

Part 1
Managing yourself

Chapter 1.1

Planning and managing your own professional development

NVQ Application:

This chapter is relevant to the following NVQ in Management Units:

- A1 Manage your own resources
- A2 Manage your own resources and professional development

Linked chapters:

The information in this chapter is related to information in the following chapters:

- 1.2 Clear communication
- 1.3 Managing your time
- 1.4 Managing information and developing networks

Introduction

A series of events brought you to the role you currently fulfil: decisions, opportunities, instinct and just plain luck, for good or ill. Think back to when you were at school or college and imagining your working life and career: did it look like the reality you are now experiencing? More importantly, what are your thoughts on the job you now have? Is it:

- fulfilling?
- satisfying?

- sufficiently well paid?
- offering enough opportunities, for development and advancement?

Now look to the future: what do you see yourself doing in one year, three years, five years? And how will you get there?

Objectives

The aim of this chapter is to encourage you to take positive action to shape your future. It will help you to:

- take a planned, proactive approach to your professional development;
- look at your future holistically;
- make the most of the development opportunities that come your way; and,
- manage your stress.

Your amazing brain

We are each of us born with some 100 billion brain cells, or neurons. Each neuron has three basic parts: the cell body, the axon, and the dendrite. Dendrites make connections with other neurons, and that's the important bit. Each neuron has the astonishing ability to grow up to twenty thousand dendrites. That makes the capacity of the human brain absolutely incredible.

How is it, when we have such breathtaking potential, we aren't a planet of superhuman beings?

A quick trip inside your head

What we think of as ‘the brain’ is made up of three distinct parts.

The first is the brain stem, also known as the reptilian brain, which controls basic functions and instincts, such as heart rate, breathing and ‘fight or flight’.

The brain stem is a stalk and at the top (but slightly behind) is the cerebellum. This takes responsibility for balance and movement, and has some duties with regard to memory.

Put your arms together from elbows to wrists. If the area to the wrist is the brain stem, then the area from wrist to the base of your thumb is the cerebellum. Now make two fists: they represent the cerebrum or thinking brain. This is the ‘wrinkly’ brain that we are used to seeing in pictures: the neocortex is folded. If it were opened out it would cover the surface of a desk. The neocortex is the seat of our intelligence and is, in effect, what makes us human. It controls such things as sight, thought, speech – all those things that we need to grow both as a species and as individuals.

In addition to comprising three separate elements, our brain is also divided into two hemispheres, left and right. Your two fists represent these clearly and are even about the same size. The left and right hemispheres are joined by a network of brain cells known as the ‘corpus callosum’, which transmits information as required between the two. As a general rule, the left hemisphere looks after logical matters (language, numbers, sequences, analysis) and the right hemisphere takes care of artistic things (rhyme and rhythm, colour and images, and concepts such as beauty and loyalty).

We often show a preference in learning. ‘Left brain learners’ are said to prefer a step-by-step linear approach to learning, whereas ‘right brain learners’ like to see the big picture and take a global approach. It is important to remember, however, that when you are engaged in an activity your whole brain is involved. In a training session your left-brain might attend to the words spoken and the meaning inherent in them, but the right brain will be picking up on tone and inflection.

Maximise your memory

We have an incredible capacity for memory and we can use our knowledge of how the brain works to develop little tricks and techniques to boost this to our advantage.

Mnemonics

A mnemonic is a device that is used to aid the memory. One I have used for years comes from *'Have Space Suit: Will Travel'* by Robert A. Heinlein (Ballantine Books Inc., reissue edition [1994]) and it helps me to remember the order of the planets from the sun. The mnemonic is 'Mother Very Thoughtfully Made A Jelly Sandwich Under No Protest' and the first letter of each word relates to a planet. It translates as follows:

- Mercury
- Venus
- Terra
- Mars
- Asteroids
- Jupiter
- Saturn
- Uranus
- Neptune
- Pluto

It not only refers to Earth as 'Terra' but also includes the asteroid belt, vitally important for a geeky kid, and it's served me well for over thirty years now. You can make up your own mnemonics or you may well come across tried and tested ones that appeal to you and that you can use to your advantage.

