who would facilitate and assist with personal development. One provider of professional services used the experience of staff who had participated in CPD activity to cascade the learning outcomes to other colleagues through a series of seminars.

### **Control and evaluation**

Effective performance in an organization will reflect, among other things, the control and evaluation of the activities which are undertaken. The questionnaire inquired how far elements of control and evaluation were applied in the context of professional development. On the matter of control, information was sought about the responsibility for managing CPD and the extent to which information was available to assist a monitoring and control function. The questionnaire attempted also to establish the general features of any evaluative processes by means of which the organizations tried to consider the cost and benefits of approved activity.

Looking first at the concept of control and the responsibility which exists for the management of CPD activities, the majority of organizations (82 per cent) invested the line manager with responsibility for liaising with subordinates to determine the most effective form of development. The line manager was seen as the source of professional knowledge for developmental purposes. In two organizations the responsibility for authorizing CPD remained with the human resource department. However, in the majority of cases the remit of the human resource department was confined to the confirmation of arrangements for developmental activity which had already been agreed between the individual professional and the line manager.

Thus for most organizations the focus of control resides with the line manager. It is the line manager who will authorize and agree CPD within a framework of general business activity. It is also the line manager who is responsible for assessing immediate and more sustained improvements in

performance that staff are expected to demonstrate. The processes which are used to assist in this assessment included debriefing sessions following attendance at various courses, the use of evaluative questionnaires to acquire data and performance appraisal.

It may be important therefore for organizations to help line managers discharge their responsibilities for professional development by providing appropriate training. Few organizations appear to offer development for this purpose. Only three organizations were able to furnish examples of such supportive development for line managers. In two of these cases, development was offered as part of a general programme designed to improve the performance of line managers across a wide range of human resource functions. Other network organizations confirmed that they had not offered any developmental opportunities to their line managers in the previous 12 months that would have enhanced their performance in discharging their responsibilities for the effective development of their staff.

The recording of CPD activities undertaken by employees might reflect the interest of several stakeholders. Many professional bodies, for example, demand or encourage their members to record details of their professional development activity. The employer, too, has an interest in monitoring CPD through the maintenance of suitable recording systems, if only to track the cost implications for resource allocation purposes. Additionally, the individual professional may have an interest in maintaining accurate records of CPD work, as this may be good evidence of self-managed professional responsibilities[14, 30].

The practice of recording CPD information varies between the professional bodies. One of the most common formats involves a record of attendance at training courses. The IPD, however, asks its members to focus on the learning outcomes of an activity. Thus the personnel practitioner must identify learning outcomes and also be able to suggest how those outcomes could be used to enhance personal performance in a work role. Any record of CPD activity maintained for the purposes of a professional body or an individual represents an obvious source of information that could assist organizational monitoring of CPD. However, the use of these sources of information might not assist in providing data about the developmental activities of staff who are not members of a professional body. With the exception of a relatively small number of organizations which have encouraged personal development plans, the most common source document for CPD records does appear to be that provided by the professional bodies to their members. In all, 59 per cent of responding organizations indicated that records of individual professional development could be derived only from this source. Where personal development plans are found to be an outcome of appraisal action, there will usually be also a formal review of the value of any CPD actions during the appraisal interview. The absence of personal development planning may, therefore, inhibit an effective review process.

**Conclusions**

The evidence obtained from the local CPD network suggests that the process of managing CPD is rudimentary. The management of CPD generally is an issue yet to be recognized as an activity worthy of management time. This lack of recognition is evidenced by five tendencies:

- (1) There was frequently an absence of a coherent CPD policy or of a set of CPD objectives that reflect business-driven needs. CPD is perceived as just a special type of development activity. Thus there was little attempt to relate professional development activities to strategic business objectives.
- (2) Records of CPD activity – even where these were maintained – tended to be simplistic, with an emphasis on listing development inputs rather than development outcomes.
- (3) Few organizations attempted any form of evaluation of company-sponsored professional development.
- (4) The major focus of CPD was on external development activity and little thought was applied to the effective management of the learning environment at work.
- (5) Most organizations were unable to cost professional development in terms of either time or finance.

However, it was clear that at the same time the individual professional often demanded organizational support for CPD and perceived this as a right flowing from professional status.

A further conclusion to be drawn from CPD practice in the local network is that the focus and responsibility for CPD, almost invariably, remains vested in the line manager. It is the line manager who suggests developmental possibilities or agrees to the individual request for development. Hence, the line manager, in turn, must perceive the task of managing CPD effectively as a vital part of his or her own personal professional development. As evidenced above, line managers seem to have substantial developmental needs which must be met if they are to discharge their obligation to manage the professional development of others in the workforce.

Initially, it may be difficult for line managers to establish any coherent organizational perspective without a clear knowledge and understanding of the strategic business objectives of their organizations. In essence, line managers need to acquire strategic awareness if they are to manage their development responsibilities both for themselves and for their subordinates. Within this context of line manager development there is a need also for effective communication skills which enable dialogue with subordinate professionals about individual objectives and standards of performance consistent with the overall business framework. The identification of agreed performance indicators also would assist the formation of a suitable evaluative element within that framework. Without effective evaluation it is difficult to justify the

continued use of organizational resources to support and encourage CPD. Line managers appear to need development to enable them to record and interpret information effectively for CPD management purposes. Further, organizations need to be conscious of what resources they allocate to CPD over a period of time. Indeed, if there is a general lack of such basic information, it is difficult to see how professional development can be reviewed, justified and sustained.

The objective of this investigation of CPD practice in South-East Wales was to ascertain how organizations manage their CPD interests at a time when the professional employee is increasingly aware of the need for continuous development and employment costs remain a major concern for any business. This investigation suggests that CPD is not yet effectively managed in many organizations. An emphasis on better management could enhance the quality of development undertaken as organizations and individuals become more aware of the beneficial effects of such activity.

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