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**study skills**

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4<sup>th</sup> edition

# **SKILLS FOR SUCCESS**

personal development and employability

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**STELLA COTTRELL**

million copy bestselling author

# **Skills for Success**

*Titles in this series by Stella Cottrell*

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Dissertations and Project Reports  
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The Postgraduate Research Handbook (2nd edn)  
The Professional Doctorate  
Structuring Your Research Thesis

# Skills for Success

## Personal Development and Employability

4th edition

**Stella Cottrell**

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# Companion site materials

## Chapter 1 Taking charge of your future

- Do I need personal development planning?  
Self-evaluation
- What are my PDP priorities?
- Priorities whilst a student. What do I want to gain from my time at university/college?

## Chapter 2 The vision: what does success mean to you?

- The long-term vision
- Evaluate whether your PDP goals are SMART-F
- Personal action plan for PDP
- Benefits and costs of achieving your goal
- Attributes needed to achieve your goal
- Does it all add up?

## Chapter 3 Know yourself

- Top 40 strong points
- Seven significant changes
- Using your personal expertise
- The impact of choices: the road walked
- The impact of choices: the road unwalked

## Chapter 4 Improving your personal performance

- Find your SHAPES for academic study: snap profile
- Find your SHAPES for academic study: rate yourself for skills, habits, attitudes, preferences, experience and strategies
- Map your SHAPES profile (2 charts)
- Your Personal Performance Profile
- Identify significant features of your Personal Performance Formula (PPF)
- Your Personal Performance Formula (PPF)
- Your Personal Performance Formula (PPF) for task 1
- Your Personal Performance Formula (PPF) for task 2

## Chapter 5 Successful self-management

- Learning from mistakes
- Attitude to challenge
- Identifying your sources of support
- Student Day Planner

## Chapter 6 People skills

- Balloon game
- Changing a recurring situation
- Monitoring my effectiveness in improving my people skills

## Chapter 7 Teamwork

- What I can contribute

## Chapter 8 Develop your leadership capacity

- Step up to responsibility
- Being an effective leader

## Chapter 9 Managing tasks and projects

- Priority organiser
- SWOT analysis
- Advanced SWOT analysis
- Evaluate your targets as SMART-F
- Action plan
- Project schedule

## Chapter 10 Thinking creatively and productively

- Evaluate your creative thinking skills
- Mindfulness meditation
- Boost your creativity

## Chapter 11 Practical problem-solving

- Problem-solving: the 'back of an envelope' approach
- Evaluating multiple solutions

## Chapter 12 The art of reflection

- Critical event incident
- Core model for reflection
- Personal model for reflection

## Chapter 13 What do employers really want?

- Written communications competence sheet
- Oral communication competence sheet
- People skills competence sheet
- Task-management planners and templates

## Chapter 14 Getting the job you want

- Recognise personal change
- Gaining insights from the workplace
- Preparing your job application
- Preparing for the job interview
- After the job interview

## Chapter 15 Building a professional identity: reputation, personal profile and records

Competences

### Tools for evaluating performance

- Improving personal performance
- Evaluating progress on learning goals
- Competitiveness audit

### Personal records

- Contents list for portfolios/  
personal records
- Record of education and training
- Evidence of learning
- Record of work history
- Learning through work
- Evidence of skills and personal  
qualities for employment

### Competence sheets

- 1 Evidence of competence in teamwork
- 2 Evidence of competence in working independently

- 3 Evidence of competence in exercising responsibility
- 4 Evidence of competence in leadership
- 5 Evidence of competence in persuading others
- 6 Evidence of competence in negotiating a compromise
- 7 Evidence of competence in problem-solving
- 8 Evidence of competence in project or task management
- 9 Evidence of competence in commercial awareness
- 10 Evidence of competence in managing a difficult situation
- 11 Evidence of competence in working under pressure or to tight deadlines
- 12 Evidence of competence in equal opportunities
- 13 Evidence of competence in managing change
- 14 Evidence of competence in taking calculated risks
- 15 Evidence of competence in learning from my own mistakes
- 16 Evidence of competence in written communication skills
- 17 Evidence of competence in oral communication skills  
Pro-forma for mapping other competences  
Health and safety

### Links to

- 'Want to know more?': Recommended further reading and resources
- Useful apps (Appendix 1)
- Useful websites (Appendix 2)



## List of abbreviations

<b>CEO</b>	<b>Chief Executive Officer</b>
<b>CPD</b>	<b>continual professional development</b>
<b>CV</b>	<b>curriculum vitae</b>
<b>CVCP</b>	<b>Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals</b>
<b>HEAR</b>	<b>Higher Education Achievement Record</b>
<b>HE</b>	<b>higher education</b>
<b>HEI</b>	<b>higher education institution</b>
<b>IiP</b>	<b>Investors in People</b>
<b>PDP</b>	<b>personal development planning</b>
<b>PI</b>	<b>performance indicator (also: KPI, key performance indicator)</b>
<b>QAA</b>	<b>Quality Assurance Agency</b>

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## Foreword

*Skills for Success* was one of the first books designed to support university-level students and recent graduates to prepare for graduate-level employment. The first three editions have been used by students all around the world as well as by employers and employees outside of the education sector. Despite the greater focus on career planning and employability in recent years, a recent report of student and employer views illustrates a disconnect between what students think employers want and what employers say they are looking for (Uffindell et al., 2020). Of students responding to the survey on which that report is based, less than half were confident about achieving a graduate job or being prepared for the world of work. Support for students, and resources such as *Skills for Success*, are still essential.

I have been fortunate to have worked with thousands of fantastic, inspiring students across my career. I have been humbled by the efforts they put into their time as students – not just with their course, but with jobs, volunteering, caring, creativity and CV-building. So many want to do well for the benefit of others: to be great professionals, to bring new skills to the workplace, to contribute usefully to society, to inspire others, to be role models. Similarly, I have been impressed by so many academic and professional support staff going that extra mile to help students to achieve their life aims and to gain the best possible next step on the career ladder.

The first edition of this book arose from requests from teaching staff in higher education who, in the face of gaining new responsibilities for improving student employability and integrating personal

and professional development into courses, had no resources to call upon. I wrote *Skills for Success* so that teaching staff as well as students had some practical starting points for working together.

This fourth edition of *Skills for Success* has been influenced by having had senior responsibility for student success and employability as Head of School at one university, and overall at two other large universities. I have also drawn on my own experience as an employer, board member, mentor and executive coach. I have read thousands of job applications and interviewed hundreds of job applicants at all levels from recent graduates through to CEOs. I have observed, first-hand, what works and what does not when people apply for jobs. I have also talked to employers from around the world about what they want in employees, especially in new graduates. I have asked graduates 'what they wished they had known' before leaving their courses or taking on new and work-related responsibilities. I have also received a huge amount of comment and advice from student representatives and teaching staff in diverse disciplines about what they consider matters most for their students.

All of these insights I have endeavoured to incorporate into the current edition. I hope that, as a result, this edition assists both academic and professional support staff with their students. Above all, I hope it goes some way towards helping students and graduates to gain confidence, recognise their incredible potential and harness their diverse talents to achieve their ambitions.

Dr Stella Cottrell

# Introducing *Skills for Success*

## Is this book for you?

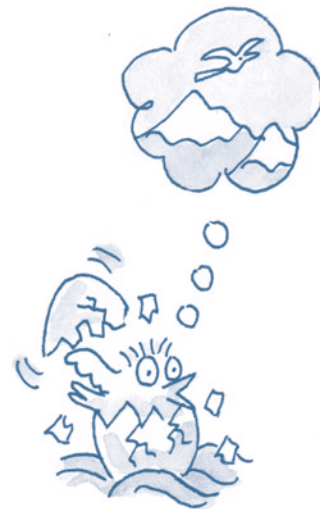
Whether you are aiming at your first job, a new or better job, a promotion at work, a change of career or a good workplace appraisal, you are likely to find this book has something for you. It focuses on skills, behaviours and ways of thinking relevant at most levels of study and of value throughout working life.

Although *Skills for Success* was originally designed for university-level students, it is used in many other contexts in both education and employment. It is especially relevant to those who want to feel more confident about what is expected in the world of work and who want to make more considered decisions about their futures.

## Shape your future

As well as practical guidance, the book provides an opportunity to pause and consider crucial questions about you, your future and the kind of person you want to be – questions such as:

- ★ What does 'success' mean for me: as a student, for working life and my life in general?
- ★ Which skills, experience, and qualities do I need in order to achieve such success?
- ★ How will I get from where I am now to where I want to be in the future?
- ★ What could I be doing now that would be helpful to my future self?



## Aims of *Skills for Success*

*Skills for Success* aims to help you to develop the attitudes, confidence, understanding, habits and generic skills associated with success in the world of work. It does this by:

- ★ Encouraging and enabling you to focus in depth on you and what you want for yourself in life
- ★ Offering practical guidance to develop skills, habits, behaviours and ways of thinking that promote and support success
- ★ Providing insights from the world of work on what is expected and how to go about securing the kind of jobs you want – building on your successes, avoiding common errors and turning setbacks to your advantage
- ★ Structured reflections, observations, self-evaluations and activities to stimulate ideas, support your thinking process and guide action
- ★ Resources to support you in recording your personal history, experience, skills and reflections so that they are ready and easy to use when applying for jobs.

## Getting started

Below, is a set of recommendations for where to begin in using this book. You don't have to follow this, of course. If you do, you can keep track of what you have done so far by checking this off  as you go.

Action	Rationale	Done <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Browse quickly</b>	Check what the book covers and gain a sense of where to find what you need.	
▼	▼	
<b>Read this Introduction: <i>Introducing Skills for Success</i></b>	Gain a sense of the book, its purpose, layout and contents. Familiarise yourself with the icons used in the book (see page xviii).	
▼	▼	
<b>Take a look at the companion site</b> (pages x and xxiv)	Familiarise yourself with the wide range of resources on the site to support your use of the book and your personal development planning (PDP).	
▼	▼	
<b>Make a commitment</b> (page 25)	Make the decision to put time and energy into your personal and professional development. Write this down. Decide what will motivate and support you to follow through on this commitment.	
▼	▼	
<b>Plan time slots into diary</b> (page 131)	Use your diary, calendar or planner to put aside regular slots to consider where you are in your PDP, and what to do next.	
▼	▼	
<b>Start to capture your thoughts</b> (page xix)	Develop the habit of giving time to developing your thoughts – in writing or using audio, video or graphics.	
▼	▼	
<b>Read Chapter 1: Taking charge of your future</b> (pages 3–28)	Find out what is meant by personal development planning, and why it is considered important for students and in professional life. Gain a steer on how to derive most benefit from PDP.	
▼	▼	
<b>Use Chapter 1</b>	Identify your PDP priorities.	
▼	▼	
<b>Follow up</b>	Use other chapters, or parts of chapters, to follow up on your interests and personal priorities.	

# Skills for Success: the approach

## All about you

This book is about you – about the kind of person you want to be and the sort of future you want. It provides information, guidance, prompts and activities to stimulate your own thinking and to help you filter what you really want amidst the clamour of many choices and everyone else's interests and needs.

## Improved decision-making

Good decision-making boosts well-being and generally makes life easier. However, it is not unusual for people to make important life decisions without really thinking them through. This leads to wasted time, missed opportunities and unnecessary complications.

You can use the guided reflections, observations and other activities in *Skills for Success* in order to consider in more depth the 'whys' and 'hows' of what makes you 'you', what influences the way you think, feel, choose and behave – so you are better placed to make the right decisions for you.

## Time for thought

*Skills for Success* encourages you to devote some space in your busy life just to thinking about you and your future. This is important as, generally, we tend to be easily distracted from thinking deeply on fundamental questions about ourselves – such as:

- ★ What do I *really* want, value, need?
- ★ Why do these things matter to me?
- ★ What would *really* be best for me?
- ★ How does all this affect the way I should be thinking and planning for the future?
- ★ What will I do to bring about what I want?

Although these thoughts might cross our minds occasionally, it is easy to become caught up in our day-to-day lives so that weeks or years pass without our giving them the time they deserve. This book supports you in making that time. Many of its activities are short and can fit into a bus or train ride, lunch break or a spare twenty minutes.

## Emphasis on action

Whilst it is important to think things through, ultimately it is essential to put your thoughts and plans into action. This book provides practical guidance and resources to help you take steps in planning towards what you want to achieve.



At last, Sybil had enough ideas to launch into action

## Employability focus

Whilst many of the skills and attitudes covered by *Skills for Success* are applicable to academic study, the main focus of this book is on preparing for success in working life – whether in your current line of work or future jobs. It helps you to consider such questions as

- ★ What is meant by 'employability'? What do employers look for?
- ★ Should I be self-employed – or an employer myself?
- ★ What kind of actions should I be taking now to improve my work or career prospects?
- ★ How can I enhance my personal profile and performance so I 'stand out from the crowd'?

# How to use *Skills for Success*

## Locate what you need

The following design features are provided to help you find material quickly and easily,

- ★ A contents page and Index.
- ★ A list of the resources available on the book's companion site (pages x-xi).
- ★ Learning outcomes listed at the start of each chapter, so you know what to expect.
- ★ Page headers and large headings for topics, to assist rapid browsing.
- ★ Icons to signal particular activities.
- ★ Summaries at the end of each chapter to highlight their key messages.
- ★ Visually distinct pages, with illustrations and graphics to help you locate and recall material more easily.

## Icons used in the book

 Self-evaluation	 Observation
 Reflection	 Activity
 Apps are available (see pages 379-80)	 Companion site materials available (see pages x-xi)
 Want to know more? Further resources	

## Do it

### Select and personalise

*Skills for Success* is designed so you can choose to use it in different ways, to suit you at any given time.

- ★ Browse and choose what interests you.
- ★ *or* Identify your priorities; go directly to those sections.
- ★ *or* Pick chapters relevant to where you are at a given time in your course or work history.
- ★ *or* Work through the book systematically to build self-awareness, confidence and ability.
- ★ *or* Use a combination of the above.

### Use the self-evaluations

Most chapters include a self-evaluation. These serve several purposes:

- 1 to increase awareness and stimulate reflection
- 2 to highlight component parts or steps that contribute to complex tasks or skills; this deepens understanding of what is involved
- 3 to pinpoint specific aspects of your current performance that would benefit from more attention
- 4 to help you prioritise your planning and development.

### Give it time

Be prepared to give yourself the time you need to investigate, reflect upon and evaluate yourself, your studies and your future. Create time for it in your diary.

## Experiment

- ★ Apply strategies, skills, models and ideas from the book to your studies and workplace, adapting and combining these to fit your circumstances and preferences.
- ★ Use these as a springboard for investigating new ways of doing things.
- ★ Become more aware of what works best for you and your circumstances.

## Become more observant

Use the guided observations and activities in the book to help you to become more aware of:

- ★ various aspects of the world of work, such as what employers say they want and changes occurring in the labour market and your professional area
- ★ what others around you are doing to advance their own futures
- ★ what kinds of approaches are effective for getting things done in your context(s)
- ★ what other people want and need: being alert to these can help your own success.

## Reflect

It is recommended that you maintain a personal blog, vlog, journal, diary, folder, ideas book or similar – to support your development over time.

### Start a 'reflective journal'

Use your journal to:

- ★ complete reflective activities from the book
- ★ capture your thoughts, insights and inspiration
- ★ develop your initial thoughts in more detail
- ★ consider your attitudes, feelings, habits and behaviours, and the implications of these for you and others
- ★ identify helpful and unhelpful responses to events
- ★ look back over earlier entries and consider how your perspective changes over time
- ★ generally think things through.

Giving attention to your experiences helps clarify your thinking and understanding. Put time aside regularly to record your reflections – and to reconsider previous entries. For more about effective reflection, see Chapter 12.

## Take action

Follow up your evaluations and reflections with decisions for action. The resources in the book and on its companion site can help you to:

- ★ decide your priorities
- ★ plan out what you will do and when
- ★ carry out what you decided
- ★ keep track of your actions
- ★ consider what worked – and what to improve.

Follow up topics of relevance to you. Further reading and resources are recommended throughout the book and on pages 390–8 (refs).

## Compare 'then' and 'now'

Save completed self-evaluations, reflections, priority lists and planners for future reference.

- ★ Compare your actions and outcomes with your original intentions.
- ★ Compare your initial responses with how you feel, think or behave later.

# Overview of the chapters

## Part 1: Self-management

Self-awareness is key to everything else. Part 1 helps you to deepen your understanding of what lies beneath your current choices and performance – and to use your insights to gain more control over your actions and your life.

### 1 Taking charge of your future

Chapter 1 introduces personal development planning (PDP) as an important strategy for preparing for the future. It clarifies what PDP is, why it matters, its challenges and benefits. Use it to identify your current PDP needs and priorities.

### 2 The Vision: What does 'success' mean to you?

Most students make sacrifices to put themselves through college or university and expect a better future as a result. Despite this, many are vague about what to do once their course finishes. Whilst that doesn't have to be a problem, it is useful to give thought to what you want in life so that you have a greater sense of direction, make coherent choices and are better positioned to make use of the right opportunities for you as these arise.

Chapter 2 enables you to think through what 'success' would mean to you. It is a chance to reflect on your ambitions, goals, motivations and values – and about the kind of life you want to find yourself living 10 or 20 years from now.

### 3 Know yourself

Use Chapter 3 to gain a deeper understanding of the part you play in your own life story. It is a chance to reflect on what has shaped you as a person, as well as how you respond to circumstances now, the expertise you have developed so far, and how you could draw on that in new contexts.

### 4 Improving personal performance

We are each distinct in what we need to perform at our best – and in what holds us back. Chapter 4 enables you to:

- ★ evaluate whether you would benefit most from working on your skills, habits, attitudes, preferences, experience or strategy (SHAPES)
- ★ analyse the factors that have a significant impact on your own performance
- ★ identify your own personal 'formula' for performing at your best
- ★ use your insights to put into place the conditions you need in order to perform well.

## 5 Successful self-management

Effective self-management is expected of adults and essential in most graduate jobs and responsible positions associated with career success. Although we might have a good idea of what this means, it isn't always easy to act like a responsible grown-up. It can be especially challenging to manage our emotions and follow through on good intentions when we feel stressed or are coping with change and uncertainty.



**Tom refused to recognise his inability to take personal responsibility for his actions**

Use Chapter 5 to consider:

- ★ your ability to use your initiative and take on responsibility
- ★ where and how your energy gets blocked – and where to focus in order to charge your energy
- ★ the important roles played by self-belief and hope for those who achieve success
- ★ your emotional intelligence and ability to manage emotions in uncertainty or distress
- ★ practical steps in organisational self-management and using time effectively.

## Part 2: People and Task Management Skills

Being more skilful in how you approach tasks and interactions with others makes study more enjoyable and less stressful. It enables you to be more effective in most situations you will encounter as a student or in work. Attributes associated with managing people and tasks are always in great demand from employers and are useful in all areas of working life.

### 6 People skills

Good people skills mean that all interactions in daily life, work and during study can run more smoothly and everyone gains consideration, encouragement and respect. Such skills enable us to create more effective, enjoyable and efficient environments and to manage difficult situations better – which is why so many people and employers place such a high value upon them. Most graduates need people skills soon after graduation, if not before. Chapter 6 helps you to identify and develop abilities that contribute to good people skills, such as:

- ★ establishing rapport, gaining allies and forming useful networks
- ★ active listening skills
- ★ assertiveness and negotiation skills
- ★ giving and receiving constructive criticism
- ★ managing difficult and unwanted recurring situations.

How do I manage people?  
Usually my presence is enough but sometimes I roar and if all else fails ... I eat them.



### 7 Teamwork

Teamwork is an essential skill for most jobs and research careers and, increasingly, features as an aspect of student assignments. Good emotional self-management and people skills contribute enormously to good teamwork. Chapter 7 looks at:

- ★ how to create great teams and be a constructive, effective team member
- ★ roles and functions that people play in teams, and the value of including and involving all members effectively to the benefit of the team
- ★ understanding team dynamics, such as at different stages in a group's formation, and during moments of conflict
- ★ using conflict and confrontation constructively
- ★ drawing on your experience so that you can present your teamworking ability well to employers during job application processes.

### 8 Develop your leadership capacity

Understanding about leadership is useful to many contexts, whether in the work place, for student projects, or in the community. It is essential in most graduate jobs. Whether you consider yourself a natural leader or take on leadership for other reasons, there is always more to learn about how to be a better leader. Use Chapter 8 to

- ★ understand what is meant by leadership, including different models and styles
- ★ decide what you value in leaders
- ★ prepare for leadership roles and/or develop as a more effective leader.

### 9 Managing tasks and projects

Being familiar with a range of typical task-related and project-management strategies will help you take on almost any new task with more confidence. Use Chapter 9 to:

- ★ apply the OPAL strategy to help you conceptualise new tasks more precisely and to navigate the processes involved
- ★ develop organisational and planning skills, such as setting goals, priorities, SMART-F targets and evaluation criteria
- ★ understand the characteristics of projects as a distinct type of task – and factors that enable their success
- ★ consider how good communications will help the success of your project – and enable you to gain most from the experience.

## Part 3: Extending your thinking

Creative and reflective thinking abilities are becoming ever more valued, both for academic study and for employment. They deepen your understanding of what you learn from study or experience and of how to apply this to new contexts.

### 10 *Thinking creatively and productively*

Many people doubt their own creativity, assuming that this is just for artists and performers. Creativity is essential to problem-solving and task completion. It is the 'spark of creativity' that brings the right idea to mind at the right time. Chapter 10 looks at ways of nurturing creative-thinking skills and using the brain productively. Use it to:

- ★ develop confidence in your creative abilities
- ★ help your brain to function more effectively
- ★ try out a range of activities to hone your creative-thinking processes.

### 11 *Practical problem-solving*

Problem-solving ability features as one of the key skills sought after by employers, as well as being central to academic study and professional life. The word 'problem' can be anxiety-provoking. It can be daunting to be faced with new problems to resolve, and frustrating to live with intractable and recurring problems. That doesn't have to be the case. Use Chapter 11 to:

- ★ find ways into new problems, so that they become more familiar and easier to resolve
- ★ use processes such as problem definition, problem statements and problem-structuring to help clarify the nature of a new problem or task to yourself and others
- ★ use similarity-finding, multiple-solution generation and criteria-based evaluation to help you decide on solutions to problems
- ★ use Action sets in order to resolve problems using mutual support processes.

### 12 *The art of reflection*

Many professions now require their employees to adopt a reflective practitioner approach. Your course tutors may also require you to reflect upon your

performance. But what is 'reflection'? How do you go about it? How do you write about it?

As you work through the book, you will find many opportunities for structured reflection. Chapter 12 outlines different methods and approaches, along with guidance on the kinds of structured reflection typically required for marked assignments in higher education. Browse these and select those methods that suit you and your course.

## Part 4: Employability and enhancing your career prospects

Surveys of students show that their main objectives in pursuing higher education are associated with finding a graduate job or improving work prospects. This may include:

- ★ gaining professional qualifications or equivalents
- ★ enhancing their career through promotion, changes of role or moving to a better job
- ★ gaining greater job satisfaction and expertise in existing employment
- ★ embarking on their first substantial job – as a first step on the career ladder
- ★ gaining more experience of employment through internships or a graduate scheme.

The skills developed throughout the book are those especially associated with graduate careers. The following chapters consider the issue of 'employability' from the perspective of both employers and students.

### 13 *What do employers really want?*

The process of gaining a job can seem rather mysterious. When there is a lot of competition for work, it can feel hard to find a job without experience – and hard to gain such experience. Even if you have been in employment for some time, it is not always obvious how to go about gaining a promotion or better job.

Chapter 13 considers 'employability' from the perspective of employers and what they look for when taking on new employees. Use it to:

- ★ gain a sense of what matters to employers
- ★ identify skills always in high demand



Not all the applicants for the job had really considered what the employer was looking for

- ★ understand how employers make use of diverse sets of skills in work contexts
- ★ articulate your skills, including academic skills in ways employers understand
- ★ weigh up potential benefits, risks and responsibilities of self-employment and/or being an employer in your own right.

## 14 Getting the job you want

Chapter 14 considers employability from the perspective of you as a potential employee going through the process of applying for jobs. Use this chapter to help you:

- ★ think through what you really want from your first, or next, job
- ★ enhance your career prospects through the process of personal development planning
- ★ make informed choices when looking for jobs
- ★ make effective job applications, including a winning CV and well-mapped competences
- ★ prepare well for interviews and assessment centres, so you can approach these with greater confidence
- ★ gain deeper insights into the world of work, through reflection on the contexts in which you find yourself – to help build business acumen and achieve your longer-term goals.

## 15 Building a professional identity: reputation, personal profile and records

The information you provide to employers as well as that available to them about you in the public domain or through third parties all contribute to your professional reputation. Chapter 15 helps you consider how to nurture and protect the integrity of your professional identity – to the benefit of your short- and longer-term employment. That includes constructing the best possible profile of yourself online as well as ensuring that you maintain reliable, easy-to-access records that support accurate and effective job applications.

Building a bank of information about your experiences and skills provides you with an invaluable resource for making good applications and preparing for interviews. You are likely to draw upon it for many years to come. Materials and templates are available on the companion site to help you make such record-keeping easy.



Raise your game to get ahead of the pack!

## About the companion site



### The companion site for *Skills for Success*

A bank of resources is provided for your personal use through the companion site that accompanies this book. You can use these to:

- ★ record and collate key personal information, evaluations and reflections
- ★ set personal priorities
- ★ create detailed action plans for tasks or for professional development
- ★ track and monitor your progress on tasks
- ★ track and monitor your progress towards personal and professional goals
- ★ prepare for job interviews
- ★ follow up recommended links to further reading, information, podcasts, talks, videos, practice materials, activities and other resources.



This icon indicates that templates such as planners and checklists are available on the companion website.

See pages x–xi for a list of materials on the companion site.

Visit the companion site at: [www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)

**Enjoy  
the book**

**I hope you enjoy using  
this book – and achieve  
all your ambitions!**

**Stella Cottrell**

# PART 1

## Self-management

Self-management skills are essential to success. They provide a solid foundation upon which to build all other skills and to take action to achieve our ambitions. At some point, all successful people learn to understand, manage, and lead themselves well in order to achieve effectively.

### Part 1 is designed to help you to:

- ★ clarify what is meant by Personal Development Planning (PDP), its benefits for you, and how to get started with a relevant personal action plan
- ★ envisage the kind of life you want for your future and clarify your goals and ambitions
- ★ consider what makes you the person you are now – and who you want to be
- ★ pinpoint factors that enable you to perform at your best
- ★ manage your time, resources and energies to best effect to achieve what matters to you.

### Personal development planning

Personal Development Planning (PDP) is the process that enables us to identify what we really want – our ambition for ourselves – and what we need to do in order to achieve that. The richness of that process, and where it leads, are down to each of us, depending on what we put into it.

### Knowing yourself

It is easier to shape a vision for the future, set goals, stay motivated, and adapt to changing circumstances if we build from a solid base. That comes from gaining a deep understanding of ourselves – not just the

superficial, obvious things that first come to mind but the more profound insights that arise from recurrent, structured self-reflection, self-questioning, broadening of experience, learning from new challenges, being open to feedback – all leading to greater self-awareness and self-confidence. It is easier to be successful in working towards our goals when these really excite us, when they match our ambitions, values and interests, and when we are being true to ourselves.

### Personal performance

When we understand the multiple factors that impact on our own performance, we are in a better position to create the ideal conditions to achieve well in the most efficient way and with least stress – whether for study, work or for personal goals.

#### Chapters in Part 1

- 1 Taking charge of your future
- 2 The vision: What does success mean to you?
- 3 Know yourself
- 4 Improving your personal performance
- 5 Successful self-management

# Chapter 1

# Taking charge of your future



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ understand what is meant by 'Personal Development Planning' (PDP) and what it involves
- ✓ recognise the potential benefits and challenges of PDP
- ✓ consider the relevance of PDP to your future career and ambitions
- ✓ decide your PDP priorities
- ✓ identify opportunities open to you now
- ✓ plan your course of action for taking forward your personal development.

## What kind of future?

Your time as a student is a major step in your professional career. When you graduate, you will be competing with millions of other graduates from around the world. Like you, they will be looking to stand out in a graduate employment market that is increasingly global. The time you spend now in gaining a good degree, in nurturing your talents and building a distinctive personal profile can make a difference in how far you achieve what you want.

## Make it happen



**Aspire.** Be ambitious for yourself. Aim high, considering the portfolio of jobs you might have over many years.



**Plan.** Map a route towards achieving your ambitions – whether academic, professional or personal.



**Investigate.** Be well informed about the range of career and life options open to you – and what is needed to be successful in those areas.



**Personalise.** Adapt your strategies to suit your individual combination of ambitions, abilities, experiences, interests, needs and preferences.



**Reflect.** Increase your self-awareness: develop good habits of introspection and constructive self-questioning. Become more attuned to what matters most to you.



**Achieve.** Take action. Follow through on your plans, adapting them as opportunities arise and as your interests and ambitions change.



**Decide.** Think through the implications of potential choices – and then choose a direction. Making decisions brings focus to your planning and studies.

# Getting started with Personal Development Planning (PDP)

Below, is a set of recommendations for taking forward your personal and professional planning. You can keep track of what you have done so far by checking this off  as you go.

Step in the process	Rationale	Done <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Find out what is meant by 'PDP' (pages 5–9)	... so you can make sense of this for your own context.	
▼	▼	
Consider the challenges (pages 14–15)	PDP doesn't tend to happen spontaneously, as is evident from the students' experiences on pages 11–12. Give thought to where the challenges would lie for you so you can address them.	
▼	▼	
Identify the benefits to you (pages 16–17)	Motivate yourself to give PDP the time it deserves – such as by identifying why and how it can be useful to you.	
▼	▼	
Decide: 'Do I need PDP?' (page 18)	Use the self-evaluation on page 18 in order to decide whether PDP is relevant to you now.	
▼	▼	
Identify your PDP needs and priorities (pages 19–24)	Complete the self-evaluations on pages 19–24 to tease out your own PDP needs and priorities, using a rounded approach.	
▼	▼	
Identify opportunities (pages 26–7)	Give active consideration to the opportunities available to you, so that your planning is dynamic, realistic and focussed. Include opportunities you could create for yourself.	
▼	▼	
Make an action plan (page 208)	Draw up a plan. Make a schedule to take this forward (pages 208–9). Review, fine-tune, and update this regularly to keep it live, relevant and realistic.	
▼	▼	
Plan into diary	Use your diary, calendar or planner to map out when, exactly, you will undertake the first few actions. Follow through: do what you plan.	
▼	▼	
Check out the companion site (page xxiv)	If you wish, you can use the templates provided for PDP self-evaluations and planners – or adapt these to suit your own purposes.	

# 'PDP': What is it?

## You and your aspirations

Personal development planning (PDP) is about you. It is about thinking ahead and taking the right steps now – to give yourself the best possible range of choices later. It encompasses consideration of:

- ★ who you are now – and want to be
- ★ your likes, dislikes, ambitions, goals, values, motivations and uncertainties
- ★ what you thought you might want from life – and how your interests might change
- ★ the jobs and life options open to you – and what these would entail
- ★ work-related knowledge and skills so you develop a soundly based confidence about the world of work
- ★ what to do to benefit from opportunities and achieve your own aspirations.

## Taking stock

In working life, employers typically use PDP processes such as staff reviews or appraisals. When conducted well, employees are supported in pausing to take stock of their work targets, career goals, training and development needs. This contributes to personal and business planning for the months or years ahead.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education in England advocated similar processes for students at every level and stage of study. This was to help students to prepare for working life and, if already employed, make better use of opportunities available to them. The QAA stressed the importance of PDP as:

Structured and supported processes to develop the capacity of individuals to reflect upon their learning and achievement, and to plan for their own personal education and development. (QAA, 2000)

Such reflection and planning are most effective when undertaken regularly and over time – because we, our circumstances and the world around us are changing all the time. It is also useful to pause occasionally to check that we still want the same things, are on track with our plans, and to recognise what we have accomplished so far.

## Guiding your destiny

However much others might take an interest in you, your studies and your future, ultimately it is up to you to make things happen. That might seem daunting, but it can also be reassuring – you can take charge and make a difference. PDP can be energising if staged thoughtfully, over time, as part of a planned process. PDP helps you to:

- ★ structure your thinking
- ★ steer your investigations
- ★ make the right decisions
- ★ clarify your direction and goals
- ★ formulate plans to guide your choices and actions.

## A creative process



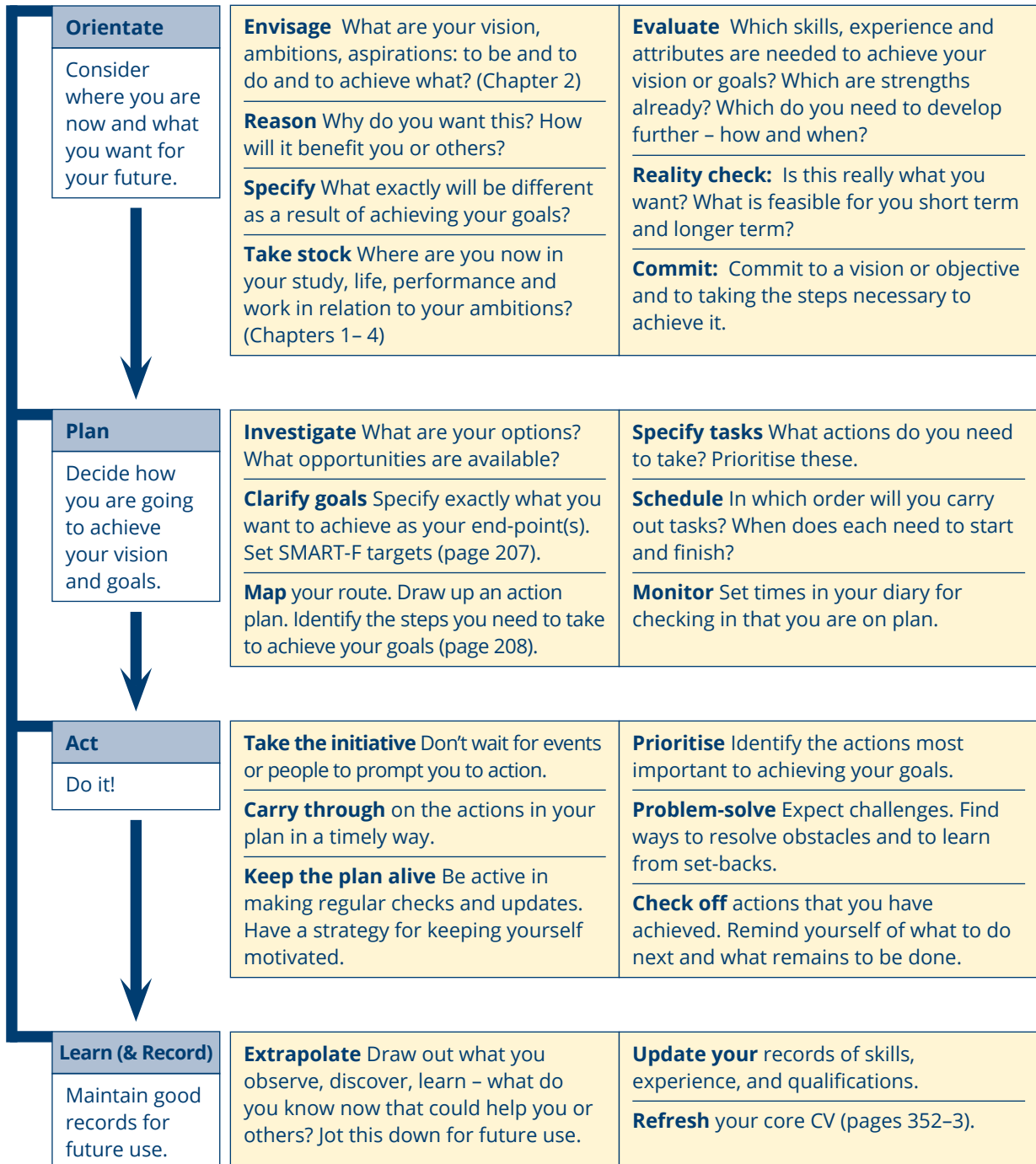
*A journey of exploration and discovery*

PDP is a creative process, requiring time, curiosity, enquiry, toying with ideas, looking for inspiration, taking risks, learning new skills, building strengths, trial and error, discussion, false starts, rethinking, and even soul searching. The more you put in, the more you get out. Key steps in that process are outlined on page 6.

# PDP as a process

PDP is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. This process is mapped below (see also page 202). The process can involve returning to any stage at any time, if needed.

## Reflect (think through ...)



# Personal development involves ...

## Aspiring for your future

Whether you have clearly formed goals or vague ideas about how you want to live your life, your aspirations help to motivate and guide you. Feel free to dream – for now, for when your course is over, for the long-term. Then consider how to turn your dreams into reality. Chapter 2 investigates this further.

I'm prepared to go vegan if you give me a job in textiles



## Bringing the right 'mindset'

Attitude is key to PDP. That means:

- ★ being determined to achieve what you set out to do
- ★ recognising what you can do already – and applying what you learnt from past success
- ★ taking setbacks in your stride so they don't deter you from succeeding in the long term
- ★ finding ways of using setbacks to good advantage – looking for positive aspects and learning from mistakes so that they benefit you in the future
- ★ persisting if you haven't achieved your goals – yet. Emphasise that word 'yet' to yourself.

## Believing in yourself

Self-belief is essential. It is reasonable to assume there will be setbacks and disappointments along the way. At such times, you have to be able to inspire yourself to keep going – and to keep re-igniting your self-belief.

Whether progressing in a career, building a business or generally in life, you need others to put their faith in you – in your skills, attitudes, values. If you want others to believe in you, you must believe in yourself, too. That can mean:

- ★ giving yourself sufficient time to think and achieve
- ★ providing yourself with opportunities
- ★ finding the right support and guidance
- ★ being a good guide to yourself and following your own best advice
- ★ grounding your self-belief, by taking action and demonstrating your potential to yourself.

## Increased self-awareness

Self-knowledge is invaluable to shaping your aspirations and to ensuring that you have a realistic plan in place to achieve your aims. It might seem self-indulgent or unnecessary to put time aside to think about yourself. However, happiness, contentment and a sense of fulfilment benefit from such introspection – and you are likely to make useful, unexpected self-discoveries, too.

Self-awareness helps in making decisions about:

- ★ the right study and work choices
- ★ how best to use your time now
- ★ which opportunities to pursue
- ★ how to cope with feelings, emotions, stress and the multiple demands on your time
- ★ managing relationships and interactions with others that affect life, study and work.

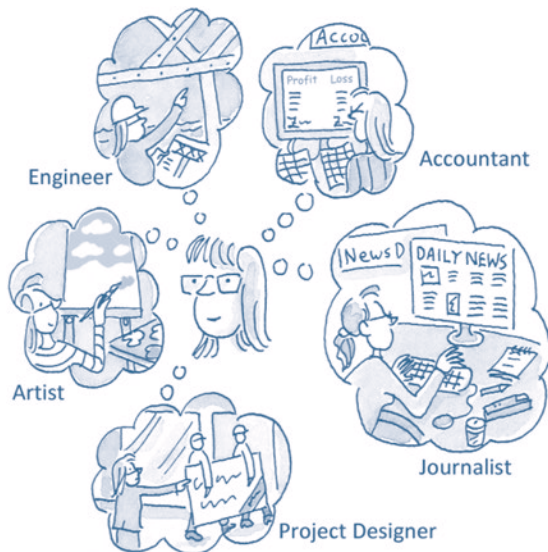
## Thinking things through

It makes sense to think in depth about questions that affect your life and future, such as:

- ★ what kind of life you are leading and where you are heading
- ★ how you became the person you are today and what you can do or change in order to be the person you want to be
- ★ the consequences and implications of your thoughts, habits and actions – and how these either take you forward or hold you back.

Chapter 12 looks at this in more detail.

## Decision-making



Whatever decisions we make, day by day and longer term, these have consequences, the full impact of which won't be evident for many years. Ideally, we will be pleased with the decisions we made, yet inevitably we will make mistakes, miss chances, make life harder than it need be.

That is where the PDP process can be of value. It provides space to pause and to:

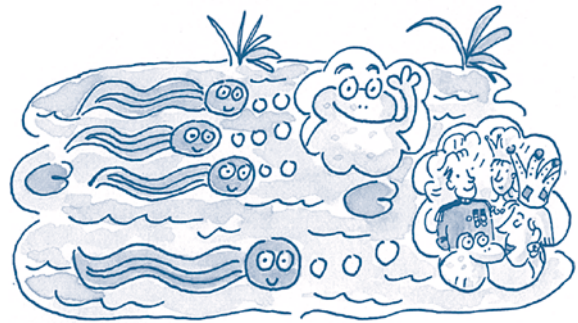
- ★ evaluate the impact of past decisions
- ★ weigh up costs and benefits of choices in the light of experience and investigations
- ★ recognise and manage pressures from others to pursue a future you might not really want
- ★ manage risks sensibly.

## Active investigation

- ★ Finding out all there is to know about the life and career options available to you
- ★ Researching the many spin-off careers and opportunities that your qualifications could open up for you – including the less obvious
- ★ Being aware of alternatives – in case the realities of particular jobs, roles or fields of works don't live up to your expectations.

There are rich resources available to help with this – online, through careers services, recruitment agencies and your institution.

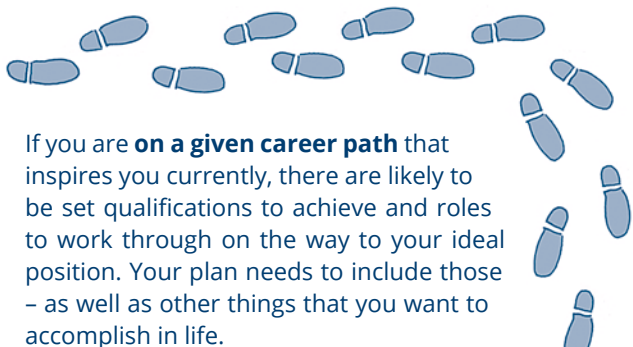
## Being open to possibilities



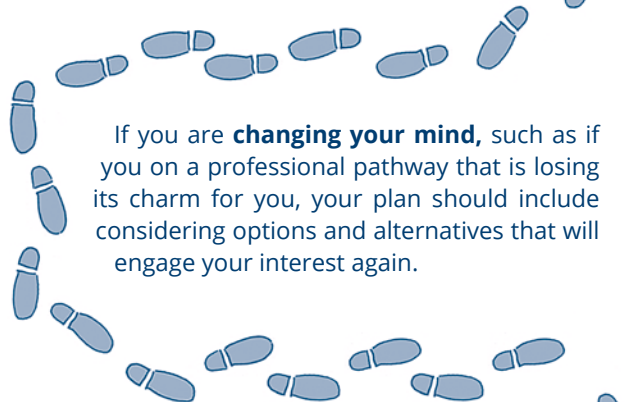
- ★ Recognising possibilities
- ★ Creating opportunities
- ★ Seizing opportunities as they arise
- ★ Trying out new things
- ★ Taking the trouble to ask
- ★ Seeking out advice
- ★ Planning for the medium and longer term
- ★ Being flexible, adaptable and resilient in the face of changing circumstances.

## Devising a personal path

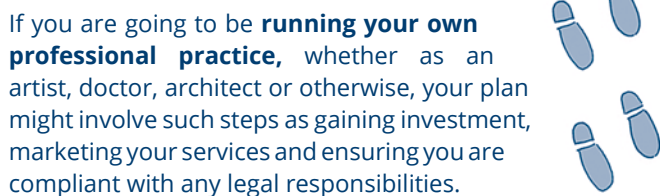
As the name suggests, personal development planning involves formulating some kind of plan, strategy or general route towards achieving our aims. The nature of this is highly individual, and will change over time.



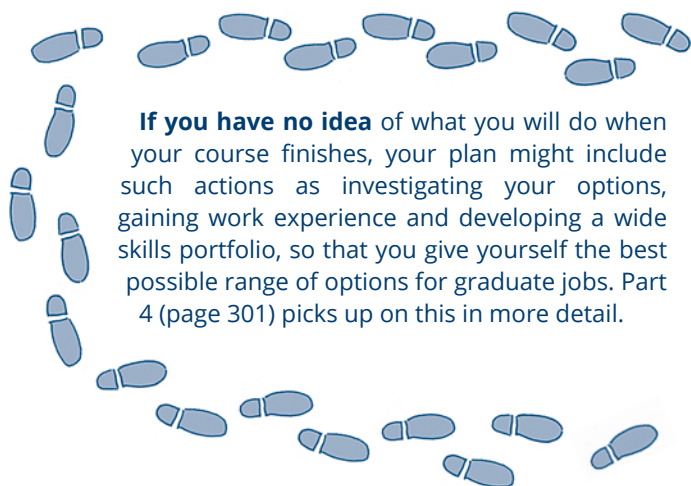
If you are **on a given career path** that inspires you currently, there are likely to be set qualifications to achieve and roles to work through on the way to your ideal position. Your plan needs to include those – as well as other things that you want to accomplish in life.



If you are **changing your mind**, such as if you on a professional pathway that is losing its charm for you, your plan should include considering options and alternatives that will engage your interest again.



If you are going to be **running your own professional practice**, whether as an artist, doctor, architect or otherwise, your plan might involve such steps as gaining investment, marketing your services and ensuring you are compliant with any legal responsibilities.



**If you have no idea** of what you will do when your course finishes, your plan might include such actions as investigating your options, gaining work experience and developing a wide skills portfolio, so that you give yourself the best possible range of options for graduate jobs. Part 4 (page 301) picks up on this in more detail.

## Just 'being' — with mindful awareness

We tend to spend most of our time distracted by such things as work, social media, socialising, entertainment and almost anything apart from just sitting quietly with ourselves. That makes it more difficult to know ourselves – and to recognise the full significance of what occurs to us and around us.



*Create space for insights to arise*

Whilst PDP involves a dynamic process of reflection, planning and action, it also benefits from quiet time where we are not constantly chasing after answers and results. Time spent in stillness and quiet allows for different kinds of thoughts to emerge. These can give us unexpected insights into ourselves and our situation.

Aim to find a healthy balance between driving yourself to achieve your goals, and leading a healthy, fulfilling life in the current moment. You can find out more about this in Cottrell (2018).

# Why PDP matters for students

## More than just a degree

When students complete their qualification, they usually have a good understanding of their academic subject and have developed skills associated with their course. This is good, but is only part of the story.

Being at university or college provides opportunities to mix with a wide range of people, to take part in new activities, to manage positions of responsibility and to broaden your outlook. Most of these opportunities lie outside of the taught curriculum although, increasingly, courses are designed to enhance personal and professional development and increase employability and work readiness. Students are being encouraged to adopt a broad-based approach that uses their time and the curriculum imaginatively.

## Why is PDP actively encouraged for students?

Typically, students regard their study as a passport to a better future – such as through a graduate job, career change or promotion. Such jobs require qualities and skills that take time, support and good planning to develop. Attributes and soft skills such as confidence, teamwork, leadership and task management cannot be acquired suddenly at the last minute or in isolation. In the past, many graduates were disappointed that they were not better prepared for time after study. Employers have long complained about students' lack of work-readiness. It has been recognised that students need structured opportunities to think about, and prepare for, their future.

## Can you really plan for an unknown future?

Whilst you can't control the future – the unexpected will happen – you can prepare for likely eventualities. You can develop skills and attributes relevant to a wide range of contexts, opening up better life chances and enabling better decision-making.

## Preparing for graduate jobs

PDP is about preparing now towards the kind of employment you will want in the future – whether that is working for yourself or others. It can encompass a wide range of soul-searching, investigating, experimenting, decision-making, planning, practising and learning from experience, as well as keeping personal records for future use.

## Achieving academically

Usually, students want to gain the best possible academic outcomes for their time as a student. This is for their own satisfaction, and because employers often require a high Grade Point Average (GPA) or degree classification.

The PDP process can help you achieve better academically as it helps you to understand more about what hinders or enhances your performance. In addition, being clearer about where your studies might lead you later on can give a sense of purpose, assisting motivation.



## PDP: what students say



### My promotion – and my attitude!

I thought 'personal development planning' was a bit of a mouthful, so I just ignored it. That is a bit of a habit with me. Then, when I went for promotion at work, they asked me about my 'commitment' to my personal and professional development. I couldn't think of what to say. I even forgot to mention I was doing a qualification at university. I hadn't thought about how I was already using what I learnt at Uni in my job. My careers adviser has helped me to think about how to plan and prepare for promotion. He asked me whether my general attitude to things that sound complicated or difficult was helpful – which it obviously isn't ... so I'm working on it!

### A 'return on my investment'

I have a huge loan for my study so I want a good job, a well paid job ... I told my personal tutor and she told me to make sure my CV looks outstanding and to put in more study hours so I get a good degree – both count. Basically, you have to think how you will look well-rounded and interesting to employers many years from now. So, I have really gone for it, like it is a full time job. One thing is ... I do a lot of organising of events and entertainment for senior citizens, and fund-raising for it as well. It takes up a lot of time but actually is quite a lot of fun and you learn a lot about managing events, marketing, and persuading people to get involved. I found out so much I wouldn't have picked up just by studying. I am more confident about getting on with people. I have also changed a lot. I do think I will have a lot of good experience to talk about when I apply for jobs.



### Start early – or miss the chance

My tutor said: 'It really is up to you. Plan now for your future.' I thought 'OK – soon' and did nothing about it. Now I am in my final year, applying for jobs like everyone else ... and I see why I should have started preparing earlier. I feel I have wasted a lot of time so I am trying to catch up quickly. The jobs I am most interested in are overseas. If I had realised this earlier, I would have started to learn another language. I could have done that using my electives for three years ...

### A rounded personal profile

To be honest, I only wanted a degree so I could get a better job. I picked up very quickly that you have to build your personal profile from day 1. I did this by getting involved with the student union. I became a course 'rep' and got a lot of training for this. I do kayaking and rowing. I do 'Global Studies' so I can talk about more than just my course (psychology). I competed in an enterprise prize ... I helped a project on science for school kids ... I can pretty much tick every box. The career I want is hard to get into without a really good degree. I am not all that strong academically so I am trying to pick up as much as I can about good study skills so I get better grades.



### On the right course?

I wasn't sure what 'PDP' was and it seemed a bit of a distraction from my study. Anyway, we had to do some careers sessions as part of a skills module in the first term. I went to talk to a careers adviser and found out that I was doing the wrong course for the jobs I want. So that was a bit of a wake-up call ... Luckily, I was able to negotiate a change of study units. It was hard work catching up but if I pass these units, I can transfer next year to the course I need. It was scary how close I came to wasting three years of study.

## PDP: what graduates say

### Least wanted, most valued

The last thing I ever really wanted to do was open the PDP file (which I had labelled 'Me'). I didn't want to think about my career or waste time 'navel gazing'. I didn't want to think about 'work'. I didn't want to 'reflect' either. If my tutors hadn't made this a compulsory part of the course so I couldn't escape it, I am sure I would never have bothered.

Looking back, I think this was because, even though I was studying a professional course in petrology, I didn't have any idea what I really wanted to do after Uni. But then one day (maybe I had been reflecting!) it struck me that it was ridiculous to feel it wasn't worth spending time thinking about myself and my life so I started to take it more seriously.

The careers and PDP sessions got me doing things to put into my CV, and just looking at life differently. They were probably the most useful part of the course because without them, I doubt I would have got a place on the graduate programme that led to my first job.

**Rahan, Operations Manager, SME**

### Checking out the 'dream' ...

All the way through school, I thought I was going to do a medical degree. I had a rather exalted view of what I thought that meant. When I found out more about the job, I couldn't see me living that kind of life. I am not good without sleep; when I realised that I would have to live for many years on 100-hour working weeks and constantly interrupted sleep, that put me off. I could see myself as a consultant, but not as a junior doctor. I didn't know then what I would do – but I was glad I found out early in my degree and could change my career path. I didn't at that point think that the volunteering work I did as a student would lead to a good career in the voluntary sector.

**Henry, CEO, voluntary sector**

### Breadth of skills and knowledge

I was lucky because the year I started my engineering degree in the States, they gave us the option of combining this with business and professional studies. I took that option and it was the best decision. It was exactly what this company was looking for so it landed me my first job and then, eventually, this line of work. I think it's great when graduates can think beyond just one subject and can converse intelligently with colleagues from all fields.