Acronyms

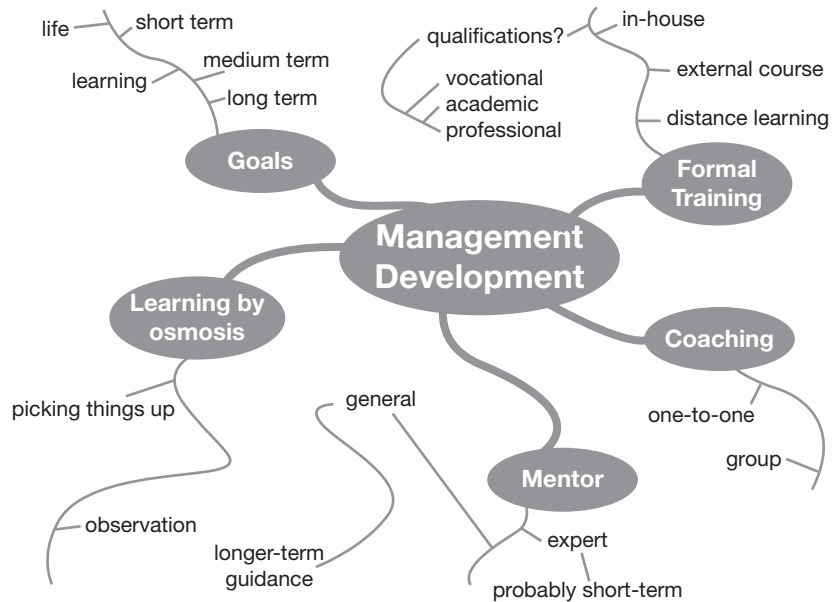
Another similar trick is to use an acronym, where every letter of a word stands for a word beginning with the same initial letter. For example: SWOT analysis looks at Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, and ASAP is widely used for 'as soon as possible'. Names and brands are routinely reduced to acronyms: ACAS, SAAB and NATO being just a few examples.

Memory joggers

People have all sorts of little memory joggers to keep them on the right track. Some we learn as children in school, such as: 'Thirty days hath September, April, June and November, All the rest have 31, Except February alone which has 28 days clear and 29 each leap year'. Whilst that one loses something in the latter stages, rhymes like this appeal to both sides of the brain and so are especially useful. Other 'joggers' can be very simple indeed: for example, if you get 'stationery' and 'stationary' mixed up, just remember that you get your paper from the *stationer* and you'll be fine!

Notation maps

Notation maps are a powerful way to take notes, to represent ideas or to recap learning. Research by Dr Robert Ornstein and Tony Buzan (amongst others) shows that not only are they a fun, visual and yet logical way of showing the various strands that make up a topic, they are also very effective. With notation maps, unlike traditional linear note taking, you start at the centre of the page. Ideas then branch out from the central premise or topic, with related thoughts and facts tied in where relevant. I find them very useful for plotting stories, among other things.



Example notation map

Devices like these are so effective because they appeal to both sides of the brain: they are logical and linear to appease your left-brain and yet quirky and clever, to appeal to your right brain. We use our brains to best effect when we can satisfy both hemispheres.

Learning styles

Whilst many theories on learning styles and types of learning exist, there are in essence four main ways in which people learn:

- By osmosis: an intuitive style that happens without you being conscious of it. We pick up things from what we see, hear, feel and do.
- By accident: an incidental learning style, where an event causes us to spend time thinking about what happened, why it happened, and what it means.

- **By reflecting:** a retrospective style that involves us actively and systematically reviewing activities and events and analysing what it is that they taught us.
- **By design:** a prospective style where we plan our learning. We consider what it is that we need to know and take positive steps to undertake training to meet the need, then review and analyse afterwards to consolidate learning. This type of learning is the most efficient and ties in neatly with the learning cycle.

The learning cycle

The learning cycle is derived from the planning cycle with its four stages of 'plan, do, check, act,' with each continually leading onto the next.