**Brett, Senior Recruitment Officer, large international company**

### Acting like a professional

I work in the health sector. Continual development is an integral part of what it means to be a professional here and for career advancement. It is expected that we reflect on our working practice. With technology changing the nature of our work so rapidly and research opening up new areas of knowledge and understanding, it is unthinkable that we could do our jobs without constant development. That means finding the time, making choices and planning ahead. I am grateful that my course insisted on PDP and reflection so I was used to them when I started work.

**Rosa, Nurse Manager**

### Challenge fixed career views

I already had a job working as a children's care assistant. I thought, as I was a mother, and knew about children and had experience in that line of work, that was my life planned out. That was why I didn't go to any careers sessions in the first two years – I was sure it would be pointless. Then we studied juvenile offending and I started to become interested in that, especially the legal aspects. I gradually became interested in being a lawyer. This spurred me to study harder so I could get onto a post-graduate course. As a lawyer, professional development is an essential part of my job.

**Sofia, family lawyer**

# PDP in employment

In work contexts, personal development planning is more likely to be organised to align self-development with business and organisational objectives. This can work to the mutual benefit of the individual and the organisation.

The individual can learn new skills and gain experiences that assist with effectiveness in their role and/or with career progression

The organisation benefits when their employees update and extend their skills.

It also means they are in a better position to promote staff internally, rather than recruiting new, untested staff.

## Identifying PDP at work

In the workplace, PDP is usually tied into an annual process of appraisal, staff review or equivalent. It might be referred to by other names such as:

- ★ Professional Development
- ★ Continuous Professional Development (CPD)
- ★ Employee Development Planning.

## PDP in work contexts

The general process in the workplace is usually similar to that outlined on page 6 above: identifying a vision or goals, evaluating current strengths and developmental needs, setting SMART targets, clarifying when and how you will undertake training and development, keeping records, and reflecting on learning.

- ★ It is usually obligatory to undertake CPD of some kind each year for the employer and/or to maintain professional status.
- ★ It is likely you will be asked for a rationale for the goals and training you identify, and to explain how these benefit the company.
- ★ Development and training are usually funded by the employer, so at the end of the year, you will be asked to account for how these helped you perform better in your role during the year or how they will benefit you in the year ahead.

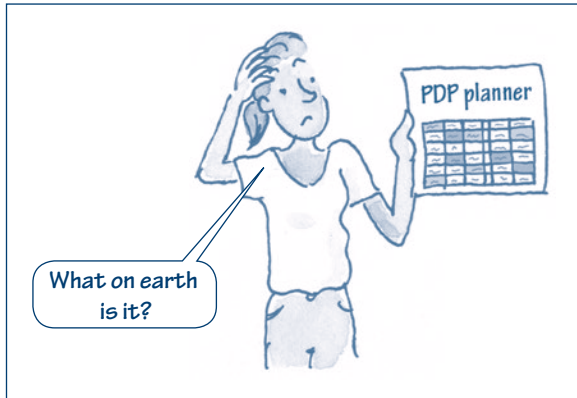
## Using student PDP at work

If you already work for an organisation, you may be asked to undertake annual reviews, set goals and identify developmental targets in the workplace. In addition, you might be asked to produce PDP plans, a Higher Education Achievement Report, Progress file, Portfolio or equivalent for your college or university. Depending on your job, you might be able to make good use of PDP undertaken as a student whilst at work. For example:

- 1 In your workplace appraisal/review, consider whether it will benefit you to list the skills, qualifications, knowledge and experience gained on your course or as part of other student-related activity.
- 2 If you do this, give specific examples of how these are of benefit in your work role.
- 3 If relevant, clarify to your employer how your course and your development as a student, as well as your work-based learning, have prepared you for taking on greater responsibility in the workplace.
- 4 Be specific about how this would help you in more senior roles, so that they can see how you are preparing for promotion.
- 5 Use this conversation to ask about opportunities that might arise in the near future for promotion – or for undertaking work-based development opportunities that would assist future promotion.
- 6 If your course already benefits your work, check whether this warrants any promotion or pay-rise whilst you are still studying on it.

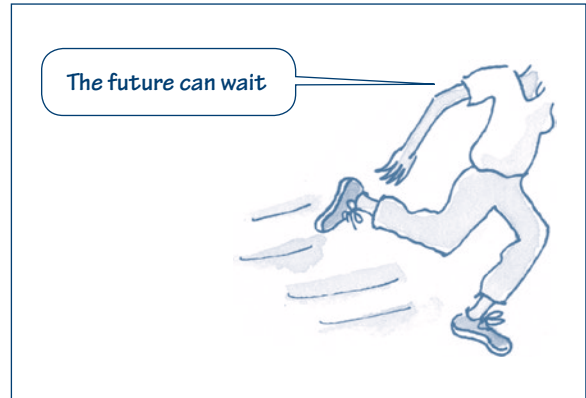
# Managing the challenges

Focusing on your own development should be of evident value and interest, but PDP is not without its challenges. Many people find it hard to get started or to give it the time it needs. There are many good reasons for this, some of which are listed below. Consider which are most relevant for you .



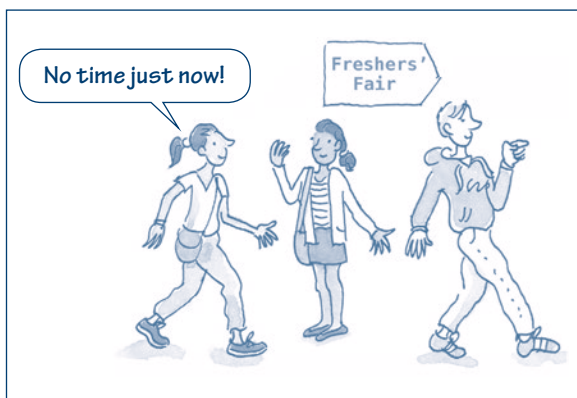
## 1 I am not clear what it is

Personal development planning, or PDP, can sound rather vague or abstract. Like many things, it gets easier with practice and familiarity. It is worth noting that for many job applications, you will be asked to demonstrate commitment to ongoing personal development. This also forms part of your annual appraisal in most jobs.



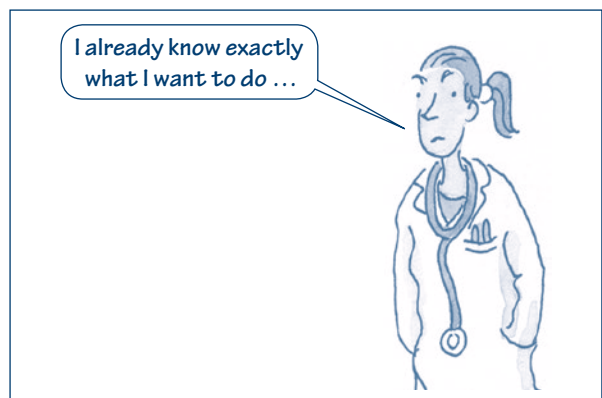
## 2 It's too early for me to think about it

It can seem as if the end of college is a long way off, and that career planning can wait until your final year, or even until after you have finished your course. It might feel difficult to imagine what you would want to do in several years' time. If so, you are all the more likely to benefit from a few visits to the Careers Service as soon as possible.



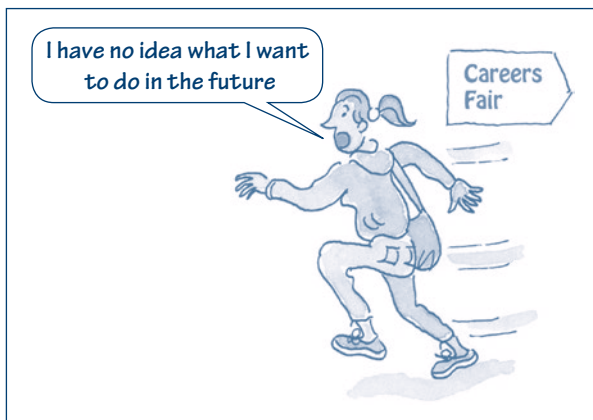
## 3 I am too busy

There can be many demands on our time which appear more urgent to deal with right now. Even with good intentions, it is easy to keep putting off the moment for thinking about your future. If this is true of you, schedule time into your planner at least once a month where you focus just on you and your future.



## 4 I don't need it

If you are already in a profession or on a particular career route, it might feel unnecessary to think about planning how to advance on your chosen career path, or to consider other possible careers. However, be wary of focusing too much on a single career route without investigating other options. You might find there is something that suits you much better.



**5 Why bother before I make my mind up what I want to do?**

If we don't have a clear direction, it can seem pointless, or even difficult, to think about the future. However, personal planning is about much more than simply heading down a single career path. It is more of a journey of discovery and about opening up possibilities for yourself.

**6 I can rush through it at some point**

Personal planning can sound like the easy option that can be put aside whilst you focus on your 'real' work. However, personal planning is about making time to think about you and your likely journey through life. It merits time. The more that people put into the process, the more they tend to value it.



**7 I don't know where to start - so I don't**

If you put off thinking about your future because you don't have an obvious starting point, rest assured that you are not alone. It can feel hard to get started. Generally, once you engage with the process, it becomes easier. There isn't a 'right place' to start. This chapter provides some ways for getting going.

## Reflection



### Attitude to personal planning

- ★ How, if at all, do the scenarios above match your own thoughts about personal planning?
- ★ Where do the challenges lie for you in undertaking PDP?

### Good places to start

Identifying potential benefits (pages 16–17)

Clarifying your needs (pages 18–24)

Deciding a few priorities (pages 19–20)

Identifying opportunities (pages 26–7)

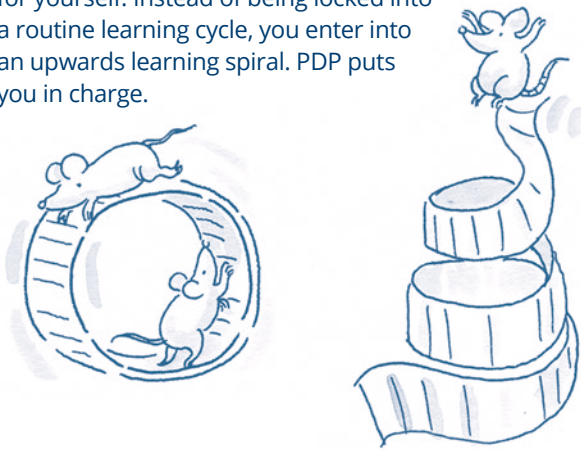
Making a commitment (page 25)

# Identify personal benefits of PDP

Although it is easy to recognise PDP as potentially useful, it is harder to turn that recognition into action and into sustained good habits. One way of maintaining momentum is by sharpening your awareness of the benefits to you – and reminding yourself of these periodically.

## An upwards spiral

When undertaken in supported and structured ways, PDP gives you a much deeper understanding of your performance. You develop abilities in evaluating this for yourself. Instead of being locked into a routine learning cycle, you enter into an upwards learning spiral. PDP puts you in charge.



## Benefits to me?

Read through the potential benefits of PDP listed below. Identify  any that you consider could be relevant to you. If there are others that are relevant to you and not on these lists, make a note of them.

### 1 Benefits to my study

Potential benefits of PDP for my studies are:

- providing a clearer focus for my academic work
- better understanding of the relative importance of academic achievement to future success
- more control over my personal motivation – and the ability to direct this to achieve my goals
- enhanced skills in self-management
- greater independence and confidence gained through a better understanding of how to improve my performance
- more enjoyment and less stress from my academic studies as I become consciously skilled

- greater awareness of how to apply what I have learnt to new problems and contexts
- reflective, strategic, analytical and creative thinking skills that strengthen academic performance
- greater clarity about how my academic studies can be made relevant to future life and/or work.

## Others relevant to me?

PDP can have a positive impact on your academic achievement, especially when combined with attention to improving study skills relevant to the context of higher education. These are addressed in detail in companion texts by Stella Cottrell, such as *The Study Skills Handbook*, 5th edn (2019) and *Critical Thinking Skills*, 3rd edn (2017).

### 2 Benefits to my career/ professional life

Potential benefits of PDP for my career, work ambitions and/or professional life are:

- a better understanding of what to do to achieve my career or work ambitions longer term
- strategies for improving personal performance that could be applied to in working life
- a better sense of the life and work I want
- being better informed about work and career options open to me
- improved decision-making
- being better prepared for undertaking work place appraisals or reviews

- more confidence in the choices I make
- confidence in the skills, qualities and attributes I bring to the career of my choice
- being in a better position to compete for jobs and to discuss my skills with employers
- the positive attitudes, creative thinking and problem-solving approaches associated with successful professional life.

### Others relevant to me?

### 3 Benefits to personal life

Potential benefits of PDP for my personal life are:

- gaining a better understanding of myself and how I 'tick'
- being in a better position to make appropriate choices to meet my life aspirations
- gaining a better sense of myself as an individual
- feeling I am more in control of my own destiny
- greater awareness of my needs and how to meet these
- greater awareness of the unique contribution I can make
- developing a positive, forward-looking approach
- developing skills such as reflection, strategic thinking, self-direction and self-evaluation, useful in most life contexts.

### Others relevant to me?

#### Activity



#### Keeping benefits in focus

- ➔ Browse through the benefits you identified above. Decide which are most important to you.
- ➔ Jot down in your own words why these are meaningful for you. What difference will these make to your life?
- ➔ Consider how you will keep these benefits 'live' for you. For example, you could keep a list in your diary, planner, as a screen saver or on your mirror. Use this to help you stay motivated.

#### What PDP do I want/need?

The activities on the following pages enable you to evaluate:

- ★ whether you need PDP and where to focus
- ★ your current priorities for PDP

# Do I need PDP? Self-evaluation

Rate your responses to the following statements. Note that *strongly agree* carries no score.

**Rating:** 4 = *strongly agree* 3 = *agree* 2 = *sort of agree* 1 = *disagree* 0 = *strongly disagree*

Statement	Rating
1 I am certain that I can keep myself motivated towards achieving my degree	4 3 2 1 0
2 I am very clear what my goals are for the next seven years	4 3 2 1 0
3 I am confident that I have an excellent plan in place for achieving my goals	4 3 2 1 0
4 I am very clear how my degree fits into my life plans	4 3 2 1 0
5 I am clear what employers are looking for	4 3 2 1 0
6 I can demonstrate that I have the skills and attributes employers are looking for	4 3 2 1 0
7 I am very clear about the importance of reflective activity to professional life	4 3 2 1 0
8 I am confident in undertaking structured reflection without guidelines	4 3 2 1 0
9 I am confident that I can develop an effective strategy to meet most circumstances	4 3 2 1 0
10 I am confident that I can set well-formed goals and/or targets	4 3 2 1 0
11 I have a clear understanding of how to evaluate my own performance	4 3 2 1 0
12 I am confident that I have good 'emotional intelligence'	4 3 2 1 0
13 I am confident that I know how to improve my performance in most circumstances	4 3 2 1 0
14 I know how to apply my expertise and skills in different contexts, beyond study	4 3 2 1 0
15 I am confident that I can see myself as others see me	4 3 2 1 0
16 I am confident that I have effective listening skills	4 3 2 1 0
17 I am an assertive person	4 3 2 1 0
18 I am a good 'self-starter'; I get on with tasks without being asked or directed	4 3 2 1 0
19 I am clear how I can make the most effective contributions to team work	4 3 2 1 0
20 I am confident at problem-solving	4 3 2 1 0
21 I am confident about assuming the lead and exercising effective leadership	4 3 2 1 0
22 I am confident that I will take a creative approach to most tasks/ problem-solving	4 3 2 1 0
23 I am confident I can make excellent job applications	4 3 2 1 0
24 I have developed useful, varied networks that can support and help me	4 3 2 1 0
25 I maintain a relevant, useful set of records to support my employability	4 3 2 1 0
<b>Add up your score out of 100</b>	<b>Total</b>

Available on the companion site:  
[www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)



Use your ratings to guide you on where to focus your efforts for PDP. If your score is anything less than 100, then there is room for development – and more so if your score is low. Your PDP needs to change over time, as circumstances change.

# What are my PDP priorities?

★ **Column A:** Identify aspects of personal development important to you at present. Rate between 5 and 0, giving 5 for *very important* and 0 for *not important at all*.

★ **Column B:** Consider how essential it is to develop this aspect soon. Rate between 5 and 0, giving 5 for *very essential* and 0 for *not essential at all*.

★ **Column C:** Add scores in A and B to gain an idea of where your priorities lie.

Available on the companion site: [www.macmillanhe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanhe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)



Aspects I want to develop further I want to ...	A How important is this to me? Rate from 5 to 0	B How essential to develop it now? Rate from 5 to 0	C Priority score Add scores for columns A and B	See Chapter
1 Clarify my vision and goals for my life	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2 and 3
2 Clarify my values	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2
3 Identify sources of inspiration	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2
4 Clarify what 'success' means to me	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2
5 Clarify what I want to achieve from university	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2
6 Strengthen my motivation	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2 and 5
7 Manage my online personal profile, relevant to employment	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		15
8 Formulate a rounded personal development action plan	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		1 and 9
9 Understand what reflection is about	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2
10 Develop a reflective journal	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		8 and wherever you see 
11 Write up my reflections well (for assessment)	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		8 and 12
12 Develop a strategy for improving performance	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		3 and 4
13 Make sense of my life story	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		3
14 Understand the effect of my personal choices	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		3
15 Gain a sense of my strengths and areas for improvement	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2, 3, 4, 5, 12 and 15
16 Make better use of my own expertise	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		3 and 12

<b>Aspects I want to develop further I want to ...</b>	<b>A How important is this to me? Rate from 5 to 0</b>	<b>B How essential to develop it now? Rate from 5 to 0</b>	<b>C Priority score Add scores for columns A and B</b>	<b>See Chapter</b>
17 Understand my personal performance profile and preferences	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		4
18 Identify personal qualities	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2 and 5
19 Know how to make SWOT and TOWS analyses	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		9
20 Improve my time management	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		5
21 Develop a more constructive attitude	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		1, 2, 5 and 9
22 Develop my self-confidence	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2-5
23 Understand more about emotional intelligence	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		5
24 Manage change and uncertainty more effectively	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		5
25 Understand what prevents me from achieving my potential	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		3, 4, 5 and 10
26 Complete tasks more effectively	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		9
27 Improve my problem-solving skills	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		11
28 Know how to set effective targets	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		9
29 Be better at getting down to tasks	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		9
30 Become a good 'self-starter'	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		9
31 Develop project-management skills	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		9
32 Develop active listening skills	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		6
33 Establish better networks	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		6
34 Develop team work skills	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		7
35 Set up a support group (or action set)	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		11
36 Be better at giving and receiving criticism	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		6

Aspects I want to develop further I want to ...	A How important is this to me? Rate from 5 to 0	B How essential to develop it now? Rate from 5 to 0	C Priority score Add scores for columns A and B	See Chapter
37 Be more assertive	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		6
38 Deal well with difficult people	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		6
39 Develop negotiating skills	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		6
40 Develop leadership skills	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		8
41 Develop creative thinking skills	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		10
42 Use my brain more effectively	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		10
43 Develop skills in applying for jobs	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		13 and 14
44 Keep good personal records for when I apply for jobs	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		15
45 Understand more about what employers are looking for	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		13 and 14
46 Analyse how well my values and behaviours match what employers seek	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		2, 13 and 14
47 Utilise my academic studies better in my workplace	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		13
48 Consider what would be required to set up my own business	5 4 3 2 1 0	5 4 3 2 1 0		13

## Personal priorities for PDP

- ★ Identify the three aspects to which you gave the highest ratings on the table above. If more than three have the same score, choose three that you think will be your most useful starting places.
- ★ Write out these priorities in words that are meaningful to you. Follow up your priorities in the chapters indicated.

You might find it helpful to refer to setting goals and SMART-F targets (page 207) and action planning (page 208). Templates for these to use for PDP can be found on pages 383–6 and the companion site.



## Priorities whilst a student

### What do I want to gain from my time at university/college?

Indicate  those items below that are important to you; use more ticks (✓) for the more important items. Then rate those items you ticked in order of importance (1 for the most important, and so on).

From my time at university I want to:	Important to me? ✓✓✓	Rating	From my time at university I want to:	Important to me? ✓✓✓	Rating
Gain a qualification			Develop a wide range of skills		
Achieve high grades / marks			Work with a wider range of people		
Gain a good degree			Develop problem-solving skills		
Gain knowledge in my specialism			Develop people skills		
Enhance my thinking ability			Try out new things		
Broaden my mind			Develop a broader set of interests		
Stretch myself intellectually			Do community volunteering		
Know myself better			Gain work experience		
Learn to believe in my own abilities			Make friends		
Gain the confidence to speak in public			Network/make contacts		
Experience student life			Take on positions of responsibility		
Enhance my career opportunities			Other things:		
Be able to get a well-paid job					
Develop technical skills					

# Take a rounded approach to PDP

Taking a rounded approach means considering your personal development from multiple perspectives. This chapter focuses on academic and career development, but other aspects of personal development can impact on your success in those areas and on your broader happiness and well-being. It is wise to give thought to some or all of these other aspects as doing so helps to ensure that your goals are well-grounded and feasible.



## Spiritual

Here, 'spiritual' refers to personal growth and/or the ability to be moved by a sense of something greater than just yourself – such as beauty in the landscape, people's capacity for kindness, or responsibility towards future generations. It can contribute to a sense of identity, community, connectedness, values, purpose and well-being. This can energise and motivate you, enabling you to achieve more than you thought possible. Development on a spiritual plane can mean finding the time and the openness of mind to connect more with the world around you: the environment, a cause, a philosophy or religion, art, ideas, music, whatever moves you. See also page 109.



## Emotional

Emotional strength plays a critical role in every facet of life. It is important to be able to respond to events in ways that honour feelings without letting emotions take control. There are many means of developing emotionally, such as:

- ★ becoming more aware of what we feel and how we respond emotionally to events
- ★ taking time to think through and talk about what we are feeling and why
- ★ learning more about what underpins our own and others' emotional responses
- ★ working on personal resilience
- ★ managing our stress levels
- ★ creating opportunities to feel positive.



## Intellectual

As a student, you develop your mind and brain as you study. If your course is specialist, there is value in broadening your knowledge base and experience so that you have a wider range of concepts, understandings and cognitive skills to draw upon. These can help in social and work settings, provide new angles from which to interpret your academic study, and enrich your life.



## Social

Social interaction plays an important role in most aspects of life so social development is of value. Useful routes include associating with a broader range of people; travel; gaining greater cultural competence; being better informed about the issues that affect specific sets of people; understanding more about the needs of different social groups; community-based activities; volunteering and helping others.



## Physical

Your physical well-being affects the energy you can bring to your goals and to every aspect of your life, and your stamina for undertaking what you need to do. Personal development in this regard includes such factors as establishing a good sleep routine, having good nutrition, increasing personal fitness, being able to relax, and taking good care of your health.



# Take a rounded approach to PDP

Taking a rounded approach is important to PDP as this helps us to:

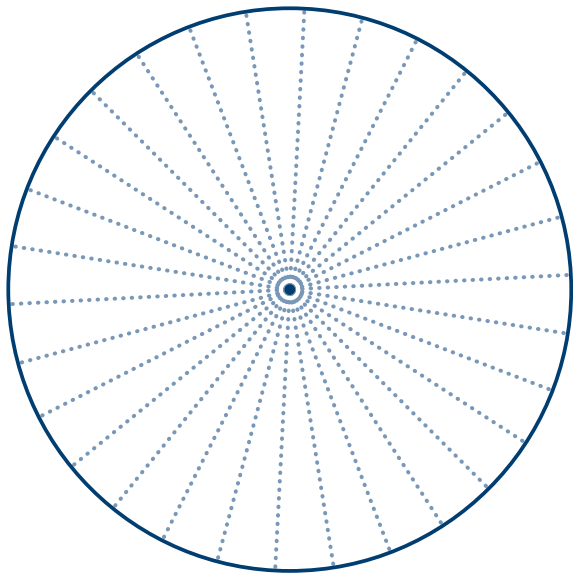
- ★ ensure health, mental health and well-being
- ★ sustain stamina and motivation
- ★ be realistic
- ★ balance current needs with future aspirations.

## Maintaining a balance?

To gain a broad sense of how well you maintain a rounded approach to your different needs.

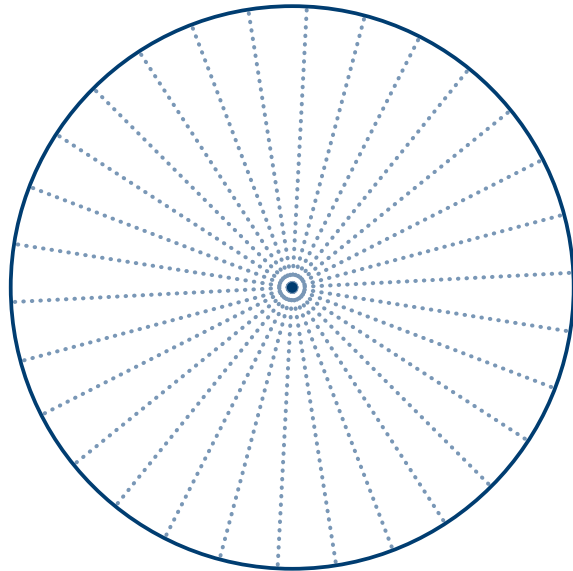
- 1 Consider how much of your time, energy and/or awareness the five aspects outlined on page 23 take up now.
- 2 Create a visual representation of that. Divide the circle below into 5 sections, to indicate the relative balance of these 5 aspects in your life at present. Use a different colour or design to shade each segment.

## Current balance



## Ideal balance

Divide this second circle to indicate the balance between these 5 aspects that you would like to maintain this year.



Compare the two circles, identifying where your current balance matches or differs from your ideal.

### Observation



For the following week, observe how much attention you pay to these five different aspects. Check whether your estimates opposite were accurate. Notice what gets in the way of maintaining your ideal balance.

### Reflection



#### Taking a rounded approach

For the five aspects outlined on page 23 consider:

- ★ How do these varied aspects interact?
- ★ Which would benefit from being included within your overall personal development plan?
- ★ What would be your priority actions for these?
- ★ How might your other goals or plans be affected if you neglect any of these?

# Make the commitment to your PDP

## Activity

### How committed am I to my PDP?



Indicate how strongly you engage with each of the aspects of PDP below by marking an X at the relevant point for you along the line between 'Not at all' and 'A lot'

Aspect	Engagement
	Not at all ..... A lot
Taking my future seriously	.....
Developing my self-awareness	.....
Thinking about what I really want	.....
Actively motivating myself	.....
Giving myself 'pep' talks	.....
Actively searching for inspiration	.....
Putting time into it	.....
Thinking things through	.....
Maintaining a journal (or similar)	.....
Investigating career options	.....
Learning new skills	.....
Looking out for opportunities	.....
Speaking to experts/advisers	.....
Gaining experience	.....
Asking for guidance and help	.....
Building a strong personal profile	.....
Making and updating plans	.....
Checking my plans are on track	.....
Building contacts and networks	.....
Sticking with things I need to do	.....
'Deferring gratification'	.....
Recording achievements	.....

## Commitment

Commitment means making a decision to carry things through – and taking the decision seriously. In working towards a career path or life goal, that can mean investing time and energy working towards outcomes that are years away. It can mean 'deferring gratification' – putting aside things you want now in order to achieve longer term goals.

It is easier to follow through on your commitment to your PDP if you:

- ★ set PDP goals that really matter
- ★ set realistic short-term targets
- ★ monitor your progress frequently to keep yourself on track
- ★ celebrate interim successes
- ★ actively look for ways to enjoy whatever you undertake
- ★ value the PDP process for the insights you gain along the way.

## Reflection



### Commitment to PDP

Using your responses opposite, decide whether these show a level of active engagement that indicates strong commitment to your PDP.

## Next Steps

Follow up initial thoughts about your PDP needs and interests by considering your vision of success in more depth in chapter 2.

If you are ready to formulate your PDP action plan, see pages 207–8 and 383–5.

# Take and make opportunities

Whilst you are a student or recent graduate, there are more opportunities open to you than at any other time, usually at no cost. Many of these will be arranged on campus or via your college, university or student union.

## Seize the chance



Employers will expect this

When you apply for jobs, employers will be aware that you had great opportunities open to you. How you used these will tell them a lot about you.



Great for building your CV

- ★ Develop new skills
- ★ Learn new things
- ★ Gain a range of experience
- ★ Demonstrate social responsibility



Good for networking

- ★ Mix with a wider range of people
- ★ Consider new perspectives
- ★ Develop awareness through exposure to more cultures, backgrounds and languages
- ★ Enjoy making friends from a wider pool



Amaze yourself

- ★ Try out things you wouldn't usually consider
- ★ Test your limits
- ★ Take a lead in organising activities and networks
- ★ Discover a new side to yourself

## Find out what is available

There are many avenues for finding out about the opportunities open to you. Some are listed below. Check  these when you have considered what they can offer you.

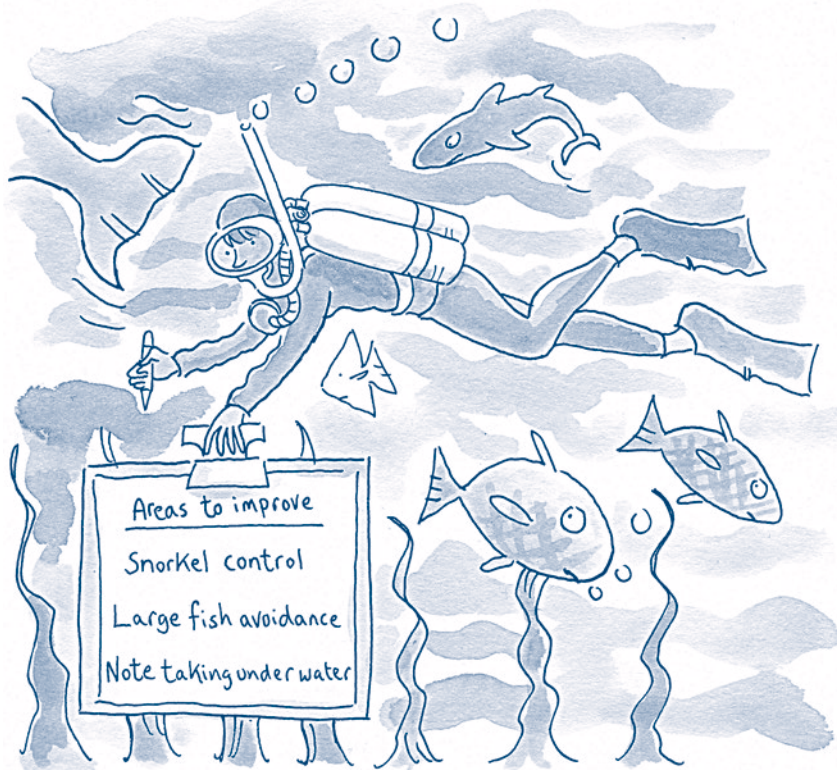
- Freshers' Fair (even if you are not a first year)
- Students Union, Guild or equivalent
- Careers Service
- Student Services
- Voluntary groups/organisations/charities
- Citizens Advice Bureau or equivalent
- Community centres and organisations
- International office at Uni/College
- British Council/international organisations
- Job clubs/Job Centre/employment agencies
- Local newspapers

## Identify opportunities ...

Indicate  which of these opportunities are available. Highlight those you want to follow up.

## Work-related opportunities

- Entrepreneurship courses or awards
- Being a course rep
- Roles in the student union or student clubs
- Contributing to a student magazine or radio
- Mentoring/coaching in local schools
- Setting up a club or support group
- Taking part in activities in the local community
- Projects for employers
- Voluntary work
- Employer talks and skills sessions
- Local part-time jobs
- Jobs available at the university/college
- Industrial or other work placements
- Work placements overseas
- Internships (for work or research)



Jamila's efforts at personal development knew no bounds

## Opportunities through the curriculum

- Credit-bearing PDP/career-planning modules
- Credit for work experience
- Credit for work-based projects
- Credit for voluntary work
- Training and credit for mentoring others
- Skills development built into the curriculum
- 'Electives', 'discovery' or 'venture' modules outside of the main subject, to broaden outlook and experience
- Time studying or working abroad

## Opportunities for advice and guidance

- Helpdesks and/or information zones
- Tutorials/personal tutor meetings
- Guidance about making academic choices
- Careers information, advice and guidance
- Support for study skills
- Facilities for learning new languages
- Online personal development resources
- Web-based resources and tools
- Student Union, Guild or equivalent

### Want to know more?



Derek Sivers (2010) *Keep your goals to yourself*. [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com) (2 Sept 2010). (Video)

Justin Baek (2019) 'Five tips to make the most of your university experience'. *Timeshighereducation.com* (1 August 2019). (Article)

Danielle Noonan (2019) '7 great jobs you probably haven't considered'. *savesthestudent.org* Updated by Jess Aszkenasy (19 Dec 2019). (Article)

# Review: Taking charge of your future

1

## Take charge of your destiny

Whilst you can't control every aspect of the future, you can steer its direction. Take action to increase your life choices, your ability to cope with whatever arises, and to achieve your ambitions.

2

## Go on a journey of discovery: get to know yourself

Use the PDP process to enjoy learning more about yourself in diverse contexts. Be prepared to experiment and try out new things so that you learn more about your own interests, limits and potential.

3

## Develop the habits of reflection and self-evaluation

Use these to keep in touch with what is relevant to you, your life and your ambitions – and to make objective assessments of what you need to do in order to achieve what matters to you.

4

## Recognise what PDP involves

Appreciate the varied aspects of the process, from deciding your personal aspirations and bringing the right mind-set through to setting goals and planning a route to achieve these.

5

## Keep your PDP relevant to you

Decide what really matters to you, whether for study, work and life more generally. Use your insights to identify a well-rounded approach and goals that are meaningful to you.

6

## Take on the challenges

Become aware of potential challenges to maintaining PDP so that these do not throw you off course. Consider how you will work through the more obvious challenges that could arise.

7

## Identify the benefits

Think through all the potential benefits of planning towards your future. Identify those that matter most to you. Use these to help sustain your motivation in working towards your goals.

8

## Decide your priorities

You can't work effectively on every front at once. Select for development those areas which interest you most and which will have greatest impact.

9

## Make the commitment

Decide to maintain your commitment. Be prepared to put in effort now – to reap greater potential benefits longer term. Value the process for the skills it develops and insights it can bring.

10

## Recognise, create and use opportunities effectively

Use your time as a student wisely; gain the full benefit of the opportunities on offer and create opportunities for yourself. Be able to demonstrate to employers that you are enterprising in your use of opportunities available.

## Chapter 2

# The vision: what does success mean to you?



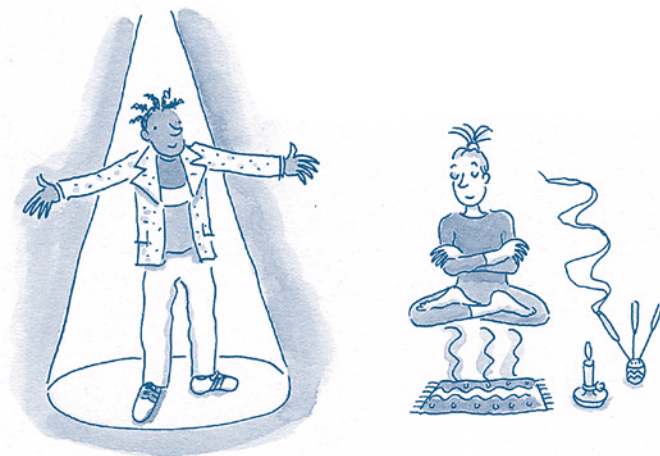
### Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ gain insight into your personal motivation, inspiration and values and consider how these affect your concept of success and the choices you make
- ✓ refine your vision of the future and consider how your studies contribute towards that vision
- ✓ identify your interim goals and targets and incorporate these into a personal action plan for PDP, in line with your vision
- ✓ consider the ingredients that contribute to success – and what these mean for you in working towards your goals
- ✓ stand back and consider whether your plans are congruent – that everything ‘makes sense’.

### Introduction

Everybody wants to be successful – yet we each have a distinct view of what ‘success’ means. It might be winning awards, gaining qualifications, entering a profession, starring on stage, creating great art or making a difference to other people’s lives. For some, it means becoming President or running a multinational company. For others, it is about good friendships, relationships, or leading a happy, healthy and fulfilling life.



*Success means different things to different people*

Our concept of personal success is open to change. This is especially true when in higher education. Typically, this is a time of transition – between school and more independence, or between an old job and a new career or role. It is a time rich with potential: new experiences, ideas, connections, opportunities and perspectives. It is likely that your horizons will be stretched. Your ambitions, values and even your sense of identity might change. All kinds of paths might open up to you.

At such times, it is worth reviewing whether your ambitions and values are also changing, whether you still want the same things, and where your priorities now lie. It is useful to think through what success really means to you, where that idea originated for you, and whether it aligns with your current values, ambitions, choices and behaviours. That should assist you in making sound decisions and motivate you to achieve your own vision of success.

# Defining success

'Success' is a highly subjective concept. Some people define it in terms of objective material criteria: how much money, how high a position in a company, how big a house. However, athletes can gain world records without earning much money. Successful artists often measure their success by how true they are to their

art. For some, what matters is integrity: knowing they did their best or were true to their values and can live with their conscience. It used to be a sign of success to still have your own teeth at an advanced age! In other words, it depends on what is meaningful to you and the people around you.

## Activity



### Spectrums of success – or knowing what you want

Below are pairs of statements, each of which relates to different points on a spectrum of opinion about success. For each statement, mark on the spectrum where you would wish your own success to lie.

For example \_\_\_\_\_ **x** \_\_\_\_\_

Being immensely rich	_____	Having enough to survive
Having high expectations	_____	Being content with little
Being a world expert	_____	Knowing enough to survive
Gaining higher degrees	_____	Passing part of one degree
World fame	_____	Recognition by colleagues and peers
Achieving high goals	_____	Achieving something
Seizing big opportunities	_____	Being aware of some opportunities
Winning on a world stage	_____	Taking part in any activity
A very high profile job	_____	Having some work, paid or unpaid
Being very popular	_____	Having some good friends
Being a world leader	_____	Living responsibly
Importance at a global level	_____	Living a quiet life
Having a close family life	_____	Escaping the family connections
Great material possessions	_____	A strong inner or spiritual life
Saving the planet	_____	Being environmentally aware

**Other things?** Is another aspect of success more important to you than these? If so, what is that?

## Reflection



### Personal concept of success

- ★ What do your responses tell you about your own concept of 'success'?
- ★ If you could be successful in only one area, what would that be? Why is this so important to you?
- ★ What would it mean not to have this in your life?

## Activity



### Successful people

- ➔ Jot down ten people you think of as 'successful'.
- ➔ What makes you think of them as 'successful'?
- ➔ Do these have anything in common?
- ➔ How might your list differ from other people's?  
You could compare your list with those of others.

## Activity



### Symbols of success

- ➔ Jot down the first ten things (or symbols) you associate with success. It could be anything – a yacht, degree certificate, lots of followers, an exhibition, etc.
- ➔ How important is each of those ten items to you personally? Are these things you want very much from life? If so, why is that?
- ➔ How might your list differ from other people's?

## Put it into words

Defining a concept in our own words can be hard to do, as it reveals where vagueness, confusion or inconsistencies might lie in our thinking. However, doing so helps us clarify what we really mean.

## Activity



### Define 'success'

Complete the sentence below to define what you define as 'success'.

**For me, 'success' means ...**

## Define personal success

We can discover that our responses vary when we consider success from various angles – such as specifying what success would mean for us personally at different phases in our life or in diverse contexts. Have a go at jotting down below some initial thoughts about what you would consider success in different areas of your life.

## Activity



### Personal success

Complete the following statements.

#### Study

I would consider myself successful in my academic studies if I:

#### Work

I would consider myself successful in my professional life, career or working life if I:

#### Personal Life

I would consider myself successful in my personal life if I:

#### Other areas of my life

I would consider myself successful if I:

# Values

You will probably already have noticed that thinking about personal success raises questions about values, beliefs and ethics.

## Why values matter

Values help us shape the future we want, affecting our thought processes and responses to everything we see and hear. They inform our assumptions about what is worth doing, saying or having in our lives or who is worth knowing. They serve as a moral compass for what we consider ethical in our own and others' behaviours. Shared values create a sense of belonging, identity, community and common purpose. Strongly held values can be energising, inspiring great acts.

Conversely, if we operate against our values, we are likely to experience self-conflict. When our values clash with those of our friends or employers, it can create difficulties in our relationships or our ability to carry out what we are asked to do or say. It is not always easy to square our desires (such as for material goods) with our ethical values and beliefs. At some point, this can make us challenge what we believed was important and what we want from life.

## Value sets

At any one time, we have attachments, interests and commitments in different spheres of our life:

- ★ **Internal:** our sense of how things should be, what we consider to be important
- ★ **Social:** principles reflected in how we behave towards others; our sense of what kind of behaviours are expected of us by those around us
- ★ **Societal:** such as national, cultural or professional expectations of what to care about, of what is right, just, fair
- ★ **Organisational:** the values of organisations we study with, work for, or use for services.

When these value sets are mutually reinforcing, life can feel harmonious. When they pull in opposing directions, that raises moral and practical challenges that we need to resolve.

## Recognising our values

The depth of our attachment to particular values is often unconscious and inherited. We may not recognise the strength of our values unless they are challenged or clash with other value sets, as above, when we move into new contexts.

The activities below can help test out what matters to you, and where potential value conflicts might arise for you, either now or in the future.

## Layers of the onion

Knowing what we 'really' value isn't always easy. There are many layers to our 'wanting', 'needing' and 'valuing', like the many skins of an onion. It is worth taking the time to ask ourselves what we value and to persist in asking: "What exactly is it about this that I value?" For example, if you value celebrity, is it fame that excites you? If so, might you value other kinds of fame more later on? If it is about money, how else might you earn at the level you want? Is it really popularity or friends that you are seeking? Keep going until you run out of questions.



It can be easier to aim for superficial things (money, power, celebrity) than to identify what creates our need for these. Whether those things are good or bad in their own right is also a value judgement.

## Reflection

### Core values



- ★ What is at the 'core of the onion' for you – what is really driving your choices of how to act and what to want from life?
- ★ What has had most influence on your values?

## Which values?

In the box below,

- Highlight** up to TEN values that you consider particularly important to you.
- Underline** values that are important to others in your life (family, friends, at work, etc.).
- Circle** the 1–3 values that are the most important for you.

### Values most important to me

Integrity	Professionalism	Honesty	Enthusiasm	Kindness	Creativity
Openness	Teamwork	Generosity	Efficiency	Caring	Justice
Variety	Sustainability	Compassion	Decisiveness	Intelligence	Positivity
Adaptability	Loyalty	Thoughtfulness	Self-reliance	Fairness	Simplicity
Moderation	Passion	Playfulness	Endurance	Courage	Humour
Thoroughness	Transparency	Trustworthiness	Inclusiveness	Energy	Diversity
Mindfulness	Self-awareness	Moderation	Dependability	Ambition	Regularity
Challenge	Safety	Predictability	Unpredictability	Harmony	Hard work
Happiness	Selflessness	Competence	Ethics	Stability	Family
Curiosity	Collegiality	Companionship	Innovation	Control	Cooperation
Tolerance	Empathy	Consistency	Self-sacrificing	Friendship	Trust
Faith	Clarity	Patience	Calm	Persistence	Order
Beauty	Enjoyment	Productivity	Optimism	Realism	Solitude
Sociability	Commitment	Authenticity	Service	Honour	Respect
Others:					

### Reflection



#### What matters to you?

- ★ What do your choices suggest about what most matters to you?
- ★ If the items you highlighted differ from those you underlined, how does that disparity affect the choices you make, your behaviours and your sense of your own values?

### Observation



#### Adhering to values?

- What values do others say matter to them? Are their actions and speech consistent with their values?
- In what kinds of circumstances are your own behaviour and speech inconsistent with your values?

# Testing our values

As values are so important, it is worth testing out whether what we think we value is really the case. This enables us to act with greater integrity, make decisions that work better for us, and make more sense of our lives. One way of doing this is to compare our desires, what we want from life, with what we say we value as principles. You can try this out with the following activity.

## Activity



### Step 1: Identifying needs and wants

Consider things that you need or desire from life. Select  as many items as you wish from the following list. Add in any other items relevant to you.

What I most value is ...	Important to me <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	What I most value is ...	Important to me <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1 A good car	<input type="checkbox"/>	21 A loving relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Challenge	<input type="checkbox"/>	22 To be a leader	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Making a difference in the world	<input type="checkbox"/>	23 Leaving something for posterity	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Feeling I am in control of my life	<input type="checkbox"/>	24 Time for myself	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Creativity	<input type="checkbox"/>	25 Money	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Fairness	<input type="checkbox"/>	26 New experiences	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Fame and celebrity	<input type="checkbox"/>	27 Sporting ability	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 Family and home life	<input type="checkbox"/>	28 Physical appearance	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 Friendship	<input type="checkbox"/>	29 Popularity	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 Having a good time	<input type="checkbox"/>	30 Good-quality possessions	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 Health	<input type="checkbox"/>	31 Power	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 Social Life	<input type="checkbox"/>	32 Being needed	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 Helping others	<input type="checkbox"/>	33 Security	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 Honesty	<input type="checkbox"/>	34 A feeling of self-worth	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 A big house	<input type="checkbox"/>	35 Spiritual life	<input type="checkbox"/>
16 Independence	<input type="checkbox"/>	36 Other things: <i>(state what)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17 Influence	<input type="checkbox"/>		
18 Integrity	<input type="checkbox"/>		
19 Intellectual abilities	<input type="checkbox"/>		
20 A good job / career	<input type="checkbox"/>		

## Activity



### Step 2: Needs and wants

List the items you selected above in order of importance to you. (1 = most important)

1		6	
2		7	
3		8	
4		9	
5		10	

### Step 3: Consistency check

Consider the top ten items you listed in step 2. What themes can you identify? For example, do your choices suggest you place a high value on any of the following:

- ★ personal qualities
- ★ people
- ★ power/ influence
- ★ legacy
- ★ other things?
- ★ time for yourself
- ★ material objects
- ★ intellect
- ★ fame

Compare your lists from steps 1 and 2 with the items you identified on page 33. Are these consistent? Do you feel comfortable with your responses or do you feel you 'ought to' value other things? If so, what does this response tell you about yourself?

#### Reflection

##### Valued compliments

- ★ What do these suggest about what you value?
- ★ What do you do to make it possible to receive such compliments?

#### Reflection

##### Put to the test?

Identify a time when your values were put to the test. In your journal, jot down:

- ★ What happened?
- ★ What did you find out about yourself on that occasion?
- ★ What did you learn about your personal values from that occasion?

### Impact and choices of values

Having looked at your values from various perspectives, consider what these mean for you in practice.

What kinds of jobs, career routes or other ways of spending time after study would be most consistent with your values?

What kinds of work or use of time would be inconsistent with your values?

When you are applying for jobs, check the company website to see what the company identifies as its values. Give thought to whether these are values you want to prioritise on a daily basis.

#### Activity

##### Feeling valued: compliments

Our values are also reflected in what we want others to think about us—such as the comments we do or don't want made about us and the compliments that we treasure. Which three compliments do you most want to hear from other people?

1

2

3

# Inspiration

Thinking about your sources of inspiration can boost your energy and spur you to action when your spirits are flagging. Drawing on inspiration can motivate success. Consider what inspires you – and what would inspire you to ‘go the extra mile’ to do something.

## Inspiring ideas?

Books, plays, music, art, landscapes, stories, myths, events, theories, science, etc.?

## Actions?

What kinds of behaviours, ways of being and achievements inspire you?

## For study?

- ★ What, if anything, inspired you to come on this course or to return to study?
- ★ Who or what motivates you to succeed in your studies?

## People?

Which individuals or sorts of people inspire you – for study, work, life or in other areas?

## Sources of inspiration

Inspiration comes in many forms, some unexpected, some from working through a process or creating new experiences. It can come from ...

- ★ your own thoughts, reflection, ideas
- ★ being asked thought-provoking questions
- ★ talking things through with others
- ★ a poem, song, art, theory, analysis, nature ...
- ★ reading a biography, hearing about an opportunity, visiting a new place
- ★ from a role model or personal hero
- ★ reflecting on the qualities of successful people (page 44 below)

## How do you inspire yourself?

- ★ What successes or experiences of your own inspire you to further action?
- ★ How do your aspirations for the future, your dreams and ambitions, inspire you?
- ★ Do you put sufficient energy into inspiring yourself? If not, what else could you do?

## Characteristics?

Of the people you selected opposite, what is it about them that most inspires you:

- ★ What they achieved?
- ★ Hurdles they overcame?
- ★ Their level of skill or ability?
- ★ Their personal qualities?
- ★ Their effect on others' lives?
- ★ Other things about them?

How might they inspire you now in achieving your vision/goals?

## How?

- ★ How do all these sources of inspiration affect your own aspirations, thoughts and actions?
- ★ What inspires you to feel good about life?
- ★ How do you make use of your inspiration?
- ★ What inspires you to go beyond yourself, to do more than you thought you could?
- ★ What other inspiration do you need?

# Clarifying the vision

Having a strong vision inspires action and points the way. That vision could be an ambition, a dream, a sense of how things might be different.

It is this vision that keeps us going when unexpected setbacks occur. It is easier to reach the top of a mountain if we have seen or imagined the summit and know where we are headed. If we are assembling a bookcase or jigsaw puzzle, it helps to have the picture before us so the end goal is clear as a realistic possibility. Such a picture is especially useful when working towards goals that last months or years, such as qualifications and careers.

This does not necessarily mean that we should have very clear life goals, with every detail planned out. Successful people seem to be characterised by not having very rigid life plans (Taylor and Humphrey, 2002). A vision of the life we want, the kind of day we want to lead, the sort of person we want to be, the work that would satisfy us – any of these provide a sense of direction and guide us in where to spend our time and energies.

## The dream

*Dream lofty dreams, and as you dream so shall you become. Your vision is the promise of what you shall at last unveil.*

John Ruskin

When we are young, we are often told to stop daydreaming, yet many inventors, artists and scientists attribute their success to a combination of systematic analysis and inspiration from dreams or daydreams. Have a go at this for yourself, by combining 'The Dream' activity and more analytical 'Long-term vision' activity on pages 38–9.

## The long-term vision

The activity on page 38 is not about making a rigid plan for your future: it is to gain a clearer sense of the type of life you want for your longer-term future. It can flag points about what you do or don't want, which you can take on board when making decisions, choosing course options and applying for jobs.

For each statement on the chart on pages 38–9, consider what you envisage for yourself, ideally, in ten years' time.

### Activity



### The dream

#### Stage 1

Find a comfortable seat where you will not be disturbed. Read the quotation by Ruskin (opposite) a few times. Let your mind mull over what this means for you. Consider:

- ➔ What dreams have other people had for you (if any)? Are these meaningful for you now? Are they what you want?
- ➔ What would be your 'dream scenario' for the future?

Your 'dream' or vision does not have to be the same as anyone else's, nor well defined. The important thing is that it inspires you.

#### Stage 2

To clarify your vision, repeat this activity once you have undertaken the 'Long-term vision' below and on page 38. You might find that the more analytical nature of the 'Vision' stimulates some changes in your thinking.

Let go of particular details when you return to the 'Dream' activity. Your mind will automatically play with the ideas you had and feed them back, either straight away or at some time in the future. As our relaxed brain likes to play with images and metaphors, it may return the ideas in unexpected ways. Be open to seeing what emerges for you.



## The long-term vision

Jot down your thoughts on some or all of the following, depending on how relevant each is to you. If you prefer, use the expandable version on the companion site at: [www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)

Ten years from now, I see myself ...		
Aspect	Write your own vision of this aspect below	How important is this aspect to me?
Living in which part of the world?		
Living in what kind of place (city, town, village, by the sea, etc.)?		
Solitary? Or surrounded by people?		
Considering the most important things in my life to be ...		
Working with colleagues who are ... Artistic? Intellectual? Kind? Caring? Down to earth? Thoughtful? Other?		
Working to stress levels that are ... Pressurised? Reasonable? Low?		
Enjoying ... Privacy? Public attention? Celebrity?		
Working how many hours a week?		
Taking a lead? Being a good deputy? Happy to be part of a team? One of a large crowd?		
Wanting to 'get by' unnoticed? With recognition for my work? In top management? World famous?		
Based mostly in an office? On the road? In the field?		
Working for myself? A large company? A small company? A charity?		
Doing work which is very varied? Very routine? Predictable?		

Aspect	Write your own vision of this aspect below	How important is this aspect to me?
Likely to stay in the same job for years? Changing job often?		
Living with a large/small/minimal family. With strong/weak/some family connections?		
Considering work to be central/important/not important to my life?		
My contribution to my community or society will be through ...		
My time outside work will be spent doing ...		
My friends will be the kinds of people who ...		
I will be the kind of person who ...		
My main achievements in life are likely to be ...		
Other important aspects of my vision of the future are ...		
The main influences, inspirations and values on this vision of my future derive from ...		
Now do stage 2 of The Dream activity, page 37.		

## Reflection



### The long-term vision

- ★ What does this tell you about the kind of lifestyle and careers that would suit you?
- ★ How can you make use of the 'vision' or 'dream' that emerged through these activities to motivate you further?
- ★ In what ways do your current study and extracurricular activities help take you forward towards achieving this 'Vision' for your future life?

# Achieve the vision: set interim goals

## **a** Identify interim goals

Whilst the vision or long-term goal provides inspiration and direction, it can seem distant, daunting or vague. Interim goals provide a more immediate focus. They take the form of:

- ★ **Desired outcomes**, such as gaining a qualification or leadership role
- ★ **Specific targets**, such as improving marks or scores by 10% by a given date
- ★ **Milestones** – set points along the route to aim for in the shorter term.

These enable us to monitor progress, and give regular tastes of success along the way.

## Shape good goals

**State your vision** Formulate this in words that motivate you. Use it to shape your goals.

**Identify the route** List the steps that you need to take to achieve your vision. This is your long-term 'To Do' list.

**List interim goals** Turn each step into an action: clarify exactly what to do and by when.

**Priority-setting** If there are many steps towards achieving a long-term goal or vision, set priorities (as you did on pages 19–22). Rate items, then select items you rate highest.

## Make an action plan

When you start to plan in detail, as below, you gain a clearer sense of what is involved and the best sequence to undertake tasks. A blank template of the example below is available on page 387.

**Evaluate your goals** Before launching into action, evaluate your interim goals, using the SMART-F targets approach (pages 207 and 386).

**Take a rounded approach** Pause to check whether your developing plan respects your different needs (page 23).

**Contributing actions** Usually many actions underlie an interim goal. For example, an interim goal of gaining a job involves job searches, researching companies, applying, etc.

If you wish, you can use templates from the companion site for each of the above stages in preparing your Action Plan.

Available on the companion site:  
[www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)



## Personal action plan (example)

Vision/longer-term goal(s):				To be achieved by (year/month):		
<i>To run my own company, making a living from it.</i>				<i>Dec this year</i>		
1	Interim goal 1	<i>Run project for uni enterprise prize</i>	Start by	End by	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
			<i>Feb</i>	<i>Dec</i>	<i>Submit project for award.</i>	
	Actions to achieve interim goal 1		Start by	End by	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
	1	<i>Obtain competition details</i>	<i>1 Feb</i>	<i>2 Feb</i>	<i>Downloaded &amp; read form</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	2	<i>Find a project team</i>	<i>3 Feb</i>	<i>9 Feb</i>	<i>Have a team of 4</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	3	<i>Decide on project</i>	<i>10 Feb</i>	<i>2 Mar</i>	<i>Outline plan written up</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	4	<i>Etc.</i>				
2	Interim goal 2	<i>Learn from a business mentor</i>	Start by	End by	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
			<i>6 Jan</i>	<i>30 Sep</i>	<i>5 sessions with mentor</i>	
	Actions to achieve interim goal 2		Start by	End by	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	1	<i>Find out how to get mentor</i>	<i>6 Jan</i>	<i>7 Jan</i>	<i>Have sources to follow up</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

# Personal investment: benefits and costs of achieving goals

## Weighing it up

All too often, when we have an idea, we launch in without considering the full picture, such as:

- ★ what we value about what we have already
- ★ how this compares to the future position we are considering
- ★ the risks to this if we pursue our goals.

Just as you evaluated the challenges and benefits of PDP in Chapter 1, it can be useful to apply a similar 'cost/benefit' approach to evaluating your goals, whether long-term or interim goals.

## A personal consideration

Each of us has to weigh up, for ourselves, the 'costs' we are willing to bear in order to achieve the goals or outcomes we are considering. In deciding on a goal, it helps to think through such aspects as:

- ★ **What you really want** – 'no matter what!'
- ★ **Your assets** What you bring to the task in hand that you are willing to 'invest' or risk. This includes such factors as time, effort, money, material resources, practice, endurance, willingness to wait or try again; having less time with friends, family or for other interests.
- ★ **Your limits** Know where your limits lie, such as the sacrifices you are not prepared to make. The costs to you and others; people's opinions; your values, and your sense of self might all be relevant.

## Benefits and costs of achieving your goals

Identify one personal goal. Using the outline opposite, consider what a successful outcome in achieving that goal would be worth to you in terms of its costs and benefits. If you wish, you can use the template on the companion site. Otherwise, jot down your responses in a notebook or use your device or laptop.



## Benefits and costs of achieving your goals

Identify one personal goal. Use the questions below to evaluate the benefits and costs associated with it. If you wish, use the template on the companion site to note your responses.

Your goal (choose 1)	Note down your response to each question using a notebook, device or the template.
Perceived personal benefits of achieving this goal?	
Perceived benefits to other people if the goal is achieved?	
What would you need to invest to achieve this goal (time, money, possible loss of self-confidence, friendship, etc.)? What level of such costs would be unacceptable to you?	
What costs would there be to others (time, money, possible loss of trust, etc.)? What level of such costs would you consider unacceptable?	
How would other people's opinions of you change if you were successful? Would this differ if the 'costs' were different? Would other people's opinions matter to you?	
How would your opinion of yourself change if you succeeded? How, if at all, would this change if the 'costs' were different?	
At what point would the benefits outweigh the costs for you? Or the costs outweigh the benefits?	

# Sustaining the motivation to achieve

## Put in the hours

The most likely route to success is by putting in sufficient hours to achieve it. There is a wealth of research that indicates that what separates high achievers from others is the amount of time they spend gaining expertise.

This is true even of apparent 'geniuses' or protégés. It is estimated that the most successful, from Mozart to the Beatles, devote around 10,000 hours to fine-tuning their craft. You won't have 10,000 hours as a student, but the general principle holds true. Even those successful at social or emotional skills tend to spend more time practising, reflecting on, and discussing these.

## High achievers and time

High achievers spend more time in:

- ★ **elaboration** – working out the precise nature of the problem, task or issue
- ★ **preparation** – making sure that they are set up for the task, with suitable space, materials, mental preparation, etc.
- ★ **perseverance** – sticking with difficult problems, going over them time and time again, looking for clues about where they are going wrong, until they find a way of resolving the issue
- ★ **practice and rehearsal** – repeating tasks until they are fluent in the skills.

## What if I don't have time?

There are many demands on students' time so, inevitably, choices have to be made. That is why it is important to look at your decision-making in the round, weighing up the diverse aspects of your life, your values and aims, and how much time you can give, realistically, to each. It helps if you are clear in your own mind about the reasons underpinning your choices, and can then make peace with the consequences of difficult decisions.

As well as the total amount of time spent, there is also the consideration of how well you spend your time. Chapters 5, 9 and 11 can help you to deploy time more effectively.

## **a** Self-motivation

When a task takes time and repetition, enthusiasm can wane. It becomes more important to take steps to keep motivation alive. It helps if you already know the kinds of approaches and thinking patterns that work for you. Consider  which of the following motivational techniques could help you to sustain your motivation.

### 1 *Set high expectations*

Success is linked to high aspirations and a realistic optimism about achieving them. Once you set high expectations, it is then important to plan towards them, creating the right opportunities for success. If you set low expectations, you are less likely to be prepared for opportunities that arise.

### 2 *Find intrinsic interest*

It is much easier to keep going with a task if you find the goal intrinsically inspiring and the task engaging. If that doesn't arise naturally, it is important to find a way to stimulate your interest. For example, you can:

- ★ rekindle your initial excitement in the overall vision – and what inspired you
- ★ remind yourself of its value or purpose
- ★ find new personal relevance
- ★ set small-scale achievable challenges
- ★ discuss with others who are interested
- ★ take pride in the expertise being gained.

### 3 *Be realistic*

Little is achieved without setbacks, effort and hard work and even some moments when you feel like giving up. Although positive thinking is an asset, unrealistic thinking sets you up for failure as you will be unprepared for obstacles and challenges that arise. Think through potential setbacks and how you would deal with them – so that you are ready to tackle them with a well thought-through plan. Take them in your stride as part of the process, rather than as disasters that spell failure.

#### 4 *Set clear milestones*

The section on setting interim goals (page 40) refers to setting milestones that help you chart your progress. The more challenging the overall goal, or the longer it takes to achieve, the more important it is to set and achieve interim targets to boost your morale.

#### 5 *Reward achievement*

If the intrinsic interest wanes for a while, you might find that rewards work. Use rewards you would really appreciate but which are appropriate to the size of the task. You can set rewards such as a break, a coffee, a walk, a special meal, phoning or texting friends, playing a game, or social media time as rewards for small targets during the day. Make sure you do take the reward once you attain your target.

#### 6 *Harness support*

If you think it will be difficult to keep yourself on track, ask a friend or mentor to check at set, regular intervals that you are keeping to plan. You could set up a support group or action set (page 266). These all work better if you set clear targets and specific dates for checking in to see whether targets are on track.

#### 7 *Recognise successes*

When things go well, pause for a moment and take note. Enjoy the moment. Focus on the aspects that worked before starting to consider anything that needed further work or improvements.

#### 8 *Record success*

It is easier to monitor and reward your successes if you keep a record. This can be useful for the task in hand and also in retrospect when you reflect back upon what you achieved. A record of past successes can be very motivating for future enterprises. Don't be too modest!

### Activity



#### Sources of motivation

When the going gets tough, I am most likely to be motivated by ... (Select ✓ all that apply to you)

- my long-term vision
- setting achievable interim goals
- creating mini-challenges for myself
- completing daily 'To Do' lists
- my values
- my belief system
- my will to win
- my sources of inspiration
- people who are close to me
- my desire to do good for others
- my desire to prove something
- achieving lots of small successes as I go
- rewarding myself for completed stages
- enjoyment of the activity
- finding something of interest in the activity
- the support of other people
- having another person monitor my progress
- recording my successes.

### Reflection



#### Getting it done!

How will you put these (and any other) sources of motivation into place?

### Want to know more?



Motivation2Study (2017) *WHO DO YOU WANT TO BE? – Motivational Video for Students & Success in Life* (Aug 14, 2017). Accessed 5 June 2020. (On changing your thoughts, decisions, habits – yourself – to achieve the goals that matter to you.)

Elizabeth Gilbert (2014) *Success, failure and the drive to keep creating*. youtube.com (25 April 2014). TED talk. (On managing success and failure by staying true to what you love.)

# Ingredients of success: learning from CEOs

Taylor and Humphrey (2002) analysed interviews made with 80 UK and US leaders, drawn from a wide range of businesses. They identified the skills and attributes typical of those successful at chief executive (CEO) level. Although most (91 per cent) had a degree and relevant technical skills, success was not closely linked to degree subject or results. Few had business degrees.

## Characteristics of CEOs

The CEOs worked very long hours – but loved their work. They enjoyed leadership and recognition. They were noticeably self-confident, good at communicating and putting others at their ease. Their excellent inter-personal skills included patience and tolerance, often learned through the job itself. They were energetic, but took care to manage stress levels and stay healthy. Male directors were more sensitive to variations in their emotional lives and needed emotional stability in order to succeed. Most CEOs had a wide range of interests and part of what they brought to a company was 'breadth of vision developed from a wide range of experience'. Most of these are self-management and people skills rather than unusual abilities or technical skills.

## Attributes of success

The surprising outcome of Taylor and Humphrey's survey was that the range of personal skills and qualities associated with success were ones most people could nurture. The researchers wrote:

*'Board directors are not a race apart ... we found ourselves in the presence of bright, hard-working people, but not creatures from another planet. They had a variety of IQs, expertise, and backgrounds. In other words, directors are just like the rest of us – and their positions are up for grabs.'*

The main skills valued by the CEOs included:

a) self-knowledge and self-awareness – this was especially noticeable, and the directors were frank about their skills and shortcomings

- b) ability to work with, and lead, teams
- c) problem-solving ability, using creative approaches and positive attitudes
- d) a desire to win, especially on behalf of the company or team
- e) a willingness to work very long hours and to 'do what it takes'
- f) emotional intelligence, especially when relating to others
- g) the ability to manage health and stress
- h) a love of change
- i) confidence
- j) a broad range of personal interests
- k) readiness to seize opportunities rather than making rigid personal plans.

Many of these skills have long been recognised as essential in the caring professions so it might be surprising to find this list associated with business success. However, similar skills are likely to be required across a wide range of professions.

## In the workplace

Increasingly, employers expect graduates to have such skills as those listed above. Negative-thinking, selfish people who lack confidence, get easily stressed, fear change or who are not aware of how they are coping with their own emotions, are unlikely to be a great asset to a team.

## In other contexts

High levels of success in any field tend to require long hours, hard work, practice, and a willingness to keep working towards achieving the goal even when you do not feel like it or want to give up. Qualities needed for other kinds of success may vary in some respects from the above list. Academic success involves critical analytical skills, for example. Successful relationships require empathy and compassion. However, there are few areas of life where the characteristics associated with CEOs, as listed above, will not be relevant and of benefit.

# Ingredients of success – for goals

## Do you have the attributes associated with success?

The attributes associated with success (page 44) can help us achieve many types of goal and are not mysterious or unattainable. If you don't have them, they can be learnt, improved and fine-tuned.

Using the self-evaluation on page 46, identify which of the attributes you consider are your strengths or relative strengths already. These provide a good basis to draw upon when taking on any challenge. Give yourself due credit.

Decide which, if any, you wish to develop further. As you may have noticed, most of these qualities:

- ★ are amenable to some immediate change by bringing conscious awareness to them
- ★ take time and practice to embed and fine-tune to the point of unconscious excellence.

Decide which, if strengthened, would make the most difference to you.

## Skills and qualities needed for your goals?

It is worth comparing the list of the attributes associated with successful outcomes at the level of chief executive officer with the attributes you regard as relevant to your own ambitions and goals. Think through the kinds of situations and problems that you might need to address in order to achieve your goals. What other qualities would help you in those circumstances? See page 47.

## A good skills 'match'?

Compare the attributes that you identified as necessary for achieving a successful outcome of your goal (page 47) with the attributes you identified in yourself on page 46.

Is there a good match? Notice where there are any mismatches. For those areas, decide what you will do to develop them.

If you use the space provided on page 47 to add in further skills, goals and attributes needed to attain your goals, decide which could be developed whilst you are still a student. What will you do to develop these?

## Breadth of vision and experience

In the section on successful CEOs above, Taylor and Humphrey (2002) identified 'breadth of vision developed from a wide range of experience' as an important characteristic of successful people. It is easy to see why this would be the case.

Experience gained in varied contexts exposes you to multiple challenges, building your knowledge base, problem-solving abilities and awareness of your own capabilities. If you take a positive attitude and learn from both the successes and the inevitable setbacks and mistakes you make, you build your resilience and ability to see opportunity everywhere. It also brings you into contact with a more diverse range of people, creating chances to develop good networks and more informed inter-personal skills. It also supports creative thinking processes.

## Reflection



### Extending experience

In your journal, jot down your thoughts on the following questions.

- ★ In what ways do you already have a breadth of experience drawn from varied contexts?
- ★ In relation to your current goals and career aspirations, what opportunities are open to you for extending your breadth of experience? Consider the opportunities on pages 26–7 for example.
- ★ What opportunities are offered through your course curriculum for designing a personal programme that extends your range of skills and experience?

# Attributes associated with success

## Self-evaluation



Do you have the personal qualities associated with success?

Attribute	Good	Wish to improve	Not relevant to me	See chapter
Self-knowledge and self-awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1 and 5
Problem-solving ability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	10 and 11
A creative approach	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	10
Positive attitude	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5
People skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	6
Team working	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	7
Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	8
Negotiating skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	6
A desire to succeed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	2
A willingness to 'do what it takes'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5 and 11
Emotional intelligence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4, 5 and 6
The ability to manage personal stress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5
The ability to cope with and/or promote change	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5
Self-confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5 and 6
A broad range of personal interests	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1
Self-knowledge (reflection, self-analysis)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1-5 and 12
Risk management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	9 and 11
Ability to cope with uncertainty	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5

## Observation



Your strengths in action

Over the next few weeks, notice occasions when you demonstrate your strengths. Take a moment to feel some pride in attributes and actions that you do well. Make a note of them, thinking through what enabled you to perform well or take the approach that you did. You might find it useful to keep a record of your best examples of some of these on the competence sheets available on the companion site.



## Attributes needed to achieve your goal

The goal or ambition analysed here is: \_\_\_\_\_

To achieve this goal or ambition, the following attributes will probably be needed:

Attribute	Highly relevant	May be relevant	Not relevant	Don't know
Self-knowledge and self-awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Problem-solving ability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A creative approach	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Positive attitude	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Team working	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Negotiating skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A desire to succeed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A willingness to 'do what it takes'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Emotional intelligence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The ability to manage personal stress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The ability to cope with and/or promote change	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self-confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A broad range of personal interests	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Good health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self-knowledge (reflection, self-analysis)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Risk management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ability to cope with uncertainty	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other skills needed to achieve this goal or ambition:

1

2

3

Personal qualities needed to achieve this goal or ambition:

1

2

3

Any other attributes needed to achieve this goal or ambition:

1

2

3

# Congruence and integrity

## Congruence

'Congruence' refers to consistency in our values, thoughts, actions, behaviours and beliefs. It is about all our energies flowing in the same direction. From the perspective of others, this can create a sense of integrity.

It takes less effort to achieve goals if there is a high level of congruence between the multiple factors that gave rise to those goals and those that affect their completion. Otherwise, it can feel as if you are 'working against yourself'. If you find it hard or tiring to stay motivated, it is worth checking whether there is a high level of congruence (or a 'good fit') between:

- ★ your vision
- ★ your values and beliefs
- ★ your motivation
- ★ those who influence you
- ★ your sources of inspiration
- ★ our interim goals
- ★ the attitudes of the people around you
- ★ your means and resources
- ★ your current circumstances
- ★ the decisions you are making.

In particular, check that your 'vision' is still relevant to you. New experiences can change this, either reinforcing it, modifying it, or making it irrelevant. Test this out on page 49.

## 'Goal inertia'

If you have 'vision inertia' or 'goal inertia', you continue to work towards a vision that might seem appealing but, in reality, no longer inspires or motivates you – there is no longer congruence between what you are doing and what you really want to do. This is especially true if your values change in the light of your experience.

If this happens, tasks seem to be more difficult or tiring. You might feel it more of a struggle to complete tasks, or look for excuses to put tasks off, or not want to do anything at all. If you experience goal inertia, it is time to recoup, to reconnect with your initial ambitions in at least some way, or else to change direction.

## What if I ...?

If you are not sure whether you are feeling goal inertia, you could try this 'what if ...' activity. It pushes you to keep thinking about alternatives, to see whether another vision would inspire you. When you keep asking yourself the same question, the obvious answers become used up so that you need to draw more on your imagination to find new responses. Let your mind range broadly. Avoid censoring your thoughts, even if an idea seems unlikely. Some of your responses might be far-fetched. However, these might contain the kernel of an idea that inspires. See what emerges.

### Activity



#### What if I ...?

Type, copy and paste at least thirty times: 'What if I ...?' as a list, leaving yourself space to write a response to each as below.

Come up with suggestions to complete each statement – and a response as below. Work quickly, so that you don't censor your thinking. For example:

'What if I ... spoke Japanese?' (I'd apply for a job in Japan)

'What if I ... invented a toy?' (I could sell the patent – or set up a business)

'What if I ... climbed Everest?' (I would be fitter and would get to travel.)

Then consider your responses.

- ★ Which ones surprise you?
- ★ Which provide useful insights into things you might want or need in your life? The responses above suggest maybe the student would like a job, to travel, be fitter, to be self-employed)
- ★ Which would be the most interesting of your suggestions to put into action?



## Does it all add up? Check for congruence and 'integrity'

Are your vision, ambitions, values and inspiration in alignment, as outlined on page 48? Check for internal conflicts or inconsistencies that could be undermining your efforts. Below, jot down your responses to the questions.

What is my goal (e.g. what I want to achieve from my time at university)?	
What is my vision of success in relation to this goal? What would success look like?	
How does this goal fit into a bigger 'vision' for my life and my longer-term ambitions?	
What motivates me to pursue this goal – what do I want to gain from achieving this goal?	
What has influenced me, perhaps over many years, in forming this goal?	
What inspiration can I call upon to help me achieve this goal?	
What are my short-term goals? How do these support my main goal?	
How does this goal fit with my beliefs and values?	
How do the attitudes of people around me support me in working towards my current goal?	
What resources do I have, to support me towards my current goal?	
What else in my current situation supports or undermines me in working towards my goal?	
Conclusions	

## Review: The vision

1

### Identify your own definition of success

What constitutes 'success' is a personal judgement – you don't need to accept other people's definitions. Consider what it means for you – in general and for different areas of your life.

2

### Recognise the importance of values

Be aware of your own values and the significance of adhering to these in order to operate successfully and with integrity. Identify which values matter most to you; use them to inform your choices and decision-making.

3

### Be inspired!

Inspiration serves many functions, from raising aspirations to giving hope and sustaining motivation. Be active in seeking out sources of inspiration – and be inspired by yourself too!

4

### Clarify your vision or long-term goals

A clear vision, dream or ambition provides direction, focus, energy and motivation. It enables you to make the right decisions, such as for study options, jobs and taking up opportunities.

5

### Set interim goals

However strong your vision for your main goals in life or for your study, well-formed interim goals, such as targets, milestones or short-term outcomes, will help to keep you on track.

6

### Weigh up the costs and benefits

Working towards your goals can be demanding. Before launching into action, think through the time, energy and sacrifices you might need to make. Decide how much it really matters to you – and where your limits lie. Use the potential benefits to inspire and motivate you.

7

### Nurture your motivation

Don't expect the initial excitement that inspired your vision to continue without further input. Rekindle your excitement and use support to sustain motivation until you reach your goal.

8

### Develop the attributes needed to succeed with your goals

The qualities associated with successful people such as chief executives are relevant at all levels and can be developed by anyone. Identify and strengthen those relevant to your own ambitions.

9

### Check for goal inertia

Over time, our interest in our earlier dreams and ambitions can fade. When energy wanes, it can feel hard to continue. One potential reason for this is that the goal no longer represents what you really want. If so, it might be time to change direction.

10

### Does it all add up: check for congruence

Before pursuing a major change of direction or a demanding project or life-changing goal, it is worth checking whether it is really consistent with your values, ambitions, needs and interests.



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ consider the impact of your own life story upon you now – and on current performance
- ✓ analyse how you construct your personal narrative and perceptions of yourself
- ✓ analyse your learning journey and its impact on your current approaches to study
- ✓ identify areas of personal expertise that can be applied to new tasks and areas of learning
- ✓ apply your experience in new contexts.

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on how your life story so far, and the narratives that you construct to make sense of your experience, contribute to your uniqueness. It encourages you to investigate how your personal history, attitudes and beliefs about your ability might be influencing the way you do things now and your current achievement.

If you undertake the activities in this chapter with different goals in mind, you are likely to gain different sets of responses. If you find that a particular type of task is proving especially difficult for you, go through some of these activities again but with only that task in mind. You may uncover unexpected hindrances that you can then address.

## Your life narrative

Personal narrative is used more and more in professional fields as a way of helping practitioners to understand the way they operate in the workplace. It is one of a number of tools that help individuals, by gaining a deeper understanding of themselves, to:

- ★ make sense of their current reactions and responses in specific contexts
- ★ understand why their responses might be different from those of colleagues
- ★ reconnect with their feelings about significant events, so as to enable greater empathy with others
- ★ value their own experiences and those of others
- ★ identify where issues from the past might be having a negative effect now, so that these can be addressed.

It does take time to work on personal narratives, but the experience can be rewarding.

## The 'true story'?

Each telling of a story, and especially our personal narrative, brings new variations. The events might be the same, but new aspects become significant. We remember new details, emphasise different factors, understand some things better, interpret meaning from new perspectives and are more aware of the impact of decisions or the consequences of actions over time. We can feel better or worse about particular aspects. To this extent, our story is always being newly written.

If you write out your story every few years and look back at past versions, it is likely that you will be surprised at how much your attitudes, responses and the themes of your story change over time.

In this chapter, you can consider your narrative from various angles in order to gain different perspectives on yourself – rather than assuming there is one fixed version or interpretation.

# Develop your own narrative

## Components in your plot

To produce the narrative for your life story, the first step is to work out key components of the plot. Use the list below to identify key events and people in your story.

### Activity 1

#### Significant components in the plot



Take five minutes to list the events and people that have been most significant for you.

#### *The most significant events*

- ➔ 'first times' you did something
- ➔ successes
- ➔ crises
- ➔ challenges
- ➔ significant choices and decisions
- ➔ opportunities that arose
- ➔ family events that most affected you
- ➔ happy memories
- ➔ school memories
- ➔ holidays that were important in some way
- ➔ friendships and relationships
- ➔ work experience
- ➔ other things (state which).

#### *The most significant people*

- ➔ parents, carers, guardians, relatives
- ➔ siblings and cousins
- ➔ teachers, school staff, pupils, students
- ➔ friends
- ➔ romances and relationships
- ➔ people you met on holiday, at social events, etc.
- ➔ professionals (e.g. nurses, doctors, etc.)
- ➔ neighbours; people who lived locally
- ➔ employers or work colleagues
- ➔ people who acted kindly or unkindly
- ➔ chance encounters who made a difference
- ➔ someone you didn't know well but who said, did or experienced something that had a big impact on you.

Draw on these lists for the following activities.

## Life Chart: plot the journey

When you have identified the main components of your story, the next stage is to lay these out so it is easier to see the plot of your life so far and the connections between events. As you do this, jot down the memories and emotions that arise.

### Activity 2

#### Life Chart: plotting the journey



Using your lists from Activity 1:

- ➔ Use a large sheet of paper or card – or a wall!
- ➔ Separate out each event and person on your list, such as by writing each on a separate sticky note.
- ➔ Organise them into chronological order.

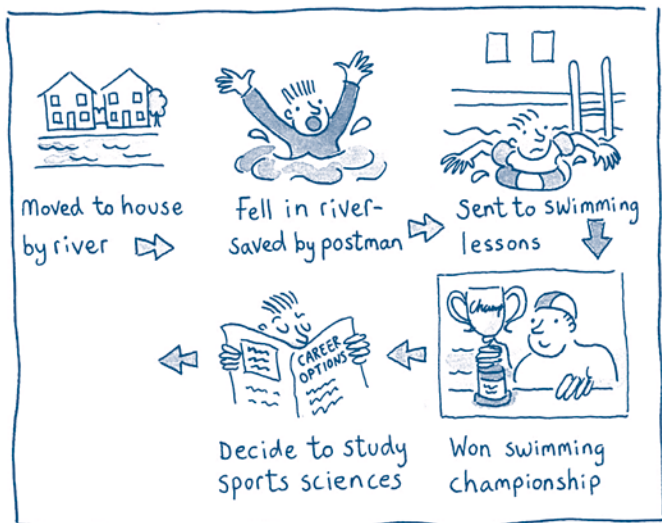
Arrange items on your wall or a visual chart so that you can 'see' the events in the order they occurred. Leave space to add, write and draw around them.

- ➔ Affix each note lightly, so you can change them around later or add new material.
- ➔ Indicate who played the most significant roles.
- ➔ Build the visual aspect, using drawings, photographs or symbols to represent an occasion (such as an ice-cream for a holiday, a dark cloud for a significant argument, etc.).

## Find the links

Once you have plotted out the key events and players in your story, the next stage is to draw out the connections between these. You may already have had to do this at a superficial level in order to work out the sequence in the plot.

Now, consider more deeply. If someone was significant in your life, what was their influence? Which events involved you meeting or losing someone who was significant in your life? Look for broad areas of 'cause and effect'. This can generate new material to add to your chart.



## Activity 4

### Create the narrative

Write out your story. Make sure you include how you feel about your experiences. Be honest. This copy is just for you – so you don't need to worry about writing a good introduction or your writing style. Just tell it.

Once you have completed your story, leave it for a few days. Then go on to the next activity.

## What's the significance?

It is because our personal narratives and their interpretations are open to change that we can take our story at any one time and look to see what it tells us about our approach to life. Some people have very extreme sets of life experiences, yet when they tell their stories, they emphasise the unexpected benefits, contacts they made, opportunities that were created, insights gained or strengths they developed as a result. Another person might have less challenging experiences and yet respond as if one of these had the power to control and constrain their life for ever.

## Activity 3

### Find the links

On your Life Chart from Activity 2:

- 1 Give the date of each event (an approximate date will suffice).
- 2 Using different colours, indicate whether each event or person was, overall, positive, negative or neutral for you.
- 3 Write a few details about the events and people you chose – such as what you felt about them then, and what you feel now.
- 4 Use arrows or other symbols or icons to draw connections between the events, and between people and events. Who or what influenced later stages in your journey?
- 5 Circle just a few people and events that have the most significant impact on your life and performance now.

## Create the narrative

You have gathered and ordered the raw material of your story. Now all you have to do is to write it out – or tell your story aloud and record it. It is tempting to cut out this step – but it is important to let the narrative develop. This will not only draw together your thinking; it will develop it.

## Reflection

### A changing perspective?

- ★ How does your current narrative differ from what you might have said about your life in the past?
- ★ Has your interpretation of any particular events, people or other aspects of your life changed over time?
- ★ Has your interpretation of your own role in events – and of what you are able to do – changed over time?

### Want to know more?

Lori Gottlieb (2019) *How changing your story can change your life*. (22 Nov 2019) (TED talk on Youtube.com).

# Themes in your tale

## Recurring themes

We noted above that each telling of a story, and especially our personal narrative, brings new variations. By analysing what we choose to include and exclude each time, what we emphasise or brush over, the themes that run through our story of events, and changes in our interpretations from one telling to another, we can gain clues about ourselves that we might otherwise miss.

### Reflection

#### Themes in your tale



Read through your 'narrative' or 'story' considering the following.

- ★ **Positives and negatives** Have you included more positive or more negative experiences and events for your story? Could you have included more positive items? Are you avoiding negative or difficult issues that throw light on your experiences?
- ★ **Themes or patterns** Do any general patterns emerge in your story? For example, is it full of adventures? Disasters? Effort? Reward? Disappointments? Seized or missed opportunities? Meeting and losing people? Solitary achievement or collaboration with others?
- ★ **The general tone** of your story? Is it sad or happy? Full of praise or blame? How does it read?

Then consider what these themes in your narrative suggest about how you view your life. Is this the most helpful approach for you? Does it further the 'vision' you identified in Chapter 2?

## Life is like a ...

It is also helpful to stand back from the details of your story and consider how you sum up your life, such as in everyday conversations or when things go wrong. Your instant responses can provide insights into how you view your own control over your destiny and how your life feels to you.

One way of doing this is to consider how you describe your life and the similes ('my life is like ...'),

or metaphors ('my life is ...') you use. Some people compare life to a journey or a mission or a battle. Others think of it as a gift, a burden, an adventure, a lesson to be learnt, a trial, a treasure trove, a bottomless pit, a walk in the dark. These are their 'life metaphors'.

Maybe you catch yourself using expressions such as: 'My life is a disaster waiting to happen ...' or 'It's all part of life's rich tapestry ...'. If so, these indicate your metaphor for your life. By identifying and analysing the metaphors you use currently, you can gain insights that you might not have noticed before about how you view life – and how this might come across to other people.

### Activity 5

#### Life metaphor



- ➔ What is your personal metaphor for your life? You might need to give some thought to this. If you think there is more than one metaphor, just select one for this exercise.
- ➔ What words do you use, if any, to express that metaphor in daily life?
- ➔ How does it help you to make sense of your life?
- ➔ In what ways, if any, does this metaphor help, inspire or hold you back?

### Activity 6

#### A new life metaphor?



After the previous activity, you might like to create a new metaphor for your life, to inspire you for the future. If so:

- 1 Choose an item that inspires a positive reaction in you.
- 2 Jot down the words: My life is a ... (or, if you prefer, My life is like a ...). List as many points of comparison as you can between the item and your life.
- 3 Try out different comparisons, or metaphors until you find the one(s) you prefer. Pin this up for a while as a reminder.

# Yourself as Hero

You are the key player in your story, its 'hero'. One way to make sense of your life is to analyse the role you give yourself within your life story. This can give you insights not only into your character, but also into how other people might perceive you. For this to be helpful, you need to be honest with yourself and about what kind of character comes across.



## Reflection



### You as 'hero'

- ★ Do you feel comfortable about the kind of hero that comes across in your story?
- ★ How far does the hero you have chosen represent the way you really think, feel and act?
- ★ What does this choice tell you about the way you view your life or yourself as an active agent in your own story?
- ★ Do you play very different roles depending on who you are with, where you are or what you are doing?

## Activity 7



### The Hero

Consider the roles you have given yourself in your narrative: what part do you play in the plot? For example, are you active, taking the lead, and making things happen? Or do you sit back and wait for things to happen? Are you the passive recipient of other people's actions? Maybe you sound like you are forever in battle, holding your ground?

Overall, have you written the narrative so that you sound mainly like:

- ➔ the Warrior stepping into battle and fighting your own or others' wars OR
- ➔ the Saint who is always doing good and in the right
- ➔ the Martyr who has to suffer so others can benefit
- ➔ the Adventurer, looking for new experiences
- ➔ the Scapegoat, carrying the blame for others
- ➔ the Ruler, commanding the troops or the people
- ➔ the Sportsperson, playing a good game
- ➔ the Villain, who has been lucky or clever enough not to be caught
- ➔ the Wounded Soldier, who needs time to heal
- ➔ the Conjuror, pulling unexpected rabbits out of hats
- ➔ the Dragon, the Knight, or the Maiden awaiting rescue
- ➔ a different kind of hero? (Identify what type).

# Identify your personal caricature

Self-recognition is notoriously difficult to achieve. However, one way of gaining perspective on the self is through use of a 'caricature' technique.

A good caricaturist helps us to recognise a person by exaggerating particular features. These are often the characteristics that make the person more individual and distinctive.

By exaggerating our own personality traits, behaviours, speech patterns, or events that seem to recur in our lives, we can stand back and take

a look at these with a fresh eye. This may bring home certain aspects of ourselves more clearly. We gain a great deal from such insights – although self-recognition can involve a certain degree of embarrassment or discomfort.

The activity below allows you to stand back for a moment from your main narrative and work with some emerging themes. This is intended as a light-hearted activity that can, nonetheless, enable useful personal insights to emerge.

## Activity 8

### Create a personal caricature



Jot down the outline of your narrative again – or selected sections from it. This time, deviate from your memory of actual events in order to exaggerate certain key themes. Select personal traits, mannerisms, behaviours, speech, and/or themes in your life that you think are typical of you. If you are not sure about what these might be, ask a friend. For example:

- ➔ If the first draft of your story (or your life in general) contains many examples of 'beginning' and 'starting' activities, exaggerate this theme, adding in many more things that you 'started' (real or imaginary).
- ➔ If it contains many examples of meeting people, then flood your next draft with meetings, inventing meetings that never happened.
- ➔ If there are a number of accidents or disasters in your story, invent a whole lot more.
- ➔ If you think a particular comment is very typical of you, write it out seven times each time you introduce it.

I was just about to do that.  
I was just about to do that.  
I was just about to do that.  
I was just about to do that.  
I was just about to do that.  
I was just about to do that.  
I was just about to do that.



## Reflect



- ★ Read through your story, aloud. What does it tell you about yourself?
- ★ Are you comfortable with your personal caricature – or do you want to change it?
- ★ Were you able to see the funny side – and laugh at your caricature?
- ★ How can you use this 'caricature' or 'exaggeration' technique to assist your personal development?

# Choices

Sometimes, it can feel that other people, events, history or 'destiny' rule the plot of our lives. Whilst it is true that we are all only part of a much bigger story, and that there are many influences on our lives over which we do not exercise control, we are agents in our own tale. There are choices that we make every day, some of which turn out to be more significant than others.

## Activity 9



### The choices made

On your life chart, mark occasions when you made a choice that had a big impact upon your life. Then consider:

- ➔ What kinds of choices have you faced?
- ➔ What opportunities did you take, create or miss?
- ➔ What were the effects of the choices you made on later events?

Think of at least two ways that your life might be different now if you had made alternative choices – one 'good', one 'bad'.

## Reflect



- ★ Were all the outcomes of the 'good choices' ones you anticipated at the time – and would still welcome?
- ★ In what ways did the 'bad choice' provide opportunities that, in retrospect, were positive in some way?
- ★ What do you think characterises a 'good choice'?

## The impact of choices



There are two activities on the companion site that can help you to think through the impact of decisions you made.

## Evaluating experience

All choices and the experiences they entail bring opportunities to learn and to develop new strengths and insights. Your story will include experiences that were wonderful or unwelcome, which developed you as a person, shaped your personality and influenced how you view the world now. This should be apparent from your personal narrative.

## Activity 10



### Evaluating opportunities

- ➔ What were the most difficult things you had to face? What did you learn from those that could help you in achieving your 'vision' (page 37)?
- ➔ How easy or difficult do you find it to regard experiences and challenges as 'opportunities'?

## The 'next chapter'

Having written the narrative of your story to date and analysed it from various perspectives, it is time now to think about what the next chapter in your story might be.

## Activity 11



### The 'next chapter'

How do you want the plot of your life to unfold? What kind of story do you want to be telling about your life in 20 years' time?

- ➔ Is that reflected in your 'vision' (pages 37–9)?
- ➔ What kind of role do you wish to play in the next chapter of your life?
- ➔ What would need to change in your life now in order for you to play that role successfully?

# Your top forty and significant seven

Look again at your life story. Count how many examples of personal success you included. Was there at least one for every year of your life? If not, consider writing in some more.

Our personal success is rather like breathing: we rarely notice it on an everyday basis. However, it is hard to ignore 'hiccups' – the things that go wrong. Beaver (1998) argues that we do not spend enough time thinking of all the things we *can* do and spend too long focusing on what we *cannot* do. She encourages us to draw up very long lists of what we can do – and much shorter ones of things we cannot!

## Activity 12

### Top forty strong points



- 1 Make a list of at least forty of your strong points, successes, qualities, attitudes and attributes. If that sounds like too many, you are underestimating yourself.
  - 2 Put stars \*\*\* next to your ten greatest assets.
  - 3 Circle the seven of which you are most proud.
- There is a template you can use on the companion site.

## Reflection

### Value your strengths



- ★ What is it like to recognise so many strengths in yourself? Do you ever pause to value these?
- ★ What is the ONE thing that you do best?
- ★ Are these strengths appreciated by people around you? If not, how do you account for this? Do you hide your strengths? Do you surround yourself with people who don't appreciate you?
- ★ What could you change in order to gain more recognition for your strengths?

Jot down your thoughts.

## Activity 13

### Seven significant changes



List seven significant improvements or changes you could make in your life that would help you attain your goals (or generally make life easier or happier for you!).

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	

## Reflection

### Considering change



- ★ What is it like to recognise areas that you could improve or change?
- ★ What do you do, at present, to cope with them or to work around them on a day-to-day basis? Do you hide them, develop strategies to work around them, blame other people or find help and support?
- ★ Who or what can help you to manage better in these areas?

# Your learning history

Early learning experiences are amongst the most profound influences upon our attainment and current levels of performance. They affect our approaches to learning itself, shaping our belief in ourselves and our ability to see opportunities for improving our performance. In writing out your life story, you might already have included some significant events that had an impact on how you learn and study. This is an opportunity to focus specifically on your learning history and how it affects you now.

## Activity 14



### Learning history

- a List the incidents that have had the most significant positive impact on the way you now approach study and learn new things. They could be anything from times you were happy at school or enjoyed unexpected success in a subject, or support you received, or even just a few words that appeared insignificant at the time but left a lasting impression on you.
- b Then, list those incidents that have had a significant negative impact on the way you now approach study or learn. In what ways do these affect you now? Now you have identified them, what could you do to reduce their effect on you?

## Draw on your insights

Use your insights from the activities opposite to draw out the particular factors that enable you to learn best. The self-evaluation on pages 60–1 can help you to pinpoint these.

## Activity 15



### Best learning experiences

Think back to your time at school. Call to mind one or more occasions when your learning seemed to flow, when it was fun, when you enjoyed it and felt a sense of accomplishment. Make a list now, before reading on, of all the conditions that helped to give rise to such positive learning experiences for you.

If you find this tricky, keep returning to the sentences:

'My best learning experiences were when ...'

OR

'I got most out of learning when ...'

## The effect on you now?

### Reflection



#### The impact of your educational experiences

- ★ What positive things did your educational experience give you that you carry into learning now, whether in formal study or life more generally?
- ★ Consider your responses to the activity on pages 60–1. Which of these could you bring or adapt to other situations such as at work or for personal goals?
- ★ Jot down your thoughts.

## Agents in our learning destinies

Recognising and understanding why we study the way we do, and why we respond to some learning approaches, content or contexts better than others, can help us to take control of how we learn and study best now. It is useful to understand how history shapes us – but also important to remember that we are active agents in our own history. We make the difference.

Whatever the situation, we bring the mental attitude that affects how well we can learn. We decide whether we will approach a task with a constructive attitude, and bring the necessary levels of curiosity, effort and time. We may not be able to determine many aspects of study, but we do make choices that will affect how well we study, how much we learn and how far we enjoy doing so.

# What helps you to learn?

## Typical responses

Below is a list of typical responses to the activity 'Best learning experiences' on page 59, drawn from diverse groups and educational contexts. Consider how similar these are to items on your own list – or are worth adding to it. Check  all that are relevant to you.

## My best learning experiences were when ...

### *Nature of the task*

- I felt the task set was interesting, worthwhile or of value to myself or others
- the learning was relevant to the real world or had practical uses
- when the task involved learning new theory
- the work was going to be seen and appreciated by someone other than a teacher
- it was clear what was expected from me
- the task had familiar aspects to it
- the task felt completely fresh and new
- I could move around or there was movement built into the activities
- there was a creative aspect to the task
- there was personal choice in some aspects of the task
- there was a 'teaser', mystery or puzzle to be solved

### *Social learning*

- I could work on my own
- I could work with my friends
- people encouraged me and kept me going
- new people joined the class or group
- we worked in small groups or teams
- we worked in pairs
- we taught each other
- I helped and supported others
- there was a diverse range of people
- I was inspired by others

### *The teacher*

- the teacher was fair
- the teacher knew what or how I wanted to learn
- the teacher thought of interesting ways of introducing new material
- I felt the teacher was on my side supporting, motivating and inspiring me

### *Feelings and emotions*

- I was treated like I mattered; my opinions and ideas counted
- there was praise and appreciation which came across as genuine
- I was able to take pride in my own work
- I enjoyed what I was learning

### *Timing*

- I had time to finish what I was doing without rushing
- I had time to absorb what I was learning
- there were lots of breaks so I didn't feel overloaded
- I was working under pressure

### *Mastery*

- the tasks were not too difficult
- I felt I understood one thing before moving on to another
- the tasks set were manageable but challenging so that there was a sense of both competence and achievement
- I felt I was really being stretched

## Assessment

- I understood the point of the assessment
- I felt I had a fair chance of submitting the work that was expected
- I had plenty of practice in the method of assessment
- I knew I couldn't get away with not doing my best
- assessment and feedback were spread out across the year
- assessment and feedback were concentrated into one or two points during the year
- my hard work was recognised
- I felt the way it was marked was fair

## Technology

- I could do everything through my device/laptop
- I was able to get away from the screen often
- I made good use of the available tools
- I found good apps to support my study
- I used social media for encouragement/ ideas
- I made use of a lot of video and/or audio
- I ignored what other students were saying or doing on social media

## Special features

- we went on field trips or visits
- we had guest speakers or celebrity visits
- we showed our work to others (such as visitors)
- we linked up with students in other locations/ countries

## Engagement and mindset

- I really engaged fully with what I was learning
- I felt confident that I could do it
- I felt I belonged and was entitled to be there
- I was committed to making a success of it.

## Others?

1

2

3

## Reflection



### Create ideal conditions for learning

At school, you might have been dependent upon other people to create the right conditions for your learning. Now, you have more control over your learning experiences, whether formal learning for your qualification or in learning informally at work or in everyday life.

Which of the items on the list above could you put in place for yourself now, to enhance your current learning experience as far as possible?

# Responding to setbacks

In your narrative and learning history, you might have experienced obstacles and let-downs. Setbacks can lead to disappointment, discouragement or even 'denial' – a pretence that nothing went wrong. Whilst we would all rather avoid them, they can still lead to positive outcomes even if these require some rooting out or take time to become apparent.

Setbacks and challenges contain the seeds of future success. Considering them constructively is empowering, and opens up valuable insights into how to approach similar situations differently. Successful people usually say they learnt more from failures than success, or became 'better people' as a result. Apparent 'failure' can help us to face up to realities we otherwise try to avoid. They force us to pause, review, take new paths, meet new people, try things that we wouldn't have done, and to gain valuable qualities such as resilience, coping skills and empathy.

It is noticeable that the stories of many successful people include a critical experience when they were

dismissed, belittled, ignored, suffered discrimination, or encountered a serious setback. Paradoxically, dealing with such events became the driving force for their success.

This is also noticeable amongst students facing the most extreme difficulties or complex circumstances. Many with serious disabilities or multiple responsibilities often find ways of completing their degrees and developing careers when others are overwhelmed by lesser hurdles. Typically, they learn to use apparent disadvantage as advantage, developing skills in managing time brilliantly, applying technologies in imaginative ways, negotiating, multi-tasking or prioritising.

Anybody can make use of difficulty in order to emerge stronger – but not everybody does. When faced with bad news, setbacks or adversity, we can decide to use these in various ways:

- ★ as an excuse for not doing something
- ★ to 'prove' something
- ★ to keep going as before
- ★ or to learn and move forward.

## Reflection



### The 'best failure'

Jot down responses to at least five of the following:

- 1 What, on the surface of it, was the best 'mistake' or failure of your life so far?
- 2 What characterised it as a 'failure'?
- 3 What was your own role in it?
- 4 What good and poor choices did you make?
- 5 What lessons did you learn? What benefits resulted from learning those lessons?
- 6 What opportunities arose out of this event?
- 7 How did the event spur you to action that you might not otherwise have taken?
- 8 What does this event tell you about the nature of success and failure?

## Reflection



### Setbacks to your 'vision'?

In your personal journal or blog consider:

- ★ What is making it hard for you to achieve the 'vision' you identified on page 37). What setbacks might you face?
- ★ How might you convert such difficulties into sources of insight, inventiveness, motivation and/or connection with others?
- ★ How have you already dealt with any setbacks to achieving your visions of goals? What strengths did this demonstrate, that you could call upon for the future?

Locate your response where you can see it easily – and call on it when needed.

# Drawing on your expertise

## Personal expertise metaphor

When confronted with new tasks, people often say things such as:

- ★ I don't know where to start.
- ★ I can't cope with this.
- ★ I am no good at things like this.
- ★ I am not good enough.

Sometimes, the gap between previous experience and the current task can make a task more difficult to achieve.

However, we can take on such challenges more easily if we recognise, value and draw upon an area of personal expertise. One way of doing this is to use your own expertise as a template or metaphor for finding points of connection between familiar and new tasks. This helps to make sense of what is involved in the new task, and as you are using your own internal model of how to approach a task, it can boost your confidence and problem-solving capability too.

Your area of expertise can be effective even when it seems to bear little relation to the task in hand, as the examples below illustrate. Conversely, failing to recognise the similarity between new problems and those that we can solve already, is a key obstacle to resolving problems and improving performance.

Below, are examples of how three students made effective use of their areas of expertise from everyday life in order to address their study difficulties. As you read these, consider how you might use such an approach in order to make use of your own expertise.

## Examples

### *Victor and car maintenance*

Victor's challenge was in producing academic writing. He had little writing experience because he entered university from a foundation programme that did

not use formal written assignments. He was very reluctant to write and was convinced that he lacked the logical, sequential skills needed for continuous prose. On the other hand, he identified a strong interest and practical experience in car engines – which he used as his 'expertise metaphor'.

First, Victor listed all the processes and skills he used when working with car engines, then those he had found out were involved in writing an essay. He then looked for significant points of comparison between the two sets of lists. As he did so, he thought of further points for each list.

Victor analysed the ways car mechanics use skills in:

- ★ finding out information (about the engine)
- ★ sequencing the order of tasks
- ★ planning time to meet deadlines
- ★ weighing up options
- ★ forming a theory about what is wrong
- ★ testing out ideas (about how to fix it)
- ★ selecting between options using the appropriate methods for the job
- ★ prioritising tasks
- ★ testing out results
- ★ re-evaluating the work done
- ★ reflecting on performance.

Victor found that the most helpful approach for him was to compare the factors that make an engine run with those needed for writing an essay. He wrote these out as a list of key points which he could look at whenever he found academic writing difficult. His list is reproduced below (page 64).

This might not be how other people view an essay: the important point is that Victor's metaphor worked for him. It released his potential, not simply to write essays, but to write good essays. This was because the process of writing now made sense in terms of things he really knew about.

# Personal expertise metaphor: examples

## Victor: 'My Engine'

When I first started university, I had not worked at the academic level required by university before. When I visited the learning development unit ... [it was] suggested that I treat an essay like a car engine. When I broke the metaphor (analogy) down, this is what I came up with:

- 1 Fuel – this supplies the necessary stored kinetic energy to power the engine – research at the library, lectures, seminars.
- 2 Battery – this stores the electrical energy – research notes, essay outline.
- 3 Oil – this lets the engine run smoothly – spelling and grammar.
- 4 The alternator – supplies electrical energy necessary for the engine to run – the essay question, unit guide, using aims etc.
- 5 Engine ignition system – supplies the spark to ignite the fuel, and the sequence in which the cylinders fire – paragraphs.
- 6 Introduction – where this essay is going.
- 7 Main body – critical discussion of main points.
- 8 Conclusion – insights gained and mileage from essay, i.e. 'What I have learned'.
- 9 Tool box – this is where the necessary tools are bought, borrowed or acquired, and stored – dyslexia workshops, English workshops, Accelerated Learning seminars, etc.

This can be broken down even more ... When all the elements of the essay are integrated successfully then it should flow like a smoothly running engine.

Victor B.

## Roger: aircraft assembly

Roger consistently failed to produce written work. He wrote well but was too much of a perfectionist. He evolved his ideas well during the process of writing and this also meant that, in practice, he would need to produce more than one draft. However, he always approached each draft as if it were the last, starting the whole of his work 'in neat' and editing beautifully as if this were the draft he would submit. This meant he never reached the end; for all his hard work, he never had a finished item to submit. In effect, he was fine-tuning his work too early in the process.

Roger's area of expertise was assembling light aircraft that arrived from overseas as 'flatpacks'. He analysed the process of assembling a plane and the similarities with assembling an essay. At this point, he recognised that if he tried to build a plane as he did an essay, that would be impossible, too. If he tightened all the nuts and bolts, sanded down, painted and so forth on one part of the plane before going on to the next,

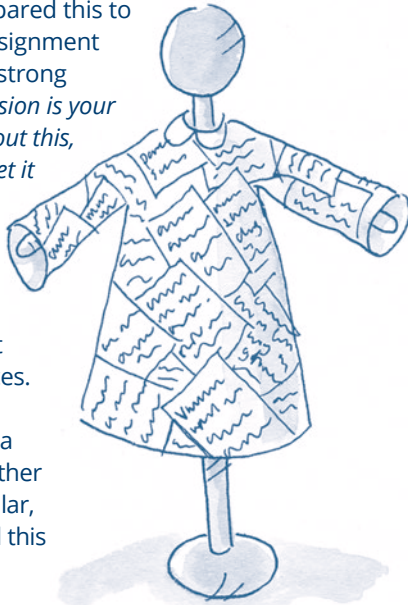
it would be impossible to manoeuvre all the pieces into place. The tightening up and final touches should be undertaken only when all the pieces are in place. Roger could easily see the comparison with fine-tuning an essay too early.