- **Plan:** we plan a learning experience, perhaps by booking a course, setting aside some time for study or booking time with a mentor.
- **Do:** we undertake the experience.
- **Check:** we review and analyse what we learned, either using our own notes or perhaps by discussing it with our mentor or manager. This stage is key: if we undertake a learning experience without reinforcing the knowledge or skills gained afterwards by referring back to notes and/or notation maps and recapping the main points, we will lose that information.
- **Act:** we work out how we can incorporate that learning into our way of doing things, and assess what it is that we need to learn next. This may involve developing complementary skills or digging deeper into the current subject.

In fairness, it's more like a continuous spiral, with one 'Plan, Do, Check, Act' cycle leading into the next.

What do you need to learn?

Take a long, hard look at your life and ask yourself this very question. Learning takes commitment, can be difficult and is undertaken at a cost, possibly financial, definitely in terms of time that would otherwise be spent doing other things. Consequently it makes good sense to consider what it is that interests you or that you want or need to learn in order to achieve your life goals. It is a good idea to make a plan, perhaps to record it formally, and to see that it ties in with your job plan and appraisal. That way you can involve your manager, which should help at least with sorting out work-related training.

Exercise: Where do you see yourself?

It is a good idea to take the time to set some personal and professional goals. You might want to think about:

- where you want to live, both geographically and in terms of type of dwelling;
- whether you want to own or rent your home;
- who you want to work for (here you can specify the sector, name a firm, or decide that you would rather work for yourself); and,
- what you want to be doing, and at what level.

For example:

	Now	1 year	3 years	5 years
Place	London	London	Newcastle	Edinburgh
Type	Flat	Flat	House (2 beds)	House (3 beds)
Status	Rent	Rent	Buy	Buy
Work for				
Position	Team leader	Supervisor	Manager	Manager
Earn				
Drive				

We'll return to this a little later. For now, just let some ideas develop.

Once you have your starting point and a series of milestones on the way to your destination, you are in a position to plan your journey. As with all things, break the various goals down into manageable steps.

John Bird, founder of 'The Big Issue', advocates starting with three per cent, because whilst you might aim big, the path to success is travelled via a series of small steps.

Firstly, assess how the requirements and opportunities of your current job will help you to move toward your overall goal. There must be some synergy in order for you to be able to enlist your employer's help: if you work in IT and want to learn some technical skill, chances are you can work that into your job plan. If you work in IT and want to take a creative writing course, chances are you're on your own. (Although some enlightened employers do provide funding for such unrelated pursuits, they tend to be in the minority.)

Ask yourself a series of 'What if...?' questions so that you have a contingency plan. The question 'What if... I am made redundant?' may spark a number of ideas, some of which might surprise you. For example:

- I could take a year out and do a PGCE;
- I could start my own business;
- I could take time out to travel;
- I could buy a new suit, update my CV – and get back out there!

There is no right or wrong answer to any of this, there is only what is right for you at a given point in time.

As an aside, money saving expert Martin Lewis advocates trying to have at least three months' survival money in the bank 'just in case'. I've rarely managed that, but if you can do it, then it is a very good idea. If you have that safety net, then any sudden job loss without any – or immediate – monetary compensation does not also have to constitute a financial crisis.

Working with a mentor

A mentor can offer advice and assistance and help you to keep on track and achieve your goals. Consider someone from your network, your manager or perhaps a specialist. When asking for help, decide if you feel it would be most desirable in the shorter or longer term. A specialist mentor might be useful in the shorter term whereas a generalist might be better to work with for longer. Ultimately it will depend on their availability and willingness to mentor you. As you progress in your career, be prepared to return the favour for more junior colleagues and contacts and to act as a mentor to them in return.

You should make a point of seeking out feedback on your performance and progress. If you have a mentor, then much will come from that source, or if not, then look to your manager or other managers with whom you work, and your peers. Don't be defensive when you get feedback that consists of more than a slap on the back; whilst praise where it is due is always welcome, it is this second, more balanced kind of feedback that we can learn most from.

Shy bairns get nowt!

Ask for chances and opportunities; do not assume they will automatically come your way. You might be the perfect person to take on a department while the existing manager is absent for a period of time, but even the best management have been known to miss what is under their noses. Put yourself forward: 'You have to show willing', as I used to be told time and again when I was growing up.