Once he had drawn this initial parallel, Roger found many other similarities between aircraft assembly and academic study. When introduced to new information, for example, he felt he should play around with it, like pieces of the flat pack, observing roughly how to structure these: *'As you bring them closer together, you are working quite globally – with an eye on how it all fits together. Then you can home in and complete sections.'* Similarly, he could see how good planning and structure were like 'glue' that held writing together: *'Keep an eye on how the sections will link. Aircraft glue is like a linking sentence, or a logical sequence that dovetails into the next item.'*

## Luzia and dressmaking

Luzia also had difficulties with essay writing. She had low self-esteem and was reluctant to identify any area of expertise. Finally, she settled on dressmaking skills. She listed key processes in making a garment, then drew parallels between these and essay writing. Luzia saw that both dressmaking and essay writing require a clear vision of the final product. She couldn't set about choosing a pattern or buying materials until she had a sense of what she was trying to achieve. She compared this to interpreting an assignment title and having a strong argument: *'Your vision is your interest in it – without this, you just wouldn't get it done.'*

Similarly, both garments and essays need structure, and that affects other choices. Before starting a new garment, Luzia would decide whether it would have a collar, cuffs or pleats and this guided her choice of pattern and material. The initial work with the pattern affected quality later: *'the pieces of a dressmaking pattern have to be laid out in a precise way so that the cloth falls properly'*. For a good essay, the pieces of the argument need to be organised logically. Tacking a dress together before the final sewing was like writing drafts before a final write-up. Trying a dress on to check for 'final flaws' was like proofreading. For Luzia, the most important element of dressmaking was having 'equal seams'. She saw this as like treating different schools of thought equally in an essay: *'you must ask the same questions of each'*. The dressmaking analogy enabled her to make sense of essay writing, calling upon her own expertise.



### Make it 'make sense'

Donaldson (1978) showed that young children are capable of performing tasks well above their supposed developmental level if tasks are presented in a way that 'makes sense' to them. Victor, Roger and Luzia

demonstrate that this is also true of adult expertise. They used their own areas of relative expertise to address tasks that they had previously considered too difficult. They used their expertise templates as extended metaphors to draw analogies that helped them make sense of tasks they had found challenging.

Students often resist the idea that they are an 'expert' in anything. The first task, therefore, is to identify an area of expertise. This won't make you 'arrogant', as some people fear. Rather, it will provide you with a useful problem-solving tool. Select any tasks or skills that have distinct stages or aspects and that you:

- ★ perform with relative ease
- ★ can complete without supervision
- ★ feel comfortable doing – and may even enjoy.

### Applying the metaphor

**Type** It can work even if your area of expertise is very different in type or complexity.

**Purpose** The aim is to gain insights into how you get things done, so it doesn't matter if you overstretch the metaphor in order to achieve that (it is problem-solving not a literary exercise!).

**Level of expertise** You don't have to be of Olympic standard to be an 'expert' for this activity – expertise in everyday tasks can work, too.

**Points of comparison** Check whether it works better for you to use component parts (as Victor did), processes (like Roger) or skills (Luzia) – or other factors such as emotions or personal qualities.

**Brain work** Don't rush it – mull over the potential connections. Let your brain find and form links.

**Problem structure** Look for points of similarity in the underlying structures of the familiar and new tasks. This helps you form a generalised problem-solving approach (or 'heuristic') to use more readily in new situations.

**Order** Focus on analysing your expertise in depth before starting to draw analogies.

**Relevant differences** Identify these and consider their implications.

# Applying your expertise

You can access fuller versions of the following templates on the companion site.



## a. Identify your area of expertise

Select one task you can complete well (with ease, without supervision, etc.). It could be from your 'top forty' activity (see page 58). It could be making a cake, dancing, playing pool, swimming, painting a picture, fixing a computer, etc. Consider this as your area of expertise for this activity.

Area of personal expertise  
(state which)

--

## b. Break it down

- ★ Make a list of the key components, processes and/or skills involved in that task, as in the examples of Victor, Roger and Luzia (pages 63–5).
- ★ List the skills and qualities involved in completing typical activities in your area of expertise.

Components (parts or features -  
see Victor), pages 63–4

Processes (the way things are  
done: see Roger), page 64

Skills used in this area of  
expertise (see Luzia), page 65

Components (parts or features - see Victor), pages 63–4	Processes (the way things are done: see Roger), page 64	Skills used in this area of expertise (see Luzia), page 65

## c. Detail the new task/situation

Area of personal expertise  
(state this).

--

Components (parts or features)

Processes (how things are done)

Skills needed for this task

Components (parts or features)	Processes (how things are done)	Skills needed for this task

## d. Draw out similarities

Draw parallels between your area of expertise and the area for improvement, using your lists for (b) and (c) above. Continue to compare the two (or to 'extend the metaphor') as far as you can, so that you are really using your area of chosen expertise to assist you in the area for improvement. For example, if your area of expertise was 'playing computer games' and your area for improvement was 'speaking in public', keep completing the following sentence: 'Speaking in public is like playing computer games because ...'. When you run out of ideas, take a break to do something different. Then come back and complete the sentence a few more times.

Use the table here (or on the companion site) to list significant points of comparison (such as in component parts, processes, skills etc.) between your area of expertise and the task you want to address.

	This aspect of the new task, problem or situation is like ...	... this aspect of my area of expertise
e.g.	<i>Using academic conventions for study is like...</i>	<i>... understanding the off-side rule for football (much easier once you know it!)</i>
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

Highlight the points of comparison that you think will be most helpful. Identify any actions that arise as a result of your insights into how to manage the new task or situation.

## e. Consider any significant differences

Be aware of any significant differences between the new task or situation and your area of expertise. Consider the implications of these (if any).

	This aspect of the new task, problem or situation is significantly different ...	... from my area of expertise, so...
e.g.	<i>There are usually lifeguards present to watch over our safety when swimming</i>	<i>... so I will need to work out the health and safety implications for myself for the event</i>
1		
2		
3		
4		

The implications of these differences are:

# Review: Know yourself

## 1 Tell your story

We are each the author of our own story. We shape its narrative and provide the interpretations. These can be sources of energy, insight and motivation that carry us towards our vision of success. Re-narrating and reflecting on it enable more conscious awareness of how to shape our future story. Noticing recurring themes and repeated scenarios in the narrative can help us to decide which patterns to keep or change.

## 2 Recognise your 'life metaphor'

Bring more awareness to how you interpret events in your story and how that, in turn, affects your attitudes, mood and behaviour. Consider whether it helps you. Does it affect how others perceive you?

## 3 Identify your role as hero

Consider whether you are happy with the kind of hero you are in your story so far – and whether that is the role you want to play for the future. Will it help you achieve the success you want for yourself?

## 4 Acknowledge your strong features

Use caricature to help you recognise aspects of yourself that stand out as typical. Note your strong defining features. Benefit from being able to see flaws, accept mistakes and laugh at your 'funny side'.

## 5 Note your choices

Become more aware of how your choices are affecting your life story. Use your insights to influence your responses to opportunity and to make better decisions.

## 6 Value your strengths whilst being open to change

Don't underestimate how much you bring to the table – and also the benefits of making changes so you become even better.

## 7 Use your learning history

Analyse your experience to work out what helps you to learn best. Use this to help you in new situations.

## 8 Value your 'failure' and setbacks as well as successes

There is often much more to learn from setbacks than from success. Recognise both as opportunities to gain useful insights about what to do, or not to do, in the future.

## 9 Understand your areas of relative expertise

Recognise and value your areas of relative expertise. Analyse these so that you understand better how you perform at your best. Use your insights in order to make better sense of new problems and situations.

## 10 Apply your personal 'expertise metaphor' or template

Draw out relevant similarities and differences between your areas of expertise and new tasks or contexts, so that you create a personal working model for how to proceed. Use familiar strengths to give you the confidence to tackle new tasks.

# Chapter 4

# Improving your personal performance



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ understand your own needs for performing at your best
- ✓ identify how your learning and performance are affected by your current skills, habits, attitudes, performance, experience and strategies (SHAPES)
- ✓ evaluate your personal preferences for factors such as structure, pressure, external direction, sensory mode, working with others and using specific approaches to tasks
- ✓ consider whether you are using key well-being factors to your advantage
- ✓ draw together your insights in order to identify your optimal conditions for performing well – and to put those conditions into place.

## Introduction

We all have preferred ways of approaching tasks – and we vary in what we need in order to work at our best. The more we understand the factors that impact on our performance, the better we are placed to create our optimal conditions. Knowing what works for you means you can decide when it is useful for you to work to your preferences – and when to work around them.

This chapter provides activities and resources to help you consider a wide range of factors that can, potentially, impact on personal performance, whether for study or work. By considering your performance from many angles, you can derive your own formula for success. You can then test it out and adapt it for different contexts and tasks.

## Learning and performance

How well we do things depends partly on what we have learnt and partly on how we put that learning into action. Broadly speaking:

- 1 Learning is about finding out ‘how to ...’ – whether through accident, experience, instruction, theory, practice or other means.
- 2 Performance includes learning, but involves putting learning, knowledge, skills, personal qualities and experience into practice.

We may be better at one of these than the other. We might, for example, have learnt a speech well but not be able to perform it in public. Alternatively, we might find it hard to learn a speech yet speak well in public or when improvising.

In general, people judge us by how well we perform – not by what we believe we have learnt. This means that it is worth considering the conditions that are conducive to us performing at our best.

# Achieving more

## Unique individuals

The better you understand your own performance, the more you can achieve. This book takes the position that we are each unique in the particulars of:

- ★ how we learn and work
- ★ what we bring to learning and tasks
- ★ how we respond to circumstances, such as to change or other people
- ★ what we need to achieve at our best.

Those particular details can be what really counts – if not all the time, then at least for specific activities or for significant tasks and occasions.

## Personal preferences

We all have preferences in the way we work and study. Factors that have a profound effect upon one person's performance, might not affect someone else. Dunn and Dunn isolated 21 different factors that can affect learning. They found that individuals can be acutely sensitive to particular conditions, and under-achieve if these are not in place. Changing an apparently insignificant aspect, such as seating position, or the amount of light or noise or social learning can have dramatic effects for confidence, outcomes and well-being (Dunn et al., 1995; Lovelace, 2005).

This chapter enables you to study your own preferences in detail.

## Learning 'types'?

There has been much debate about the ideas of personality 'types' and 'learning styles'. You can try out some popular versions of this later in the chapter, and decide for yourself whether the idea of a 'type' helps or hinders you.

## Attaining peak performance

### More than just 'getting by'

Much of the time, we can 'get by' by doing things in broadly the same way as other people or using strategies that worked for us in the past. However, if we wish, we can take action to achieve more than just doing 'OK'.

To do so, we need to observe and consider the fine details of what really works for us as individuals – the attitudes, behaviours and conditions that enable us to perform well with maximum ease. This attention to detail, even to factors that appear minor at first glance, is valued in professional fields such as medicine, sports or business where success counts.

## The athletes' approach

Top athletes make countless fine adjustments to all aspects of their training, equipment and technique just to improve by the tiny but significant margins needed for success. They and their support teams investigate every angle, such as weather, environment, diet, clothing, sleep, mental attitude and focus, both during training (whilst learning) and for the day of the competition (performing). What is needed for training can be different from what is needed for competing.

This approach to shaping your mindset and behaviours in order to achieve 'peak performance' can be adapted and applied to academic and work performance too.

## Select the occasion

We do not need to pay minute attention to each aspect of every activity we undertake. However, it helps to be aware of what impacts most upon our performance – so that we can call upon that self-knowledge whenever we want to do well, gain a competitive edge or conserve time and energy.



# Personal performance and 'SHAPES'

## Skills

Academic, people, task and self-management skills enable you to perform effectively across a wide range of activities, whether for study, work or life. Consider how far your own performance is affected by your current skills. You can consider their impact on your academic study, for example, on page 74.

## Habits

a

When a set of actions or behaviours served us well in the past, it is tempting just to repeat them in new situations – even if they don't work well in these. It is usually easier to continue with familiar approaches rather than risk new ones. Sometimes our habits were not that helpful in the first place. Consider whether you are attached to habits or patterns of doing things that serve you well – or are now a hindrance. If so, what needs to change? See page 75. It can take several weeks of daily practice to change a habit, so using a habit-shaping tracker in your diary or planner can help.

## Attitudes

Whether we are conscious of it or not, our learning and performance are affected by the attitudes and beliefs that we bring to them. These have a powerful effect on our behaviours and emotions, and on how others perceive us and react to us. Consider whether you bring a constructive, 'can-do', self-motivating attitude to your study. See page 75.

## Preferences

Following our preferences can make tasks more enjoyable, less of an effort, more intuitive, and make it easier to stay on task for longer. You can consider these on page 76. However, what we 'prefer' does not necessarily work best, and might just reflect a habit or unhelpful comfort zone. What worked previously might not work under new conditions. Consider how willing you are to test your preferences to see whether they really help or hinder you – and to put them aside if needed.

## Experiences

Our past experiences shape our readiness and confidence to take on new tasks, as well as how we make sense of what is required. Pages 59–61 looked at the impact of experience on your learning. Consider how other experiences could be affecting your approach to study – and to other tasks (page 76).

## Strategies

Once you understand the factors that have an impact on your performance, you can devise better strategies to help you perform at your best. Consider whether you put sufficient time and thought into devising strategies that take account of the diverse factors that affect your performance for the activities that matter most to you (page 77). Consider your best SHAPES for tasks that you wish to find less stressful, tiring, time-consuming or boring – or that you just want to enjoy more.

# Changing SHAPES

As with other kinds of critical self-evaluation, SHAPES can help you make sense of personal performance at both a given moment and over time. You can capture your evaluation visually and see at a glance how your judgements change over time.

This is illustrated below for two students, Noleen and Idris. Their self-ratings changed a great deal in the first eight weeks of their course, as they gained more experience both of study and in making balanced self-evaluations. The criteria they used are available on pages 74–7 for you to use yourself.

## Noleen's SHAPES

### Self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses (week 8)

Weaker areas					SHAPES	Strengths				
Non-existent	Very weak	Weak ☆	Quite weak	A little weak		OK	Quite good	Good	Very good	Excellent
		☆			Skills					
		★			Habits					
					Attitudes					★
					Preferences				☆	
					Experience	★				
					Strategies		★			

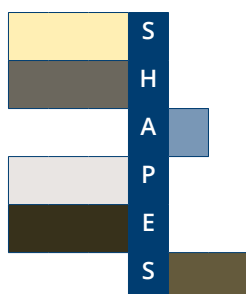
## Noleen

In week 1, Noleen gave herself the lowest ratings for almost everything. By week 8, she has both a more balanced appreciation of herself and more experience of study.

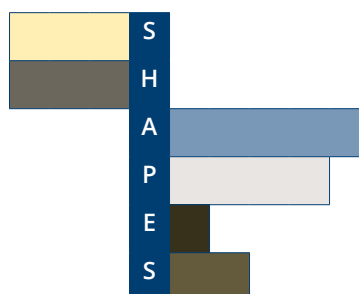
Noleen had had very little recent experience of study, so that, even in week 8, her study skills and habits are still relatively weak. On the other hand, she recognises that, in life and at work, she is self-motivating, well used to dealing with challenges constructively and sticking with difficult tasks until they are completed. These are useful attributes to bring to her studies. Her preferred ways of approaching tasks serve her well at work so she is monitoring them to see whether they prove effective for study too. This is reflected in her improved ratings for attitude, preferences and experience.

### SHAPES Profile: Noleen

Week 1 Snap Profile  
◀ Weaker Stronger ▶



Week 8 Profile  
◀ Weaker Stronger ▶



## Idris's SHAPES

### Self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses (week 8)

Weaker areas					SHAPES	Strengths				
Non-existent	Very weak	Weak	Quite weak	A little weak		OK	Quite good	Good	Very good	Excellent
					Skills					☆
					Habits	★				
	★				Attitudes					
					Preferences		☆			
					Experience	★				
			★		Strategies					

## Idris

Idris did very well at school and expected to find university easy. In week 1, all of his self-ratings were high.

By week 8, he finds study harder than expected and his SHAPES evaluation is more realistic – and looks very different.

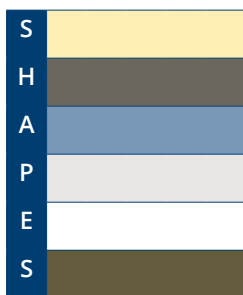
Idris is aware that he has become over-distracted by his social life and doesn't put in the study hours that he should. He thinks his grades are likely to suffer as a result, and is starting to feel discouraged and demotivated.

Although school prepared Idris well for many aspects of his course, he didn't learn how to cope when things don't go well. He realises this, so his rating for 'Experience' has dropped. He still rates 'Skills' highly, but feedback from his tutors and friends has persuaded him that his study habits are not as good as he thought and that his attitude is holding him back.

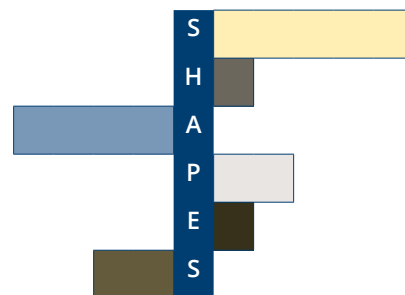
Idris is honest in admitting that he tends to study in ways that suit his preferences for socialising rather than what might work best for his grades. He recognises that he needs to change his study strategy in order to achieve well on his course.

### SHAPES Profile: Idris

Week 1 Snap Profile  
◀ Weaker Stronger ▶



Week 8 Profile  
◀ Weaker Stronger ▶





## Find your SHAPES for academic study

- (a) First, use the 'snap' profile, below, to make a quick judgement of your SHAPES for academic study.
- (b) Then complete the self-ratings below and on pages 75–7 to test out your judgement. For each, carry across your total scores to the 'Draw your ratings together' table on page 77. Then map your scores onto the chart on page 78, following the directions provided.

'Snap' SHAPES Profile					SHAPES	Strengths				
Weaker areas						OK	Quite good	Good	Very good	Excellent
Non-existent	Very weak	Weak	Quite weak	A little weak						
					Skills					
					Habits					
					Attitudes					
					Preferences					
					Experience					
					Strategies					

### Rate yourself for skills

For each of the following sets of statements, rate yourself on a scale of 0–5, where 0 is a low rating for how true this is of you at present, and 5 is the highest rating. Then add up your total scores.

Skills	
1 I am aware of the academic skills relevant to this level of study on my course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
2 I have well developed academic skills for this level of study on my course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
3 I am aware of the 'people skills' relevant to this level of study on my course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
4 I have well developed people skills for this level of study on my course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
5 I am aware of the task management skills relevant to this level of study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
6 I have well developed task management skills for this level of study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
7 I have a good understanding of the kinds of self-management skills relevant to this level of study on my course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
8 I have well developed self-management skills for this level of study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
9 I regularly review the skills I could develop further, in order to improve how well I manage my studies and achieve on my course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
10 I am proactive in developing a broad range of relevant skills	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
<b>Total score</b>	



## Rate yourself: habits and attitudes

Habits	
1 I have developed a good routine for daily study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
2 I have developed a good system for settling down quickly to study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
3 I understand the conditions I need in order to study most effectively	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
4 I am good at putting those conditions into place	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
5 I study at times of day (or night) when I can think clearly	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
6 I plan my time carefully to make sure I have enough time for study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
7 I use all of my planned study time effectively	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
8 I am aware of things I do that make my study less effective	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
9 I work at changing poor study habits, such as by using a habit tracker	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
10 I am good at managing potential distractions	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
<b>Total score</b>	

Attitudes	
1 I am strongly motivated to study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
2 I welcome academic challenges	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
3 Even when I don't feel like it, I find ways of settling down to work	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
4 I find ways of making study interesting	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
5 I believe that if I put in the time and energy, I have a good chance of doing well	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
6 I look for the enjoyment in the subjects I study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
7 I use tutor feedback constructively to improve my work	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
8 I look for what I can learn from both my successes and failures	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
9 If things don't go well, that spurs me to do better next time	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
10 I always 'go the extra mile' to make my work as good as possible	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
<b>Total score</b>	



## Rate yourself: preferences and experience

Preferences	
1 I know my preferences for 'structured'/'unstructured' ways of studying	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
2 I know what I prefer about working alone or with others when studying	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
3 I know whether I prefer to study in concentrated bursts or by taking many breaks	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
4 I know whether I prefer to work with the 'big picture' first or to work from the details	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
5 I know what kind of physical learning environment I prefer to work in	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
6 I know whether I prefer to learn by listening, looking or doing (see page 87)	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
7 I make effective use of my learning preferences to develop good learning strategies	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
8 I give a lot of thought to how I prefer to learn and study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
9 I am aware of when my learning preferences are not the most effective way for me to get things done	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
10 I take care not to indulge my preferences at the expense of doing things well	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
<b>Total score</b>	

You can undertake a more detailed analysis of your preferences using the tools on pages 80–91.

Experience	
1 I have recent experience of being in formal education	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
2 I have previous experience of work and/or study relevant to the course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
3 My previous experiences of learning have been positive	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
4 My previous study experiences prepared me well for this course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
5 The content of this course builds on material familiar to me	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
6 I have experience of the teaching methods used on this course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
7 I have experience of the assessment methods used on the course	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
8 I had experienced success in my previous studies	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
9 I have a lot of experience of keeping myself motivated	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
10 I give thought to how I can learn from, and make use of, my experience	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
<b>Total score</b>	



## Rate yourself: strategies

Strategies	
1 I recognise that the approach I take to my studies can have a major impact on how well I perform	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
2 I put time aside to reflect upon my approach to my study, considering whether it is really effective or not, and how I can improve it	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
3 I use structured self-evaluation and reflection to help me understand how I study best in different kinds of circumstances, and why	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
4 I draw effectively on my understanding of how I learn best – in order to devise an effective study regime for myself	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
5 I look out for tips, techniques and guidance on how to improve my study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
6 When I find out about different ways of approaching study, I make a point of trying these out for myself	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
7 I make sure I continue to develop my study skills to match the greater levels of difficulty and complexity for each level of study	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
8 I have a system for monitoring whether I am slipping into study practices that are relatively ineffective for me	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
9 I am able to recognise when I am becoming bored or demotivated and adapt my strategy in order to keep my mind engaged	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
10 I adapt my strategies to keep study interesting and enjoyable	☹ 0 1 2 3 4 5 ☺
<b>Total score</b>	

### Draw your ratings together

Bring together your ratings from your total scores on pages 74–7.

<input type="checkbox"/> Skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Habits	<input type="checkbox"/> Attitudes	<input type="checkbox"/> Preferences	<input type="checkbox"/> Experience	<input type="checkbox"/> Strategies
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Map these ratings onto the charts on the following page.



## Personal SHAPES

**Reflection** Which SHAPES factors do you think have the greatest impact upon your current learning and performance?

**Observation** For a few days, take more notice of how these different factors impact on how well you settle into study and how effective you are at getting things done. Observe what kind of difference they make, depending on what you are doing, what you are studying and who else is there.

# Map your SHAPES profile



- ➔ As in the examples of Noleen and Idris (pages 72–3, use a star ☆ to indicate where your ratings lie, using the first chart below. Use the ratings that you have drawn together on page 77.
- ➔ Then, shade the boxes outwards from the central spine ◀ ▶ to those boxes with your star. You may find your SHAPES easier to consider if you use a different colour for each row.

SHAPES Profile										
Weaker areas					SHAPES	Strengths				
0–5	5–10	11–15	16–20	21–25		26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50
Non-existent	Very weak	Weak	Quite weak	A little weak		OK	Quite good	Good	Very good	Excellent
					Skills					
					Habits					
					Attitudes					
					Preferences					
					Experience					
					Strategies					

To make your SHAPES profile stand out more clearly, map your results onto the chart below.

Skills Habits Attitudes Preferences Experiences Strategies										
Date or week:										
◀ Weaker						Stronger ▶				
					S					
					H					
					A					
					P					
					E					
					S					

# Use your SHAPES profile

Once you have derived your SHAPES profile, how can you make use of this to help you achieve success? Below are some suggestions.

## 1 'Honesty' check

Look back over your self-ratings. Consider whether you might have made an inaccurate rating for whatever reason. Be frank and honest with yourself.

Amend your ratings if necessary so that they are a true reflection that you can rely upon if you want to compare your self-ratings at a later date.

## 2 Validity check

Share your SHAPES profile with a friend, mentor, peer or tutor whose opinion you trust. Ask them whether it appears to them to be an accurate reflection of what they know of you as a student or colleague.

Although you do not need to agree with what they say, be open to their feedback. Consider what this tells you about yourself. If relevant, amend your SHAPES profile accordingly.

## 3 Evaluate your profile

Compare the snap SHAPES profile you made initially with the one based on your detailed self-ratings. Reflect on the accuracy of your snap judgement. Where were you most, or least, accurate? How might that be significant for you in understanding your attitudes towards your learning and performance?

## 4 Provide your analysis

Look again at the brief analyses of Noreen's and Idris's SHAPES on pages 72–3. Jot down a similar brief analysis of your own SHAPES profile. In doing so, consider how these factors interact with each other, and whether improvements or changes to particular factors could lead to improvements across several other aspects of your profile and performance.

## 5 Clarify personal preferences

When studying and operating independently, as is typical in higher education and in many jobs, we have

more chances to work in accordance with our own preferences. We can choose which ones to use, adapt, or work around.

**1 Identify your options** Think through the myriad options open to you for adapting the conditions under which you study or work. (See Personal performance factors below.)

**2 Identify your preferences** Identify, systematically, the options you prefer. Do this for your preferences generally and/or for particular types of task or assignments.

**3 Identify the strengths of such preferences** Consider which of your preferences, if any, appear to exert a profound effect on your performance. These are likely to be those items with high self-evaluation ratings.

**4 Consider impact** For such strong preferences (or aversions), consider when and how these affect the way you approach your study (or other tasks, if relevant).

**5 Take action** Think of ways that you can adapt your study to take on board your preferences, to enhance your learning experience and achievement.

## Personal performance factors

The activities on the following pages are designed to help you analyse the impact of different influences and conditions upon your personal performance. You might find that you do not have many strong preferences, and can perform well under all circumstances. If you do rate any aspects highly, you are identifying factors that might have a significant impact on your performance, for better or worse.

Your individual set of preferences equates to a Personal Performance Formula that is likely to enhance your success.

Use the following pages to identify your preferences and derive your own Personal Performance Formula.

# Performance Factors 1: Structure

The following activity looks at how far you prefer to work in structured or unstructured ways. Rate each pair of statements only once. Rating: select from a scale where 3 = 'very strong preference' and 0 = 'no preference'. Which of the statements in each pair is more true of you? How does this affect the way you study?

Less structure	Rating	More structure
1 I enjoy creative chaos	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I enjoy being very organised
2 My desk/workspace is a mess	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	My desk is always neat
3 I never plan my work	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I always plan my work in detail
4 I remember things in my head	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I write lots of lists
5 I never use bookmarks	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I always use bookmarks
6 I leave my papers out overnight	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I tidy my papers away at night
7 I work whenever I find the time	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I work to a strict routine
8 I study what interests me that day	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I work to a strict timetable
9 I have a relaxed approach to time	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I always meet deadlines
10 I am happy to 'go with the flow'	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I need a clear sense of the end goal

Score for less structure \_\_\_\_\_

Score for more structure \_\_\_\_\_

Total score:

## Interpreting your score

- ★ Total score: 0–10 suggests you are flexible for this factor.
- ★ Total score: 21–30 suggests you have very strong preferences, though these might not form a particular pattern.
- ★ A score of 21–30 for the 'Less structure' column suggests you have a strong preference for working or studying in your own way, in your own time. This can be a creative and independent way of working. Danger points to watch for are missing deadlines and not fulfilling the requirements for an assignment. It is worth considering whether a more organised and structured approach would help.
- ★ A score of 21–30 for the 'More structure' column suggests you have a strong preference for working or studying in an organised and systematic way. This can be efficient and productive; you are likely to be someone who gets things done in an organised and timely way. Danger points to watch for are over-rigid ways of thinking and working. It is worth considering whether greater flexibility and more variety would benefit you.
- ★ Scores of 11–20 for either column suggest moderate dependence on your preferences. It may be useful to experiment with features of the opposite column.

## Performance Factors 2: External direction

This looks at how far you prefer to work with or without external direction. Rate each pair of statements only once. Rating: select from a scale where 3 = 'very strong preference' and 0 = 'no preference'. Which of the statements in each pair is more true of you? How does this affect the way you study?

Less external direction	Rating	More external direction
<i>I prefer ...</i>		
1 lectures to be unpredictable	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	to know what to expect in lectures
2 a lecture or class just to unfold	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	an outline or agenda at the beginning of lectures and classes
3 to develop my own projects	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	to be given set assignments
4 to use my own assignment titles	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	tutors to set assignment titles
5 to explore topics for myself	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	the lecturer to provide an overview first
6 to develop my own reading list	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	tutors to give the reading list
7 to do things my own way	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	to be told exactly what I have to do
8 to pick up how to use software as I go	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	to go on a course to learn new software
9 to get on with study on my own	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	to have a lot of contact with tutors
10 to work out how to solve new problems	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	clear guidance on how to approach new problems

Score for less external direction \_\_\_\_\_

Score for more external direction \_\_\_\_\_

Total score:

### Interpreting your score

- ★ Total score: 0–10 suggests you are flexible for this factor.
- ★ Total score: 21–30 suggests you have very strong preferences, though these might not form a particular pattern.
- ★ A score of 21–30 for the 'Less external direction' column suggests you have a strong preference for taking control over how you work. This can be useful in developing as an independent, autonomous learner, capable of taking on new projects and setting targets for yourself. Danger points to watch for are possible weaknesses in team working and not fulfilling assignment requirements. It is worth considering whether you need to be more open to ideas from others.
- ★ A score of 21–30 for the 'More external direction' column suggests you are open to direction and leadership from others. This can be useful in ensuring that you are going in the right direction, for using time economically and for team working. Danger points to watch for are reliance on others to do your thinking and planning, and underdeveloped personal independence and leadership. It is worth considering how you might take more control over your own learning and be more open to exploration and risk-taking.
- ★ Scores of 11–20 for either column suggest moderate dependence on your preferences. It may be useful to experiment with features of the opposite column.

## Performance Factors 3: Social

This looks at how far you prefer to work with or without other people. Rate each pair of statements only once. Rating: select from a scale where 3 = 'very strong preference' and 0 = 'no preference'. Which of the statements in each pair is more true of you? How does this affect the way you study?

Preference for working with others	Rating	Preference for working alone
1 I prefer group work	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I prefer to work on my own
2 In a library, I prefer to sit near others	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	In a library, I prefer to sit on my own
3 I like to go through lecture notes with a friend	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I prefer to keep my lecture notes private
4 I value hearing other people's ideas	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I prefer to develop my own ideas
5 I enjoy the interaction in group work	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I enjoy thinking through an idea in quiet reflection
6 I learn more through discussion than reading	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I learn more from reading than discussion
7 I find groups have more ideas	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I come up with more ideas on my own
8 I find team working really useful	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	For me, team working is a waste of time
9 I like to discuss study assignments with others	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I prefer working alone on study assignments
10 I would find a study support group helpful	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I work best if left to myself

Score for working with others \_\_\_\_\_

Score for working alone \_\_\_\_\_

Total score:

### Interpreting your score

- ★ Total score: 0–10 suggests you are flexible for this factor.
- ★ Total score: 21–30 suggests you have very strong preferences, though these might not form a particular pattern.
- ★ A score of 21–30 for the 'Working with others' column suggests a strong social preference when working or studying. This can be useful for gaining a wide set of perspectives and ideas, for developing social skills, team working and mutual support. Danger points are possible over-reliance on others and not developing your own ideas. It is worth considering how far you would benefit from spending more time studying independently.
- ★ A score of 21–30 for the 'Working alone' column suggests a strong preference for solitary working. This can be useful for avoiding distractions, achieving goals and developing independence. Danger points could be under-developed interpersonal skills and failure to appreciate the work of others. It is worth considering in more depth what can be gained from working with others, such as skills that arise from reconciling varied sets of opinions and personalities. You might lose out by not gaining access to a wide set of perspectives, especially in real-life or 'applied' settings.
- ★ Scores of 11–20 for either column suggest moderate dependence on your preferences. It may be useful to experiment with features of the opposite column.

## Performance Factors 4: Sensory stimulus

This is to consider the impact of sensory and physical factors. Rate each pair of statements only once. Rating: select from a scale where 3 = 'very strong preference' and 0 = 'no preference'. Which of the statements in each pair is more true of you? How does this affect the way you study?

High stimulus	Rating	Low stimulus
1 I need to work in a very bright room	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I need to work in a very dim light
2 I need music or TV in the background	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I need absolute quiet to work
3 I prefer to work with a lot going on around me	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	My attention is very easily distracted
4 I always eat when I am studying	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I can't think about food when I am studying
5 I need to drink a lot when studying	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I never drink whilst studying
6 I work best when it is either very hot or cold	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I prefer a moderate room temperature
7 I tend to fiddle with things as I work	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I am very still once I settle down to work
8 It helps me to think if I walk about	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I can't think if I am moving around
9 Doodling helps me to listen in meetings and lectures	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I focus on listening and making notes in meetings and lectures
10 I prefer to work on several things at once	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I need to finish one thing before starting another

Score for high stimulus \_\_\_\_\_

Score for low stimulus \_\_\_\_\_

Total score:

### Interpreting your score

- ★ Total score: 0–10 suggests you have a high tolerance for working in most conditions.
- ★ Total score: 21–30 suggests you have strong preferences, though these might not form a pattern.
- ★ A score of 0–1 for any item suggests you are not affected by that kind of stimulus.
- ★ A score of 2 for any item: your performance might be affected if you lack your preference.
- ★ A score of 3 for any item: your performance might be seriously affected if you don't work with your preferred level of stimulus. Give thought to how you might make it possible to gain the type and level of stimulus you need in most study contexts (for example, if you are light sensitive, by wearing hats or sunglasses to dim light).
- ★ A score of 21–30 for either column suggests a strong overall preference to have or avoid stimulus when studying or working. High scores might also indicate excessive tiredness, stress or other causes. If any of these sounds likely in your circumstances, it might be useful to talk to a counsellor or adviser about this.

### Experiment

Have a go at studying with different kinds of stimulus present or absent. Monitor whether these affect your performance. Many people just follow patterns established for school classroom learning, as if that were the only 'right' way to study or work when alone. You will find that you learn more easily if you find the stimulus combination that suits you best.

# Performance Factors 5: Global or serial

This looks at whether you prefer 'global or 'serial' approaches. Rate each pair of statements only once. Rating: select from a scale where 3 = 'very strong preference' and 0 = 'no preference'. Which of the statements in each pair is more true of you? How does this affect the way you study?

Global styles	Rating	Serialist styles
<i>When studying or working on a project, I prefer to ...</i>		
1 begin by gaining a broad overview	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	start off from interesting details
2 have the whole subject mapped out in a diagram or description	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	find the logical sequence
3 work from fully rounded examples	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	work from a clear list
4 use mind maps, 'picture' notes or a recorded discussion to learn material	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	use headings and bullet points or a recorded list of key points to learn material
5 launch in at the deep end	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	plan things out carefully first
6 use my intuition	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	adhere strictly to logic and facts
7 use my imagination	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	reason things out
8 find out how it all links up	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	classify and categorise information
9 search for similarities	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	search for differences
10 draw things together	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	analyse and separate out details

Score for global styles \_\_\_\_\_

Score for serialist styles \_\_\_\_\_

Total score:

## Interpreting your score

- ★ Total score: 0–10 suggests you are flexible for this factor.
- ★ Total score: 21–30 suggests you have strong preferences, though these might not form a pattern.
- ★ A score of 21–30 for 'Global style' suggests you have a strong preference for taking a holistic approach to work or study. This can be useful for synthesising information and making creative links. It is worth considering whether you need to bring more order and system to your activities. Watch for potential weaknesses in managing detail, order and sequence in your work or writing.
- ★ A score of 21–30 for 'Serial style' suggests you take a logical, analytical approach to study. This can be useful in ensuring clarity and structure in your work. It is worth considering whether you need to create opportunities for developing your imagination and intuition. Potential weaknesses could be in drawing together your ideas into a coherent whole and seeing the bigger picture. It may help to experiment with searching out links and connections between ideas.
- ★ Scores of 11–20 for either column suggest moderate strengths for that style of working. It may be useful to experiment with features of the opposite column.

## Performance Factors 6: Pressure

This looks at how far you prefer to work with or without pressure. Rate each pair of statements only once. Rating: select from a scale where 3 = 'very strong preference' and 0 = 'no preference'. Which of the statements in each pair is more true of you? How does this affect the way you study?

Prefer high pressure	Rating	Prefer low pressure
1 I complete tasks in one go	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I break tasks into manageable sections
2 I get everything done	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I select certain things to do
3 I want to please everyone	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I know I can't please everyone
4 I adapt well to the time available	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I take the time I need to do things properly
5 I enjoy multi-tasking	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I prefer to focus on one thing at a time
6 I work best with tight deadlines	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I work best without deadlines
7 I need to feel a sense of urgency	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I need to feel very relaxed when working
8 I work best without help	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I work best with support from others
9 I catch meals when I can	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I always take a break for meals
10 I need the final result to be perfect	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	I am very happy with 'good enough'

Score for high pressure \_\_\_\_\_

Score for low pressure \_\_\_\_\_

Total score:

### Interpreting your score

- ★ Total score: 0–10 suggests you are flexible for this factor.
- ★ Total score: 21–30 suggests you have strong preferences, though these might not form a pattern.
- ★ Scores of 21–30 for 'High pressure' suggest that you are likely to respond well even when there are exams, competitors, targets and tight deadlines. Take care to manage stress levels; check carefully that they are not adversely affecting your performance, behaviour or health without realising. You might need to set your own targets for activities that you find boring or of low importance.
- ★ Scores of 21–30 for 'Low pressure' suggest that you may be good at protecting your health and well-being, and at producing good work even when there isn't external pressure to do so. Beware of over-sensitivity to stress and to external requirements and conditions. Build your resilience so you are capable and confident when there is higher pressure. Remember that a reasonable level of stress can be energising and useful.
- ★ Scores of 11–20 for either high or low pressure suggest moderate preferences for that way of working. It can be helpful to experiment with features of the opposite column.

# Performance Factors 7: Approach

## Engaging with new tasks

When you have something completely new to learn, how do you set about learning it? Tick any of the boxes that apply to you.

I find it easier to get started on a task when I ...	
<input type="checkbox"/> listen	<input type="checkbox"/> read about it
<input type="checkbox"/> personalise the material	<input type="checkbox"/> ask questions first
<input type="checkbox"/> watch others	<input type="checkbox"/> adapt the task to suit myself
<input type="checkbox"/> picture it in my head	<input type="checkbox"/> jot down ideas
<input type="checkbox"/> write down what to do	<input type="checkbox"/> make a chart
<input type="checkbox"/> turn it into a picture	<input type="checkbox"/> colour-code various aspects
<input type="checkbox"/> create a set of headings	<input type="checkbox"/> talk it through with others
<input type="checkbox"/> categorise and label component parts	<input type="checkbox"/> link it to what I know already
<input type="checkbox"/> day-dream about it	<input type="checkbox"/> describe or explain it to others
<input type="checkbox"/> record myself talking about it	<input type="checkbox"/> think about it whilst doing something else, such as housework, exercise, etc.

- ★ Which of the above methods are you not using at present that might be of use to you?
- ★ Are there other starting points you could employ that you are not using currently?
- ★ Highlight the methods that you feel are the most important in helping you to achieve well.

## Honey and Mumford types

Honey and Mumford (1992) developed a questionnaire that divided people into four 'learning styles' or types, as outlined below. Which of these, if any, is more typical of you?

- 'Activist'** I prefer to work in intuitive, flexible and spontaneous ways, generating ideas and trying out new things. I usually have a lot to say and contribute. I like to learn from experience, such as through problem-solving, group work, workshops, discussion, or team work.
- 'Reflector'** I like to watch and reflect, gathering data and taking time to consider all options and alternatives before making a decision. Lectures, project work and working alone suit me.
- 'Theorist'** I like to learn by going through things thoroughly and logically, step by step, with clear guidelines, and to feel I have learnt solidly before I have to apply what I know. I prefer to learn from books, problem-solving and discussion.
- 'Pragmatist'** I like to be practical and realistic. I prefer to learn on work-based projects and practical applications.

## Reflection



### Learning 'styles'

- ★ If you identified strongly with one of these 'types', do you think you would benefit from choosing certain kinds of study module or programme in order to ensure the teaching and assessment match your preferred 'learning style'? Could you organise your own study or work to suit your 'type'?
- ★ Do you think it is helpful to see yourself as a 'type' of learner? What might be the disadvantages of identifying too closely with one style of learning?

## Performance Factors 8: Sensory mode

Some students find that they study or learn more easily using a dominant sensory mode: visual, auditory or kinaesthetic. You can use the evaluation below to check whether you might have a strong sensory preference. Then consider whether (and how) that might make a difference to your own performance.

**Rating:** 4 = *yes, this is essential for me* 3 = *yes, it is true of me* 2 = *sort of true/don't know*  
1 = *hardly ever true* 0 = *not true of me at all*

1	When I'm reading, I picture the scene in my head	4	3	2	1	0
2	I have a good memory for conversation	4	3	2	1	0
3	I will remember something better if I have seen it written down	4	3	2	1	0
4	I remember things best if I get up and move about	4	3	2	1	0
5	I use my hands a lot when I'm speaking	4	3	2	1	0
6	I like to have a mental picture of what I am learning	4	3	2	1	0
7	I remember where phone apps are by movements I make to access them	4	3	2	1	0
8	I repeat things out loud or over and over in my head to remember them	4	3	2	1	0
9	I doodle whilst I am listening	4	3	2	1	0
10	I add up numbers out loud	4	3	2	1	0
11	I can't add up unless I can see the numbers written down	4	3	2	1	0
12	I'm good at remembering the words to songs	4	3	2	1	0
13	I prefer to watch something being done before I try it myself	4	3	2	1	0
14	I like to ask a lot of questions in class	4	3	2	1	0
15	I find it easy to remember where I last saw something	4	3	2	1	0
16	I write out words to see if the spelling feels right	4	3	2	1	0
17	I have a good eye for colour	4	3	2	1	0
18	I'm good at sport	4	3	2	1	0
19	I am able to learn things off by heart quite easily	4	3	2	1	0
20	I have a good ear for music	4	3	2	1	0
21	I'm good at practical things	4	3	2	1	0
22	If somebody tells me a set of instructions, I can remember them quite easily	4	3	2	1	0
23	I tend to move around a lot on my chair when working	4	3	2	1	0
24	I tend to fidget and play about with my hands a lot	4	3	2	1	0
25	I prefer to have instructions written down so I can see them	4	3	2	1	0
26	I like to learn by doing	4	3	2	1	0
27	I visualise a spelling to see if I have got it right	4	3	2	1	0
28	I run a film in my head of what I have to learn	4	3	2	1	0
29	I prefer to learn through discussion	4	3	2	1	0
30	I like to hear exactly what I have to do	4	3	2	1	0
31	I like to 'just try it out' rather than following instructions	4	3	2	1	0
32	I like to learn by doing practical things	4	3	2	1	0
33	I remember the exact words used in instructions or messages I hear	4	3	2	1	0
34	I like to learn from slides, pictures and/or video	4	3	2	1	0
35	I sing and hum a lot	4	3	2	1	0
36	I like the tutor to use slides and/or handouts so I can see the point being made	4	3	2	1	0

## Sensory mode: Scoring

Write down your scores for each statement and then add up your totals.

Visual scores		Auditory scores		Kinaesthetic scores	
Statement 1:		Statement 2:		Statement 4:	
Statement 3:		Statement 8:		Statement 5:	
Statement 6:		Statement 10:		Statement 7:	
Statement 11:		Statement 12:		Statement 9:	
Statement 13:		Statement 14:		Statement 16:	
Statement 15:		Statement 19:		Statement 18:	
Statement 17:		Statement 20:		Statement 21:	
Statement 25:		Statement 22:		Statement 23:	
Statement 27:		Statement 29:		Statement 24:	
Statement 28:		Statement 30:		Statement 26:	
Statement 34:		Statement 33:		Statement 31:	
Statement 36:		Statement 35:		Statement 32:	
Total					

### Interpreting your score

Each statement that you rated above indicates a preference for either a visual, auditory or kinaesthetic way of learning and performing. As you probably recognised when completing this:

- ★ **Visual learners** find it much easier to learn if information is presented so they can see it or imagine it
- ★ **Auditory learners** find it much easier to learn by hearing and recalling sound cues
- ★ **Kinaesthetic learners** learn best through physical sensation, such as movement, touch or a feeling.

*A strong preference:* The more marked the preference for one sense, the more you might benefit from, or even need to find, ways of using it to make learning easier. You might also like to consider whether you would gain from developing your other senses further.

*No strong preference:* If your scores for all three areas are similar, then you probably do not have a strong sensory preference for learning. If your scores are high (40–48 for each area), then you use all of your senses well to assist your learning. If scores are low (between 0 and 24), you could benefit from drawing on your senses more consciously to assist your learning and recall.

# Performance Factors 9: Well-being

Below are a range of factors that affect performance directly and/or indirectly because of their impact on general health, mental health and well-being. Which, if any, could be undermining your performance?

Well-being factor	Aspect or feature	
	<u>Underline</u> those factors which you need to improve. <b>Highlight</b> any that you have noticed have a significant impact on your performance.	
Sleep	A regular sleep pattern	Getting around 7-8 hours sleep a night
	Having power naps	Catching up on lost sleep
Nutrition	Eating proper food every day	Eating a variety of fruit and veg
	Drinking plenty of water	Avoiding junk food as a regular main meal
Stress management	Being aware of your stress triggers	Being active in managing stress levels
	Asking for help when needed	Maintaining balance in your life
	Keeping stress in perspective	Using stress to help you perform
Exercise	At least 20 mins exercise a day	Varying your exercise
	Social activity (e.g. team sports)	Varying high and low intensity activity
Relaxation	Taking time for yourself in the day	Having quiet time in the day
	Making time for things you enjoy	Taking time to rest
Socialising	Maintaining contact with family	Getting out and meeting people
	Companionship/time with friends	Having conversations/chats
Concentration	Using mindfulness techniques	Avoiding multi-tasking
	Avoiding substance abuse	Taking time away from electronic devices
Other factors that affect your well-being		

## Observation



### Well-being

Take time in your week, or before an assignment or exam is due, to notice what difference it makes to you when these factors are, or are not, in place. What happens to you, and to your study, when you neglect these?

## Reflection



### Well-being and performance

- ★ Which of these well-being factors do you find hardest to put in place and/or maintain?
- ★ What sources of support are available to help with this – such as Student Services or through the local community?
- ★ See also pages 23 and 127.

# Personal Performance Profile

Use the chart below to draw together your results for the activities on pages 80–9.

- ★ Column A: provides the name and page number for each activity.
- ★ Column B: Write here your 'total score' for performance factor activities 1–6 and 8.
- ★ Column C: State what kind of preference or needs, if any, you showed for each factor.

## **Personal Performance Factors Profile**

A Performance factor	B Score	C Preference
<i>Example: Structure (page 80)</i>	22	<i>Strong preference for low structure</i>
<i>Example: External direction</i>	9	<i>No preference either way</i>
<b>1 Structure (page 80)</b>		
<b>2 External direction (page 81)</b>		
<b>3 Social (page 82)</b>		
<b>4 Sensory stimulus (page 83)</b>		
<b>5 Global/serial (page 84)</b>		
<b>6 Pressure (page 85)</b>		
<b>7 Approach (page 86)</b>		
<b>8 Visual, auditory or kinaesthetic (pages 87–8)</b>		
<b>9 Key well-being factors (page 89)</b>		

### Reflection



#### Well-being and performance

- 1 For factors 1–6, note whether you gave mainly high, moderate or low ratings. How sensitive are you to any particular factors when you want to do well?
- 2 Consider what your ratings suggest about what to do, or put in place, to perform at your best.

## Identify significant features

The Personal Performance Profile above indicates those factors for which you have the lowest and highest tolerance when you have a task to complete.

In addition, you might have identified strong preferences within one or more of the performance factors – these might even have skewed your overall rating. For example, you might have a strong preference for one or two items listed for ‘Less Structure’ (page 80) but all your other preferences might have been for ‘More structure’. If you had a similar number of strong preferences for the lists on the left and right for a given factor, this might balance out into no overall pattern of preference

for that factor, even though individual features are significant for you.

Consider your responses to the activities on pages 80–9. Identify which features of each stand out as most significant for you. These might be features that you consider most useful for helping you to focus, stay calm or enjoy what you are doing. Alternatively, they might be features that have a strong negative impact on your performance. Jot down your observations and thoughts about which features are most relevant to you – and why. You can add your own further examples for each performance factor if you prefer. If you wish, use the template on the companion site.

### Activity

#### Significant features of each factor



Factor	Features of the performance factors that are most relevant for me
<i>Example: Structure (page 80)</i>	<i>Overall, I prefer structure. I like to sort things myself rather than have tutors or others organise everything in detail. For me, structure means such things as lots of lists, my timetable and planner, trackers, having a strong routine ...</i>
Structure (page 80)	
External direction (page 81)	
Social (page 82)	
Sensory stimulus (page 83)	
Global/serial (page 84)	
Pressure (page 85)	
Approach (page 86)	
Honey and Mumford styles (page 86)	
Visual, auditory or kinaesthetic (pages 87–8)	
Well-being factors (page 89)	
Other factors or conditions significant for me (such as those identified under Expertise template and Learning history in Chapter 3).	

# Personal Performance Formula (PPF)

Having looked at a wide range of factors, features and experiences in this chapter and Chapter 2, and considered how these all impact on your performance in different ways, select the top 5–10 actions you can take to put the conditions in place to optimise your performance for study. It is up to you how many you list, where you select these factors from, and how you word them so that they are meaningful to you.

Be realistic and creative, as it might not be feasible to have everything exactly as you prefer. For

example, if you have a strong preference under External Direction (page 81) for tutors to set assignment titles, but your tutor does not do that, look for a good alternative. Your tutor might be willing to have a conversation that prompts ideas, or to give examples of titles used in the past. You might be able to draw on old exam papers, dissertations or journal article titles instead to stimulate ideas. You might word this below along the lines of: *'Look for sources of external inspiration to stimulate ideas for assignment titles'*.

## Activity



### Personal Performance Formula for study

**In your own words, list 5–10 actions you can take to ensure the best conditions are in place to optimise your own academic performance. Identify your formula for success.**

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	

This is your Personal Performance Formula (PPF) as identified through your own structured reflective analysis of how you do things, and of what makes the most difference to your study.

# Name it! Test it!

## Name your PPF

It is likely that, on page 92 you identified a unique combination of factors that impact on your performance – which is why this is referred to as your Personal Performance Formula (PPF). As such, that unique combination, or formula, won't yet have a name. It is a good idea to give it one. Naming your performance formula helps you to:

- ★ summarise the list of relevant factors or specific features or conditions that affect your performance
- ★ make the formula your own
- ★ remember it when needed.

The name you give can:

- ★ be as long or as short as you like
- ★ summon up a sound, feeling or image meaningful to you
- ★ rhyme, if you want it to
- ★ include your name – or not
- ★ sum up, or hint at, your performance preferences
- ★ relate to a famous person, event or fictitious character
- ★ be humorous – or not!

## Activity

### Name your PPF

- ➔ Write the name you have given to your PPF here – in a style that suits you!

## Test out your PPF

So far, you have identified a performance formula (PPF) in relation to your overall study. For some people, their PPF is applicable to almost everything they do. For others, it can vary greatly from one task to another. Indeed, one reason why people under-achieve is that they cling to factors that were successful in the past or to a specific context, without adapting their understanding of what will work for them in new situations. It is worth checking out how far your PPF applies to different key tasks and contexts.

## Activity

### Test your PPF for constancy

- ➔ Select two distinct study or work tasks that vary in scale, character, or both. Write brief details of these in a copy of the chart on page 94. This is also available on the companion site.
- ➔ List the items that you identified for your PPF (page 92). For non-study tasks, you might need to decide equivalent non-study features for structure, external direction, etc.
- ➔ Jot down whether and how each factor applies to the two tasks or activities you identified.
- ➔ Decide whether, overall, the PPF does apply to each task or activity (circle YES or NO).
- ➔ Note down any other factors that would be significant in helping you perform this task.