Under pressure

The cost of workplace stress, it seems, is very high indeed. It was reported by Nick Triggle on the BBC news website in November 2009 that the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) had estimated the cost of work-related mental illness to be £28bn, or one quarter of the UK's total sick bill. More than 13 million working days a year are lost as

a result of work-related stress, anxiety and depression and – according to NICE – the single biggest cause of problems is bad management.

These costs, of course, are purely financial: there is also the toll on individuals to take into account. Stress can cost people their jobs and relationships, and do significant long-term damage to their physical and mental health. Stress is a serious issue.

What is ‘stress’?

A simple workplace definition of stress is to have more to do than your time will allow. Stress can also be caused by monotony, boredom and insufficient stimulus. Whichever, the common denominator is a feeling of helplessness, of having little or no control over your life. As organisations increasingly try to achieve more with fewer people, the pressure on each individual increases and whilst one person’s nightmare is another person’s challenge, everyone has their breaking point. In October 2009, a teacher in a Nottinghamshire school attacked a pupil and is currently awaiting trial on a charge of attempted murder; it seems that stress was a major factor in this experienced teacher’s actions.

Causes of stress

There are many causes of stress, but the main ones arguably are as follows:

- **Conflict:** this may be experienced with a spouse or partner, child or other family member, friend or work colleague.
- **Major life events:** marriage, divorce, childbirth, bereavement: both difficult and happy life events come with stress attached.
- **Finances:** not only a lack of money now, but also perhaps the knowledge that a secure future hasn’t been planned and provided for whilst the clock is ticking.
- **Holidays:** most of us look forward to our holidays, and yet they can still be stressful; travel arrangements and organising Christmas are just two examples. There are also those who dread their holi-

days, perhaps because they will mean a period of isolation or they fear their absence from the office will diminish their control over their job.

- **Lifestyle:** constantly burning the candle at both ends can take its toll and also lead to other types of stress, such as financial.
- **Change:** stress is often related to change: in the workplace, this could be a change in job role and/or responsibilities, a reorganisation, a merger, a change in staffing levels or level of output. This change may be perceived as opportunity or threat, and our threat response generally has three stages: shock, which will reduce performance levels; panic, which will increase performance levels dramatically for a period of time; and resignation, when the stressor remains in place for a period of time and wears the individual down, resulting in feelings of exhaustion and helplessness.
- **Work:** the causes of workplace stress may be grouped into four broad categories:
 - 1 **Environment:** the physical environment in which people work. Stress can be triggered by such factors as temperature (constantly too hot or too cold); lack of natural light and/or fresh air (an unnatural environment); noise; shabby facilities.
 - 2 **Role requirements:** expectations about job title and grade; inequality of status and remuneration between people on the same grade; relationships between people at work; required output levels; variety and content of work, promotion or demotion.
 - 3 **Personal needs:** individual's development needs in order to adequately fulfil the job role and develop their career in the short, medium and long-term; job satisfaction; sense of achievement and self-worth; appreciation.
 - 4 **Role conflict:** we all have a range of roles that we fill in our lives; these are related to work, family and social situations and stress arises when there is conflict between them. For example, missing a friend's birthday party due to work requirements; being unable to work overtime due to attending a parents' evening at school.

Signs of stress

We all have our own stressors, signs of stress and ways of coping with it. In general, however, stress makes us feel:

- overwhelmed – we feel that we cannot cope and cannot think straight;
- overburdened – we are fighting a losing battle, as no matter how hard we work, we simply cannot keep up; and,
- overtired – physically and emotionally, partly due to trying so hard to get on top of things and partly due to the anxiousness and nervous tension we are experiencing.

The signs that we are experiencing undue levels of unhealthy stress may be physical, mental, emotional and behavioural. Let's take a closer look.

Physical signs of stress

- Digestive disorders
- Headaches
- Insomnia
- Racing heart
- Muscular aches and pains
- Nail biting, teeth grinding
- Nervous tics
- Hair pulling

Cognitive signs of stress

- Poor memory
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgement
- Constant worry
- Apathy

Emotional signs of stress

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Frustration
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Impatience
- Restlessness
- Irritability

Behavioural signs of stress

- Aggression
- Inactivity in the face of deadlines
- Frantic activity
- Emotional outbursts
- Over-reacting
- Fast and/or loud speech pattern
- Stammering

How stressed are you?