Based on her past performance, Lucy was confident she knew how to make friends with cats



## Test your Personal Performance Formula (PPF): Task 1

Task 1 (*short description or name of the task*)

Your PPF factors (from your list on page 92)	How the PPF applies to this task	Applies?
1		YES/NO
2		YES/NO
3		YES/NO
4		YES/NO
5		YES/NO
6		YES/NO
7		YES/NO
8		YES/NO
9		YES/NO
10		YES/NO
<b>Total number of 'Yes'</b>		

Other factors or conditions that would enable me to perform best at this task:



## Test your Personal Performance Formula (PPF): Task 2

Task 2 (short description or name of the task)

Your PPF factors (from your list on page 92)	How the PPF applies to this task	Applies?
1		YES/NO
2		YES/NO
3		YES/NO
4		YES/NO
5		YES/NO
6		YES/NO
7		YES/NO
8		YES/NO
9		YES/NO
10		YES/NO
<b>Total number of 'Yes'</b>		

Other factors or conditions that would enable me to perform best at this task:

# Test what works for you

## High constancy?

If more than half of your PPF factors applied to both tasks, then you have identified a PPF with general applicability. The higher the number of factors that applied to each task, the stronger your formula is likely to be. In this case, make sure you benefit from this insight by applying your PPF to tasks where you think it could be helpful.

Note whether any particular factors seem to affect you in multiple contexts. If so, these are likely to be areas of sensitivity. These deserve your consideration.

## Better PPF for the task?

Even if you identified a PPF with high applicability, it is still worth checking whether another formula could be even better for specific kinds of task. You can do this by:

- ★ evaluating factors for particular tasks or contexts as you did for study on pages 80–9
- ★ considering whether additional factors could make a difference for specific tasks or contexts.

If you do identify a task-specific PPF, note it down, name it, and find a way to recall it for future use.

## Low constancy?

If few of the factors you identified in your PPF for study applied to other tasks, that is not unusual. The factors that affect studying for coursework can be distinct from those that apply in the exam room or a work-based project.



Donna reckoned she performed best in a party atmosphere

You might be more sensitive to task or context than to other factors. Success for you might depend on how well you think through your performance needs in relation to particular tasks and situations. If you are not achieving the outcomes you want, then it is especially important for you to plan significant tasks carefully, identifying what you need and how you will put things in place to meet your needs so as to maximise your chances of success.

You might benefit from identifying a Personal Performance Formula for particular kinds of task or context. If you think this is so:

- ★ list the key factors (in summary)
- ★ devise a name for each PPF
- ★ consider a way of ensuring that you will recall this PPF when you need it – and the kinds of task or activity to which it applies.

### Want to know more?



Paul Blackburn (2019) *How to improve your performance. 3 Personal Performance Tips* (July 23, 2019).

Eduardo Briceno (2012) *The power of belief – mindset and success*. TEDxManhattanBeach (Nov 19, 2012).

## Apply your PPF

### Playing to your strengths

Your PPF identifies the conditions under which you prefer to take action. When you work to your preferences, you operate in ways that are most comfortable and familiar for you. That means that you are more likely to:

- ★ be 'playing to your strengths'
- ★ engage with the task
- ★ be able to focus on the task in hand
- ★ avoid needless pressure and stress
- ★ avoid emotional states that detract from your performance
- ★ be less distracted by your surroundings.

If you have identified an ideal set of conditions, your PPF, it makes sense to use it.

### Making it work

Your performance preferences will sometimes be easy to accommodate where you work or study. Inevitably, on other occasions, there will not be an exact match between the way you want to work or study, how others teach or manage, and what is expected in the particular circumstances. It is up to you to identify:

- ★ factors essential for you to perform at your best
- ★ whether these could be accommodated
- ★ how you can adapt either your needs or the task in order to work more closely to your preferences
- ★ how you will work around the 'gaps' if your PPF cannot be accommodated.

### Finding a way

Although there will be times when you have to work in conditions that are not ideal, consider whether you could negotiate with your employer or tutor for more flexibility so you can better apply your Personal Performance Formula. It might be possible, for example, to:

- ★ complete part of a task at home where you can adapt the conditions to suit you
- ★ work in a quieter room for tasks where you need to concentrate
- ★ defer the task until a time that suits your ways of working
- ★ have longer to perform one task if you can take less time on another
- ★ work with a colleague on parts of the task that play to mutual strengths
- ★ negotiate the deadlines on an aspect of the task
- ★ swap that task for another.

### Reflection



#### Find a way

Consider one task that you are finding difficult at the moment. Which aspects of the task or your work/study conditions could you negotiate in order to be able to work on this more easily in line with your personal performance formula?

### 'What I like' v. 'what works?'

Check whether your preferences are helping or hindering! Although it can be beneficial to work to your preferences, you might have selected factors that:

- ★ narrow your overall range of choices
- ★ make life more comfortable but offer too little challenge
- ★ reduce pressure but don't get the job done
- ★ reduce your chances of gaining something that matters to you
- ★ put too much pressure on other people to accommodate your needs.

This requires you to be very frank with yourself. You are likely to know whether you are fooling yourself that your preferences are working if they are not. If your work, marks or feedback from others are not improving, then it is likely that you need to reconsider – and identify the formula that really will work!

# Review: Improving your personal performance

## 1 Consider performance as well as learning

Be aware of what affects how well you learn and also what then impacts on your ability to apply your learning well in practice – such as in exams, in class or at work.

## 2 Achieve more: attain 'peak performance'

Be prepared to take the approach of top athletes, paying attention to small details that are significant to your own performance. These can make performance not just better, but easier and more engaging too.

## 3 Analyse your performance from multiple perspectives

Don't assume your current level of performance is fixed. Use varied tools to consider and reconsider what makes a task easier, more enjoyable and more rewarding for you to do at your best. Chapters 2–4 provide various ways of doing this although you can use any others you prefer.

## 4 Rate your SHAPES

A thoughtful rating of diverse aspects of your Skills, Habits, Attitudes, Preferences, Experience and Strategies can focus your attention to what you need and how you perform best. Making visual representations of your SHAPES for any given task and time enables rapid comparisons at a later date.

## 5 Analyse your SHAPES

An honest and thoughtful analysis of your SHAPES profile can stimulate insights into how and why you achieve as you do now as well as pinpointing relative strengths to build upon and areas for further focus. It helps to clarify constructive actions that you can take to ease and maximise your performance.

## 6 Evaluate your preferences

You can consider your performance from a range of angles, such as your preference for structure, external direction, social learning, working under pressure, sensory stimulus, your approach to task, emotional factors and others. In doing so, other factors relevant for you can also emerge.

## 7 Identify the most significant factors for you

People vary in whether they have few or many preferences, whether these are strong or weak, and how far any particular factors enhance or obstruct learning or performance. We can benefit from working out what is really essential to our own performance – our Personal Performance Formula (PPF).

## 8 Own your own formula for success

Name your personal formula to make it your own. Recognise and respect what you need in order to perform at your best. Be aware of when your preferences work for you – and when they don't.

## 9 Test your PPF and adapt it to suit new contexts

Check whether your personal formula works well for all tasks and circumstances – or whether you need to adapt it to suit diverse situations.

## 10 Apply and adapt your personal performance formula

Use your PPF to put into place the right conditions for your learning and performance. Where it isn't feasible to have exactly what you need, identify near equivalents.

# Chapter 5

# Successful self-management



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ appreciate the importance of self-management as crucial to success
- ✓ to understand the key intra-personal skills and practical skills that enable effective self-management
- ✓ recognise what energises (motivates) or blocks (inhibits) you for study and other tasks
- ✓ develop self-belief and other constructive thinking patterns that support success
- ✓ evaluate and cultivate your emotional intelligence
- ✓ improve your time management.

## Introduction

Many bright and talented people, whilst able to shine intellectually, jeopardise their potential success through poor self-management. In part, this is because we have a passing knowledge of such skills since childhood so they can appear all too familiar. It is easy to assume we have mastered them and are already using them expertly in our lives – when this is not the case.

In reality, we need to refine and adapt self-management skills to suit the more demanding and complex contexts we encounter as we progress through life and work.

When senior staff in diverse businesses talk about their developmental needs, it is evident that it is the mental and emotional demands of their roles that are most challenging. Successful people often refer to their awareness of the ‘work on themselves’ they have undertaken to date and have still to do in order to be even better in their roles. When it comes to self-

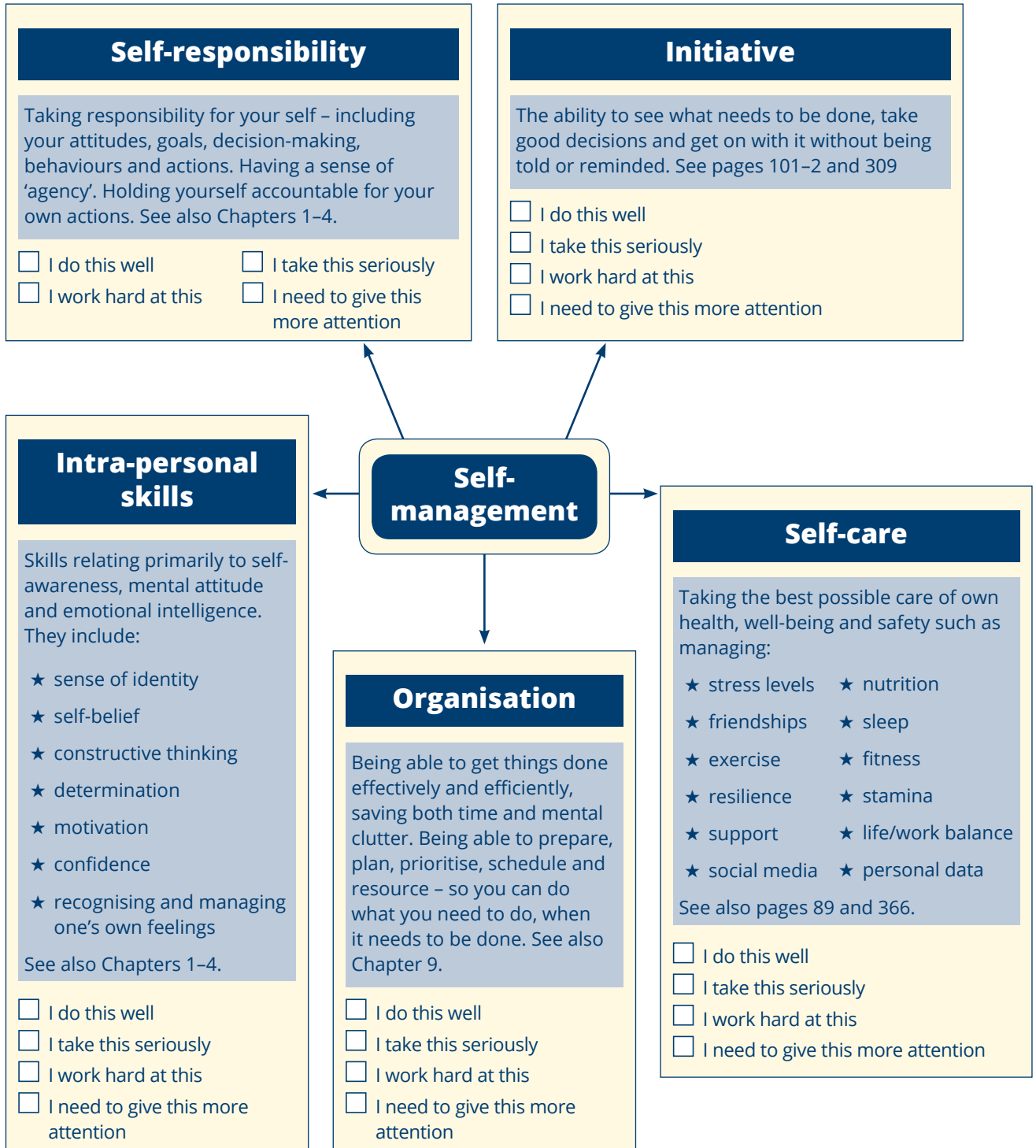
management skills, especially intra-personal skills such as self-belief, positive thinking and emotional management, there is always more to learn.

Enhancing our self-management skills is empowering. Well-developed intra-personal skills enable us to exercise greater control of our thoughts and emotions. Time management skills and solution-focused thinking help us cope well under pressure. Together, these attributes enable us to deal with difficulties, manage uncertainty, and take on new challenges with confidence.

Although the chapter does not go into detail about sensitive subjects, whenever material relates to emotions and our inner world, it can feel sensitive. If this is true for you, do talk to someone you trust such as a tutor or student services. Student services are confidential and staff in them might be able to find support for you away from the university or college if you prefer.

# Aspects of self-management

Consider these five key aspects of self-management. Decide  whether these are areas with which you already engage actively for managing your own life.



# Take the initiative

## What is 'initiative'?

A person with initiative takes action as and when necessary, without waiting to be asked – and does so well. This involves attributes such as:

- 1 **Alertness** – being observant and aware of what is going on around you, so that you notice when action is needed or when opportunities arise.
- 2 **Agency** – recognising that you are an active agent who can step up to do or say what is needed – and doing so.
- 3 **Judgement** – being able to weigh up accurately what is needed, when, by whom, and whether it is better to act, wait, ask for information/support, delegate, etc.
- 4 **Creative problem-solving** – being able to identify, think through and select from potential solutions, and carry them out.
- 5 **Self-awareness** – being aware of what you really can do, what is beyond your expertise, when you need help, and what you still need to learn.
- 6 **Confidence** – having the self-assurance and self-belief to act and/or take a lead.
- 7 **Resilience** – building your mental and emotional strength so that you have the courage to act, take reasonable risks and, at times, bold decisions.

## Reflection

### Taking the initiative



- ★ Which of the above attributes are strengths for you in managing your own life, in the present and for the future? Which do you need to work on further?
- ★ Are you better at drawing on these attributes in some circumstances more than others? For example, are you more likely to be spurred to action for your studies, at work, for personal interests such as sport or music, for helping others, or for planning for your future?
- ★ Are there areas of your life or future planning where you need to be more proactive in taking the initiative to get things done? Do you take the initiative for your PDP – or wait to be reminded?

## Why develop initiative?

Whether at work or in life more generally, people tend to appreciate those who show initiative. It is useful to have people on your team who have the ability to see what needs to be done and take decisions when needed, using good judgement. Initiative is associated with leadership ability and life success, and is highly valued by employers in many countries. In terms of self-management, initiative on your own behalf helps take your wishes forward.

## Acting for yourself

### *Don't 'sit back and hope'*

Don't assume that the cavalry will ride in to sort out your life. Get used to making time to think about what you need to do – on a daily basis, for the week ahead, and for the longer term. This is partly a question of good organisation and time-management (pages 128–31) and partly of attitude.

## Recognise what stops you now

If you are reluctant to take the initiative now, or find others always step in before you do, consider why that happens. Pages 104–8 might help identify particular factors that encourage or inhibit you.

## Mobilise your energies

Recognise that you need to mobilise your energies to do whatever you need to achieve your ambitions or, if necessary, to work out what these might be. Be a good 'self-starter'. If that isn't your strength, use support to mobilise you.

## Clarify your first steps

It isn't always obvious what you will need to do further along the route – but you can start to take action now that helps you work out the first steps.

## Gain support

Taking the initiative doesn't mean you have to do this alone. Get as much support, inspiration, advice, guidance and information as you can. Use the professional services provided on campus or at work, as well as online support provided through your institution, company or professional body. Support can be especially important if you are not clear on your first steps, or are not great at acting on your own behalf, or need motivation or reassurance in order to get going.

## Ask trusted friends and family

Nobody knows you as well as your family, friends and colleagues. These know you from different contexts so, collectively, provide insights about what you are like in diverse circumstances. It can be hard to give honest feedback, so make it easy for them to tell you what you need to know.

## Be resourceful

If you can't do things the way you want at first, look for alternatives. Develop insights into what works well and what does not – for yourself and others. Gain practice in problem-solving. Find out how intransigent problems were resolved in your field. (See also Chapter 11.)

## Learn from mistakes

When things don't turn out well, think through why they didn't work – and what made you think they would. Might some aspects work better under other circumstances? Pinpoint the lessons you can take from the experience. Regard these as an asset to take into the future.

## Investigate

Research, observe, analyse, consult and reflect – so that you are better placed to trust your own judgement. Inform yourself well before taking action. Think things through in a critically reflective way, so that you have the best possible sense of whether your actions are wise.

## Learning from mistakes



To help think through an occasion when you benefitted from insights arising from a mistake or failed action, see the resource on the companion site, *Evidence of competence in learning from my own mistakes*.

## How well do I use my initiative?



Circle either **YES** or **NO** to each question below. NB Note the word 'systematically'.

*Do I take action, systematically, to...*

1 keep my studies on track?	YES/NO
2 make suggestions as part of groupwork?	YES/NO
3 work out the best way to do things?	YES/NO
4 find out the fastest route?	YES/NO
5 ask questions when I need information?	YES/NO
6 find out about useful opportunities?	YES/NO
7 stay informed about my subject?	YES/NO
8 maintain my own well-being	YES/NO
9 ask for help when I need it?	YES/NO
10 plan my finances?	YES/NO
11 update others when I am running late?	YES/NO
12 make appointments to discuss careers?	YES/NO
13 develop useful networks for the future?	YES/NO
14 find out sources of help available to me?	YES/NO
15 find holiday jobs (or better roles)?	YES/NO
16 inform others of my needs	YES/NO
17 identify when others need help/support?	YES/NO
18 work out for myself what I need to do?	YES/NO

Use your responses to decide whether you are generally good at taking the initiative, and to identify areas where you could usefully take even more.

# Taking personal responsibility

## A sense of agency

A first step in self-management – and in taking the initiative is in recognising yourself as an ‘agent’ in your own destiny and that you have choices. If you feel that life ‘is done to you’ or that you are just a victim of circumstance, then it is hard to recognise all those things that you *can* do. Sometimes, the choices are good; at other times they are hard to conceptualise. Even when we cannot influence external events as much as we would wish, it is up to us how we manage our thoughts, feelings, responses and actions.

## Recognising your power

In the context of self-management, taking responsibility means recognising yourself as a thinking, feeling, creative person whose responses and behaviours have an effect on you and your circumstances. It means such things as:

- ★ admitting to yourself what you could be and what you are capable of achieving
- ★ recognising that your feelings and emotions have an impact on you, on others and on what happens around you
- ★ learning to accept weaknesses and failings as human – and learning from your mistakes
- ★ appreciating that you can shape your thinking patterns and emotional responses – for better or worse.

This is especially important at those times when it feels that life is unfair, that the odds are stacked against you, or that others have it easier than you. Those things might all be true – but you still have your own role to play. You can make a difference.

## Accountability

In the context of self-management, this means answering to yourself for your life, actions, achievements and well-being. This does not mean ignoring the wide range of social, cultural, economic and other factors that affect you. Rather, it means:

- ★ gaining a better understanding of yourself and your circumstances
- ★ moving beyond ‘blaming’ external factors
- ★ recognising your own role in events.

## Unhelpful self-messaging

We tend to create internal stories and messages about events, including why we have or haven’t succeeded as well as we wished. It is typical to focus on what went wrong, on what is not perfect – and then to attribute blame. That could be unhelpful self-blame, or finding someone else at fault. You might notice others (or yourself) repeating phrases about ‘they’, ‘them’ or ‘it’ who are responsible for all ills. Take notice of times when you hear yourself thinking the following.

Big Bad ‘they’	Big Bad ‘it’
they made me ...	it is too difficult ...
they started it ...	it is too soon ...
they should take the first step ...	it is too complex ...
they shouldn’t put me in this position ...	it overwhelms me ...
they shouldn’t set these deadlines ...	it won’t work ...
	it’s a waste of time ...

## Changing the message

We can create alternative messages that lead to more productive outcomes. If we use these often, they become habitual and so ‘kick in’ automatically. For example:

- ★ I can do this ... I’ll have a go.
- ★ I take responsibility for my part in this.
- ★ We can find a way to resolve this.
- ★ In the circumstances, the best step is ...
- ★ The first step is ...

### Activity

#### Change the message



- ➔ Which ‘it’ or ‘they’ do you tend to find yourself blaming?
- ➔ Jot down five constructive responses to use when things don’t go as you wish – where you take responsibility for your own role.
- ➔ Choose the one you like the most and write it where you will see it this week. Try it out a few times and note down what happens.

# Getting on with it – or not

Good self-management involves putting ourselves in a position, mentally and physically, where we can undertake what we want and need to do, without undue stress and, ideally, with a sense of job satisfaction or enjoyment.

Most people have a reasonable sense of what to do in order to succeed – at least in broad terms. We know that we should take care of our well-being, study hard, plan ahead, build our work experience, manage our finances and so on. Sometimes we do – and sometimes we don't. That begs the question: why don't we always act in our best interests?



*Bob knew it was time to fly the nest, but something kept him hanging on*

## The eight-level framework

The answer to that question isn't always straightforward – if it were, we might all be much more effective, sensitive, positive people. There might be an obvious cause on the day. However, if a behaviour is frequent, entrenched or contrary to our aspirations, the answers might lie deeper in our psyche and be harder to access.

The Eight Levels framework (adapted from Dilts et al., 1990) is useful for gaining some insights into what is motivating or inhibiting us – whether

that is learning, performing, listening, speaking, understanding or taking other action. All eight 'levels' can affect us, some more than others. Considering the characteristics of these, and recognising which tend to affect us the most, can help us to pinpoint where we are most energised (motivated) or blocked (inhibited).

On this model, factors that have the most overall power over us, such as our sense of purpose and identity, are referred to as 'higher level'. These are buried deep in the core of the model. Levels nearer the surface, such as environmental factors, are generally less significant and/or easier to change. The eight levels are shown on the diagram below, and detailed on pages 105–9.




If positively engaged, higher-level motivators can go a long way towards overriding negative impacts, or 'inhibitors', at lower levels. It is as though the 'core' has a greater gravitational pull on our energies. We can use the model to locate where the energy we need for a task is fired or blocked.

By analysing your experience in this way, you can identify for any task (or for your well-being):

- ★ levels at which key 'inhibitors' lie
- ★ levels at which motivating energies lie
- ★ ways of managing inhibitors so that your experience is better and/or personal performance improved.

You can also use this model to make better sense of what is going on for other people (see Chapter 6).

# Eight levels: motivators and inhibitors

Level		Details of this level
explore ↓ and reflect	<b>1</b> <b>Environmental</b> (where? when? with whom? in what context?) 	This refers to the immediate physical and social environment: heat, light, noise, odours, pleasantness, comfort, access, distractions, etc. These can have a profound effect upon performance. Fortunately, it is usually relatively easy to either put in place what we need, or to resolve, adapt or work around inhibiting factors on the day or in the short term. Calling on higher-level motivations (levels 6–8) can help us to override problems at this level. See page 107.
	<b>2</b> <b>The nature of the task/content</b> (what?) 	If we usually do well in a given environment, but are unable to learn a particular subject or perform a specific task there, the problem might lie in the content of the task (such as what we are reading, hearing, etc.) or its nature (it might be too easy, advanced, daunting, irrelevant, etc.). Conversely, if the task engages us, this can be energising, and overcome negative environmental factors.
	<b>3</b> <b>Behaviour</b> (how are we acting, speaking, thinking, etc.?) 	We often say we want one thing but then behave as if that isn't the case. Students usually want good grades for their work but might not study in ways that develop their knowledge and understanding sufficiently. There can be all kinds of reasons for counterproductive behaviours – peer pressure, unhelpful habits, poor induction into a job or course, not knowing what is expected, etc. If you are motivated by behavioural change, it is a good focus for action, and can overcome Level 1–2 inhibitors.
	<b>4</b> <b>Capability</b> (what is my aptitude, expertise, potential?) 	Often, we either can or can't do something based on current attributes such as skills, strength, our level of practice, health, physical condition, etc. We might be able to increase our capability – or work around obstacles and inhibitors. If you are motivated at the capability level (you enjoy being able to master a task), you are likely to place emphasis on your ability to do something – or at least to have a go – and achieve success.
	<b>5</b> <b>Emotional</b> (how do I feel about ...?) 	You might notice you have a strong emotional response to a topic or task. Positive feelings about oneself, the learning context, the course and potential outcomes can stimulate our energies. Negative feelings can suppress brain activity and overall energy, making it hard to focus. See pages 108.
	<b>6</b> <b>Beliefs/values</b> (why?) 	Our belief and values systems exercise a strong hold. We use these as a basis for action. If we believe a topic is relevant for us, it is more motivating. Beliefs about self-worth and individual potential are especially powerful: some students have a deeply held belief that they are 'born to lead', are likely to achieve the highest grades or, conversely, 'that they don't belong' or are 'not good enough'.
	<b>7</b> <b>Identity</b> (who am I?) 	At times, our effort, success or difficulty is experienced at the identity level; we feel we are 'the kind of person who... should/can't/must, etc.' The sense of identity is close to our core and powerful in its effects to mobilise or suppress energies. If a difficulty lies at this level, it is a priority to address it. Drawing on what is important to our identity can inspire, energise and motivate strongly.
	<b>8</b> <b>Higher purpose/                      mission</b> 	'Higher purpose' and 'mission' refer to the overall direction and motivation that drive a person. As the term suggests, higher purpose is typically associated with ambition or drive for something beyond the self and immediate self-interests – such as 'doing good', artistic endeavour, spirituality, a philosophy, religion or personal mission. A strong sense of mission is powerful in overcoming even great obstacles.

## Speech indicators of 'level'

If your energies are strongly motivated or inhibited on a task at a particular level, this is usually evident in your speech (as in the italicised text below).

Observe the words you use or emphasise – to help identify which level to focus on.

Level		Speech
1	<b>Environment</b>	'I can/can't do it <i>in this room, with this light, with this music on, with people like these, at an institution like this</i> '
2	<b>Task</b>	'I can't learn <i>that</i> '; 'what's <i>this</i> project/essay/task supposed to be about?'; ' <i>this</i> is what I call nonsense'
3	<b>Behaviour</b>	Note speech that emphasises verbs ('doing words'): 'I can't <i>learn</i> or <i>do</i> that'; ' <i>writing</i> essays is too difficult'; 'it takes me too long <i>to do</i> that'; 'I'll <i>do it</i> '; 'I'll <i>have a go</i> '; 'I want <i>to get on with it</i> '
4	<b>Capability</b>	'I'm <i>not able</i> to learn that'; 'I <i>don't know how</i> to learn that'; ' <i>How can I</i> do that?'; 'I'm <i>useless at</i> this'; 'I'm <i>good at</i> this!'; 'I will <i>be able to</i> do this if...'; 'I <i>can!</i> '; 'I've <i>done this before</i> '
5	<b>Emotions</b>	'I <i>feel</i> I'll never learn this'; 'this <i>irritates, angers, upsets</i> me'; 'I <i>don't feel good</i> about this situation'; 'I'm <i>getting annoyed</i> by this essay!' (or expressing emotions through tears, laughter, anger, behaviours, etc.)
6	<b>Beliefs/values</b>	'I'm not likely to star at this subject'; ' <i>this is</i> a soft option: I need to focus my attention on the other modules'; ' <i>It's only</i> a discussion group so I don't need to turn up'. We might note a conflict between our beliefs/values and behaviour: 'Music is what is important to me, but that's not what I am studying'
7	<b>Identity</b>	'People <i>like me</i> can't...'; 'I'm the <i>kind of person</i> who'. Note an emphasis on 'I' or 'we'
8	<b>Higher purpose</b>	'I want to ... make my life count', '...make a difference', '...help others', '...serve my country', '...change the world', '...be a role model to my children', etc.

# Managing performance at the right level

## Reflection



### Which level is in play?

When you are struggling with a task, pause a moment to consider at which level your energies are most likely to be blocked or energised.

- ★ What does your speech pattern (including for your 'inner chat') suggest are the most important levels for you to work on to reduce blocks and motivate action? See page 106.
- ★ How relevant is each level to your performance on this task? In what ways do these affect your performance?
- ★ How can you better manage any negative impact or make more use of positive impacts?

## Action at the right level

### 1 Manage the environment



If factors in your physical environment make it hard for you to settle down to a task or to concentrate on it, either choose a different place to work or set up your space in a way that better meets your needs. Your responses to the activity on page 83 can help identify what to change. Environmental sensitivity can be caused by trauma or stress, so it can help to investigate these issues too.

### 2 Reframe tasks

If it is the nature of the task that blocks you – it could be one that holds little interest or seems alien to you – look for ways to change the way it is framed or worded. For example:

- ★ Look for a different way of thinking about it
- ★ Break it into manageable sections
- ★ Rephrase instructions
- ★ Put things into your own words
- ★ Imagine you are explaining it to someone much younger
- ★ Look for real-life examples that are similar
- ★ Sketch it as a chart, diagram or picture.

See also Chapter 9.

### 3 Manage behaviour

Managing performance at the third level means that you address the behaviours directly, looking for ways of changing how you act or respond, rather than just analysing the behaviour. It can feel motivating if you feel you have the power to adapt your responses in ways that produce the outcomes you want. Actions you can take include:

- ★ Become more aware of your inconsistent or contradictory behaviours and unhelpful habits – ask a friend, partner or sibling!
- ★ Identify your triggers. What sets you off? What do you do that indicates to you or others that an unwanted behaviour or habit is about to kick in?
- ★ Decide what you will do differently at that trigger point in order to initiate a different set of behaviours.
- ★ Ask a friend to prompt you if you don't spot the trigger.
- ★ Decide on appropriate rewards for particular changes in your actions.
- ★ Make sure you reward your successes in changing behaviour.

Counterproductive behaviours can indicate blocks at other levels such as a lack of motivation if your goal or task is not consistent with your sense of identity or purpose. It might reflect self-doubt in your capability, or triggers in the physical environment. If changing the behaviour doesn't remove the block, look for solutions at other levels.

#### **4 Managing capability**

If you feel you are having difficulties because of lack of knowledge, ability, skills or experience, consider what you need to raise your capability:

- ★ You might need more practice.
- ★ You might need a stronger foundation in the knowledge, skills and concepts: see Chapter 10 on how the brain develops to support new learning.
- ★ You might need to improve study skills.
- ★ You might need to bring a different attitude or mindset (page 103).
- ★ You might be in the 'transitional stage' where some confusion is typical (page 122).
- ★ You might work better at a different pace.
- ★ You might need support and guidance.

Allow yourself more time to get to grips with the topics or skills. Break bigger tasks into smaller, manageable targets. Find or set up a support group or action set (page 266).

#### **5 Managing emotions**

If your study or performance is affected by emotional reactions or blocks, it is important to be kind to those emotions. Pretending that they don't matter probably won't help much, unless action at other levels results in a change in those feelings. You might need to talk to someone you trust to work out which emotions are involved and why. Considering strengths and gaps in your emotional intelligence can also help (pages 115–18).

If you do feel your feelings are getting in the way of you performing at your best:

- ★ Don't push the emotions away; notice them, sit with them for a while; see if they change if you give them some attention.
- ★ Consider whether there are some ways of approaching the task that would make you feel better.
- ★ Query whether your emotions are in proportion: is this something that you can just 'shake off'?
- ★ Consider whether you are displacing emotions (page 119). If so, what might the real emotional issue be?
- ★ Consider using the ABCD model to help manage distress (pages 120–1).
- ★ If the emotions persist, talk to someone about them.

#### **6 Drawing on beliefs/values**

If your beliefs and values are making it hard to undertake a task well:

- ★ Check whether you can reconnect with any initial belief in the value of the task that might help you through.
- ★ Identify a source of motivation that makes sense in terms of your values and motivation (pages 33–5 and 36–43).
- ★ Check whether there is consistency between your values, beliefs and actions (see Congruence pages 48–9).
- ★ Challenge negative thinking (page 103).
- ★ Speak to someone who can give you useful and constructive advice about how to achieve your aims.
- ★ Bear in mind that it takes time to change something as fundamental as our beliefs.

## 7. Recognising identity

Identity is rarely singular and unified. We belong to many communities with distinct values, beliefs and customs, some of which might conflict. We might fully identify with some aspects – but not with others. For each of us, our individual identity is unique.

### Student identity

With which of the following descriptions do you identify most strongly?

<i>a student leader</i>	<i>a 'lost cause'</i>
<i>a 'good' student</i>	<i>a 'bad student'</i>
<i>gifted</i>	<i>'mediocre' or 'average'</i>
<i>a mature student</i>	<i>'the clown in the group'</i>
<i>a part-time student</i>	<i>'not a (name)'</i>
<i>an international student</i>	<i>'the one at the back'</i> <i>part of the student</i> <i>community</i>
<i>Other student identity?</i>	

- ★ Where did this identity come from?
- ★ If it is negative, what can you do now to challenge that way of thinking about yourself?

### Personal identity

- ★ Apart from being a student, how would you sum up your identity?
- ★ Which aspects of your identity are most important to you, and why?
- ★ Consider the positive aspects of your identity: what makes you who you are?
- ★ How you could harness positive aspects of this identity to help you accomplish tasks you find hard?
- ★ Which aspects (if any) of that identity might be holding you back?

If you are unsure about your 'identity', it may help to work through selected aspects of Chapters 2 and 3, such as your vision for your life, your values, inspiration, life narrative and the kind of 'hero' you are in your own story. However, don't get too tied down in philosophical aspects of identity at this point.

## 8. Finding purpose

If you can find a relevant and meaningful connection between what you need to do and what really matters to you – your mission in life, vocation or other form of 'higher purpose', you are more likely to be inspired and energised. The stronger your sense of purpose, the more likely you are to overcome obstacles at all other levels in order to achieve it.

Your higher purpose for your studies might be the good you hope will stem from completing your degree: helping others through a professional role, changing the world through your discoveries or enterprise, providing for a family, creating art, being a role model, or one of many other reasons that really matter to you.

Conversely, if there is never any space in your day to engage with what really matters to you – or even to consider what that might be – then you lack an essential source of motivation. You might even start to feel that life is frustrating or dull.

### Reflection



#### Higher purpose

- ★ What does 'really matter' to you? What would drive you to accomplish the most difficult of tasks if you really needed to?
- ★ How or when do you provide space for that higher purpose in your life now?
- ★ How or when could you enable more time to be given to what really matters to you?

For tasks that you are finding problematic now, list some ways that you could change the way you think about these, or the way you perform them, so that they help you to connect with your identity and/or higher purpose.

# Self-belief, hope and optimism

## Benefits of self-belief

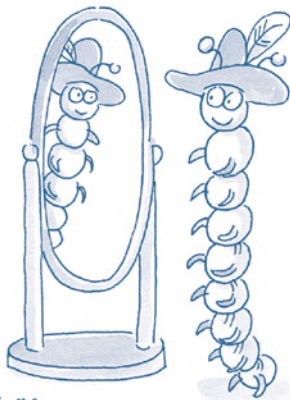
Belief in oneself makes it easier to achieve success without undue stress and anxiety.

Self-confidence enhances performance. It contributes to positive thinking that generates 'happy' chemicals in the body. This makes it easier to feel content, energised and motivated. It is also attractive to other people, inspiring them to believe in you, too. This can bring more interest, followers, resources and support, increasing the likelihood of success.

### Activity

#### Self-descriptions

- ➔ List at least 30 things that you like about yourself.



1. tall
2. handsome
3. flexible
4. manages change well...

- ➔ Underline all items on your list that contain a positive description: 'I'm reliable', 'I am kind', 'I'm helpful', etc.
- ➔ If there are fewer than 30, add more. Don't underestimate yourself.
- ➔ If any contain qualifiers (words such as 'I try to ...' or 'I am quite ...'), re-word them more strongly.

Which three descriptions of yourself do you like the best? What reasons have you for believing that these are accurate?

Self-doubt, by contrast, can be corrosive. It leaves people second-guessing their decisions and abilities, distracting them from productive thinking, draining their energy and wasting time. It contributes to stress, which makes the brain less efficient. It is also more likely to encourage a sense of defeat and a belief that there is 'no point'.

## Optimism and hope

Self-belief requires an element of optimism – as we don't know exactly how things will turn out. Optimism and hope are associated with academic success (Adams and Wiklund, 2002; Day et al., 2010). That means it is useful if you can start out hopeful and maintain that sense of hope that you will do well.

However, hope on its own is not enough (Ickson et al., 2019; Feldman and Kubota, 2015). The positive effects also depend on:

- ★ Setting realistic expectations. Your self-confidence needs to be well-grounded in what is feasible for you in the time allowed, given your experience, training, resources, commitments, efforts, etc.
- ★ Conscientiousness and self-efficacy – that is, taking care to do what is needed in order to achieve. That can be anything from putting in the right number of hours of study, to developing concentration, getting enough sleep, completing tasks on time, etc.

## Reflection

### Grounded self-belief

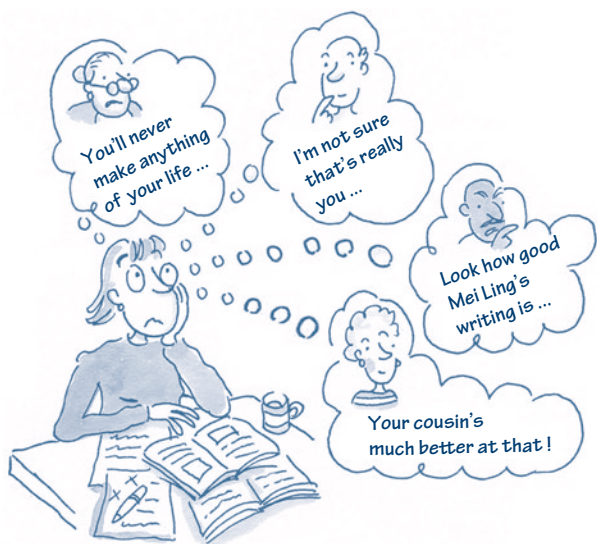
Jot down a list of things you have undertaken and/or achieved that make you feel pleased or proud. Then, choose ONE to think about in more detail. Note down:

- ★ What happened? What did you do or say?
- ★ What were the consequences? How did you or others benefit from this situation?
- ★ What personal characteristics and positive qualities are demonstrated in this incident?
- ★ What can you find in this incident that should make you feel good about yourself?

# Self-permission

Sometimes, we are unable to move forward because we refuse to give ourselves 'permission' to do so. It is as if we hear a pre-recorded message repeating in our minds such things as:

- ★ I'm an imposter – I shouldn't be on this course/in this job/achieving all this!
- ★ I shouldn't believe this will work out for me – it will be worse when it all goes wrong
- ★ I'm not good enough
- ★ I'm not worthy of the risk
- ★ I'm not deserving of the consequences
- ★ I'm not made for this sort of thing
- ★ I'm not strong enough to cope with failure
- ★ It's not me
- ★ I don't want the attention this will bring
- ★ It will all go wrong, so I don't want to engage with it...



## Why do we this?

Withholding self-permission might seem an odd thing to do – to refuse to let ourselves enjoy success or to believe that we deserve it or even to acknowledge that we have the potential to excel. However, 'imposter syndrome' and similar responses are very common, especially amongst successful people. The reasons for it can be varied such as:

- ★ strong messages at school or in the family that encouraged low expectations or low self-belief
- ★ a bad experience of success, such as criticism, bullying, or too much attention
- ★ fear that doing well will lead to greater demands being made of you as a result
- ★ wanting to avoid the shame of failing
- ★ fear of 'losing face' – wanting to avoid others thinking you were wrong to believe you could accomplish something
- ★ lack of relevant role models so you can't 'see' yourself succeeding at a task/role.

## Tackling self-doubt

If you recognise these or similar messages in yourself, it is worth tackling your self-doubts. Typically, that is easier to say than to do because such doubts can be deeply ingrained. However, starting now means you can reduce them for the future. For example, you can:

- 1 Acknowledge the doubts.** Bring them into the light so you can work on them.
- 2 Consider their cause or origin.** Is there (or was there ever) an element of truth to them? Challenge why that would have to be true for all time. What could change?
- 3 Acknowledge what you do well** – rather than only noticing what you could have done better.
- 4 Hear praise.** Note it. Consider what it means. Notice if you are only hearing messages of 'improvement needed'.
- 5 Take the time you need to excel** – rather than over-focusing on what you haven't done well – yet.

## Reflection

### Self-doubts

- ★ Which self-doubts (if any) do you experience?
- ★ What underlies these?
- ★ What kind of messages would help you to tackle such doubts and/or give you greater permission to do well?



# Being positive and 'solution-focused'

## Difficulty-focused thinking

Focusing on difficulties usually produces negative responses: the problem can seem insoluble. It depletes your own and other people's emotional and physical energy, creating a sense of weariness, hopelessness or helplessness. The dominant message is that it will be hard work to find answers and that solutions are unlikely.

The difficulty-focused approach uses words and phrases such as:

- ★ 'but ...'
- ★ 'it's hard to believe ...'
- ★ 'I can't see how ...'
- ★ 'oh no!', 'not again!'
- ★ 'that won't work'
- ★ 'I doubt it.'

At worst, difficulty-focused people tend to pick fault with every proposal, draw attention to flaws in the best possible solution, and discourage others from believing that there could be a sensible solution.

## Solution-focused thinking

A solution-focused approach describes the situation, identifies the points of difficulty, and moves quickly to a search for the best possible resolution. It uses words and phrases such as:

- ★ 'yes, and we could also ...'
- ★ 'what if we ...?'
- ★ 'are there other ways of looking at this?'
- ★ 'let's brainstorm ideas ...'
- ★ 'let's look again at our options ...'
- ★ 'let's see if we have missed any options ...'
- ★ 'let's see how we can make this work ...'
- ★ 'what could we adapt?'
- ★ 'who could help us ...?'

The dominant message is that a solution of one kind or another will have to be found eventually, even if it is an interim one, so it is better to focus energies on finding the solution sooner rather than later. A solution-focused approach is often expected of those in managerial roles. As most graduates enter jobs with managerial responsibilities, it is worth cultivating this way of thinking. If you have been surrounded by people who take a difficulty-focused approach, you might find this a useful challenge.

## Reflection



### Being solution-focused

Do you tend to use words and phrases associated with a 'difficulty-focused' approach or a 'solution-focused' approach?

- ★ Which words and phrases are typical of you when faced with a complex situation?
- ★ Do you tend to take a solution-focused approach?
- ★ What could you do to develop a more solution-focused attitude?

## Taking on challenge

Lazarus (1999) identifies two main strategies for approaching a difficulty: 'problem-focused coping' and 'emotion-focused' coping.

- ★ Problem-focused: looking outwards to the external, concrete problem and its circumstances
- ★ Emotion-focused: looking inwards at personal attitudes and emotions that impact upon your individual reaction to the situation.

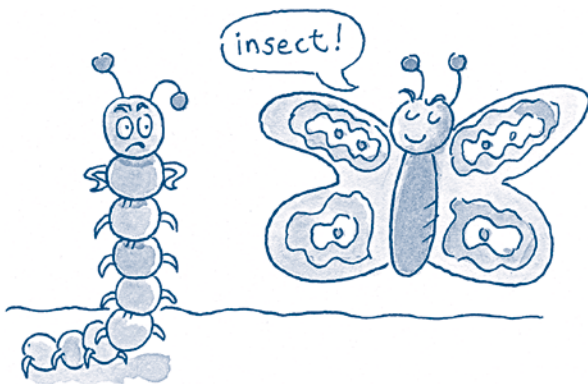
A solution-focused approach can use each of these, adopting a constructive and positive attitude for either. The solution-focused approach takes the position that there is a solution to every problem and that we have that solution within us. Sometimes, we arrive at the solution more easily if we talk to others or use a particular strategy. The 'solution' is the best constructive outcome that can be found for the situation in the circumstances. This may not be everything that we would like, but it directs energy in a positive way so that the best outcome possible is achieved.

A solution-focused approach requires very little, beyond an attitude of mind and a willingness to persist in looking for answers.

## Creating positive conditions

A negative, blaming, 'can't be bothered' working environment is not inspiring. A few people taking such an approach can spread negativity all too quickly, making it harder for others to make positive suggestions and creating a culture which is self-defeating. You can probably think of the people around you who create an aura of negativity. (Might you be that person?)

As adults, we can monitor the impact of the social environment on our responses, taking note of what leaves us feeling encouraged and what does not. We can take action to create a more positive social environment that supports what we want to achieve.



It wasn't what Cuthbert said as much as the way he said it

## Identify negative inputs

- ★ Be alert to factors in your current environment that could undermine or sabotage your goals.
- ★ Observe which people leave you feeling dejected, anxious, tired or despondent.
- ★ Notice how you feel and how you respond when you are in the presence of negative attitudes.
- ★ Give thought to what you can do to reduce the impact of such factors upon you.
- ★ Be aware of your own negative contributions to the social environment.

## Identify positive inputs

- ★ Identify the people around you who leave you feeling positive about your goals, direction or programme of study.
- ★ Observe what it is about them that seems to increase positive responses.
- ★ Take note of any aspects of your social environment that support your goals. Remember that competition and constructive criticism can be included as positive inputs.

Jot down these factors, starting with 'I ...', and identifying how you could increase the positive aspects of your environment. For example:

*I appreciate the way Busola makes a point of saying she enjoys good seminars. I could identify the things I find positive about each seminar I attend.*

*I find it useful that the library is open until 8:00 p.m. I will use it more in the evenings.*

### Want to know more?



Alison Ledgerwood (2013) *Getting stuck in the negatives (and how to get unstuck)*. TEDxUCDavis (Jun 22, 2013). Accessed 28 May 2020

*5 ways to think in a more solution focused way.*

[www.gomadthinking.com/blog/5-ways-to-think-in-a-more-solution-focused-way/](http://www.gomadthinking.com/blog/5-ways-to-think-in-a-more-solution-focused-way/) (4 Sept 2017). Accessed 28 May 2020

C. Snyder et al. (2002) 'Hope and academic success in college'. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(4), 820–826. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.94.4.820>

# Emotional intelligence

Staying positive and maintaining self-belief even when things don't go well takes emotional strength. 'Emotional intelligence' is a term popularised by Goleman (1995). It involves:

- ★ knowing the appropriate feelings for the circumstances
- ★ experiencing and expressing feelings appropriate to the situation
- ★ making opportunities to express feelings that could not be expressed fully in the original circumstances
- ★ remaining in charge of our feelings even in challenging circumstances, so that they don't control our responses.

Emotionally intelligent people are able to work constructively with their emotions in this way, acknowledging and empathising with others' emotions without being consumed by them.

## Working with emotions

Emotional self-management can be difficult to develop, precisely because emotions often get in the way – especially at the beginning. When we work with our emotions, we become more aware of what we are feeling. This is important, but not necessarily pleasant. The feelings we most need to understand in ourselves tend to be those that are uncomfortable or even painful. This creates a natural temptation to shy away from experiencing, examining and understanding them.

If we try to avoid any issue where emotions are involved, it can mean we do not get to the heart of important personal and interpersonal issues. If we never learn to work with our emotions, they will obstruct us. Although it is sometimes felt that expressed emotions get in the way of good reasoning, more often it is unacknowledged and unexpressed emotions that prevent us from making accurate, rational interpretations.

Unrecognised emotions tend to find ways of expressing themselves at unexpected times and in an uncontrolled way – when we face a situation that triggers an unexpected sense of unease, anxiety, pain or discomfort. Then, people tend either:

- ★ to over-express their feelings, showing excessive anger, fear, passivity or distress

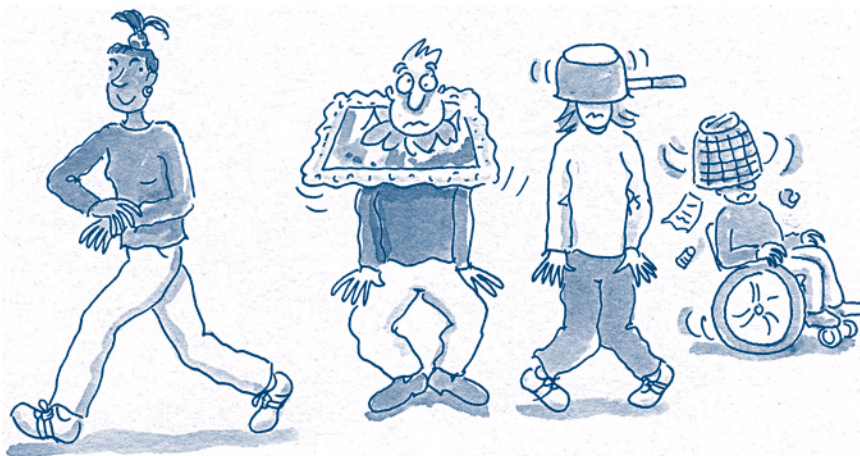
OR

- ★ to bottle up their feelings in order to cope.

On the other hand, when we understand more about ourselves, know our own triggers, and develop our emotional intelligence, we are better able to manage a wider range of situations.

Different circumstances permit a different level of expression. We need to consider such matters as:

- ★ What response will lead to the most constructive outcome?
- ★ How will other people respond?
- ★ What are other people's needs?



Emily prided herself on her emotional detachment



## Evaluate your emotional self-management

The following activity enables you to evaluate your emotional intelligence. This is not a scientific test: emotions do not lend themselves easily to such testing. However, it gives you an opportunity to reflect upon your emotional self-management through a structured activity, to gain greater insights.

### 1 Emotional management (self)

For each item, identify  which one response is most true for you.

Item	Usually true	Often true	Seldom true	Not true	Don't know
1 I know which emotions I am experiencing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 I am aware of my emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 I allow myself to feel emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 I take notice of my emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 I can name the emotions I am feeling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 I tell other people what I am feeling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 I take responsibility for my own feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 I know what triggers different kinds of emotion in me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 I can respond without being overwhelmed by emotion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 I can express the right amount of feeling for the circumstances	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 I can be assertive rather than aggressive or passive whilst feeling emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 I know when my feelings are not being expressed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 I make opportunities to express my feelings after an event, if needed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 I know the ways that my feelings affect my performance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 I regularly talk about my feelings to somebody I trust	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16 I reflect upon my feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17 I allow myself to feel 'small' or vulnerable at times	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18 I cry if I need to	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19 I will allow myself to withdraw from a situation in order to experience my feelings, where feasible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20 I am aware of how my feelings are affected by the people around me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## 2 Emotional management (others)

For each item, identify  which one response is most true for you.

Item	Usually true	Often true	Seldom true	Not true	Don't know
1 I can tell which emotions other people are experiencing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 I am aware of other people's feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 I allow other people to feel their emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 I take notice of other people's emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 I can name the emotions other people are feeling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 I speak to other people about their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 I take responsibility for my own feelings when other people are being emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 I know what triggers emotional responses in people I see regularly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 I am aware of my own responses to other people's emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 I allow others to express what they feel is right for the circumstances	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 I can be assertive when other people are being aggressive, passive or emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 I am aware when other people are not expressing their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 I make opportunities to enable other people to express their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 I am aware of how I let other people's feelings affect my performance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 I regularly listen to someone I know well talking about their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16 I reflect upon the way feelings are experienced and expressed in groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17 I allow other people to feel 'small' or vulnerable if they need to	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18 I am comfortable when others cry if they need to	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19 I understand when other people withdraw from a situation in order to experience their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20 I am aware of how my feelings affect the people around me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### 3 Emotions in action

For each item, identify  which one response is most true for you.

Item	Usually true	Often true	Seldom true	Not true	Don't know
1 I feel comfortable even when people disagree with me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 I can allow other people to have their own opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 I can feel angry without taking it out on others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 I can accept criticism without getting angry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 I can voice my own opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 I am able to remain positive even when the situation looks gloomy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 I can allow myself to be sad – and to experience the sadness without pushing it away	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 I can make decisions and act upon them	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 I stop and assess a situation before I act or speak	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 I feel comfortable working with people from very different backgrounds to mine	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 I can enjoy diversity in the people around me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 I will speak out for what I believe is right	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 I ask for help when I need it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 I can let myself feel emotions without using alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, comfort eating or self-harming	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 I am calm in a crisis	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16 I can identify when my behaviour is unreasonable – and stop it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17 I can manage uncertainty without having to have an answer straight away	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18 I can manage my emotions under pressure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19 I take responsibility for my own part in events	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20 I can admit a mistake and apologise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

#### Scoring your responses

For each item on the above sets of questions, allocate to yourself the following scores:

*Usually true (4); Often true (3); Seldom true (2); Not true (1); Don't know (0).*

1 Emotional management (self): Score

2 Emotional management (others): Score

3 Emotions in action: Score

**Total score:**

# Emotional self-management

## Interpreting your scores

**171–240** If your answers are accurate, your emotional intelligence will be an asset in almost any situation. Notice any items to which you gave lower ratings; consider whether there is room for development there. Also consider whether there are areas not covered by the self-evaluation where you know your emotional responses are less than ideal. With your level of emotional intelligence, it is likely you are aware of aspects to develop further.