In 1967, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe conducted some research into the connection between stress and illness. Their results were published as the 'Social Readjustment Rating Scale' (SCRS), but are more commonly known as the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale. The scale takes a range of life events, including deaths of family and friends, illness, and changes in circumstance experienced over a period of two years as a predictor of illness. Each event is given a life change unit score or rating, ranging from the highest (death of a spouse, which scores 100 units) to the lowest (minor violation of the law, at 11 units). Scores are tallied and the results are as follows:

- **300+:** serious risk of illness
- **150 – 299:** moderate risk of illness
- **150-:** slight risk of illness

The 'Further reading: Online' section at the end of this chapter has a URL you can use to access an online version of the scale, where you can score your own stress level and judge whether this constitutes a risk to your health. When I completed the test as part of the research for this book, my score was over 500; perhaps unsurprisingly, I was also recovering from illness at the time.

Stress response

Stress is a happening that makes us feel threatened or fearful. The natural reaction is fight or flight. There are times, however, when neither reaction is possible: being scolded by a manager at work or cut up by another motorist, for example. Despite not being able to react in the way we might like, we still experience the same physical stress response as if we were in a life or death situation. Adrenaline and other stress hormones flood the body, the heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate increase and senses become more acute. The more often this happens, the more threatening it is to a person's health.

Stress busters

We each have our own methods of dealing with stress, and not all of them are necessarily good for us. If we overindulge in alcohol or resort to comfort eating, we can actually add to our stress by trying to work when we feel jaded or unwell, and making ourselves unhappy as we find that increasingly our clothes feel uncomfortably tight. A little of what you fancy is fine – just try not to overindulge. Healthy stress busters include:

- **Visualisation:** a proven technique that can either provide a break (at your desk) from the daily routine or help you to be more effective in your job role: there is evidence that if we 'see' things as we would like them to be, then we can move closer to that reality. *'Human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.'* (William James, philosopher.)

- **Meditation:** in use for over 2,500 years, meditation is a technique that helps you to relax and clear your mind of mental clutter and chatter. It is simple, free, and has been shown to reduce stress, blood pressure and anxiety. See the 'Further reading: Online' section at the end of this chapter for sources of further information.
- **Exercise:** jogging, gym, yoga – whatever you do, exercise has many benefits; just be sure to choose something you enjoy. If your heart sinks at the thought of it, you will add to your stress!
- **Breathing:** stress is often accompanied by hyperventilation (fast or overly-deep breathing). This in turn can cause dizziness, sweating, palpitations and chest pains, which further increases anxiety. Simple breathing exercises, however, can help to alleviate the problem. Try this:
 1. Sit in a chair with your back straight and your hands in your lap.
 2. Breathe in through your nose to a count of five.
 3. Breathe out through your mouth, also to a count of five. Repeat as necessary.
- **Budgeting:** this should be done for both your money and your time. (See Chapters 1.3, Managing your time and 5.2, Setting and working with budgets.)
- **Planning:** for a secure future.
- **Taking a break:** whether it's a five-minute visualisation holiday, a brisk walk at lunchtime, a week in the sun or even tendering your resignation, getting away from it all is a great way to rejuvenate yourself. It may feel like you get more done by staying at your desk all day and grabbing a sandwich for lunch, but you are likely to be more productive if you take even just ten minutes away to clear your head and get a breath of air.
- **Eating healthfully:** it can be easier and more gratifying to snack on fast food and chocolate, but it doesn't nourish and rarely satisfies for very long. Distract yourself from over-eating by reading, cleaning your teeth, going for a walk, whatever works for you,

and do be sure that when you do eat, you do so consciously and with relish. *'Let your food be your medicine and your medicine be your food.'* (Hippocrates, ancient Greek physician.)