**131–170** If your evaluations are accurate, you have good foundations for developing your emotional intelligence further; it is an asset worth nurturing. **Items you rated 3 or 4:** notice these strengths and consider where they can be an asset to you. **Items rated 2:** you already demonstrate some emotional awareness in these areas, so decide how you can build on these. **Items rated 1:** Think through why these are so hard for you. If your response to any items is distress, anger or dismissal as unimportant, it is likely you would benefit from talking about these with an expert, such as a student counsellor. Decide which areas you would benefit from developing first.

**Under 130** If your score is accurate, it suggests that you experience difficulties understanding and managing the emotional requirements of many situations. Life can feel harder when emotional self-management is a challenge. You might feel

that people misunderstand you and your motives much of the time, which is not a comfortable place. There are many possible reasons for low levels of emotional self-management, from stress to poor role models or unresolved life issues. The counselling services at college/ university can usually provide a helpful, confidential steer if your emotional self-management is not serving you well at present.

**Items you rated 3 or 4** Notice the kinds of emotional situation that you cope with best: think about what makes these easier for you to handle. If you rated any areas strongly, use these to identify attributes you have that can assist you in other areas of emotional self-management.

**Other strengths?** There might be areas of emotional intelligence in which you excel that are not covered by this activity. Consider whether you have strengths in interactions with particular kinds of people (family, children, elderly, patients, etc.). You might deal with emotional interactions best in certain contexts, such as when communicating online or by phone, or when there is less direct eye contact, few people around, or when particular personal performance factors outlined in Chapter 4 are in place for you. If so, use these insights to understand better what you need in order to develop your emotional management.

## Activity



### Emotional responses

Consider three contrasted situations where you experienced a strong emotional response – such as in a group, on your own, with another person, at work, on your course, etc. For each situation, jot down your responses to the following questions.

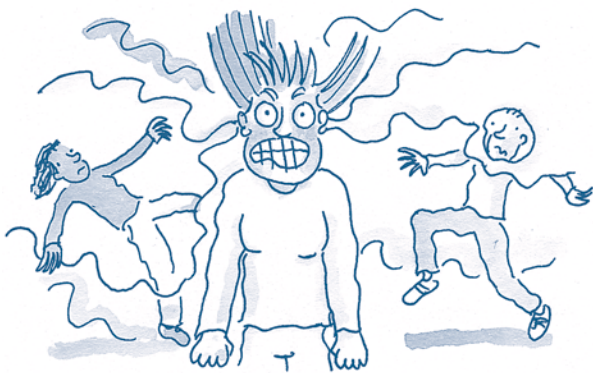
- ➔ What happened?
- ➔ Which feelings did you express?
- ➔ What were the consequences?
- ➔ Were your responses different depending on the circumstances or people involved?
- ➔ What did you feel?
- ➔ What did you do at the time?
- ➔ What did you do or feel within the next 48 hours?
- ➔ Did your responses enable you to achieve a constructive outcome in each situation?

# Unexpressed emotions

Whilst it is important to know what we feel and to acknowledge our feelings, there are times when it is not appropriate to express all of what we feel. In the activity above, you will probably have identified feelings you did not express at the time. If such feelings go unacknowledged for a long time, they do not usually just disappear. Below, are some ways that our minds deal with unexpressed feelings. As you read through these, identify which responses seem to be most typical of your own. You would be a very remarkable person if you made none of the following responses.

## Displacement

The emotion is ignored and sneaks out when not expected, typically when you experience a similar emotion later. For example, you say nothing when you are irritated several times during a morning, and then snap or shout at somebody for something very minor later on in the day. Many people are not aware of what they are feeling, yet their feelings can be all too evident to the people around them.



Ida knew for certain she had her anger under control

## Distorted thinking

Unexpressed emotions can eat away at people, leading to these distorted thinking patterns.

- ★ **Blocks** – thinking there is no answer/way out.
- ★ **Exaggeration** – magnifying the problem.
- ★ **Over-generalising and drawing false conclusions** – judging everything from one or a few examples: 'My first essays were bad – I'll never be able to write any! I shouldn't be on the course.'
- ★ **Amplifying one's own role in events** – seeing oneself as incompetent, unkind, bad or completely to blame for all that went wrong. This can be an unconscious way of refusing to admit one's actual role (as it invites reassurance from others that we are not wholly to blame).
- ★ **'All or nothing' thinking** – 'If I can't have this then I don't want anything.'
- ★ **'Magical thinking'** – believing that one is jinxed, doomed, specially chosen, fated.
- ★ **Mistaking feelings for facts** – 'I feel it's all terrible, so it must be.'
- ★ **Focusing on negatives** – seeing only what went wrong, and judging a situation only by what was not perfect.
- ★ **Rationalising** – finding a reason for doing what you want to do, or for not doing what needs to be done.

## Reflection

### Displacing emotions

Think of an occasion when your emotional reaction was strong for the situation.

- ★ What happened? What did you do or say?
- ★ Which emotion was being displaced?
- ★ What had originally provoked the emotion – was it something recent? Was it the result of a long build-up of emotion?
- ★ What could you have done to prevent displacing the emotion onto the later situation?

## Reflection

### Distorted thinking

We all use distorted thinking from time to time.

- ★ What kinds of situations prompt you into distorted thinking?
- ★ Which of the above patterns of distorted thinking do you tend to use the most?
- ★ What benefit do you gain from such distorted thinking in the short term? Bear in mind that if you didn't feel it was giving you something, you wouldn't do it.
- ★ How do such thought patterns obstruct you in achieving your goals? (They do!)

# Managing personal distress

## Distress

When emotions are not acknowledged, we can feel distress without understanding why this is the case.

## Note signs of distress

Disproportionate responses are noticeable when quite small things that do not seem to affect other people, or which do not usually affect you in this way, provoke a strong reaction in you. An apparently small event might seem highly significant at such times, and/or lead to tears, shouting, anger, a sense of anxiety or fear, or possibly even a violent response. You or others might feel that you are out of control. This is often a signal that something has been building, unexpressed, for a long time.

When you feel such distress, it is usually advisable to take action. For example:

- ★ Take some time away from the situation so you can calm down.
- ★ Avoid being entirely on your own – though you might prefer to sit apart until you calm down.
- ★ Give some time to thinking through why you reacted so strongly. The ABCD model below provides one means of doing this.
- ★ Talk the event through with someone you trust. Ideally, speak to a counsellor. They can help you release the emotion in a manageable way.
- ★ Be aware of other triggers that could be contributing to your reaction, such as stress, overwork or lack of sleep.
- ★ Don't forget to apologise to others who were affected. Even if they were in the wrong, if your reaction was disproportionate, this can be confusing and distressing for them too.

## The ABC(D) model

Dryden and Gordon (1993) and Ellis (1994) outlined the 'ABC model' for managing situations that cause distress. It helps analyse the source of the distress and separates the core of the problem from the beliefs and attitudes that amplify it. This makes it easier to find a solution or way of coping, whilst keeping the underlying issues in perspective. ABC stands for:

**A = Activating event:** What happened that led to the emotional distress?

**B = Beliefs:** What beliefs contribute to the emotional distress?

**C = Consequences:** e.g. anger, illness, inability to work, difficulty getting down to work or concentrating

The example below (page 121) adds 'D':

**D = Dealing with it:** What action will you take to manage the situation?

## Activity



### Would the 'ABCD model' work for you?

- ➔ Read through the ABCD model outline above and the worked example on the next page. Consider when and how it might be helpful to you.
- ➔ If possible, identify either a current or a past situation which created undue stress, pressure or distress to you or someone you know.
- ➔ Work through each of the stages of the model, applying them to the situation you identified.
- ➔ If doing this generated any ideas about dealing with such a situation, consider when and how you might apply these in the future.
- ➔ If this model wasn't useful, how might you adapt it so that it worked better for you?

## Want to know more?



Daniel Goleman (2013) *Focus: the secret to high performance and fulfilment* (Nov 2, 2013). (On using emotional intelligence and mindfulness).

Abria Joseph (2015) *Removing negative self talk*. TEDxYouth@NIST (Nov 2, 2015). Accessed 2 June 2020

Stella Cottrell (2019) *50 Ways to Manage Stress* (London: Red Globe Press).

# The ABC(D) model for dealing with distress

**A Activating event** A student, Gareth, didn't read the course handbook. As a result, he didn't realise that two essays were to be submitted on the same day. He asked for an extension, but was refused because it wasn't possible in the circumstances. He has to complete both essays in five days. If not, he will need to retake the module.

**B Beliefs** Gareth can make a decision to work flat out to produce two essays, possibly accepting lower marks, or he can defer one of the modules and increase the possibility of higher marks for both in the long term. This would take him several months longer, but is feasible. However, Gareth feels he is 'totally stupid' to have got into this situation and that this is 'typical' of the mess he makes of his 'whole life'. He links this current problem with others he experiences, so that the issue is no longer a missed deadline (which can be managed) but everything about his life. He doesn't believe he can write the essays as he has convinced himself that nothing he does will work.

**C Consequences** Gareth's beliefs lock him into inaction. All his energies are diverted into self-blame and hopelessness. He feels small, and too embarrassed to talk to his friends. Instead of using his time to write the essays, he wastes it worrying or drinking, trying to push the problem away. Because he is stressed, he can't concentrate or make sense of what he reads. He misses shifts for his part-time job, adding to his troubles, and convincing him further that his 'life' is a problem.

**D Dealing with it** What could you do if you found yourself in a similar situation? In this case, it is beliefs that are fuelling the distress, leading to unhelpful consequences. You could either focus on the problem so as to divert yourself from the beliefs – or address the unhelpful beliefs.

## 1 Focusing on the problem

- ★ **Describe the activating event**, reducing it to the basics. Acknowledge what went wrong and what has been learnt. Yes, Gareth should have read the handbook. However, he is unlikely to make this mistake again. This could be a critical lesson from which he learns and gains in the longer term. He is far from being the only student to get into such a position.
- ★ **List all your options** Find out what these are and write them down. Note the advantages, potential drawbacks and feasibility of each.
- ★ **Use a problem-solving strategy** Move as quickly as possible into 'problem-solving mode' (see Chapter 11). Brainstorm options for solving the core problem. Evaluate these. Choose one.
- ★ **Make a decision** then stick to it and accept the consequences. The consequences might not be ideal, but they can be the 'best possible' for the situation. They are not life-threatening or catastrophic in the larger picture.
- ★ **Develop an action plan** and follow it. See page 208.

## 2 Addressing unhelpful beliefs

- ★ **Motivate yourself** Jot down positive phrases such as 'there is a solution' or 'I will do this'.
- ★ **List** your negative thoughts (beliefs). Go through your list. Undertake a reality check.
- ★ **Ask** 'Is this belief going to help me find a solution?'
- ★ **Challenge** all beliefs that generalise or start with 'I should have ...' or 'I always/never...'. Erase or delete any that aren't helping you move forward.
- ★ **Replace** Exchange your unhelpful belief with an example of a more constructive working substitute. Write this where you can see it. Re-read it often to shape the belief.
- ★ **Focus** Cease thinking about similar situations; focus on the current situation.
- ★ **Speak** to a friend or counsellor to put the situation into perspective.

# Managing change, confusion, uncertainty

## Transitional learning

Issues discussed in higher education tend to be complex and still under consideration. Even established positions can be overturned by new findings or cultural change. There can be several feasible answers, depending on the methodology used and how evidence is interpreted, or there might not be sufficient evidence yet to form a firm conclusion. Some issues discussed at this level directly challenge what we have learnt before, or seem to contradict views that we or people close to us hold as true. This can be unsettling and confusing if our understanding seemed clearer at earlier stages in our education.



**1 Initial equilibrium:** first there is a state of satisfaction with our current ways of thinking and doing.



**2 Disequilibrium:** then we gain a sense of growing dissatisfaction and an awareness of the limitations of our existing ways of thinking and doing. This is the stage where confusion and worry can set in.



**3 A more stable equilibrium:** finally, if we persist in our enquiries, we can move to a more sophisticated way of thinking that overcomes the limitations of our previous thinking and performance.

Our understanding is on a more secure base. To progress to more sophisticated ways of thinking, we need to be receptive to disequilibrium and to manage or 'contain' short-term confusion. Otherwise, we might cling to the 'security' of a less advanced equilibrium.

## Reflection



### Feeling confused?

- ★ Do you feel that you are finding it harder to learn since starting university-level study?
- ★ Do you ever feel that you are more confused the more you learn?
- ★ How does this make you feel?

## 'Equilibration'

Saven-Baden (2000) uses the term 'transitional learning' to refer to 'shifts' that occur when students' frames of reference, or 'life world' are challenged by their learning. This state is: 'characterised by frustration and confusion, and a loss of sense of self'. Siegler (1991) cites the example of a child who thinks that only animals are living things. When she hears plants referred to as being 'alive', she becomes uncertain of what 'alive' means. This uncertainty, although temporarily uncomfortable, is a necessary stage in opening up to a new understanding of the world. Dissatisfaction begins an internal questioning which then opens us up to exploring new options.

Experiencing some confusion can be a useful sign that we are pushing ourselves, our learning, our knowledge and skills beyond their former level. In other words, we are not stagnating. Piaget (1975) described this process as 'equilibration' and regarded it as essential to our development. Equilibration has three stages:

## Reflection



### Coping with disequilibrium

- ★ Think back to a time when you felt you would never learn something – but did. What was it that was difficult to learn?
- ★ How did you manage to work through the 'confusion' or disheartened stage to the stage where you started to feel you understood what you were learning?
- ★ What did it feel like once you understood?

# Uncertainty: wanting 'right answers'

University life and study can be very challenging to our way of seeing the world. Many would argue that it should be, and that a university education should stretch students and make them re-evaluate their core beliefs and ways of thinking. The challenge can be difficult to manage at first.

In the 1970s, Perry undertook research with students at Harvard and Radcliffe in the USA. He found that even outstanding students often expected to be given, or led towards, the 'right answers' by their tutors. How far is this true of you? Check your own responses using the following activity.

## Activity



### Is there a 'right answer'?

This activity is likely to take at least half an hour and maybe longer. There are three parts.

#### Part 1 Issues *Jot down your ideas about three of the following*

- (a) It is ethical to clone human life.
- (b) Students should be trained to develop their thinking skills as part of every programme.
- (c) All adults should be required to contribute 50 hours a year to community or environmental work.
- (d) To protect the environment, each person should have a restricted number of travel miles for holidays over their lifetime.
- (e) Emotional intelligence should be part of the school curriculum.
- (f) There should be a curfew on all people with a criminal record.
- (g) Science requires creative thinking rather than logic.

#### Part 2 Approaches

Below is a list of approaches students take when considering issues (adapted from Perry, 1970). For each of the issues you considered, decide which of the six following positions best describes where you stand on the issue.

##### 1 Absolute answer

I think this is a question of right and wrong or that the answer is obvious. I know where I stand, and I don't think an alternative answer is acceptable. Recognised authorities such as my tutor, a book, the law or a professional body can provide a definitive answer for me on this.

##### 2 Temporary unacceptable uncertainty

The right answer hasn't been found yet but needs to be. Professionals, academics or other authorities need to clarify what the right answer is in order to avoid confusion.

##### 3 Acceptable uncertainty

Everyone has a right to his or her own opinion. All answers are equally acceptable. My answer is as good as anyone else's. Lecturers and experts do not have all the answers.

##### 4 Relativism

It's all relative. There are no 'right answers' – it depends upon the circumstances..

##### 5 Taking responsibility for a point of view

I understand and appreciate other viewpoints on this issue, but I believe some answers or perspectives are better than others, and that I should decide where I stand. I realise that this might bring responsibilities and have implications for how I think, speak, and the choices I make.

##### 6 Commitment and openness

I am committed to this viewpoint which has great importance to who I am, my values and the kind of person I want to be. I realise this carries personal responsibility. However, I am open to re-considering this as I learn and grow, even if that means holding some uncertainty.

## Part 3 Style of thinking

Perry identified nine stages of thinking, depending on a student's level of openness to uncertainty.

- ➔ Which of the nine stages below is closest to the approach you took for the activity on page 123)?
- ➔ In general, which is most representative of you and your ability to sit with uncertainty?

### Position 1: 'Right-answer' (stages 1-3) (Approaches 1 and 2, page 123)

- 1 Absolutist:** there are right answers available. Things are either right or wrong. It is the teacher's job to provide the right answers.
- 2 Bad authority versus good authority:** there are right answers but uncertainty is created by poor teachers or leaders. It is fine for teachers to withhold right answers to help students to find 'right' answers themselves.
- 3 Temporary uncertainty:** there are right answers but it isn't clear what these are yet.

### Position 2: Relativist (stages 4-5) (Approaches 3 and 4, page 123)

- 4 Acceptable uncertainty:** 'Everyone has a right to their opinion' despite what teachers or leaders might think. For assignments, find out the lecturers' opinions first.
- 5 'All knowledge and value are contextual and relative':** For assignments, students should ask: 'What is required of me in this context?'

### Position 3: Commitment (stages 6-9) (Approaches 5 and 6, page 123)

- 6 Personal orientation:** you feel it necessary to choose one of many possible answers, whilst tolerating other views
- 7 Commitment:** you stand behind a viewpoint.
- 8 Responsible:** you realise and experience the implications of your commitment and the responsibilities it brings.
- 9 Evolving:** your commitment to your views is 'an ongoing, unfolding activity' through which lifestyle and identity are expressed.

## Changing position

You do not have to agree that the nine stages above apply to every question. However, they can be a useful tool for evaluating the nature of your own responses to issues, and your readiness to accept uncertainty. You will know how comfortable or uncomfortable you feel about applying any particular stage to your own ideas. You might need a greater knowledge of all the issues and the consequences of taking a particular position in order to change your viewpoint.

Perry found that it can take years for students to feel comfortable at stages 7-9 of this hierarchy. It can be hard for people to feel comfortable at levels 4-9 on some issues unless their sense of self, core beliefs or values undergo change. There isn't a 'quick fix' to changing the way we think. However, being aware of how we are thinking and responding can help the process of development.

You can also use the nine stages to help you understand where other people are in their thinking. It is important to be sensitive to where people are situated: you cannot force people into a different set of beliefs.

## Reflection



### Managing uncertainty

- ★ What are your expectations of your lecturers? Do you expect them to provide, or lead you towards, a 'right answer'?
- ★ How comfortable do you feel with the idea that there may not be 'right answers' to questions that are important to you?
- ★ How open are you to hearing opinions that contradict your own?

If this interests you, ask your tutors for literature that discusses the nature of 'truth' or 'fact' or 'right answers' in your subject area.

# Holding uncertainty

When we feel uncertain or confused, we lose our sense of equilibrium. Naturally, this makes us want to find our 'balance' again. The temptation is to act too quickly, rushing in to find a solution so that we feel better. Often, this leads to hasty action which limits our possibilities. It is important to learn to tolerate uncomfortable feelings of uncertainty whilst we learn more. We need to:

- ★ acknowledge our feelings of discomfort
- ★ pause before rushing to decisions or action
- ★ find support if needed: talk to someone
- ★ find out more about the issues of concern
- ★ aim to understand what we find challenging – and look for potential opportunities
- ★ consider our options, preferably within a problem-solving strategy
- ★ act when we have weighed up the options.



Not everyone appreciated Gary's capacity to sit with uncertainty until he had weighed up all options carefully

## Reflection

### Managing uncertainty

- ★ What kinds of uncertainty have you experienced recently? How did you react?
- ★ In retrospect, could you have managed this differently – or more constructively?
- ★ Did you look for any support in managing this uncertainty? If not, what stopped you?
- ★ How might you manage uncertainty and challenge better?

## The changing context

Technology and changes in the workplace have revolutionised the way we work and study. For most of history, people knew from childhood what kind of job they would have, their station in life, their relative income, the tools they would use. Lives were mapped out often before a person was born, depending on their family circumstances.

Today, things move quickly and change is the dominant pattern. More people have a chance to study for a degree and opt for almost any profession, at any age. It is expected that we will continue training in new skills throughout our lives and it is likely that most of us will have several jobs, probably in diverse locations. The technical skills learnt today will become out of date very quickly; even factual information has a short shelf life.

Change inevitably brings uncertainty and, depending on what else is going on in our lives, we each manage this differently. There may be some kinds of change that you always welcome, and others that cause distress.

## Reflection

### Coping with change

- ★ What kinds of change do you find easiest to accept and to cope with?
- ★ Which do you find difficult to cope with?
- ★ What actions do you take to help you manage change so that you are better able to cope with those difficulties? You might find benefit from the ABCD model (pages 120–1).

## Activity

### Attitude to challenge

Have a go at evaluating your *Attitude to challenge* using material on the companion site.



## Coping with change

For each item below, identify  which one response is most true of you

Item	Usually true	Often true	Seldom true	Not true
1 I enjoy change	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 I look for the opportunities in new situations and circumstances	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 I feel comfortable meeting new people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 I am confident about coping in new surroundings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 I welcome new perspectives on an issue or problem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 I ask people for feedback that helps me improve	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 I can change plans at the last minute without stress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 I can study well in a wide range of circumstances	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 I enjoy starting new subjects or projects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 I will work early or late at short notice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Scoring your responses

For each item, allocate to yourself the following scores:  
*Usually true (3) Often true (2) Seldom true (1) Not true (0)*

Score

### Reflecting on your score

- 24–30** This suggests you have a strong and positive approach to change. Consider how this benefits your study and could help you in working life. Do you look for change at the expense of continuity? If so, how might this create challenges for you and/or others?
- 16–23** This suggests you are generally positive about change. Consider how this benefits you. How might you strengthen your rating further? How would that benefit you?

- 8–15** This suggests that you are ambivalent about change – sometimes positive, sometimes not. Note your lower ratings: how could you become more comfortable about change in these areas? What benefits would that bring?
- 0–7** Your score suggests a strong preference for continuity. You might need to be creative to find work and circumstances that would give you such continuity. Consider the disadvantages that your resistance to change brings – and what would help you to develop greater flexibility.

# Get organised

Good organisation makes life much easier – and is an essential aspect of self-management.

## Identify support

Very few of us have the ideal resources, but none of us is without any. This is especially true for students. Make use of those available to you. Be well informed about what these are – and don't make any assumptions about who does or should use them. They are there for your benefit.

A wide range of services, events and support are offered through most universities, colleges and/or in the community. Usually, you will find details on their websites. Look for their social media posts to find out about special offers and relevant events.

### Activity

#### Find information



- ➔ Make a list of all the sources of support available to you through the Student Union and Student Services
- ➔ Follow this up by making appointments – put these in your diary.
- ➔ Before appointments, read the literature provided so as to check the documentation or details you need to bring. Always take your student identity card or number.

## Map your resources

List the sources of support available to you for different aspects of your studies, life and future planning. These might include your personal resources, as well as help, advice or other support available through friends, mentors, professional bodies, sports and arts organisations, family, charities, your country's government, governments abroad, online services, employers, Student Union, trades union, course or workplace. Consider the range of support you can call upon for:

- ★ academic advice, guidance, study skills
- ★ post-graduate study
- ★ accommodation
- ★ financial advice and support

- ★ career planning and employability
- ★ finding work or a job
- ★ networking
- ★ staying healthy and fit
- ★ social life/meeting other people
- ★ emotional well-being, mental health and stress management
- ★ fun and relaxation
- ★ international travel, study, work.

A template for mapping your resources is available on the companion site.



## Select good apps

There is a huge range of apps that support student life and study. Using a good selection can save you time. Beware of wasting time constantly chasing new apps, trying these out and using apps when it would be just as quick to complete tasks without them.

- ★ Which apps are best is a question of personal choice.
- ★ Ask friends or students in the year above you about what they have found useful.
- ★ Select a handful that really make a difference.

Suggestions for useful apps are updated annually in *The Macmillan Student Planner*.

## Organise your time

Good organisation is one important aspect of time management: it saves time which you can then spend where you most need it. Time-management underpins success in many fields, including academic study. Use the following pages to:

- ★ Consider your own time character
- ★ Evaluate how well you use time
- ★ Improve your time management.

# Understand your time character



## Time management characteristics

Your time is one of your most valuable resources. Good time management is key to good organisation and reducing stress. How well do you use your time at present? For each item, identify  which response is most true for you.

Characteristic	Yes, a lot	Yes, sometimes	No	I don't know
I recognise the following characteristics as true of me:				
Being late	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not knowing where I am supposed to be	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Delays because I can't remember where I put things	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Missing appointments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rushing at the end of a task	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Missing deadlines	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not being clear what I need to do next	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Being late for a bus or train	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting caught up in interesting diversions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Finding it hard to get started	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Taking too long to complete a task	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Running out of time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not knowing how long it takes me to complete a task	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dashing around all day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Forgetting what I have to do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- ★ If your response to all of the above was 'NO' you seem to have very good time management. Is it perfect, or are there areas where you could improve further?
- ★ If your response to some items was: 'I don't know', then you would seem to lack awareness about your time management. Speak to people who know you well and find out what they think about your time management.
- ★ If your response to any of the above was 'Yes', the following activities and guidance may help.

# Manage time more effectively



## Factors in time management

For each item below, identify which  response is most true of you.

Time management factor	Very true	Sometimes true	Never true
1 I use small pockets of time in the day to sort out minor tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 I get down to work quickly; I am well motivated to start	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 I have timed myself completing each stage of larger tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 I know when I have done enough rather than aiming at perfection	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 I delegate work to others when I can	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 I ask for help where possible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 I have a go rather than worrying about getting things wrong	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 I have good strategies for getting myself started on new tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 I say 'no' when I lack time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 I am well-organised so as not to waste time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 I keep a diary and use it effectively	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 I plan my activities in a logical order	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Activity

#### Time solutions



If you answered 'sometimes true' or 'never true' to any of the above time management factors, identify at least three you could improve.

- ➔ Some strategies for managing these time factors are given in the pages that follow. Consider which you could adopt or adapt to help improve your use of time.
- ➔ Commit to your time management actions by writing your intended actions as 'I will...' statements: e.g. *'I will keep an effective diary.'*
- ➔ Add specific details that make it more likely you will take action: e.g. *'I will buy a diary today at the Student Shop after my Design lecture. I will carry it in my bag. I will check it every evening after dinner so I can plan ahead for the next day.'*

### Form good new habits

It takes around 6–8 weeks of persisting in a changed behaviour in order to establish a new habit. You probably are all too aware of many ways that you 'waste time' or delay actions unnecessarily. If you want to change bad time habits, then:

- 1 Be specific about what, exactly, you want to change and why.
- 2 State what you will do to change it.
- 3 Set a daily target or action which you commit to adopt for the next few weeks (or for the next set of tasks, depending on what is involved).
- 4 Make sure your targets are realistic. For example, don't cut out all down-time. You need space to relax, think and day-dream too, in order to be effective.
- 5 Tell others about your intentions – to increase commitment and gain the support you need.

You can use a habit-shaper to keep track of your target or action – to make sure you keep to your good intentions. Either create your own or use those in *The Macmillan Student Planner*.

# Improve your time management

Below are suggestions to support the 12 time management factors raised on page 129. Decide  which ones you could use to improve your time management.

## 1 Use pockets of time

This is a key strategy for effective time management. Utilise time spent waiting in queues, on a bus or for the kettle to boil. Use it to recap on your learning, formulate

lists, work out a problem, check out new apps or undertake any short tasks you can undertake on the move.



Use your device or an ideas notebook with detachable pages to jot down ideas as soon as they arise.

Make a mental note of the times in the day when you could use time in this way. This strategy also reduces the stress associated with queuing and tedious tasks.

## 2 Find the motivation

We saw in Chapter 1 how important motivation is to success. If you do not feel like doing something, take the initiative to find a source of motivation or inspiration for getting started on your task. For example, remind yourself of your long-term goals. Check these still matter to you. Remind yourself of the benefits you gain from completing it; write these down where you can see them. Set short-term targets that give frequent tastes of success.

## 3 Plan task time

Time management means knowing how long it takes to get things done from start to finish. Time yourself and use this for planning future tasks. This is easier if you identify the smaller tasks that contribute to the whole as some take much longer than expected, especially at the start and finish.

## 4 Cost your time

Work out whether the time you spend on each aspect of a task is 'cost-effective'. Usually the return (such as extra marks) decreases after a certain point. Academic work is hard to get perfect, as there isn't usually a single right answer. If you gain satisfaction from the additional study time, that is fine, as long as you calculate what you are giving up in exchange.

## 5 Delegate to others

Identify what lies beneath any reluctance you feel about delegating. For example, do you distrust others to do the job well? If so, what are the effects of this on your own time, stress levels and personal efficiency? What would be the benefits to you and to others if you delegated more? How will others learn to do a job well if you do not delegate? You could consider a compromise where you share some tasks in the shorter term.

## 6 Ask for help

Recognise your own limits. Support services are set up because it is expected that people will need help. This is especially true for students. Asking friends and colleagues for help can contribute to their own personal development too. It can build their self-esteem and problem-solving skills. It gives them an opportunity to be helpful, which they may value.

## 7 and 8 Starting strategies

Use a basic starting strategy such as brainstorming ideas or writing a list. Start with what you can do and work from there. Often, a problem arises when we focus too much on what the end product should be rather than building from what we know. Start small. Branch out. Ideas will come. See also Chapters 10–11.

## 9 Say 'no' when needed

Identify what lies behind your difficulty in saying 'no'. It might be your beliefs, such as that 'a nice person' always helps out. If so, think what it means to be kind to yourself. Also, what are the negative consequences of always saying 'yes'? For example, it could prevent others from having a chance to be kind or to take full responsibility. Alternatively, your reluctance could be a question of assertiveness or negotiation. If so, see Chapter 6. If there are long-standing or domestic issues which contribute to your difficulty in saying 'no', speak to a student counsellor.



Of all the donkeys, Geoffrey found it the hardest to say 'No'

## 10 and 11 Use a diary

A diary is an essential life tool. Some people prefer electronic organisers; some prefer paper-based so that they have good access even when there are poor Wi-fi connections. Either way, choose one that is fast to check and update. Look at it frequently during the day. Develop the habit of writing everything in it to avoid double-booking. Enter all targets. Enter deadlines on the date work should be submitted or a task completed. Write in start dates and times too.

## 12 Plan in a logical order

Write a list of all the tasks you need to undertake during the day. Re-write the list, grouping the activities by place. Allow sufficient time to move from one place to another. Write the locations in your diary and/or a day planner

A day planner is available on the companion site.



### Things that get forgotten

- ★ The time it takes to travel between appointments – mark that in.
- ★ The time when work towards a deadline should begin rather than just the deadline itself.
- ★ New locations. These might be hard to find. Plan to leave time in case you get lost.
- ★ Queuing time.
- ★ Transport delays. These are not usually accepted as excuses unless they are very rare with unusual circumstances.
- ★ Information technology going wrong; waiting to use a shared printer, etc.

### Want to know more?



Stephen Duneier (2017) *How to achieve your most ambitious goals*. TEDxTucson (Mar 6, 2017). Accessed 4 June 2020.

Saroas Ahamed (2016) *Time management*. TEDTalk. Dec 29, 2016. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2NNiiDGOoQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2NNiiDGOoQ). Accessed 4 June 2020.

Stella Cottrell (2019) *The Study Skills Handbook* (London: Red Globe Press).

Stella Cottrell (2019) *50 Ways to Manage Time Effectively* (London: Red Globe Press).

*The Macmillan Student Planner* (updated annually).

# Review: Successful self-management

## **1 Recognise the multiple dimensions to self-management**

Be aware of various aspects of self-management and the value of all of these to yourself and to those around you. These include emotional, practical and cognitive dimensions, including taking responsibility for our attitudes, responses, behaviours, emotions, time and well-being.

## **2 Be prepared to take the initiative**

Become more skilled at understanding when to take the initiative. Recognise when you do this best, and how to build your capacity for taking sensible action. Don't always wait to be asked or told what to do.

## **3 Take responsibility**

Avoid attributing your own responses, feelings, actions, successes and failures to others. Be your own person and recognise your power to act and think for yourself. Take charge of mental attitudes and internal messages – own these.

## **4 Identify what helps and hinders – at eight key levels**

Use the eight-level framework to analyse what blocks or incentivises you to action. Use this to recognise where to focus your attention and energies to effect changes in yourself, your thoughts and behaviours.

## **5 Foster hope, optimism and self-belief**

Allow yourself to believe in yourself and your potential. Success is positively associated with optimism and hope – provided these are accompanied by realistic expectations and conscientious action.

## **6 Adopt a positive, solution-focused approach**

Become more aware of the attitudes that you bring to tasks and to life. Don't waste time and energies on negative thoughts about what can't be done. Re-direct these into searching for best possible solutions.

## **7 Develop emotional intelligence and emotional self-management**

Emotional responses have a powerful effect. Recognise those areas where you and/or others would benefit from your improving emotional self-management. Use a strategy for dealing with distress.

## **8 Become skilled at coping with change, uncertainty and confusion**

Whilst some change is exciting, change and uncertainty typically demand more of our time and mental and emotional energies. Whilst this can be draining, confusing and unsettling, it can deepen our learning and inner strength over time. Build your resilience for coping with, and benefiting from, these.

## **9 Get organised**

Gain multiple benefits from organising your time and space and taking a more planned, systematic approach to task management (see also Chapter 9). Recognise the value of good time management. Keep examining your use of time and looking for ways of deploying it more effectively.

# PART 2

## People and task management skills

### Inter-personal skills

Although your work as a student is usually graded on individual effort, people skills are essential on most courses. Many class-based and online sessions are designed to be collaborative. You might be asked to take part in group work, joint presentations for seminars and workshops, peer-based support, on-line discussion boards, peer-criticism, producing class journals or collaborative research projects within your institution or with students or colleagues from other organisations. Your course might require you to work with research participants, clients, patients, employers and work colleagues, technicians, administrators and supervisors.

These are just some ways in which you may be called upon to exercise people skills. In addition, you will have the chance to meet and interact with a wide range of people through your course, your institution, and through the opportunities open to you as a student. It is likely, therefore, that during your time as a student, you will:

- ★ develop your inter-personal skills naturally to some extent through the experiences you encounter, adding to the portfolio of skills that you can carry with you into graduate job roles, *and*
- ★ benefit from cultivating your people skills, making all interactions easier, more effective and more enjoyable.

### Managing tasks and projects

Good task and project management skills help you to get things done more easily and efficiently, with minimum stress, leaving you more time and energy for other things. That is true for everyday tasks as well as larger-scale projects that you could be set for your course or at work.

In completing tasks successfully, it helps if you can draw on a broad range of skills: intellectual, intra-personal and inter-personal as well as operational. You can then feel confident about taking a solution-focused approach to most new tasks and challenges.

Task management skills also oil the wheels in your dealings with other people. For example, you can build a great deal of good will, confidence and trust if people can depend on you to be organised, punctual, and likely to complete tasks on schedule. For collaborative tasks, whether as part of your study or at work, people are more likely to want you on their team if you are good at managing projects, systematic in your approach, and able to resolve problems that arise.

If you can combine good people skills with good task management skills, then you also have strong employability skills that should enable you to succeed in most work roles.

Part 2 helps you to understand better what is meant by such skills and the various behaviours and attitudes that help you to put them into practice.

#### Chapters in Part 2

6 People skills

7 Teamwork

8 Develop your leadership capacity

9 Managing tasks and projects



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to develop skills in:

- ✓ building a good rapport with others
- ✓ giving and receiving encouragement, support and constructive criticism
- ✓ networking and finding allies
- ✓ dealing with difficult situations when interacting with others
- ✓ assertiveness, negotiation and persuasion.

## What are 'people skills'?

'People skills' is a term used to refer to effective inter-personal interactions. These involve such understandings, behaviours and habits as:

- ★ getting on with others – being a good friend, colleague or team member
- ★ empathy with others, including those whose experiences are very different to your own
- ★ being comfortable around people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, cultures, beliefs and personalities – and enabling them to feel comfortable around you
- ★ being able to form a connection, or develop rapport, with a wide range of people
- ★ being able to anticipate, avoid and resolve conflict
- ★ communicating effectively, such as through clear and timely content, negotiation and persuasion
- ★ being able to read unspoken signs about what others are feeling, communicating or about to do
- ★ adapting behaviour and communications to fit different people and circumstances
- ★ being able to manage your feelings and emotions when dealing with others and to manage difficult situations.

You can consider your own abilities in these areas and others on page 136.

## Why do they matter?

Life is much easier if you can relate empathetically and flexibly with people from all walks of life. As a student, you are a member of a diverse and international community of scholars, sharing knowledge and ideas. Whether in the lab, studio, in clinical practice, undertaking briefs for employers or contributing to class, seminars and projects, you need to communicate with others, work in groups and teams, and interact with all kinds of people who are new to you.

Similarly, in the workplace, it is essential to keep refining people skills, adapting them to new contexts. Changes in technology, communications, demographics and the global economy constantly alter the way we inter-relate. Employers value people skills and have increasingly high expectations for excellent inter-personal and communication skills, as well as for sensitivity to cultural difference and empathy for others' needs (see pages 320–1).

Good people skills enable more enjoyable and harmonious interactions, and help to avoid confusion, conflict, stress and wasted time. They can improve life for everybody.



## How good are your people skills now?

Complete this evaluation now by rating each statement. Repeat in a few weeks or months to note your progress.

**Rating:** 3 = strongly agree 2 = agree 1 = sort of agree 0 = disagree/don't know/no opportunity to test this yet

1 I have worked with a wide range of people of different ages and backgrounds	3	2	1	0
2 I am told that I am very good at working with others	3	2	1	0
3 I feel very confident about talking to people I do not know well	3	2	1	0
4 I am comfortable about leaving silences whilst other people gather their thoughts	3	2	1	0
5 I can start a conversation easily	3	2	1	0
6 I can connect well with everyone	3	2	1	0
7 I am aware of my body language and its effects upon others	3	2	1	0
8 I am always helpful and polite, even to people I find really difficult to like or be around	3	2	1	0
9 I encourage, praise and support others a great deal throughout the day	3	2	1	0
10 I see good points in most of the people I meet during a week	3	2	1	0
11 I listen well without interrupting	3	2	1	0
12 I am very good at developing trust between myself and others	3	2	1	0
13 I can feel compassionate and kind even towards people I find difficult	3	2	1	0
14 When I am in a group, I can easily tell the strengths of each person	3	2	1	0
15 I work very well as a member of a team	3	2	1	0
16 I am clear about the particular strengths I bring to a group or team	3	2	1	0
17 I am very good at resolving difficulties that arise in group or teamwork	3	2	1	0
18 I know what support I need from others	3	2	1	0
19 I am able to ask for what I need	3	2	1	0
20 I am assertive	3	2	1	0
21 I can deal well with difficult people	3	2	1	0
22 I am able to take responsibility for my own part in interactions that go wrong	3	2	1	0
23 I am skilled at offering constructive criticism to others	3	2	1	0
24 I am able to take negative criticism well	3	2	1	0
25 I am able to accept praise well	3	2	1	0
26 I negotiate well with other people	3	2	1	0
27 I know how to arrive at a good compromise	3	2	1	0
28 I can state clearly the direction and support I need from people in leadership roles	3	2	1	0
29 I have built useful networks and sets of contacts	3	2	1	0
30 I am very aware of what other people need	3	2	1	0
<b>Add up your score</b>	<b>Total</b>			

# People skills

## Interpreting your scores

- 70–90** This is an excellent score. If your ratings were accurate, you are able to manage very well your relationships with other people. This suggests an invaluable set of people skills. Consider how you could develop these further. How would you apply these skills in career areas that interest you?
- 40–69** This is a good score. If your ratings were accurate, this suggests your people skills are already well developed. Look for themes in the statements to which you gave lower ratings. Which areas could be further improved?
- 20–39** If your ratings were accurate, this suggests you have developed some people skills as well as an awareness of where you lack strengths currently. There is a lot more you could do to develop your people skills further, and that would make life easier for you. Start by looking for themes in the statements to which you gave lower ratings. Taking your life, course and career interests into consideration, decide on your priority for development at this point.
- 0–19** If your ratings were accurate, this suggests you have identified that people skills are not currently a strength for you. Check with people who know you well whether you have rated yourself too harshly. It is also important that you identify which people skills are most critical for meeting the requirements of your course and career interests. Consider speaking to the Careers Service or your tutors to identify areas of priority for future development. This score also suggests that you might have difficulties in relationships generally. That can be stressful. If so, student counselling services can offer useful ideas about how to make your interactions with others run more smoothly.

## Reflection



### Which skills will you need?

Which people skills will you need for:

- ★ the careers areas that interest you?
- ★ meeting the requirements of your programme?
- ★ your personal needs and interests?

If you are unsure, speak to the Careers Service at the university and to your tutors.

- ★ What are your priorities for developing your people skills?

## Want to know more?



**Psychometric Test** (2013) *Interpersonal Skills Test*. April 29, 2013. <https://www.psychometrictest.org.uk/interpersonal-skills-test/>. (A 50-item inter-personal skills questionnaire with instant feedback on five aspects of inter-personal skills such as integrity and empathy.)

Celeste Headlee (2015) *10 ways to have a better conversation?* TEDxCreativeCoast (May 2015).

Paul Blackburn (2019) *Why listening builds the highest level of trust* (Jun 14, 2019).

**Jennifer Fabiano** (2020) *How to give constructive criticism using emotional intelligence*. [www.theladders.com/career-advice/how-to-give-constructive-criticism](http://www.theladders.com/career-advice/how-to-give-constructive-criticism) (Jan 24, 2020).

# Developing rapport

## Rapport

Establishing rapport is the cornerstone of good relationships with others. It involves such behaviours as:

- 1 making a connection
- 2 taking a genuine interest in the other person
- 3 giving encouragement and support
- 4 skilful, active listening
- 5 developing mutual trust and cooperation.

### 1 Make a connection

Making a connection requires only a little effort. From this, the basis of good trust or friendships can develop. A few basic gestures show good will:

- ★ making eye contact
- ★ giving a genuine smile
- ★ being helpful when asked
- ★ giving a friendly greeting
- ★ showing basic consideration for the other person
- ★ using a friendly, polite manner
- ★ making a comment or asking a question that shows interest without being intrusive
- ★ being consistent in friendly behaviour.

These might seem small and obvious. However, think about the contact you have with people you find difficult. Consider which of these gestures were missing either at your first encounter or on a regular basis. Note which of these gestures you value. A forced smile, an abrupt response, an unpleasant tone of voice and such small details can put relationships on a wrong footing – making hard work of any future connections.

#### *Find the point of connection*

It is easier for us to appreciate and bond with some people more than others. Generally, we tend to like people who think, act and/or look like us, and to be more suspicious or averse to people we don't know or assume to be different. We can also be particularly averse to people who are most similar to us in our negative characteristics – without realising that this is the case. Our people skills and our efficiency benefit enormously if we can find points of connection with those with whom we don't at first see a natural connection. This can take some mental training, such as through 'metta' exercises which train us to feel more compassionate to those we don't know or like as much as others (Cottrell, 2018). The variant of the Balloon Game on the companion site is another good starting place.

## Activity

### Balloon Game



Have a go at the Balloon Game on the companion site.

### 2 Take a genuine interest

Generally, we appreciate people with similar values and beliefs to our own, who do not challenge our own view of the world or our material interests. 'Difference' can be unsettling. It suggests there might be more than one way of doing or being. Our survival mechanisms do not like this idea: it suggests others might be 'right' and our way 'wrong'. That can feel uncomfortable. As we don't generally like to feel discomfort, our minds feed us lifelines such as 'that's boring', 'he's a fool', 'that's rubbish!', to convince us we don't need to re-consider our initial response.

As we develop people skills, we are better able to accept a wider range of differences in other people. We learn to find the point of interest in difference and the value of diversity. We cease to see the world in terms of 'right' and 'wrong', but as a rich spectrum.

The benefits are that:

- ★ we find the world around us to be more interesting
- ★ we recognise more options are open to us
- ★ we are less bored; our life experience is richer
- ★ we feel more comfortable, emotionally, when with strangers
- ★ people are able to feel more comfortable around us
- ★ we have a better understanding of the world around us and of the motivations of others
- ★ we are better able to manage any situation that involves other people
- ★ difficult situations are less threatening and stressful.

### 3 Encourage and support

#### The 'feel good' factor

When people feel good about themselves, they are more likely to pass that feeling on to others. Within teams, classes and workplaces, this has an overall beneficial effect. It can be contagious. It reduces the sense of threat, leaving people more relaxed, confident and open to hearing what others have to say. If you can contribute to others feeling more positive about themselves for attributes or actions for which they deserve genuine recognition, then that is a valuable people skill.

#### Why praise and encourage?

- ★ It indicates care – that someone 'sees' you.
- ★ It shows respect for others' efforts, achievements and ambitions, which people will appreciate.
- ★ It gives due recognition for work well done, which helps to build others' confidence and self-belief.
- ★ It motivates people to do more.
- ★ It helps others to form judgements about what you value and regard as important.
- ★ It helps to build trust (page 142).
- ★ It breaks down barriers, which helps inclusion.
- ★ It helps to build rapport and a bond with others.
- ★ It reflects well on you, as someone who appreciates and supports others constructively.
- ★ It is a valuable leadership skill.

#### Reflection



#### Praise and encouragement

Think of times recently when you received praise and encouragement.

- ★ How did this make you feel?
- ★ How did it affect your actions afterwards?
- ★ Are you able to accept due praise and encouragement graciously?

#### Skilful encouragement

**Authenticity** Be active in looking for things you can praise with honesty. False praise doesn't ring true and is counterproductive.

**Little and often** Form a habit of responding with praise, admiration, compliments or other encouragement when opportunities arise each day. That could be through comments such as:

*You expressed that very well/elegantly/clearly  
That's a good point!/I like that!/Yes!*

**Show you notice** Become aware of what is important to people around you. Ask them interested questions. Congratulate them when things go well and support them if they are struggling.

**Praise small advances** If someone improves just a little or makes some effort, such as taking a step towards respecting your position in an argument or changing a long-standing habit for the better, praise or thank them.

**Occasional reminders** If you know someone feels particularly good about some aspect of their lives, appearance, work or study, refer to it from time to time. Make genuine comments. Mention personal anecdotes or events that show your appreciation of them.

**Practical encouragement** Invite colleagues to join a meeting or discussion group where they can share their expertise or views. Make coffee for everyone to celebrate a breakthrough in a meeting. Bring a cake or suggest going for a meal to celebrate others' successes. Ask if you can photo their success. Share a high five!

#### Best to avoid...

**False praise** It undermines trust.

**Unintended silencing** Using speech or behaviours that silence or shut down another person or deny their experience, even if this is meant as supportive. For example, as in:

*No need to cry! It's all right!*

*Don't be silly! Of course you can do it!*

**Highjacking their issues** – making it all about you:

*That happened to me as well*

*That's what I think, too,* followed by lots about you

**Fault-finding** – commenting primarily on what things people 'failed' to do, rather than what they have done.

#### Observation



#### Encouraging others

Become skilled at encouraging others. Observe what works best with people you know. For one week, take greater notice of what happens when you or others praise or encourage someone. Note:

- ★ What was said?
- ★ How did the person react?
- ★ How did you feel?
- ★ What (if anything) were the consequences?

# Skilful, active listening

## 4 Listen well

Good listening skills are invaluable to establishing rapport and building trust. Most people react strongly to feeling 'not heard' or when 'someone really listened'.

'Listening' is something we take for granted – as we seem to be listening all the time. However, skilful listening is about more than 'hearing the words'. It involves understanding the message, the situation and other people. It enables others to feel at ease, to trust the listener, and to express more easily what they really wish to communicate. There is an art to being able to discover what another person is trying to communicate, and this can take years to perfect. However, the following are good starting places.

### Reflection



#### Being heard

Jot down your thoughts about a recent situation when you felt that you were trying to communicate your point of view but could not make yourself heard.

- ★ What was the situation? What happened?
- ★ How did you feel? What did you do?
- ★ What could others have done differently to help you feel you had been listened to?
- ★ What benefits would there have been for others if they had listened more skilfully? For example, how did their poor listening skills affect your attitude or responses to them?
- ★ What lessons can you draw from the experience to boost your own listening skills?

### Show you are listening

Demonstrate clearly that you are listening, using appropriate body language. Lean forward a little, tilt your head slightly to the side, nod occasionally to show you are taking in what is being said. Some people do this naturally when listening. Make eye contact, without staring.

### Focus

Concentrate on what is being said. Avoid the temptation to drift off into creating your own narrative or draw on your own experiences, anecdotes, speculations or interpretations. Notice what is not said, too. Check such gaps rather than filling them with your own assumptions.

Notice whether you are so keen to make a response that you have ceased to listen at a deep level. Your idea, if important, will come back to you. Good listening is about what the other person has to say.

### Let them finish

Let people complete the point they are making without interruption. Wait for a pause or an intake of breath before you start to respond. If you really must interrupt, because of time constraints, for example, apologise for doing so. State politely the reason for the interruption. Make some reference, however brief, to what has been said, before you change the subject or rush away.

### Listen for underlying messages

The 'underlying message' can be different from the actual words used. People might say 'I'm fine!' but look or sound angry or distressed. Just note these differences. If it feels right to say so, mention the message that you are receiving: 'You sound upset' or 'You look angry'. At times, you might gain a strong impression that another story or issue is emerging. If so, consider what that might be. You could feed this back to the person: 'I hear you are saying that X is happening, but I get the impression that you are concerned about Y, too. Is that the case?'

### Check your understanding

It is easy to impose our own assumptions onto what we hear, or to misinterpret or mishear. In addition, other people are not necessarily skilled at communicating what they want us to hear. The only way to be sure that you are picking up a message accurately is to feed back what you think you are hearing and check the response. Just summarise what you think you have heard. Usually, this is best in brief phrases, prompts or questions when the other person is pausing for breath. Do this in ways that show you are trying to understand:

*They said you have to fill in the form today?  
And that wasn't what you wanted?  
So you don't want to go ahead any more?*

## Clarify details

- ★ Ask questions to clarify points and show interest.
- ★ If something isn't clear, say you haven't quite understood. Ask them to explain it again or in a different way.
- ★ Be specific about the exact points you do not understand. Your confusion might arise because the other person is not fully clear about the issue either. Your questions could help clarify their thinking.

## Good questioning

In general, less is more when questioning. Avoid long preambles with a question added at the end.

### Open questions

The use of short open questions enables others to 'open up' and provide details. It also helps you avoid putting words into other people's mouths.

*What symptoms, if any, do you have?*

*How do you feel about losing your job?*

### Closed questions

Closed questions are useful for prompting rapid, short answers, such as when yes/no responses are needed.

*Have you had any headaches in the past 24 hours?*

*Have you received formal notification of losing your job yet?*

### Unskilled questioning

Avoid using a statement that sounds like a question: it suggests you have already made up your mind and are just looking for the answer you want.

*No symptoms? No headaches? Rash? Fever? Good!*

*I bet you are glad to be out of that job!*

## Ask not tell

Avoid imposing your own opinions, even if intended to be empathetic. Give the person space to think things through. Asking open questions can prompt ideas. If the person doesn't want to follow these up, respect that. Avoid anecdotes. Don't rush in with ideas to 'fix' the situation.

*You lost your job? That's awful! You must feel terrible!*

*You know, this happened to me. I used to feel...*

*What you need to do is....*

## Leave silences

Remember that silence generally seems longer to the person listening. Many people find silences awkward and are tempted to fill them with talk. Avoid doing so, as silence has important functions:

- ★ it signals that you have finished speaking
- ★ it shows you are willing to wait and listen
- ★ it gives opportunities for others to contribute
- ★ it allows time for reflection and to organise thoughts
- ★ it allows time to manage feelings and emotions
- ★ it enables non-verbal communication to take place, which is often more powerful than speaking.

## Observation



### Active listening

For a few days, take more notice of how well you listen. Consider how good you are at...

- 1 Showing you are really listening?
- 2 Focusing intently on what is being said?
- 3 Listening without interrupting?
- 4 Tuning into underlying messages accurately?
- 5 Checking for meaning?
- 6 Clarifying details?
- 7 Using useful questions?
- 8 Asking – rather than giving your opinion?
- 9 Holding back on sharing personal anecdotes?
- 10 Leaving comfortable silences?

## Reflection



### Listening skills

Note any recent examples where you either used active listening skilfully, and/or where you learnt any useful lessons about listening.

# Developing mutual trust

## 5 Trust

Trust underpins most relationships, whether in personal life, friendships, working life, business partnerships or teamwork. You build trust when you:



These simple actions go a long way to enabling others to believe you are who you say you are and mean what you say. Whenever these are broken, a little (or a lot) of trust trickles away. Pause a moment to reflect on who you trust.

### Activity

#### Who do you trust?

Who do you really trust...

- ➔ with your secrets?
- ➔ with your money?
- ➔ to tell you the truth about themselves?
- ➔ to tell you the truth about yourself?

In each case, what created that trust?

Your responses to the above activity probably elicited an awareness that trust develops out of acquaintance – and takes time to establish. Trust is easily broken and then is hard to repair. You can't force trust; the harder you try, the more suspicious people feel. You really do 'earn it' through the proof of your actions.

It is difficult to establish good working relationships if these are not founded on trust. Co-operation with others, sharing ideas, revealing personal information, negotiating compromises, commissioning work, offering contracts, and numerous other everyday activities are all facilitated by the development of mutual trust.

### Reflection

#### Losing trust in others

Consider a time when you lost trust in someone.

- ★ What happened?
- ★ What did it feel like?
- ★ What were the consequences?
- ★ How did it affect the way you were around them?
- ★ What would they have to do to regain your trust?
- ★ Which kinds of behaviour break your trust in others?

### Reflection

#### Losing others' trust

Consider an occasion when you did something to undermine other people's trust in you.

- ★ What happened?
- ★ What did it feel like?
- ★ What were the consequences?
- ★ How has this affected the relationship between you and that person?
- ★ What was (or is) needed to restore that person's trust in you?
- ★ What did you learn about trust from this experience?

# Finding allies and forming networks

Wherever your work interests lie, it helps if you can forge good networks and supportive allegiances. That is true whether you need job recommendations, references, clients or are pursuing an academic career (Fiske, 2015). Everyone in your network is a potential link to hundreds, potentially thousands, of others.

## Value to me?

Decide  which of the following benefits of networking could be of advantage to you.

- To gain a wider range of contacts
- To stay up to date with news and events
- For advice, guidance and support
- To open up new opportunities for myself
- To be able to help out family/friends
- To gain new clients or customers
- To gain support for campaigns / projects
- To gain a mentor/learn from others' experience
- To build my self-confidence
- To raise my personal profile
- To build a professional network
- To gain job references

Others (list these)

## 12 tips for effective networking

- 1 Be selective** You can't network well with everyone. Decide your purpose for networking and which channels are best to pursue to achieve that.
- 2 Be active in nurturing existing connections** Start with friends, classmates, employers, etc. Help and support them. Listen carefully. Show you find them interesting and that you appreciate their worth.
- 3 Look for friendly allies** These could be a work colleague who appreciates your help, or classmates that share your views. Find opportunities to chat and do things together so people get a chance to know you. It builds confidence to have allies you trust and who will speak well of you to others.
- 4 Select the right social media channels** – to advance your career, gain tips from colleagues, etc. See Escoffery et al. (2017).

- 5 Be active in researching new channels** Broaden your range of contacts to open up new ideas and more varied input. With LinkedIn and social media – check others' links and connect to these.
- 6 Bring mutual benefit** Don't expect the benefits to run one way to you. Look for what you can offer as support, praise, encouragement, advice, openings for others. Be clear about what you need for yourself.
- 7 Nurture relationships** Follow up on initial contact. Make regular contact – little and often, rather than expecting immediate benefits.
- 8 Engage in events** Make chances to meet people and become known. Be there at events for your course, at work and for professional groups. Arrive early and stay late for short chats such as in queues or over coffee.
- 9 Establish your professional identity and presence** Show yourself at your strongest and in a consistent way. Have a voice: comment and contribute. Be clear about your passions and interests. See pages 365–7.
- 10 Promote others** Demonstrate that you are someone who thinks of others and can connect to others usefully.
- 11 Ask for what you need** – advice, ideas, connections, tips, mentoring, etc. Show gratitude. Be gracious if others can't give you what you need.
- 12 Think 'long-term community'** Aim to be part of a longer-term community that will be a resource for you and its members throughout your working life.

## Find out more: networking

Tanya Menon (2018). *The Secret to Great Opportunities? The Person You Haven't Met Yet*. Tedx talk on YouTube; Ohio State University (8 March 2016). (On broadening networks).

Player.fm *Best Networking Podcasts* (2020). Updated April 2020. Lists a good variety of networking podcasts, such as *Recode Decode* (for tech executives); *Big Brains* (on breakthroughs in research); *Design Details* (design culture and process); the *Entrepreneur Network Podcast* and *Coffee Break* (Spanish and French).

# Constructive criticism

## Why do I need this?

On many courses, students are asked to provide feedback to peers in 'crits', evaluations, seminars or discussion groups. This might also be an expectation in your workplace, or in roles you will occupy once promoted. Students often move quickly after graduation into positions where they need to support and guide others, whether as teachers, supervisors, managers or coaches. It is likely you will need to raise difficult issues at some point as a customer, client, patient, friend or parent. In such situations, it is essential to offer feedback that is both accurate and motivating. You also need to be able to absorb feedback constructively even when it might not be what you want to hear.

## What is constructive criticism?

Technically, criticism is about accuracy: it draws out what is good, satisfactory, or could be better. It is not about showing how clever you are at 'picking holes' in what others do or say. Constructive criticism goes further: it offers a clear, practicable way forward. It is phrased so that it offers truthful, sensitive, skilful feedback on how to proceed towards something better. To be effective, it needs to be expressed in ways others can:

- ★ 'hear', absorb and understand
- ★ make use of and put into action.

## Good feedback involves:

- ★ waiting until invited for your opinion
- ★ recognising effort
- ★ being well informed: ensuring you know the circumstances, intentions and requirements first
- ★ being clear and truthful but not blunt or hurtful
- ★ stating points that you like
- ★ indicating what the other person has got right – so they continue to do this in the future
- ★ indicating what has already improved
- ★ indicating a small number of achievable goals
- ★ identifying benefits: what positive difference would changes bring for them, their work and/or for others?
- ★ suggesting concrete examples of what is required:

*I think this would look even better if ...*  
*I like this. Have you thought about ...*  
*The second half would benefit from ...*

It should:

- ★ **be formulated positively** – as something which can be done to improve performance, rather than a statement of what is wrong
- ★ **take the person forward** – it is not simply a vague directive to do something differently
- ★ **be realistic** – the suggestion can actually be put into practice by the recipient
- ★ **be selective** – it addresses priorities rather than every aspect of performance
- ★ **be offered kindly** – delivered in a voice and manner that make it easier to accept.

## Constructive questions

Use constructive questions to discover why the person made the choices or took the steps they did – and to explore their next step forward. For example:

- ★ *'What did you think worked well?'*
- ★ *'Is there anything you would do differently?'*
- ★ *'What was your inspiration for this?'*
- ★ *'Did you find this worked?'*
- ★ *'That is an unusual approach. I am interested in why you did it this way?'*

## Unskilled feedback

It is easy to hurt people's feelings through unskilful feedback, and nothing is gained by this. Unskilled feedback is characterised by features such as:

- ★ **Overload** Too much comment is hard to absorb, off-putting and can be distressing; people stop listening.
- ★ **Negativity** People ignore feedback if they feel their efforts are not recognised.
- ★ **Ambiguity** Vague, imprecise feedback is hard to act upon. Be clear. Give details or examples.
- ★ **Demoralisation** Comments that are harsh, point out faults, or delivered with scorn are not helpful. If someone put time into something that didn't work, that in itself is demoralising. Support and encouragement might be needed alongside criticism.
- ★ **Ridicule** Even if you find that mistakes made by others seem absurd or funny, the experience might not feel like that for them.

If you find that people are demotivated, angry, distressed or resistant to your feedback, this doesn't necessarily mean your feedback wasn't constructive to some extent. The person might be poor at taking criticism. With skill, it is possible to help people see where they could make improvements that would benefit them and others.

## Reflection



### Giving constructive criticism

Think of a recent occasion when you offered feedback to someone about their work or study. Jot down:

- ★ What were the circumstances?
- ★ What did you do or say?
- ★ Which of the above constructive characteristics did you include or omit?
- ★ How might you improve your feedback?

## Using a 'positivity sandwich'?

Some people advocate giving feedback by starting and ending with positives, sandwiching suggested improvements or changes in the middle.

- 1 Strength** Start with things you like, areas that will be great to build upon, etc. This creates a 'feel-good' factor. It builds trust that you have the person's interests at heart and can see the good in what they do. This enables them to listen more to things that are less comfortable to hear.
  - 2 To improve** Provide feedback on areas for improvement as above. Offer them as suggestions, so that the person feels they have some choice. However, if there isn't a choice, don't create a false impression. A good starting point for this part of the sandwich can be to ask for the person's own opinion first. For example:
    - ★ *How well do you think you did?*
    - ★ *Are there any changes you would make/any improvements you would want to make?*
    - ★ *If you were doing this again, what might you do differently?*
  - 3 Strength** Finish on a high note. This could be by summarising the positives and/or pointing out how a few changes will really add to their strengths – commending them on the progress so far.
- Use with caution** If you use this method often, people will notice and might not trust the positive feedback. Make sure that you are genuine in all feedback.



Jane was starting to realise that her helpful advice was not universally appreciated

## Receiving criticism

Accept criticism gracefully, however it is given. Not everybody is skilled at giving criticism.

- ★ Consider all criticism carefully, even if it sounds unacceptable.
- ★ Look for the truth in what is said. This is sometimes easier after you have had some time to reflect.
- ★ Hear both the positive and the negative aspects. Many people hear only negatives.
- ★ Check you understand what is being said. It is easy to mishear, especially if it didn't sound positive.
- ★ Acknowledge the feedback. It was probably not easy for the other person to give it. Say thank you.
- ★ Use it. Reflect upon the meaning of what you have heard. What steps could you take to improve your performance?

## Reflection



### Receiving criticism

Think of a recent occasion when somebody offered you feedback or criticism about your work or performance. Jot down:

- ★ What were the circumstances?
- ★ What did they do or say?
- ★ How did you respond? What else could you have done to make best use of the criticism?
- ★ What does this experience tell you about giving and receiving criticism well?

# Being assertive

## What is assertiveness?

Assertiveness means standing up for yourself without demonstrating anger. Assertive people look for solutions that suit both parties, respecting the rights of both.

### Reflection

#### Characteristics of assertive people



What picture comes to mind when you think of an assertive person? Jot down your thoughts.

Assertiveness is about:

- ★ respecting your own and other people's rights
- ★ respecting your own and others' needs
- ★ being clear and straightforward with other people
- ★ taking more control over your own life and taking responsibility for changing what you do not like.

## Rights

Palmer and Dryden (1995) listed rights associated with assertiveness. These include the right to:

- ★ say 'no'
- ★ make mistakes
- ★ consider your needs important
- ★ express your feelings in an appropriate way without violating anybody else's rights
- ★ take responsibility for your actions
- ★ respect yourself
- ★ set your own priorities
- ★ be assertive without feeling guilty.

You could include others, such as the right to:

- ★ do well in life
- ★ ask for what you need to know
- ★ be consulted in decisions that affect you
- ★ fairness and justice
- ★ personal safety
- ★ love, think, be
- ★ be free of insult and discrimination on the basis of who you are or what you believe
- ★ your opinions.

## Activity

### Your rights



What other rights, if any, would you add to the list opposite?

- ➔ Do you know your rights?
- ➔ Which of your rights do you need to defend most often?
- ➔ Which do you find hardest to claim?

## Respecting rights and needs

'Rights' are neither universal nor equally applied. They are not necessarily all 'human rights' by international agreement that apply to all countries or conditions. People in prison cannot set all their own priorities, for example. Some rights are protected by law; others are commonly held beliefs about human rights. You might have to decide which rights apply for your circumstances.

An individual's interests have to be weighed against those of others and for the situation. We are not generally comfortable with the idea that a surgeon might have 'the right to make mistakes' on a regular basis. Having the right to an opinion doesn't give a right to impose it on others or to subject others to insult or harm. Assertiveness is not about insisting on your own interests at all costs. When you are assertive, you ensure that:

- ★ you look at the whole picture, with you in it
- ★ you know your own opinions
- ★ you identify your own needs and interests
- ★ you weigh up, realistically, whether to stand up for your rights; sometimes it isn't safe or in your longer-term interest to do so.

## Being clear and straightforward

When we state our needs calmly and clearly, we show respect to ourselves and others. When others know where you stand, they can then choose to respond in the right way.

Assertiveness is not about the following behaviour.

- ★ **Being aggressive** Assertiveness does not include: rage, shouting, forcing other people to do what you want, physical force or threats of force, aggressive body language or intimidating others. You have the right to feel angry, or to shout in private, but not to use these to coerce others into doing what you want.

# Using assertiveness techniques

- ★ **Being manipulative** Assertiveness does not include using psychological games to manoeuvre people into doing what you want. For example, it does not involve shaming people, trying to make them feel guilty or anxious, reminding them of what they 'owe' you, or playing upon people's doubts and fears.
- ★ **Being passive** Assertiveness does not include: being silent about your own needs and interests; being a 'martyr'; staying quiet when you want to speak out; effacing yourself so that you are not seen, heard or considered. Such behaviour can be irritating to others, especially if they feel that they have to take full responsibility for your needs.
- ★ **Being passive aggressive** Assertiveness does not include expressing that you are 'fine' or 'OK' whilst acting as if you are angry. Such behaviour confuses situations, making them harder to resolve. It is passive aggressive to say 'I don't mind', 'do what you want', 'whatever!' whilst using angry facial expressions, body language or tone of voice. Angry silences, walking out of the room, making a noise to block out what another person is saying, not turning up to appointments and generally not co-operating, are all ways of expressing passive aggression.

## Reflection



### Evaluating personal assertiveness

It is rare for anybody to go through life in an assertive, completely fair, reasonable manner. Most of us use aggressive, manipulative, passive aggressive or passive approaches at times.

- ★ Which approach do you use most often to get your way or to avoid unpleasant situations?
- ★ Do people who know you well agree that this is the approach you use?

## Taking control over your life

When we use assertiveness techniques, we take responsibility for our actions in order to increase our control over an aspect of our life.

## Reflection



### A recurring situation

Select one situation which recurs in your life where you feel you deserve to have your opinions, needs or interests taken into consideration and respected – and where you feel this does not happen at present.

- ★ What usually happens? What do you do? What do you say?
- ★ What rights are at issue in this situation?
- ★ What are the rights of others in this situation?
- ★ What kind of behaviour do you demonstrate when you feel you are unlikely to get your way?
- ★ What do you gain by this behaviour?
- ★ What are the effects of this upon others?

Then consider the assertiveness techniques below in relation to your 'recurring situation'.

## Assertiveness techniques

### 1 Identify blocks to assertiveness

What has been preventing you from using assertiveness techniques up to now?

- Not being aware of differences between aggression, passivity, manipulation and assertiveness
- It wasn't part of your family or cultural background
- Fear of other people's responses
- Fear of failure
- Blaming yourself for the situation
- Not wanting to hurt other people's feelings
- You wanted a quiet life
- Your current methods get you what you want.

### 2 Put yourself in the picture

Look at the 'big picture': identify all the interests of all the parties, including your own.

Ensure you are in the picture: don't leave yourself out!

Consider whether, in this instance, you should be at the centre or nearer the periphery of the picture. Some passive people always put themselves on the edge. Whilst that might seem unselfish, others can feel they are put in the position of being the more selfish person, which is not pleasant. Aggressive people might find reasons always to be at the centre.

### 3 Make 'I' statements

People who find it hard to be assertive can find it difficult to make 'I' statements such as:

- ★ 'I want ...'
- ★ 'I am responsible for ...'
- ★ 'I need ...'
- ★ 'I feel ...'

Sometimes this is very noticeable because they refer to their own needs in very general terms:

- ★ 'Everybody needs ...'
- ★ 'It is important to ...'
- ★ 'We all need ...'
- ★ 'You have to ...'

#### Activity

#### Make 'I' statements

Make 'I' statements for the 'recurring situation' you selected on page 147.

Aspect	'I' Statement
What do you want?	I want ...
What do you need?	I need ...
How do you feel?	I feel ...
What rights are involved?	I have the right to ...
What are your responsibilities?	I am responsible for
My behaviours	I will (do). ...

#### Reflection

Jot down your responses to the following:

- ★ How easy was this activity for you?
- ★ What kind of speech do you usually use in order to avoid using 'I' statements?
- ★ Which statement was the most difficult to make?
- ★ When else can you use such 'I' statements?

### 4 Choose the moment

Ensure that...

- ★ **The time is right.** Choose the best time available – the 'perfect moment' might never arrive. Agree a time with the person or put time aside in a meeting to discuss the matter. Be clear how long you need.

- ★ **You have the person's full attention.** Ask for this if necessary. Choose a time when they are able to give you their full attention. Avoid competing with social media, television, loud music, etc.

### 5 State the issue and the desired change

Take responsibility for letting the person know what you find unacceptable or difficult about their behaviour. Do so calmly and without 'blaming'. Describe behaviours rather than the person. Acknowledge responsibility for your own part in the event and for your own feelings and responses. Make it clear what you want.

#### Example 1

*'I feel hurt when you do not respond when I speak to you in the mornings. I would like you to say "hello".'*

Rather than:

*'You are so rude in the mornings. You make me feel ignored and angry and it affects my whole day.'*

#### Example 2

*'I need the price lists by 4:00 p.m. If I receive them after 4:00, it is difficult to get our updates in the post.'*

Rather than:

*'You know the post goes out at 4:00. I don't know how you expect us all to get everything done when you can't be bothered to get the lists to us in time.'*

### 6 Ask the other person's opinion

When you have stated what the issue is for you, check whether there could be a different interpretation. Ask the person how they see the situation and what they think about it. Show that you have a genuine interest in hearing their point of view. Let them give their interpretation without interrupting them.

#### Want to know more?

Psychology Today. Assertiveness Test [www.psychologytoday.com/gb/tests/personality/assertiveness-test](http://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/tests/personality/assertiveness-test). (A ten-minute test to check out how well you speak out for yourself.)

Adam Galinsky (2016) *How to speak up for yourself*. TEDxNewYork (Sept 2016).

## 7 Use positive language structures

When you make 'I' statements, use positive language structures. These avoid the use of 'no' or 'not'. They are clear, to the point and say exactly what you will do. Avoid words such as 'try', which suggests hard work or failure. Avoid modifiers such as 'some', 'maybe', 'sort of' or 'quite'.

Positive language structure	Avoid
I will ask for a lift.	I'll try and see if I can get a lift.
I am entitled to this money.	I really think I should have what is due to me.
I want these comments to stop.	I think it would be better if there were fewer of these comments.
I will complete the race.	I intend to make a good shot at completing the race.
Can I have help lifting this, please?	I can't lift this on my own! You could help!
I need to say something.	I'm never given a chance to say what I need.
I feel angry and upset.	I am trying not to get angry here!

## 8 Acknowledge the feelings

It is not unusual to see people arguing, even hissing through gritted teeth, 'I am not angry! I am not angry!' when it is clear to others that they are. This can make a situation difficult to resolve because the truth isn't being acknowledged.

It isn't always pleasant or easy to talk about feelings, but it is usually useful. Even if you do not voice your feelings, make sure that you at least know what they are. Otherwise, other people will know more about you than you do yourself.

- ★ Check what you are feeling.
- ★ Acknowledge to yourself how you are feeling.
- ★ Make an 'I' statement about this: 'I feel ...'

- ★ Take care not to spill the emotion onto people around you. You might be entitled to feel angry, for example, but it is your responsibility to manage that emotion.
- ★ Be prepared to hear how other people feel and to consider what that means. You might not like hearing what they say, but they have the right to express how they feel too.

## 9 Suggest and invite solutions

Being assertive means looking for a solution that suits both sides as far as possible. Make constructive suggestions for a way forward. Point out the advantages to both parties. Ask the person for their suggestions and be prepared to negotiate (see pages 153–5).

## 10 Clarify what has been agreed

Check that you are both clear about the details of what is agreed. This will avoid disputes later. Writing down the agreement strengthens the commitment. Read what the other person has written and check you agree with the details. Keep a copy. Let them do the same.

If you are not used to being assertive, it will take time to change your habits and thinking. You can build your confidence by using some 'practice runs', either with a trusted friend or with a student counsellor. Keep a record of times when you are assertive and what happened so that you can monitor your progress.

## Reflection

### Assertiveness



In your reflective journal, jot down your responses to the following questions:

- ★ What could you gain by being more assertive?
- ★ What difficulties are there for you in putting assertiveness techniques into action?
- ★ How will you address these?
- ★ Which of the above techniques could you use?

# Dealing with difficult people

## On becoming a monster

Any of us can be a difficult person occasionally. Most of us have 'pet hates': situations and people that we do not manage skilfully and which seem to make us unreasonable. When we are confronted by someone we find difficult, empathy is a useful starting place. It is worth considering that this person might, like us, might be very reasonable if circumstances were different.



### Reflection



#### Empathy with 'difficult people'

Jot down one occasion when you acted unreasonably or 'out of character' – when you found yourself shouting, complaining unnecessarily, making a difficult situation worse, or blowing something out of proportion.

- ★ What led you to behave like that?
- ★ What can you learn from your own experience that might help you to understand when other people seem to be unnecessarily difficult?
- ★ What kinds of circumstances make you unreasonable? Might similar things affect 'difficult people' you know?

## 'Is it just me?'

If you experience a particular person as difficult on several occasions, you might conclude that the person is just plain awkward. That might be the case. There could still be ways to ease your interactions with that person so that your day is more pleasant and runs more smoothly. Consider:

- ★ Do other people find this person difficult?
- ★ Who seems to manage situations with this person best? What do they do?
- ★ What is it about the difficult person that provokes a negative response in you?
- ★ What is it about the person that makes you find it difficult to give calm and measured responses?
- ★ What do you do that contributes to making the situation more difficult than it need be? What could you do to improve the situation?

### Reflection



#### Dealing with difficult people

Think of one interaction with a 'difficult person' that you consider had a significant impact upon you. Jot down a brief outline of what happened.

- ★ How did you feel at the time?
- ★ How were you affected afterwards? For example, was it hard to settle down to work, enjoy your evening, sleep or feel calm?
- ★ How many times did you narrate the episode to others? How much time did this take up? What might you have done with that time otherwise?
- ★ In retrospect, how might you have responded differently, during the event or afterwards, so the experience affected you less?
- ★ What do you have to gain by changing the interaction you have with this person?

## The effect on me?

Difficult people can have a profound effect upon those around them. Dealing with them, talking about them, reciting what happened, planning what to say or do – all take up time and drain emotional energy. Although it is useful to plan how to cope better, it is also important to ensure that such a person does not become an excuse for time wasting and for diverting your energies. Whatever this 'difficult person' does, you have a personal responsibility to manage the effects upon yourself.

# Managing difficult situations

## 1 Identify the behaviour

The golden rule for interacting with people is to separate the behaviour from the person. This isn't always easy. When thinking about the person, make a conscious effort to focus on their actions. For example: *'That irritates me'* rather than *'She irritates me'*. This distinction will then come more easily to you when you are with the person.

## 2 Isolate the source of irritation

For the 'difficult person' you identified on page 150, jot down the behaviours that irritate or concern you. For example, do they:

- ★ interrupt you all the time?
- ★ refuse to let you express your point of view?
- ★ interrupt your study or work?
- ★ arrive late for each seminar or meeting?
- ★ take up all available time with their opinions?
- ★ do other things?

## 3 Find positive interpretations

Look for characteristics about the person that you can genuinely appreciate. Find a positive aspect to their unwanted behaviour, such as a desire to please, a willingness to contribute, a sense of humour.

## 4 Consider their needs

Usually behaviour has an intention – even if it is inappropriate to the context. Sometimes people simply go about getting what they need in a misguided way. The people you find difficult might be trying to:

- ★ gain attention
- ★ be noticed
- ★ be respected
- ★ make friends
- ★ be heard
- ★ be seen as clever
- ★ draw attention away from what they perceive as their flaws.

Consider how you (or the group) could give that person some of what they need. This might make them less demanding, and easier to cope with.

## 5 Acknowledge the person

People behave unreasonably when their needs are not met. Listen to what they are communicating, and let them know you have heard. For example:

### *Their situation*

- ★ They are distressed
- ★ They are angry
- ★ They want attention

### *Your response*

- 'I can see/hear that you are upset.'
- 'I can see/hear you are angry.'
- 'That is a good idea/an interesting point.'

## 6 Identify what they want

- ★ Ask the person what they want.
- ★ Repeat this back to them so they know you have listened and heard them correctly.
- ★ Consider whether the request is feasible.
- ★ Let them know what is feasible.
- ★ Stay calm. Be prepared to negotiate (page 153).

## 7 Acknowledge your feelings

- ★ Identify what you are feeling. This will give you more control over your own responses. Are you angry? distressed? unhappy? raging? guilty? irritated?
- ★ Check how well you are managing your emotions. Do you need to calm down? Do you need to step away for a moment to clarify your thoughts or feelings? If so, state calmly that this is what you are doing and that you will return shortly to consider what they need.
- ★ State your feelings clearly and simply so that the other person knows how you feel.

## 8 State indisputable facts

Rather than get into an entangled argument, focus on statements of fact:

- ★ 'They are closing the doors. We have to go now.'
- ★ 'The seminar is starting. We can't resolve this now.'
- ★ 'We haven't got the receipts here. We can look at this again once we have them.'

## 9 Keep it clear, simple, current

- ★ Unless really necessary, avoid arguing about details.
- ★ State what needs to be done.
- ★ Keep to the present situation. Don't regurgitate the past.

## 10 State what you want

Consider what would be a reasonable outcome for you from the situation. State this calmly, simply and clearly. Avoid unnecessary details or commentary. You might need to repeat what you want several times if the person is shouting or in full flow.

- ★ 'I want to leave this until we all feel calmer.'
- ★ 'I want you to stop ringing me after 9 p.m.'
- ★ 'I want to hear what other people have to say.'
- ★ 'I want a refund.'

### *Offer positive solutions*

- ★ Look for an acceptable solution.
- ★ Offer a way out of a stalemate.
- ★ State the advantages of the proposed solution.
- ★ Be prepared to negotiate a reasonable compromise or to find a 'bridge' – even if you feel the other person should be taking the initiative.
- ★ Invite all parties to write down the agreed solution so that it is clear and on record.

## 11 Clarify tasks/roles

If people are difficult team members, they might not be clear or happy about what is expected of them.

- ★ Involve them in key decisions.
- ★ Negotiate and clarify targets.
- ★ Ensure their role offers sufficient challenge and interest.
- ★ See also Chapter 7, page 163.

## 12 Look for 'bottled up' emotions

Even if somebody is being difficult, they probably think they are being reasonable. At that stage, there is probably little you can say to change their mind. When we are emotional, we are not open to logical reasoning. Be prepared to wait until the person is calmer before expressing your own perspective. You are more likely to get a better response then.

The probability is that the person has built up emotions such as anger, frustration, rage or fear over a very long time – possibly in situations that have nothing to do with the current one but which feel like 'the same thing happening all over again' at that moment. This can mean they are 'dumping' how that feels onto you or other people without realising it.



If such emotions are dumped on you, this is not fair and you should not put up with it. The angry person probably cannot see what they are doing. It is unlikely to be helpful to discuss this at the time unless:

- ★ you know the person very well
- ★ you have a relationship which permits discussing personal matters (as the source of the emotion may be very personal)
- ★ you have agreed to set time aside for this
- ★ you are both calm.

### *Don't 'pass the parcel'*

It can be tempting to respond to emotional 'dumping' by unloading all your own emotions too. This might even feel good at the time. However, it is not a skilful way of dealing with the person or the situation, and makes it even harder to resolve differences over the longer term.

To avoid unloading your emotions on others:

- ★ Check which emotions you are most likely to unload onto others.
- ★ Be aware of what triggers this response in you.
- ★ Observe the kinds of 'emotional dumping' you seem to invite most from other people. Is this their anger? Irritation? guilt? shame? anxiety? fear?
- ★ Plan a coping strategy so that you are not drawn into this sort of interaction.

This kind of behaviour is often associated with excess stress. Take active steps to:

- ★ become more aware of your stress triggers
- ★ maintain stress at a manageable level of stress
- ★ develop the ability to regain calm when stressed, such as by using mindfulness or other techniques.

See Cottrell (2018) for more about using mindfulness and 'metta' techniques that can help, and Cottrell (2019b) for managing stress.

# Negotiation skills and persuasiveness

Negotiation covers a wide spectrum. It can cover everyday situations, such as influencing how much of the food budget goes on chocolate or vegetables. It is an important part of group work, and most types of job include at least an element of negotiation with customers, clients or third parties.

Good negotiators exercise a broad and subtle set of skills and qualities. These include:

- ★ decision-making
- ★ reading the situation and the 'opposition'
- ★ persuasiveness and communication skills
- ★ assertiveness (page 146)
- ★ dealing with difficult people (pages 150–2).

## Weigh up potential options

When negotiating, you may have to make decisions rapidly. It is important to be well prepared before you start. Think through the issues, questions, potential options and choices you will face so that you are not taken by surprise. Be clear in your own mind about your preferred position – and what is not acceptable. Consider how you can best persuade the other party to give you what you want/need.

### The stakes

Consider what is really at stake for you in the negotiation. What is your ultimate aim? Use this to inform the negotiation process. The ultimate aim might not be fully achievable now: world peace, a harmonious group atmosphere, or a successful group project will not be established through one negotiation or change. However, the negotiation should take you closer to your ultimate aim. Even if it is a small advance, something has still been achieved in the right direction.

Negotiation involves two sides with competing interests. Each side will have to concede something if an agreement is to be reached. Be clear what you want from the situation.

## Which stake to pursue



### Your ideal solution

A clear vision can strengthen your bargaining position. What would your ideal solution look like? What would be

the benefits? Form a clear picture of this so that it motivates you to negotiate strongly.

### A good acceptable outcome

What would this look like? What would be the benefits of this for you? What parts of your 'ideal outcome' are you prepared to relinquish? Don't open with these: keep them in reserve, in case you can achieve them.



**The next best option** Decide in advance which points you will concede on. Use these to bargain with.

### The likely outcome

Be realistic. What is likely to happen? Is this acceptable? You may gain a better deal, but if you do not, how will you come to terms with the likely outcome?



**The 'bottom line' – or minimum acceptable** Know in your own mind the point at which you would walk away from the negotiation.

Rehearse stating your bottom line calmly so that you sound firm and convincing when making your case. Write it down; take it with you so you do not concede on essentials.

# Decide your negotiating position

## Know when to concede

In deciding your likely final position, consider what you are likely to be able to persuade the other side to do or concede, and how. Also, consider what you are prepared to concede and why. It is not always easy to decide whether to push for the best option or to make concessions in order not to lose everything. Before starting to negotiate, weigh up:

- ★ **Deadlines** How much time you have in order to hold out for the best option.
- ★ **Costs** What might you lose if you take a long time to come to an agreement? How long can you hold out for what you want?
- ★ **Risks** What will happen if you hold out and do not get what you want? Will you still be able to manage the situation and/or your reputation? Some people can manage risks (emotionally, socially or financially) better than others.
- ★ **Competition** Is anybody else likely to make a better offer and undermine your bargaining position?
- ★ **The history** In similar situations, or with this person or team, what usually tends to happen? What points are they likely to agree and unlikely to concede?
- ★ **Your well-being** It can be stressful taking risks in negotiation, especially if it goes on for some time. For personal negotiations, consider the level of pressure you can sustain. For workplace negotiations when money or a job is involved, manage stress carefully to help you hold on for the deal you need.



All too late, George realised he hadn't included negotiation skills in his personal development plan

## Firm approach/ flexible mind

From what has been described above, it should be evident that negotiation requires you to weigh up many possibilities, to assess the situation, and to be able to accept one of a number of outcomes, depending upon the circumstances. If you can balance firmness of approach with flexibility of mind, then it is easier to manage negotiations.

You also have the option to be inflexible, and to insist on the best possible option. You could be successful, which would then feel great. Sometimes that is worth the effort and risk. With this option, you are more likely to leave with nothing – which you might be comfortable doing. You might have to start a new set of negotiations, so weigh up carefully the costs of taking an 'all or nothing' position.

## Consider your long-term position

If you are engaged in negotiations with the same people, organisations or sectors often, they will become aware of how you negotiate – whether you have a reputation for giving in easily, making useful compromises or walking away from negotiations. Consider what kind of reputation is useful for your context. People won't put time into negotiating with you if they feel they have nothing to gain – whether in work or in life generally.

## Take advice

Because it isn't always easy to know when to be flexible and when to hold out, talk through your options with someone you trust. They can bring a different perspective and raise unconsidered consequences. Ask them to push you in thinking through:

**What could I live with?** Even if you disliked the outcome, is it one that could still work for you?

**What are the benefits?** Are there any potential benefits for you that you haven't considered in the options that the other side in the negotiation is (or might be) proposing?

**Aspects I haven't considered?** Sometimes it useful to be prompted on matters such as: 'What is fairest to all parties?', 'Is it worth being generous on this occasion?' or 'Am I too willing to give up things that matter to me?'

# Conduct a persuasive negotiation

## Read the situation

### *Investigate the background*

Find out all you can about the other person, team or organisation: their needs, interests and motivations. This puts you in a stronger position to negotiate.

### *Clarify mutual positions*

Invite both sides to discuss their objectives and the possible options. This helps you to see where there is room for manoeuvre. There will be a range of items that are not negotiable. It can take significant time and energy to try to alter the 'non-negotiables'. Clarify what others will or will not accept. If you can live with these requirements, then leave them out of the discussion, and focus on what can be negotiated.

### *Manage the information flow*

Don't give away too much information, too early, about how little you are prepared to accept. It is likely that the other negotiator will go straight to your bottom line. Aim to maintain the advantage in the negotiation. Make sure your social media doesn't give away information that weakens your negotiating position.

### *Read the body language*

Ribbens and Thompson (2002) argue that up to 90 per cent of communication is non-verbal. Look for clues about how the other side is feeling: people are less likely to negotiate to your advantage if they feel they need to 'defend' their own position. Look for:

- ★ signs of distress (fidgeting; agitated movements; looking down; touching the face; pacing)
- ★ a closed stance (arms and legs crossed; pursed lips; tightly clasped hands; the body leaning forward in a defensive position)
- ★ obstructiveness (avoiding eye contact; shaking the head; refusal to engage in communication)
- ★ anxiety about speaking (moving hands across the mouth; biting the lips)
- ★ unwillingness to listen (sitting forward with hands moving over the ears; moving to interrupt; drumming fingers on the table).

## Persuasive communication

### *Create an open relaxed atmosphere*

If people look, sound or feel defensive, it helps to put them more at their ease so that they open up to your ideas. You can be more persuasive if you:

- ★ have a pleasing manner – develop rapport
- ★ avoid 'hard sell' approaches, emotive appeals or approaches that might appear manipulative
- ★ focus on their agenda for a while, as this is familiar terrain for them
- ★ ask for breaks; use these for informal interaction to help form a connection
- ★ mirror their body language for a few minutes and gradually introduce more relaxed postures (arms in relaxed positions, legs uncrossed, leaning back; calm movements of the head or hands)
- ★ consider the negotiation from their perspective; you are more likely to act in ways they accept if you are genuinely thinking about their position.

### *Speak to their vision*

Demonstrate active listening (page 140). Refer to their objectives and interests: clarify any ways that your proposal goes some way towards these. Spell out the advantages of your position for them. It helps if other parties see their goals can be met through the solution you propose.

### *Show willingness to compromise*

Let the other party know that you are willing to make concessions. Be clear about your 'ideal' scenario, so it is obvious where you are making concessions. The other party will not want to feel that they are the only ones who have to make compromises. Observe their response to your offer to see what kind of additional information or further persuasion is needed.

### *Keep the lines of communication open*

Stay calm, even if you are not getting what you want. Don't 'burn your bridges' by walking out or giving ultimatums. Leave possibilities for further dialogue. If necessary, brainstorm new options together, take breaks, reconsider your positions and start again from the beginning. Whilst the negotiation is still open, there is hope of achieving something.

# Change recurring situations

## Unlocking the inevitable

At times, we can feel that the same type of situation keeps occurring in our interactions with others. The likelihood is that this is because we keep doing similar things, provoking the same responses. Even if we feel that someone else is the cause of the difficulty, we still play a role in the situation. We can change ourselves but not others. If we notice that a situation keeps recurring, we can analyse it and identify what we can do differently.

### Activity



#### Changing a recurring situation

Analyse a recurring situation by jotting down your responses to the following prompts and questions – or use the template available on the companion site.

The situation. Give brief details of the context and what usually happens.	Jot down your responses in your reflective journal, log or notebook – or download the expandable template from the companion site.
What do you do? What kind of behaviour do you use?	
What are the effects of this behaviour?	
How do you feel about the situation? 'I feel ...'	
A constructive way of thinking about this situation is ...	
Identify your goal. 'The change I want to bring about is ...'	
What are your rights? 'I am entitled to ...'	
What are the rights of the other party or other people in this situation? 'They are entitled to ...'	
What are your responsibilities in this situation? 'It is my responsibility to ...'	
What are the responsibilities of other people? 'They are responsible for ...'	
What will be the right time and place? How will you ensure you have their full attention?	
What 'I' statements could you make?	
Your recommendations for a solution are ...	
The minimum you will accept is ...	
What support can you get from others (such as practice runs, somebody to encourage you)?	
Other comments	



## Review: People skills

- 1 Recognise the value of constantly improving people skills**

Whether as a student, at work, or in everyday life, all interactions are improved and difficulties more easily resolved if you can relate empathetically and flexibly with people from all walks of life.
- 2 Make a genuine connection**

A few basic steps are all that are needed to start to establish rapport. Make the effort to find shared points of interest or experience. Be sensitive to, and interested in, how others differ in thought and experience.
- 3 Be generous in encouraging and supporting others**

Ease interactions by offering encouragement, praise and support that the recipient can recognise as genuine. Help others to feel positive about what they can contribute and what they have done well.
- 4 Refine active listening skills**

Learn more about a person or situation by using active listening. Ask more skilled questions. Become more attuned to the meaning of silences and to picking up on issues that have not been verbalised.
- 5 Develop trust through your actions**

Trust is essential to relationships, whether in friendship, business partnerships or otherwise. It has to be earned and is easily lost. Take care to behave and speak in ways that help others build their trust in you.
- 6 Build your networks**

Be active in forming and maintaining relationships that help create mutual opportunities for support, advice and openings for yourself and others.
- 7 Become adept at giving and receiving criticism**

Recognise the value of accurate, honest feedback provided in a constructive way. Offer this in ways that are easiest for the recipient to hear, accept and use. It doesn't need to sound negative.
- 8 Be assertive**

Stand up for yourself. State calmly and clearly how you see the situation and what you need to be different. Avoid being blaming, aggressive, passive, or passive aggressive.
- 9 Become better at managing people you find difficult**

Consider your own response and what you can do to ease the situation rather than attempting to change others. Draw on your empathy and assertiveness. Give people a chance to redeem the situation.
- 10 Negotiate skilfully for the best attainable outcome**

Identify potential options, from the ideal through to the unacceptable. Don't reveal your bottom line too early. Know when to walk away and when to concede some points in order not to lose all.
- 11 Change unwanted recurring situations**

Take note of unwanted interactions that you find yourself in more than once. Analyse the situation so that you can pinpoint useful changes for the future.
- 12 Monitor your progress**

There are always new people challenges. It helps to keep a record of situations that you encounter, how you dealt with them, what you learnt, and how your skills and insights improve over time.



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ understand team dynamics and what is involved in good teamwork
- ✓ consider how you could develop better team skills
- ✓ create great teams and be an effective team member
- ✓ manage conflict and confrontation constructively in team contexts
- ✓ identify the contribution you make to teams and groups
- ✓ present your teamworking skills effectively when applying for jobs.

*Learning in groups reaps greater benefits than attending formal lectures or presentations. It gives students more scope to express themselves, to establish effective relationships with tutors and others in the group, and to develop a range of skills such as team working.*

Skills and Enterprise Network, 2001

## Why teamwork matters for you

'Finding and keeping a good team' is amongst chief executives' most highly rated ingredients of success (Taylor and Humphrey, 2002). Since that was written, teamworking has become an even greater feature of academic and working life. Many professions now require multi-teamworking, and expect not only excellent teamworking skills but also the ability to work flexibly and skilfully across teams with complementary roles and abilities.

Team players are usually well-appreciated by both employers and colleagues. On the other hand, our natural self-interest in our own needs, moods, beliefs, wants and feelings can make it easy for us to undermine the effectiveness of our team or group.

## Use the challenge

Don't expect teamwork to be easy. Assume that any mix of individuals will bring challenges, diverse sets of assumptions and divided opinions. Be open to learning from the experience – even if it feels frustrating or difficult at times. Use the opportunity to understand more about team dynamics, and the roles and functions that each person fulfils for the team. Build your confidence in taking your space whilst respecting that of others, and in getting your points across whilst helping others to take on board the best ideas from the team as a whole.

Become better at coping with uncomfortable situations in groups, and in confronting people constructively when this is needed.



# Teamwork as a student

## Gain lots of practice

Learn to operate within many varied team contexts. Consider  which of the following you could take part in to build team skills.

- Playing team sports
- Musical group, orchestra, choir
- Quiz teams
- Productions of a play, film or video
- Voluntary projects or fund-raising
- Cheerleading
- Leisure teams: bowling, darts, etc.
- Student societies and clubs
- Study groups and action sets
- Debating teams
- Group talks, seminars and presentations
- Support groups
- Study and research projects
- Online community forums
- Writing a joint wiki or blog
- Teams helping at social events such as student welcomes or meet-and-greets
- Work-based project teams

### Consider:

- ★ Which would work best for the time you have available?
- ★ What kinds of skills would these develop?

## Gain varied experience

Look for opportunities to take on the various roles of team 'secretary' or organiser, time-keeper, presenter, and chair/leader.

Have a go at fulfilling diverse functions for teams (not necessarily stating these to the group unless it is something it has chosen to discuss). Depending on the team, aim to be 'the ideas person', the cheerleader/motivator, the harmoniser, the supportive one, the one who eases communications, and/or the planner/organiser.

Gain a sense of which roles and functions seem to come more naturally to you – and which ones you need to work at so that you open up more options for yourself.

## Learn from the process

Naturally, when we embark on a team task, our attention is on the end point: winning the competition, raising the largest amount for charity, beating a rival team, or getting the best grades for a project. To develop team skills well, stand back and reflect on the process. Become more aware of how every aspect of teamwork is useful.

- ★ Learn how the team interacts – and why; gain an understanding of team dynamics (pages 161–7).
- ★ Become better at recognising the point where things start to go wrong.
- ★ Notice how and why communications work – and when they start to break down.
- ★ Identify how and why the team won or lost, was successful or not, worked well or not.

## For group assignments

Check carefully the purpose of these: why were they set? Often, this is to provide the opportunity to develop the attributes covered in this chapter. This might be reflected in the assignments' marking /grading criteria – although not always.

Whilst many students are wise to the benefits of gaining teamwork experience for their CV and job applications, it is easy to forget this angle when teamworking gets tough. For example, students often complain about team members that don't pull their weight. That can be frustrating when it occurs; at such times, it is useful to focus on learning from the process and capturing this for your CV.

## Use feedback

Ask others what you could do to be a better team member. Jot down any comments made about your teamworking skills and reflect on what these are telling you. Be open to hearing comments that might at first seem unfair or inaccurate. Use them to help you understand how others perceive you – and to decide how to create a different impression.

# Being part of a great team

## What is a 'team'?

A team is more than a collection of individuals. Any group could operate as a team if it is focused on being effective for the mutual benefit of all. Smith and Katzenbach (2003) argue that efficient teams need commitment to a common purpose and accountability to each other. A really great team uses constructive processes that enable personal growth as well as effective collective working to deliver its goals.

### Activity

#### Effective teams



A good team will show most of the following characteristics. Rather than just reading through them, consider two or more teams that you are in, or have been in, ideally one that seemed to work and one that didn't.

Reflect on whether, and how, they each exemplified these characteristics.

## A great team ....

### *Works as one*

- ★ it has a shared vision; it knows what it wants to achieve
- ★ is clear about targets and priorities – and agrees these together
- ★ shares information
- ★ can make decisions
- ★ is able to achieve more together than individuals each achieve alone.

### *Takes collective responsibility*

- ★ makes decisions together
- ★ takes responsibility for what the team does as a whole, the good and the bad
- ★ shares disappointments
- ★ doesn't blame each other
- ★ looks for solutions to conflicts or failures
- ★ shares the praise and glory together.

### *Supports and motivates*

- ★ supports each other through setbacks
- ★ watches out for each other's needs.

## *Works to strengths*

- ★ has members with diverse qualities, who contribute in complementary ways
- ★ takes time to discover the experience, skills and interests of all and how to work to these
- ★ shares expertise, to mutual benefit.

## *Respects, includes, communicates*

- ★ makes efforts to ensure that nobody feels left out or undervalued
- ★ gives room to individuals to be who they are
- ★ recognises diverse ways of being a good team player
- ★ enables all members to express their views
- ★ gives each member equal time to speak on an issue, inviting people who have not spoken yet to contribute their views
- ★ builds trust through its behaviours
- ★ values everyone's time.

## *Is a pleasure to be part of*

- ★ provides more to members than just achieving the goal (e.g. a positive sense of being in a team; collegiality; mutual support)
- ★ members look forward to seeing each other
- ★ members feel respected and cared for
- ★ members enjoy working together.

## Good team members

Individuals are good team members when they:

- ★ commit to the team – and put it ahead of personal glory on the task
- ★ are fair-minded and treat others' time, opinions and dignity with equal respect
- ★ contribute their fair share to work and discussions
- ★ encourage and enable others to do well
- ★ appreciate the value of the diverse skills, abilities and perspectives others can bring
- ★ do what they say they will do, and act in ways that enable others to trust them
- ★ can be relied upon to be good team spokespersons or 'ambassadors'.

# Creating a great team



## 1 Bond

- ★ Get to know each other really well: gain a sense of who you are as people so that trust can develop naturally.
- ★ Do something fun together – see a different side to each other.
- ★ Show interest in what others in the team are going through – and what they enjoy.
- ★ Make mutual commitments or a contract, to help ensure you all benefit from the team.
- ★ Define your purpose and goals: forge a group identity.



## 2 Create the team ethos

- ★ What is it about the task, or teamworking, that matters most to each member? Consider how you can best honour what each person values.
- ★ What will characterise your working relationship as a team? If someone observed you working together, what words would you hope they used to describe your team ethos?
- ★ Aim to establish a sense of fun, enjoyment and mutual care so that everyone looks forward to teamwork sessions.



## 3 Set ground rules

Discuss how you will operate as a group – consistent with the ethos you have started to establish.

What kinds of behaviours or speech are acceptable – or not?

- ★ Make a list of the 'rules' that every member commits to honouring (e.g. punctuality; doing the tasks allocated by the team; mutual respect; etc.)
- ★ Decide how the group will ensure these rules are kept.



## 4 Decide processes

- ★ How will the team make decisions?
- ★ How will the team resolve problems and address things that go wrong in its working relationships?
- ★ How will it communicate with itself and others?



## 5 Set team goals

- ★ Clarify the purpose and aims of the team.
- ★ Identify what each member wants to achieve.
- ★ What goals and objectives are held in common? Clarify where goals differ.
- ★ Refer back to your agreed process for making decisions, in order to arrive at goals for the team as a whole.
- ★ Clarify anything that was discussed that you now agree not to pursue as a team.



## 6 Make a team analysis

Put some time aside at the start to work out how best to work as a group. Don't assume everyone likes working in teams, or has similar past experiences of them (positive or negative). As well as forming the ground rules, talk through such aspects as:

- ★ Who knows who? Be open about any existing friendships or previous experience of working together – and how that can be used as a strength rather than a source of division.
- ★ Experience of teams: what kinds of teams have members worked in before; is this new terrain or familiar to everyone?
- ★ Assumptions of teamwork: the opinions and expectations of how teams should or shouldn't operate – and why.
- ★ Strengths – the expertise, interests, energies, contacts, ideas, the team could draw upon.
- ★ Limits – what the team as a whole doesn't want to do or can't do.
- ★ Preferences – who wants to do what.



## 7 Clarify the tasks

- ★ Define the overall assignment; list tasks that contribute to its achievement.
- ★ Decide together on a strategy (or plan) for carrying out these tasks in an efficient and timely way. See Chapters 9 and 11.



## 8 Recharge

Take a few minutes at the start and end of each meeting, and/or after any major disagreements, to reinforce a sense of team and recharge good will.

- ★ Acknowledge any difficulty so it doesn't fester – don't pretend it doesn't exist.
- ★ Acknowledge the importance of getting through challenges and working as a team.
- ★ Thank everyone for what they contributed, and for raising concerns so these could be addressed.
- ★ Identify what went well during the process and the value of what has been learnt from working through the difficulty.



## 9 Allocate roles

Agree together:

- ★ Which roles are needed?
- ★ How will you decide who has each role?
- ★ Will roles be rotated to develop everyone's skills and CV?

### *Some useful roles for teams*

- ★ Leader, to chair meetings, provide direction, and set the pace (see Chapter 8)
- ★ Secretary for making notes, taking minutes, and managing communications
- ★ Treasurer (if there are finances involved)
- ★ Co-ordinator/Planner, for schedules, organising, time-keeping, etc.

### *The role of 'followership'*

If the team has a leader, the leader needs to be supported to be effective. This is sometimes referred to as 'followership'. It is a skill in itself, and involves:

- ★ being able to 'manage upwards' – to help the leader to see what is needed
- ★ being someone the leader can trust and rely on to do right by the team
- ★ knowing when to listen, speak, ask, check, advise or just get on with what was asked.

In the workplace, this includes being able to develop a good relationship with managers and team-leaders, to mutual advantage.



## 10 Fulfil team functions

According to Belbin (1996), individuals tend to behave, interact and contribute to teams in a particular way, thereby fulfilling diverse functions such those on page 164. In a much-repeated experiment, Belbin and the Cambridge Industrial Training Research Unit found that teams made up entirely of the best business brains were far less successful than those with mixed memberships. Check whether your team is a good mix and who is fulfilling these key functions.

### *The best team 'mix'?*

Not all teams need someone who is strong in each function – and several members might excel at many. Belbin recommended having:

- ★ a co-ordinator: to lead or chair
- ★ a 'plant': an imaginative person with creative problem-solving skills relevant to the task
- ★ a monitor-evaluator: to spot and weigh up good and bad ideas
- ★ an implementer or completer-finisher: to ensure things get done
- ★ a spread of other types.

Further, teams can benefit from having other balanced 'mixes' – of extroverts and introverts, those who generate ideas and those skilled at evaluating ideas, people who enjoy change and those who appreciate continuity.

## Reflection

### Team function



Consider which of the team functions listed on page 164 you perform best.

## Want to know more?



M.R. Belbin (2010) *Team Roles at Work*. 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group).

*If you wish to take the Belbin self-perception inventory, ask at your Careers Service.*

# Team functions and Belbin team types

## Belbin team types

Function by team type	Positive characteristics	Potential shortcomings
Implementer	Steady, reliable, sensible, gets things done. Well-disciplined, organised.	May not welcome change and new ideas. Expects too much from others.
Co-ordinator	Focused, looks for consensus, tries to involve everyone. Delegates work; chairs meetings well.	Doesn't bring many ideas. Might be seen as manipulative. Passes their own work on to others.
Shaper	Outgoing, high-energy, no-nonsense, speaks their mind; ready to overcome obstacles; gets things moving.	Impatient, irritable, insensitive to others' feelings; might say the wrong thing at the wrong time.
Plant	Creative, imaginative, lateral thinker, generates ideas, enjoys looking for solutions, inventive. Good at holding the 'big picture'.	Inflated sense of their own 'genius'; ignores targets and details; lives in a dream-world; does not communicate ideas well to others.
Resource investigator	Curious, interested, outgoing. Likes exploration, information, meeting new people, challenge, trying out gadgets.	Short interest or attention span; invests and then moves on to something else; may pilfer other people's ideas.
Monitor-evaluator	Considers all angles; unemotional; takes on many perspectives; good at weighing up the evidence and making a judgement; good at decision-making.	Rigid in ideas and in their love of 'logic'; not open to creative or lateral thinking; over-critical. Not good at generating novel ideas.
Teamworker	Observant; listens and responds well; smooths over conflict; diplomatic; good social skills; sensitive to others; puts the team first.	Can be swayed by all views; easily influenced; prevaricates; finds it hard to come to a decision.
Completer-finisher	Good attention to detail; responsible; conscientious; reliable; delivers to target; fine-tunes the final effort.	Poor at delegating and trusting others; picks fault; over-perfectionist.
Specialist	Single-minded, dedicated, offers skills that are hard to find; gets on with the task; self-motivating.	Not interested in the big picture; doesn't mix with the team; narrow horizons.