- **Talking to people:** having a support network of friends and family is a powerful way to cope with life's problems. You must balance that, however, with some time for yourself. We all need time alone to recharge our batteries and do just exactly what we please.
- **Getting enough sleep:** you can't keep up either physically or mentally if you constantly rob yourself of sufficient sleep. Try to get what you need, whether six, seven or eight hours a night.
- **Getting a hobby:** finding something that both distracts you from your stressors and provides satisfaction is a great way to help alleviate stress. My main ones are reading, writing and photography. When the chips are really down I often make soup. I find the simple action of balancing flavours and preparing vegetables almost hypnotic, and those actions and the resulting meal are soothing.
- **Focusing on 'now':** we all spend time going over and over things in our minds, fretting and agonising over details. 'If only I'd said that...' or 'I wish I'd thought of this then...'. Then we start to imagine what we will do next: 'Just wait until she does that again!' and 'I won't give him the satisfaction next time.' We drive ourselves mad at times. It can be very hard to do, but letting go what has happened and focusing on the current situation rather than dwelling on the past or trying to second-guess the future is a great skill, especially in a time of crisis.
- **Remember how good you are:** if you are feeling really overwhelmed, either have a read of your CV or make a list of all the things that you can do well. You will very likely surprise yourself and boost your spirits at the same time.
- **Resist the temptation to take on other people's stress:** some folk do their utmost to dump their problems on others, and if you are the sort of person who always tries to help, you are likely to be a target. Empathise or offer advice by all means, but encourage such people to deal with their own problems.

- **Change what you can:** some things we must live with, but if it is in your power to change anything that is causing you undue anxiety or unhappiness, then you owe it to yourself to make that change.

Conclusion

Remember, life is all about balance. Balance between mind and body, what you earn and what you spend, the food you eat and the energy you expend. When things are in balance, we are in control and can cope with life's problems better when they arise. When things are out of balance, issues can quickly spiral out of control.

Also bear in mind the twin issues of rights and responsibilities. You have the right to make mistakes, but you have the responsibility to own up to them and put them right. You have the right to say 'no', but you have the responsibility to only do that when saying 'yes' would be very difficult or impossible. You have the right to be paid a fair wage for what you know and do, but you have the responsibility to provide a fair day's work in exchange.

We cannot avoid stressful situations: the act of living means they are inevitable at some point. We can, however, take steps to both avoid and eliminate unnecessary stress and equip ourselves to deal effectively with unpreventable stress.

Your future is in your hands!

Exercise: Where do you see yourself?

Earlier in the chapter we started to think about where you might like to be in the future. Use the table below to make some notes. Add in extra categories if that would suit you better – and be honest, it's just for you at this stage.

	Now	1 year	3 years	5 years
Place				
Type				
Status				
Work for				
Position				
Earn				
Drive				

Planning and managing your own professional development checklist

- My brain is amazing!
- I use mnemonics, acronyms and other devices to boost my memory.
- I know how to draw a useful notation map.
- I have a plan to help me achieve my personal goals, staged over a number of years.
- I have a plan for my personal development, which supports the achievement of my goals.
- I understand my stressors, signs of stress and stress reactions.
- I take positive steps to manage my stress.

Exercise: Where do you see yourself?

I hope you took – or will take – some time to think about where you want to be. You can share with other people as much or as little of that as you like, but keep your destination in mind, work towards it in small steps and you stand a very good chance of arriving there.

Further reading

In print:

- Accelerated Learning for the Twenty First Century, Colin Rose and Malcolm J. Nicholl, Judy Piatkus (Publishers) Ltd (1999)
- Shaping Your Career, Harvard Business Press Pocket Mentor, Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation (2008)
- How to Change Your Life in Seven Steps, John Bird, Vermilion (2006)
- 10 Minute Guide to Stress Management, Jeff Davidson, Macmillan USA, Inc. (2001)
- The Book of Stress Survival, Alex Kirsta, Thorsons (1992)

Online:

- <http://managementhelp.org/mgmt/prsnlmt.htm> – The Free Management Library – see the section on ‘Managing Yourself’.
- http://www.quintcareers.com/SWOT_Analysis.html – Quintessential Careers website.
- http://helpguide.org/mental/stress_signs.htm – website for Helpguide, an organisation that aims to provide information to help people deal effectively with life’s challenges.
- <http://www.meditationexpert.co.uk/> – website packed with information on meditation techniques, practices and stress relief.
- <http://www.harvestenterprises-sra.com/pages/article/TheHolmes-RaheScale.htm> – online version of the stress test.