### Activity

#### Team functions using Belbin team 'types'



- 1 Which of above team functions do you find yourself occupying the most? Is that the role in which you feel most comfortable? Could you fulfil all the other functions effectively?
- 2 For teams you are in, are there people who are fulfilling these functions well?
- 3 If you had to choose just one or two other people to be in a pair or small team with you, which of these 'types' would best complement your own strengths?

# Helping the team to work well

## Helpful things to do

You can make a difference to the functioning of a team through a multitude of small actions.

- 1 Learn and use everyone's name.
- 2 Always act with courtesy and respect.
- 3 Look for chances to give honest praise.
- 4 Be willing to adapt to help things work.
- 5 Aim to make quality contributions rather than talking longest or loudest.
- 6 Reflect back to the group, in brief, what it has said, done or achieved so far.
- 7 Ask whether those who haven't yet spoken on the point would like to do so.
- 8 Leave spaces or silences so everyone can absorb what has been said, think, and work out what they want to say.
- 9 If the group is 'stuck' on relatively minor points, bring it back to the main issues.
- 10 Don't agree with the same people all the time, to the exclusion of others.
- 11 If ideas are blocked, suggest 'brainstorming' options together.
- 12 If there is conflict, suggest ways through.

## When things go wrong

Even when teams are enthusiastic, hopeful and keen to achieve together, things can go wrong. The actions for creating a great team (pages 162–3) can help the team to build the right foundations for effective working and for resolving problems. However, high-performing teams still experience challenges at times. Often, this is because some members underestimate the impact of their individual behaviour on the rest of the team. The activity below can help to bring awareness to how you or others might be weakening a team.

## Activity

### Sabotaging a team



Drawing on your experience and observations, list ways that members could sabotage the team they are in – making it unpleasant, annoying and/or unproductive.

Then compare your list with the checklist of unhelpful behaviours below.

### Unhelpful team behaviours



If your team isn't working well, use this as a checklist together, to help identify  what is going wrong.

- not bothering to get to know some (or all) of the other team members
- dominating the group – or not contributing enough
- forming factions that split team energies
- not taking responsibility for tasks that need to be done, leaving one or two others to do these
- speaking badly about some team members
- trying to split the team into 'goodies' and 'baddies'
- being late or not turning up at all
- putting own interests before those of the team
- not listening to other people's ideas
- not using the strengths and qualities of each person to best effect
- messing about/time-wasting
- not caring what happens to others on the team
- not being able to take criticism.

## My behaviour in teams

Use the evaluation on page 166 to guide your observation of your own behaviours in teams. If feasible, ask other team members for feedback, too. Aim to form a fair, accurate picture. Use these to identify how you could help your teams be even more effective.

# How do I behave in teams/groups?

## How do I behave in teams/groups?

Each set of statements below represents opposite ends of a spectrum. Decide how close you are to either end, indicating this along the dotted line accordingly: ...X..... Before deciding, observe yourself in action during teamwork. Provide an accurate response that others would recognise rather than assuming you are always 'somewhere in the middle'.

Am I more like this....?		Or more like this?
I tend to dominate group space /time	.....	Usually, I am invisible in groups
I multi-task whilst others are speaking	.....	I listen closely to what others say
I generally think my ideas are the best	.....	I always think others' ideas are better
I try to force through my opinions	.....	I don't argue my case strongly enough
I have to make all the decisions	.....	I leave others to make the decisions
I push myself forward as leader	.....	I avoid being the leader
I insist on speaking for the group	.....	I insist others speak for the group
I interrupt others quite a lot	.....	I usually don't find an opening to speak
I am bad at punctuality	.....	I am obsessed by punctuality
I waste team time	.....	I insist we stick to a strict agenda
I get caught up too much in details	.....	I tend to neglect important details
I leave others to do most of the work	.....	I usually do more than my share of work
I get into a lot of arguments	.....	I avoid conflict at all costs
I like to share every thought and idea	.....	I keep my thoughts and ideas to myself
I speak out about things I dislike	.....	I harbour silent resentments/dislikes
I don't always do what I agreed to do	.....	I do as agreed – no matter what!

### Activity



### Turn short-comings into strengths

- 1 Read through your responses above. What kind of team character comes across?
- 2 Identify which of your own behaviours are less than helpful to teams or groups you are in currently. Acknowledge the impact they are having.
- 3 Consider how your less helpful behaviours could be adapted so that they become useful for the team. For example, if you tend to push your ideas too strongly, the positive side is that you have ideas and share them. If you communicated them differently, it could be an asset to the team.
- 4 Choose at least one aspect of your team behaviour to improve. Set yourself a target for changing that. What will you do, by when? How will that benefit the team? What support or help would you need from the team in order to form a new behavioural habit?

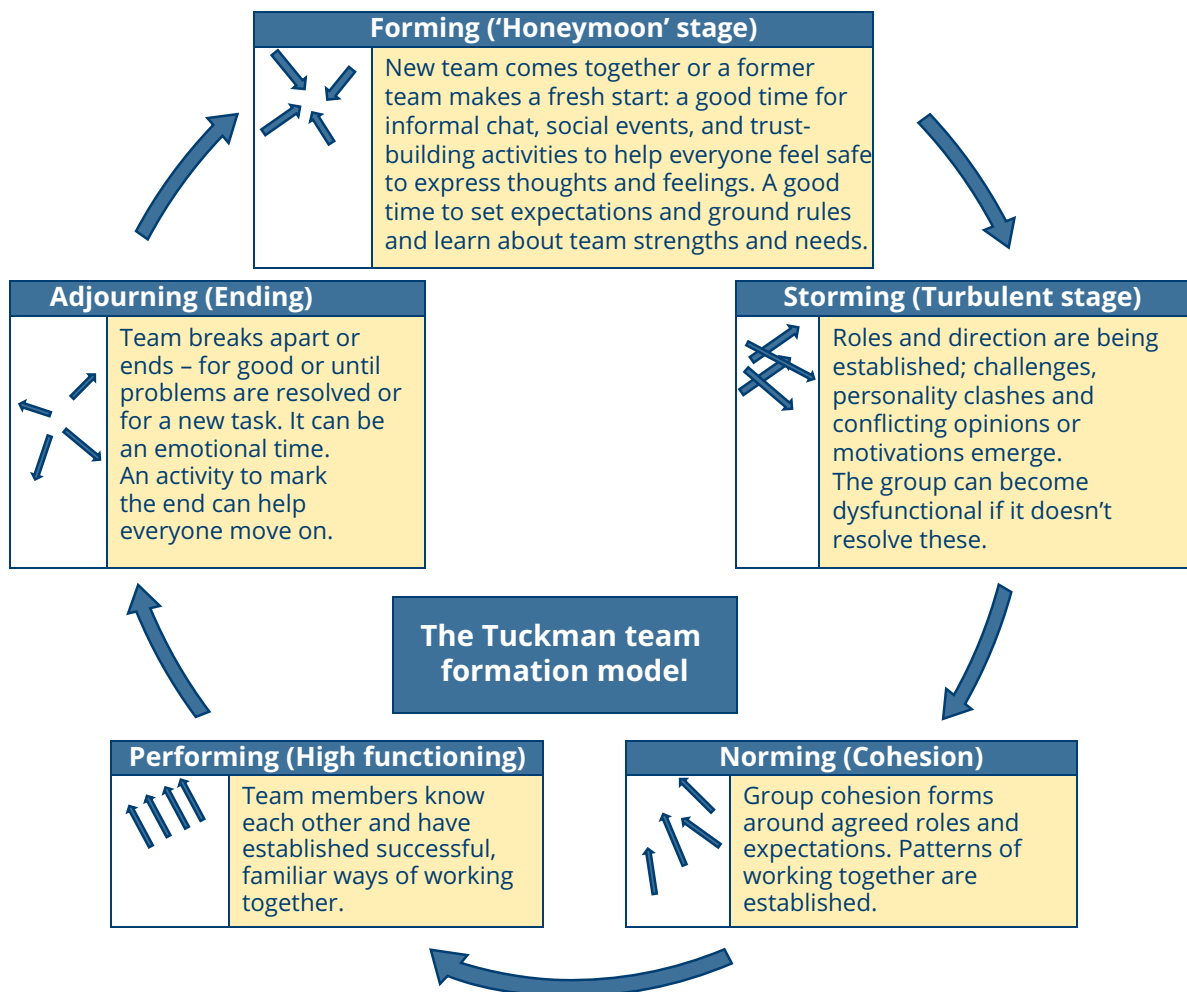
# Understand team dynamics

## Making sense of teams

Teams develop their own characters and ways of doing things. Understanding these helps us to make sense of why a team works well or badly, with conflict or harmony, effectively or not. The interactions of the ideas, values, experiences, emotions, behaviours, needs and motivations of each member of the team create its dynamics – affecting the energies of each individual and the team as a whole. What is *not* said or done contributes to the dynamics for better or worse, and can be as significant as what *is* said or done: see page 168.

## The Tuckman team model

Tuckman (1965) noted that the longevity of a group affects its dynamics. New teams are generally different to those where members know each other well or are closing down. Teams tend to go through four stages of development: forming, storming, norming and performing (Egolf and Chester 2013). Tuckman later added a fifth stage – ‘adjourning’ – after which teams might re-form. Distinct challenges arise at each stage. McCahan et al. (2015) emphasise that teams tend to move back and forward between stages rather than progressing in sequence. Not all teams reach the high performing stage.



### Want to know more?



S. McCahan et al. (2015) 'Introduction to teamwork', in *Designing Engineers: An Introductory Text*, (Hoboken, NJ): Wiley, pp. 219–246.

# Involve and include the whole team

## Inclusive team dynamics

Team dynamics are improved when teams actively seek to include all members in all aspects of the life of the team. If everyone starts out wanting to be inclusive, that encourages individuals to join in and voice what they need to perform at their best.

All members bring a unique set of experiences which will impact on how comfortable they feel within the team or group. When a group is inclusive, everyone compromises on some individual interests in order to find the best possible arrangements for the team as a whole. Some aspects of our usual way of doing things are easy to adapt; some are harder to change but might be essential to enabling others to participate at all.

A great team does its best to make everyone feel comfortable. Below are ways of developing an inclusive culture in teams.

## Friendliness

Team members do not have to like each other or be friends. However, everyone should be able to expect basic courtesies such as:

- ★ **Dignity** Being spoken to and treated with respect and politeness.
- ★ **Recognition** No one should feel invisible, ignored or left out.
- ★ **Collegiality** Included in social interactions alongside other members of the team, such as greetings, chats, decisions, humour, social activities, etc.

## Look out for others

If everyone looks out for everyone else, inclusion is not difficult. A few simple steps go a long way.

**Prevent exclusion** Take steps yourself to check others are not being left out by decisions made by the team; don't leave it for others to sort.

**Demonstrate interest** Smile and say hello. Check they are ok. Ask about their day or holidays. Seek their opinions. Check they have said all they wanted on an issue, etc.

**Find out** what people like and need, so you are better placed to enable them to achieve these.

**Be observant** Take note of who hasn't contributed, and ask kindly if they would like to. Notice who needs support, help, a chat, a partner for a task.

**Give a helping hand** Ask how people are getting on with their team tasks. Check whether they need help. See if others can help or offer to help yourself. Don't let other team members fail when they just need a bit of help or advice.

**Make everyone feel needed** Share tasks fairly so that everyone's contribution matters. Speak about the importance of everyone's role in the group. If someone seems isolated, ask for their help with something you are doing.

**Don't take things too personally** If someone seems distant or unfriendly, they might be preoccupied with difficulties at work, with family, study, finances or health. They might have a disability or mental health issue that is draining or distracting them.

## Watch for scapegoating

Groups often bond through unhelpful tactics such as setting up other groups as the 'enemy'. Sometimes, a team colludes in regarding one of its own members as problematic, then blames that person for most of what goes wrong. This is known as 'scapegoating'.

Scapegoating is not unusual. When it occurs, members reinforce each other's opinions that they are completely justified in vilifying or blaming that person. They amplify any action or aspect of behaviour that seems wrong, but don't notice similar behaviours in everyone else. Groups can find it hard to accept this is happening. Be vigilant in watching out for early signs of scapegoating, such as the team...

- ★ descending into gossip
- ★ commenting on who doesn't seem to fit in
- ★ focusing on one person's faults
- ★ losing a balanced view of an individual
- ★ over-stressing one person's role in what goes wrong
- ★ not giving due recognition to what that person does contribute – especially if they are quieter, more introverted, or stand out in some other way as different.



When things started to go wrong, Gertie the goat started to feel a sinking in her stomach

If you are part of a group that has, for example, gone silent or obviously changed the conversation when someone approached, perhaps because a private matter was being discussed, assume this will have been noticed and would feel uncomfortable or stressful. The person might reasonably assume that they have been the subject of gossip. Ease the situation. You don't need to share details, but you can acknowledge that a private discussion had been under way and apologise if that felt awkward for anyone else.

## Inclusiveness on disability

Be aware that good organisation, scheduling and time management by the team can be especially important if any of the team (or clients) have disabilities. It can impact on aspects such as:

- ★ booking specialist help or transport
- ★ booking the right kind of specialist help for the tasks involved
- ★ conserving mental and physical energy.

## Inclusive communications

Inclusive teams consider such matters as:

- ★ who might need to sit in particular positions in order to see or hear what is being said
- ★ the speed of communication, especially if any members are not using their mother tongue, or are relying on lip-reading
- ★ use of specialist terminology, especially if this is potentially confusing to new members
- ★ puns and use of humour – if members are from different cultures, language groups or on the autistic spectrum.

## Social inclusiveness

Social activities can help teams to bond. Much of the disharmony in groups arises from not knowing each other, leading to doubts about good intentions and motives. Seeing each other in new contexts reduces the unknowns, which can take the heat out of disagreements, reduce misunderstandings and help the team resolve problems from a position of good will. Such bonding only works if everyone is included. Otherwise, it can be divisive.

Be aware of what restricts any members from participating. Depending on the members, this could be childcare costs, caring responsibilities, travelling home safely, lack of money, disabilities that make it difficult to be in noisy or high-stimulus environments, personal or cultural reasons for not being around alcohol or certain foods, etc. Set up team social events at times and places that mean everyone can join in.

### Want to know more?



Stella Cottrell (2019) 'Developing cultural competence'. *The Study Skills Handbook*. Chapter 9.  
British Council (2013) *Culture at Work. The Value of Intercultural Skills in the Workplace Report*.

# Managing team conflict

## Use conflict to advantage

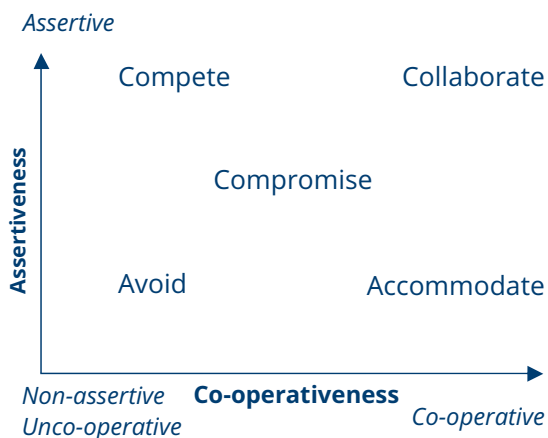
Even with the best intentions or amongst friends, when individuals work together conflict can arise – even outside of the initial ‘storming’ stage (page 167).

Whilst it can be stressful and waste time, conflict can bring positives too. It isn’t something to be feared or avoided at all costs. For example:

- ★ It can demonstrate that people care: it is often a sign of passionate commitment to the team’s goals.
- ★ It clarifies issues that might have been lurking harmfully below the surface.
- ★ It can force a team to find innovative resolutions and creative synergies.
- ★ It provides an opportunity to develop skills in negotiating consensus or other ways forward – invaluable skills for life and employment.
- ★ For individuals, it can highlight areas to work on in communications, emotional management and inter-personal skills.
- ★ Teams that emerge well from conflict can be more strongly bonded and effective.

## The TK Conflict Mode model

The Thomas-Kilmann (TK) model (1977) identifies five modes of behaviour people bring to managing conflict, depending on how far they act to satisfy their own needs (assertiveness) or the team’s (co-operativeness).



If your team is struggling with internal conflicts, check the mode of behaviour each member brings to resolving the situation. Whilst collaboration (high

assertiveness, high co-operation) is the ideal, other behaviours can be useful, depending on the context. Recognise these potential impacts on team dynamics and performance.

**Compete** Are individuals competing enough to put forward ideas and take their space? Or are some asserting their own point so forcefully that other voices and ideas are drowned out?

**Accommodate** Is enough effort being made to take on board others’ ideas? Conversely, is everyone so keen to maintain ‘harmony’ that speech and the flow of ideas are constrained?

**Compromise** Is compromise being used constructively to find the best synthesis of ideas? Or would one person’s great idea be best for the team in this instance?

**Avoid** Is this an occasion when it is useful to ignore the issue and just get on with the task? Or will that lead to greater problems later?

**Collaborate** If everyone is both assertive and co-operative, the team as a whole benefits. All voices get heard. Everyone is willing to listen to these and find the best for the team as a whole.

**Motivations** As a team, aim to understand what prompts each person to adopt the mode they do – in general or at that time.

### Observation



#### Conflict mode

Note which of these modes tends to predominate in teams, groups or seminars that you are in. Which mode do you tend to adopt most easily? How has that helped or hindered the team?

### Want to know more?



Kwame Christian (2017) *Finding confidence in conflict*. TEDxDayton talk

K.W. Thomas and G.F. Thomas (2004) *Introduction to Conflict and Teams: Enhancing Team Performance using the TKI* (Mountain View, CA: CPP, Inc.).

# Confronting team members

## Why confront?

Confronting in this context means facing up to what needs to be done or said, such as when members are letting down the team. The team needs to address any serious issues so that it does not fall apart or rely for success on everyone working harder because of those who are not contributing as they should. Skilful confrontation:

- ★ has a constructive purpose
- ★ is best undertaken when anger and other emotions have had a chance to die down
- ★ should keep to the facts of what is happening and the consequences rather than in sweeping statements of blame.

## Before confronting

**Clarify the issues** It is possible that there are many strong emotions flying around which can confuse the issues. If so, calm the situation and then think through what exactly is going wrong and needs to change.

**Clarify the goal** Be clear what you/the team wants others to do differently.

**Choose time and space** Consider carefully where you can raise these issues in a private, respectful way, with sufficient time to work through whatever arises.

**Script** If necessary, prepare and rehearse a script to help you present the issues without getting angry or distressed.

## During confrontation

Maintain the person's dignity Remember that this is likely to be hard for them to hear.

**Maintain calm** Stick to the point. Take a break to cool down if things get heated.

**Clarify** Explain the issue, what has happened, and what kind of solution you are seeking. The person might not realise the impact they had.

**State facts neutrally** *'So far, we have spent several hours discussing this and we haven't agreed a plan'* rather than *'You won't agree to any plan that anyone proposes'*.

**Ask and listen** Use open questions such as 'How do you feel about this?' The person might be unaware of their behaviour. Give them a chance to take things in and to explain if they wish.

**Be open to the unexpected** Confrontation can reveal unexpected sets of dynamics. The whole team can find that their own actions are perceived differently than they had assumed. This can be useful for working out team needs.

**Create a 'way back'** Conduct the confrontation in such a way that the person can see a way forward for themselves in the team with dignity.

**Agree next steps** Decide together what are acceptable ways forward. Changing some aspect of the task or schedule, sharing roles, or altering communications, locations or group processes might resolve the issue.

## Repairing the team

Lencioni (2005) found five problems that create the most difficult dynamics in teams, undermining their effectiveness. Check whether these affect your team. Lencioni advises tackling them in sequence, starting with trust.

- 1 Lack of trust** Trust is essential for open communications, risk-taking, and support. If lost, it has to be earned back. Members need to express their commitment to the common purpose again. It can help to spend time together, understanding each other's past and future motivations.
- 2 Fear of conflict** If this is the issue, the team needs to recognise that conflict brings benefits and can be survived. Without it, ideas are stifled, feelings go unexpressed, resentments fester and trust can be impaired.
- 3 Lack of commitment** If members reveal this, such as through behaviours listed on page 165, the team should check why this is happening and take steps to bond and commit as a team again (page 162).
- 4 Avoidance of accountability** If individuals are not taking responsibility for their actions, the team needs to raise this.
- 5 Inattention to results** If the team is losing sight of its goals and failing to achieve essential milestones along the way, it should find out why. It could be for many reasons, from too little short-term pressure to lack of clarity about effective teamwork.

# What I can contribute

The skills and qualities you contribute to a team will develop through experience. However, if you are not used to teamwork, you will feel more confident at the beginning if you can identify things you can contribute already. Use the following activity to recognise the wide range of contributions that team members can make. If you prefer, you can download it from the companion site. Then decide:

- 1 Which of these you can offer now to groups and teams you are in, because you have experience or abilities in these areas.
- 2 Which of these are personal strengths – where you could make the most useful contribution.
- 3 Areas you want or need to develop further (even if they are already relative strengths).

## Activity



### Contributing to a team

For each way of contributing to teams, decide  whether boxes 1 and/or 2 and/or 3 apply to you.

Contribution	1 Can offer?	2 Strength?	3 Develop?
<b>Team spirit and inclusiveness</b>			
1 Enabling others to bond well			
2 Helping the group to stay motivated			
3 Creating/re-establishing harmony when needed			
4 Supporting others to get things done			
5 Noticing when others are being left out			
6 Drawing in anyone who is being left out			
7 Helping others to contribute the best they can			
8 Recognising others' strengths and contributions			
9 Praising others when they do well			
10 Celebrating group successes			
<b>Communications</b>			
11 Listening well to others' views, ideas, opinions			
12 Contributing usefully to discussions			
13 Knowing when to be quiet/silent			
14 Keeping others informed/up-to-date as needed			
15 Communicating on behalf of the group/team			
16 Bringing structure to group discussions			
17 Making minutes/notes of meetings			
18 Networking on behalf of the group			
19 Keeping group discussions focused			
20 Writing letters, messages, etc. for the group			
<b>Organisational skills/Getting things done</b>			
21 Planning out what needs to be done			
22 Working out the team's priorities			
23 Allocating tasks fairly			
24 Tracking that everything is being done as needed			
25 Suggesting improvements to group processes			

Contribution	1 Can offer?	2 Strength?	3 Develop?
26 Keeping the group focused on its purpose			
27 Finding ways of doing things more effectively			
28 Organising events			
29 Bringing a task through to completion			
<b>Creativity, analysis and problem-solving</b>			
30 Coming up with good ideas and solutions			
31 Analysing and weighing up options			
32 Making decisions, based on the facts			
<b>Acting responsibly</b>			
33 Completing tasks I have been allocated			
34 Taking the initiative when needed			
35 Respecting other team members' time			
36 Committing to the group as a team member			
37 Letting others get on with what they need to do			
38 Acting with integrity, whether as leader or follower			
39 Clarifying to the group where it needs to change			
<b>Information, data and numbers</b>			
40 Researching information for the group			
41 Managing data for the group			
42 Interpreting data, charts, graphs, etc.			
43 Sharing information and experience			
44 Creating graphics, illustrations, images, slides			
45 Managing finances/acting as treasurer			
46 Making charts, tables, graphs, data			
47 Doing the maths, number work, statistics			
48 <b>Other ways I can contribute</b> (e.g. specialist skills, languages, driving, technologies, etc.)			

## Reflection



### Team contribution

- ★ Are there any areas above that you enjoy more than others?
- ★ How could you build on your strengths?
- ★ Which aspects would be the most useful for you to work on, in order to function more effectively as a team member?

## Observation



### Myself in team action

- ★ Over several meetings of teams or groups, take more notice of how you behave as a team member – and how others respond to what you say and do. Use the list above and evaluation on page 74 to help you focus on specific behaviours.
- ★ Be honest about what you note: it will help you to become (or remain) a good team member.

# Teamwork when applying for jobs

## Employer requirements

Employers benefit when employees are able to work effectively as collaborative teams. When applying for jobs, take note of whether teamwork is a requirement. Look out for wording such as:

- ★ 'Will work across multiple teams...'
- ★ 'Works effectively alone and in teams'
- ★ 'Is a collaborative teamworker'.

## 'We' or 'I'?

Balance references to team successes and your own specific contributions. Employers want to know what you did for the team and as part of the team. Using only either 'we' or 'I' can be risky as it does not give a sense of both shared and individual contributions.

## Maintain a record

It isn't always easy to remember the best examples to use in response to questions raised during the job application process. Keep a few brief notes of recent occasions when you:

- ★ led a team or group – what you did well and the skills you demonstrated
- ★ were in a group or team that didn't work – and what you learnt from the experience that would help in future
- ★ acted as a good team-member. Consider what this shows about how well you can operate within a team.

## On your CV

Include references to teams, groups and/or working with others in each section of your CV (at work, as a student, sports, hobbies, etc.). List brief examples of your experience of working in teams – ideally examples relevant to the job you are seeking.

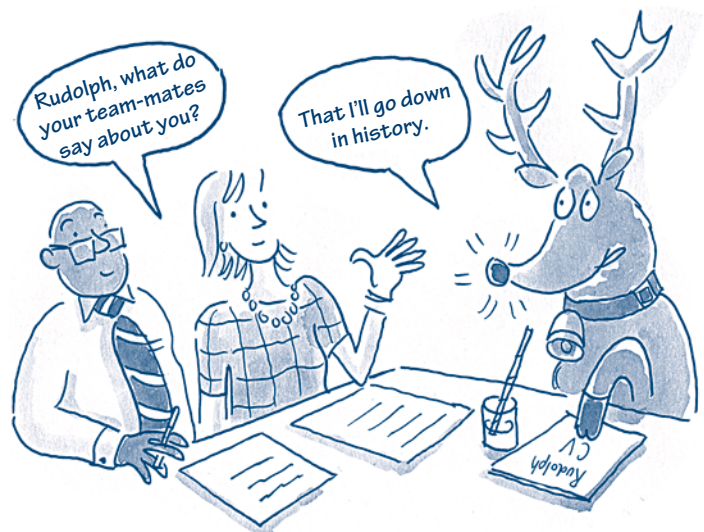
- ★ What did the team(s) as a whole achieve?
- ★ What, in brief, was your role/contribution?
- ★ List 3–5 skills/strengths you bring to teamwork.

## In your application

- ★ Provide a sentence that lists around three jobs or settings in which you developed team skills.
- ★ Provide a sentence that summarises a successful team project you contributed to and what, specifically, you contributed.
- ★ Give a sense of where your strongest team skills lie.
- ★ Where possible, state how you think you could contribute to teams in this job.

## At interview

Avoid repeating information from your CV or application. Either use different examples or provide richer details. Prepare at least three examples. Be able to speak about these both in brief and in detail. The employer will observe how teamwork attributes are reflected generally, such as in how you speak about others or collaborate well or react when you don't get your own way.



Be ready to answer questions such as:

- ★ What have you learnt from your experience of working in a team recently?
- ★ How would team members describe you?
- ★ Tell us about a recent occasion when you demonstrated good teamworking skills.

## In assessment centre tasks

### What is involved?

Employers and recruiters often include a team task such as a discussion group or working on a problem or activity relevant to the job. They might use an 'ice-breaker' such as sharing background details with another candidate and reporting their points back to the group (so listen carefully!) Use any informal chat time to get to know other candidates so you are more relaxed around them. Treat them as future colleagues rather than as competitors.

### What do employers look for?

Employers, typically, look for the following.

- 1 The usual features of good teamwork** and of being a constructive, active team member (page 161). Practise these so that they become habitual, automatic behaviours. This will help you to relax, focus and be yourself during assessment.
- 2 A range of skills in action** They will observe how well you demonstrate skills such as clear thinking, good listening, creativity, task-management, problem-solving, analysis and ability to take criticism during teamwork. They might look at specific behaviours such as whether you:
  - ★ can cope under reasonable pressure
  - ★ stay focused on the important issues
  - ★ encourage others to contribute.
- 3 Forward movement** They will observe whether your input and behaviour move the group towards a good solution, or obstruct it with negativity, wasted time, lack of contributions, indecision or weak decisions.
- 4 Company values** They will check whether your behaviour is consistent with company values. Be familiar with these well in advance.
- 5 How you get on with others** (as relevant to the job). Show genuine interest in other candidates and their views. Invite their views. Listen. Act as if relaxed (even if not). Smile.

### Things to ask yourself

It can be useful to prepare a mental checklist of behaviours that you think assessors might observe – and how you might demonstrate these

without it looking forced or artificial. Draw on this during your time at the centre. For example:

- 1 Am I speaking too much – or not enough?
- 2 Am I repeating myself? (If so, stop.)
- 3 Am I encouraging others to speak?
- 4 Am I taking on board others' perspectives?
- 5 Are we using time well? What can I suggest that would help us use the time to best effect?
- 6 Have we drifted off subject or away from the brief? If so, is this a good moment to remind the group of the focus of the brief?
- 7 Would this discussion benefit from more structure? If so, what can I suggest?
- 8 Would the discussion benefit from more ideas? If so, suggest a brainstorming session, or that everyone write down a few ideas and put them up for everyone to consider together.
- 9 Am I sounding too negative? If so, how can I balance that with constructive comments?
- 10 Would it help if I fed back to the group where I think we have got to so far?

## Observation



### Through employers' eyes

Put yourself in the shoes of recruiters: watch TV programmes such as *The Apprentice* which are based around team tasks. Jot down:

- ★ Your observations of behaviours that were unhelpful – or embarrassing – to watch.
- ★ The comments made by team members, judges, studio panel members, etc.

Reflect on how you behave when you feel stressed, threatened or unsupported.

## Want to know more?



<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/275425-group-exercises-what-to-expect>

[www.brightnetwork.co.uk/graduate-career-advice/assessment-centre-advice/succeed-group-exercise](http://www.brightnetwork.co.uk/graduate-career-advice/assessment-centre-advice/succeed-group-exercise)

# Review: Teamwork

## **Use the teamwork opportunities provided for students**

1

Take part in many teams to gain varied skills and insights. Recognise that student teamwork assignments are usually set to provide experience relevant to employment – not just to get an assignment completed.

## **Focus on process as well as outcomes**

2

Whilst it is important to keep an eye on the intended team goals, teamwork can offer much more. Good teamworking enables a positive experience of collaborative working and enables personal growth, too.

## **Understand what underpins great teamworking**

3

Great teams don't just happen. The actions and behaviours of the team members are paramount. Even small actions, over time, shape the team as effective or dysfunctional.

## **Commit to being a good team member**

4

Teams work effectively when members commit to putting team interests ahead of individual glory-seeking and when everyone can rely on each other as respectful, dependable, and trustworthy. Be aware of how your own behaviours affect team morale, efficiency and effectiveness.

## **Put time into creating a sense of team**

5

Don't underestimate the importance of developing a sense of team. That usually means putting time into getting to know each other and bonding, either over time (if there is time) or away from the main task.

## **Understand formal and informal roles required for effectiveness**

6

Identify and allocate roles needed to fulfil key functions for the team and to carry out each task. Be aware of softer functions such as coordination, planning and ideas generation. Decide who will fulfil these.

## **Recognise and manage team dynamics**

7

Learn to interpret more accurately what is going on in your team at a given time, such as whether it is in the process of forming, storming, norming, performing or adjourning. Observe what triggers your team into each of these stages.

## **Strive for positive, inclusive team dynamics**

8

Become more skilled at creating and maintaining teams that involve everyone fully, to the benefit of the team as a whole, and to help the personal growth and well-being of each team member.

## **Use conflict and confrontation in teams constructively**

9

Don't fear conflict and confrontation – these can bring energy and diffuse problems. Use them sensitively, being aware of the conflict dynamics. Respect the dignity of all, so you can re-group as a stronger team.

## **Be confident in teamwork components of job applications**

10

Be aware of what you can contribute to teams already, and build your skills and experience. Prepare good examples of your experience to draw upon, as well as lessons learnt. If invited to team assessments, remember to demonstrate that you can be active in helping a team to function effectively.

# Chapter 8

# Develop your leadership capacity



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ identify the relevance of 'leadership' to your own life and career
- ✓ understand what leadership entails
- ✓ become familiar with different models and styles of leadership
- ✓ recognise the qualities of a good leader
- ✓ decide what kind of leader you are - or would want to be
- ✓ identify actions you can take to strengthen your leadership capability
- ✓ clarify actions and approaches to take when you are in leadership roles.

Understanding more about leadership is useful to many contexts, such as for:

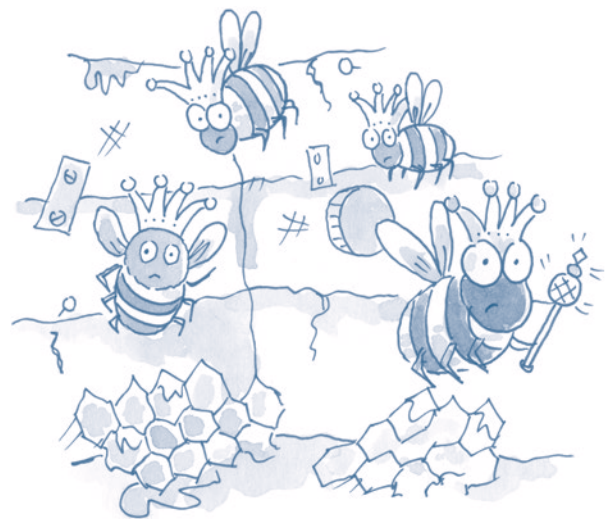
- ★ recognising good (or poor) leadership in others
- ★ working effectively with leaders
- ★ exercising social responsibility
- ★ making career decisions
- ★ taking on aspects of leadership yourself; many students step into leadership roles whilst on their course or soon after graduation.

People can feel reluctant to consider themselves as potential leaders. Sometimes, this is because they don't value aspects of leadership that they already exercise, or they don't recognise themselves in stereotyped views of a 'leader'.

By contrast, others believe they are great leaders without pausing to consider whether they are as effective as they believe and what the implications of their leadership style might be on the overall effectiveness of a team or organisation.

This chapter enables you to consider different models, styles and characteristics of leadership and how these apply to you and your own vision of leaders. It encourages you to consider your own leadership potential and to identify ways of further

developing your leadership capability. This can not only develop your confidence but can also open up a wider range of life opportunities.



*The hive ran into trouble when everyone wanted to be queen*

# Why does this matter for me?

## Why develop leadership?

Whether or not you consider yourself to be a 'natural' leader, it is highly likely that at some point you will have to take on leadership responsibilities. This might be as a manager, team leader, supervisor, trustee or elected officer – or as the most senior or experienced person present when action is needed. You might need to lead a group, to captain a sports team, to run a support group, choir or social event, to lobby for a cause, to take care of your family or vulnerable people, to take important decisions on behalf of others. You might wish to lead your own enterprise, start a charity, head a department, or effect change for a cause important to you.

If you are ambitious for your career, then leadership qualities will be essential to almost

every job and role you take. Most graduate jobs and senior professional roles involve an element of leadership. If you are in a job already, promotions at work will generally involve greater levels of responsibility, such as leading a larger or more complex team, influencing more important decisions, and persuading a wider range of people. It is likely that your ability to step up when it matters will have an impact on your career success.

In addition, you are affected daily by the decisions and behaviours of leaders – at work, in politics, media, commerce and even in religious, cultural and social life. It is useful to be able to call upon different perspectives on what constitutes good, ethical, effective leadership.

## Leadership: personal relevance

Identify  your own reasons for developing leadership abilities and understanding – for now or the future.

### Career

- I am ambitious for my career
- I want to gain a good graduate job
- I want to be promoted at work
- I want to change my current job
- I want to run a successful business
- I will need to supervise or manage others
- I enjoy taking the lead
- I want to understand and support workplace leaders

### Ethics and social responsibility

- I want to make a difference through my life
- I want to bring about a particular change
- I want to influence important decisions
- I want my voice (or message) to be heard
- I want to do right by others when I lead

- I want those I lead to do well
- I want to respect others' well-being when I lead

### Effectiveness and impact

- I want to get things done
- I want to run a successful business
- I want things to run smoothly
- I want those I lead to be effective

### Self-respect

- I want to do my job well
- I want to know that I can do it
- I want my abilities to be recognised
- I want those I lead to respect me
- I want to be a good manager/leader

### Other reasons?

# Different kinds of leader

There isn't one type of leader, nor agreement about what kind of leadership is 'good' or effective, nor even why leaders are needed (Storey, 2016). Few leaders will exhibit all the attributes outlined in the models on pages 180–1. They bring their own personalities, concepts of leadership, strengths, experience and levels of confidence.

This is useful because the role of leader is varied, calling for diverse approaches and attributes. A leader might be required to envisage a new direction, improve organisational performance, introduce major changes, engage staff in establishing shared values, develop capability across teams, form strategic networks and partnerships – or any combination of these. That is why there isn't a definitive list of leadership qualities or skills. Despite this, leadership stereotypes sometimes prevail.

## Leadership stereotypes

The traditional stereotype of a leader is of an autocratic or charismatic personality, who either orders or charms others into doing things their way – and expects compliance. Such leaders often generate followers who contribute to their 'mystique' as a special kind of person who should be followed.

Whilst the attributes of such leaders can be useful in emergencies and when time is limited, they can constrain a team or organisation. Increasingly, such leadership approaches are not considered to be the most advantageous for a business, for developing a wide range of talent in its workforce, nor for addressing diverse tasks, contexts and cultures (Howell and Avolio, 1992; Dinh et al., 2014).

## Other kinds of leader

Increasingly, leaders are expected to exemplify the kinds of attributes outlined in the leadership models (pages 180–1). It is assumed that leaders will:

- ★ delegate strongly to those with the best expertise
- ★ and/or distribute leadership across many roles
- ★ and/or aim at being democratic and inclusive
- ★ and/or train, encourage and support everyone to do their jobs well without constant direction.

Leaders vary in their approaches. This can be because of their personality, experience, their reading of the context, or because of whatever views of leadership are dominant at the time. This results in a range of leadership styles, such as those outlined on pages 182–4.

## Recognising potential

One unfortunate effect of the leadership stereotype opposite is that it inhibits talented people from coming forward to take on leadership roles or prevents them being appointed if they do. Many valuable kinds of leadership have long gone unrecognised and undervalued. The continued sway of the stereotype may contribute to the difficulties facing many women when applying for, or entering, leadership roles, as well as excluding men who don't seem to 'fit the mould'.

Many people don't recognise leadership potential in themselves – yet are competent at seeing what isn't working as well as it could, sorting out problems, making useful suggestions, planning a course of useful action, delegating tasks, deciding on priorities, managing time, organising events, helping others to see things differently, speaking out when they see something is wrong, and so on. The foundations of competent 'leadership' lie within such skills, many of which are developed through everyday life.

## Reflection



### Recognising your potential

- ★ Consider if/how leadership stereotypes have affected your view of yourself as a leader.
- ★ What leadership attributes have you developed through the 'demands of everyday life'?

# What is leadership? Two models

One way of understanding what is meant by leadership is to examine current models, such as the ILM and Healthcare models. Both illustrate the wide range of behaviours, skills and values regarded as essential components of effective leadership. The models organise such attributes into a smaller number of 'dimensions'. It is worth reflecting on similarities and differences between the dimensions selected for each model, and on why similar components might be grouped differently.

## ILM leadership model

The Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) model uses five dimensions and wide-ranging sets of contributing components. Note that many of these are relevant to success as a student, too.

### Are these dimensions useful?

Zhu et al. (2017) found these five dimensions were reliable and also strongly associated with innovative workplace performance. Consider for yourself whether, and how, this model helps you understand what is needed for effective leadership. Comparing it with another model, such as the Healthcare model, helps create a richer mental model of what leadership involves.

### Activity

#### Using the ILM model



Evaluate yourself on this model for free <https://myleadership-institutelm.com/app#/mlp>

Free webinars and other free ILM resources are available at: [www.institutelm.com/free-tools.html](http://www.institutelm.com/free-tools.html)

Dimension	Components
<b>Authenticity</b>	Being able to inspire trust – because of such attributes as: Congruence (pages 48–9); Fairness; Integrity; Being true to your values (pages 32–3); Openness and effective communication
<b>Vision</b>	Developing a strategy (page 202); Problem-solving (pages 249–68); Planning (page 208) Evaluating risks; Creativity (pages 223–48); Inspiring others; Innovation; Enterprise; Continuous improvement; Adaptability
<b>Achievement</b>	Commitment to a purpose (page 25); Setting and achieving challenging goals (page 40); Motivating oneself and others (pages 105–9); Enthusiasm; Emotional intelligence (pages 114–26); Adaptability, such as changing leadership style to context (page 184); Self-development (pages 13–26); Resilience (pages 99–126); Managing performance (pages 80–97); Developing other people.
<b>Ownership</b>	Taking the initiative (page 101); Taking on responsibility (page 193); Learning from mistakes (page 62); Time-management (pages 127–31); Critical reflection (pages 269–92); Decision-making (pages 202–3); Social responsibility; Personal development planning (pages 5–13); 'Followership' (page 163)
<b>Collaboration</b>	Teamworking (page 159); Building network (page 143); Leading projects (pages 214–19); Appreciating diversity and respecting different cultures; (page 187); Engaging stakeholders; Managing customer relationships; Negotiating (pages 153–5); Running meetings; Communicating; Dealing with conflict (pages 170–1)

## The Healthcare model

The UK's National Health Service (NHS) has developed its own model to help its leaders to understand better how their behaviours affect others, the service and the working environment. Although designed for a specific organisation, it is relevant to other contexts and adapted by other professions. The Healthcare model uses nine dimensions. Anyone can evaluate their

performance on each dimension at four levels: essential, proficient, strong or exemplary. The model emphasises that individuals can identify aspects of leadership in which they excel already or need further development – whatever their job role. Consider what you find to be essentially similar and different between this model and that of the ILM.

Dimension	Components
Inspiring a shared purpose	Promoting, role-modelling, and being true to a shared vision
Leading with care	Contributing to a caring, safe environment that enables everyone to be effective in their roles; this includes self-care
Evaluating information	Making evidence-based decisions that respect diverse perspectives
Connecting our service	Working collaboratively across the service, understanding how everything links up and affects other areas
Sharing the vision	Helping everyone to contribute to a compelling vision for the service; bringing the vision to life
Engaging the team	Promoting an atmosphere of teamwork, mutual respect, compassion and pride in everyone's contribution
Holding to account	Being clear about expectations and providing feedback, so everyone can manage and improve their own work effectively
Developing capability	Championing learning and development for oneself and others, to benefit individuals and the service for the future
Influencing for results	Building effective relationships and networks to achieve results that are sensitive to diverse needs and priorities

### Activity

#### Self-evaluation using the Healthcare model



You can evaluate yourself against this model by using its reflective questions at: [www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk/resources/healthcare-leadership-model/nine-leadership-dimensions/](http://www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk/resources/healthcare-leadership-model/nine-leadership-dimensions/)

In using this model, consider what kind of working environment and teamworking would be created in workplaces that applied this model of leadership.

# Leadership styles

Individual leaders vary in their dominant style, especially in how much 'control' they try to exert or delegate. You might recognise some of the styles below from your own experiences. Consider which you would prefer:

**A To lead** when you are in charge, such as for team projects

**B If being led** such as when you are a team member or employee.

To track your responses, indicate how far you like each style by highlighting or circling one or more 'likes' (♥♥). If you wish to follow up on any of these, further reading is suggested.

Style	Key characteristics	Typically useful ...	Not usually useful...	Like?
<b>1 Laissez-faire</b> (Robbins et al., 2007; Pahi and Hamid, 2016)	A 'light touch' or 'let people get on with their jobs' approach. Leader intervenes only if there is a problem	... if there is an obvious end goal  ... if leading highly motivated experts or effective, well-established, well-networked teams	... if team members need direction or feel no-one is bothered what they do  ... if a coherent plan or strategy is needed	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥ B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥
<b>2 Transactional</b> (Avolio and Bass, 2002)	Leader focuses on performance. Sets goals with team members; provides direction, oversight, mentoring and training in exchange for incentives (rewards/penalties)	... for achieving clear, measurable goals  ... if employees/team find goals motivating and achievable  ... if organisation must raise performance or achieve KPIs for funders, trustees, etc.	... if individuals focus on own goals and rewards rather than team objectives  ... if innovation/creativity is needed  ... if individuals are reliant on others to achieve goals	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥ B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥
<b>3 Coaching/developmental</b> (Lombardo, 2019)	Leader helps everyone align personal and organisational goals; emphasises listening, learning and development	... for developing talent/creating new leaders  ... for enabling autonomy/learning from experience	... if time is an issue  ... if the nature of the business means there isn't room to 'learn from mistakes'	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥ B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥
<b>4 Distributed</b> (Spillane, 2006)	Leader delegates many responsibilities and decisions; most or all of the team or employees are expected to lead on some aspect(s)	... for giving a sense of involvement/ownership  ... to use everyone's expertise and ability  ... to develop leadership ability in more people	... if training, support and co-ordination are not provided  ... if people don't have the authority or resources to carry out the responsibilities they have been given	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥ B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥

Style	Key characteristics	Typically useful ...	Not usually useful...	Like?
<b>5 Participative (or inclusive or democratic)</b> (Gastil, 1994)	Leader encourages everyone to express views; collaborates with team and helps it reach consensus if feasible	... to raise morale and give the sense that everyone is valued  ... to gain a broad range of ideas/perspectives  ... for identifying breadth of opinions and needs	... if decisions require clarity, speed or specific parameters  ... if it isn't feasible to use contributors' ideas and they find this demotivating	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥  B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥
<b>6 Affiliative</b> (Goleman, 2000)	Leader focuses on developing a sense of a bonded team	... when there is a need to restore trust or harmony	... if the focus on the team as a whole allows individuals to get away with poor performance	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥  B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥
<b>7 Transformative</b> (Tichy and Devanna, 1986; Pawar and Eastman, 1997).	Similar to coaching style but the leader's focus is on inspiring a shared vision for the organisation or team rather than individual goals	... for bonding a team, or overcoming factions and self-interest  ... to help align personal and organisational goals  ... for promoting change	... if individual or competing interests cannot be reconciled with the vision	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥  B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥
<b>8 Pace-setting</b> (Goleman, 2000)	Leader sets high expectations, and expects everyone to direct themselves to meet these	... for rapid results  ... for innovation  ... for high standards  ... if people know what they are doing	... over a longer term, as can be exhausting  ... if teams need mentoring, feedback or co-ordination	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥  B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥
<b>9 Charismatic/visionary</b> (Conger and Kanungo, 1987, 1998); Khurana, 2002)	Leader is good at communicating a strong vision and is an inspirational role model in bringing it about	... for instilling confidence that the vision can be achieved	... if the leader is not a convincing role model  ... If it encourages over-dependence on the leader	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥  B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥
<b>10 Autocratic (authoritarian / command)</b> (Goleman, 2000)	Leader exercises a high degree of control. Strong on direction or 'command'	... for rapid or 'life and death' decisions  ... if there is a cultural expectation of this style	... if more 'democratic' styles are expected in the work culture  ... if individuals feel excluded from decision-making	A To lead? ♥♥♥♥♥  B If led? ♥♥♥♥♥

## Observation

Note any differences you feel about any of these leadership styles when considering the practicalities of being a leader yourself rather than being led.



# Right style for the context?

## Styles used

In a survey of 3,871 leaders, participants reported that, in practice, they used some or all of the six styles opposite (Goleman, 2000). Goleman argues that leaders need to call flexibly on at least four styles, and especially command, democratic, coaching and affiliative.

Effective leaders adapt their style to suit the context. Such flexibility is sometimes referred to as the 'situational style' after Hersey and Blanchard (1977). Alternatively, leaders can identify a deputy with complementary strengths to lead in specific areas.

## Which style to use?

Each style could be right for the context depending on considerations such as the following.

**Cultural expectations** Different cultures, workplaces and teams value and expect particular leadership styles, depending on what they are used to or on prevailing cultures, philosophies and ideals.

**History** The kinds of leadership already tried out in this context, and how well these have worked.

**Current position** The style that would work best for this team, given its routines, experience, clarity of expectations and needs of team members.

**Time** The level and kind of consultation and participation feasible in the time available.

**Urgency** Whether decisions need to be made, or actions taken, quickly

**Focus** Whether a different style would work best for specific aspects of a task or for making particular decisions.



**Expertise** Whether there are advantages in drawing on a wide range of talents and perspectives, such as when team members or employees have specialist knowledge.

**Synthesis** There could be benefits in combining different styles to suit the context.

**Cost v. benefit?** What would be lost or gained by using a particular leadership style – and whether that matters in the context.

**Personal style** Which styles or syntheses the leader feels most confident in using successfully.

# Key leadership orientations

Although there are many leadership styles (pages 182–3), research into these found that two broad orientations underpin much of what is known about leadership behaviours and attitudes, even if they are not directly acknowledged as such. These are the ‘consideration’ and ‘initiating structure’ orientations, identified in the 1940s at Ohio State University (Stogdill, 1974).

The ‘consideration’ orientation	The ‘Initiating structure’ orientation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ ‘People-centred’</li> <li>★ Collaborative</li> <li>★ Takes on board individuals’ goals</li> <li>★ Values the learning that comes from the process of arriving at decisions</li> <li>★ Considers the interests, needs and satisfaction of team members/staff</li> <li>★ Emphasises such aspects as culture, training, communication, contribution, praise, feedback, support, learning and professional development, life–work balance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ ‘Task-centred’</li> <li>★ Directive</li> <li>★ Focuses on organisational goals</li> <li>★ Values results</li> <li>★ Focuses on the team or organisation performing well against its prime goals</li> <li>★ Emphasises organisational strategy, goals, plans, schedules, tasks, structures, incentives</li> </ul>

Both orientations are important and can affect leadership outcomes (Judge et al., 2004). Depending on the context, leaders need to adjust their emphasis and, generally, need to maintain a balance between the two. For example, even leaders who are task-focused, need to ensure that everyone has the resources, confidence, time and expertise to do what they need.

When a team wants or expects ‘consideration’, an effective leader will look for ways to include them more in the process of sharing ideas and contributing to strategy and decision-making. Where there is an expectation that the leader should ‘just get the job done’, then the leader’s priorities are more likely to be about providing a clear vision, goals and a path that directs everyone towards achieving these.

## Conflicting demands

Leaders, typically, report to more senior managers or to a Board, shareholders, funders or the public – who may expect a different leadership orientation than the staff or team. One set of people can be

telling the leader ‘get this sorted quickly’ whilst another argues that time is needed to talk things through collaboratively. This could arise for students as leaders, too, such as:

- ★ When some members of a team want to complete a project assignment early so they can focus on the rest of their course, whilst others want to go slowly to reduce stress or to fit in other priorities.
- ★ When some members of a team want everyone to meet frequently to discuss how the project is going and make decisions about it collaboratively, whilst the rest feel that each team member should be allocated jobs and allowed to get on with them.

## Reflection

### People or Task?



To which leadership orientation are you more drawn?

# What do you want in a leader?

## What do people like – and dislike – in their leaders?

To some extent, what people appreciate in a leader will depend on the culture and expectations referred to on page 184. In everyday life such as at work or as a student, it is the relatively small things that make people appreciate and admire a leader – or which provoke annoyance and resistance. Consider the comments below, reflecting on whether these issues matter to you too.

### Like in their leaders

*She really knows what she is talking about!*

A great listener!

*She treats everyone fairly*

They involve everyone – our opinions matter

We are kept informed about what is happening

They show respect for our time/work/family life

They are working really hard to make things happen – it makes me want to the same

I trust him to do as he says

### Dislike in their leaders

We never see them. I don't know what they do

*They don't communicate with us. We never know what they are planning*

She has favourites. It's not fair!

*He is so disorganised – always late or doesn't turn up!  
It's like he doesn't value our time*

They rush in to things without checking them out first- it makes more work for us

*They keep changing their minds – so what's the point of starting anything*

My boss is so unpredictable – we never know what to expect

## Observation



### Good leaders?

Observe how you and others react to the leader of a team or group you are in now. What is useful about their ways of doing things – and what isn't? What can you learn from your observation?

## Activity



### Being 'led': your advice to leaders

It is advisable for leaders, and potential leaders, to pause frequently to consider what it is like to 'follow' or to 'be led' rather than to lead. It can help them to be better leaders themselves.

- 1 Draw on the likes, dislikes and your observation (opposite) as starting places for considering the following questions.
  - a) When you need to choose a group or team leader, what influences your choice?
  - b) What persuades you to 'go the extra mile' when completing a task for someone else?
  - c) What do you admire most in a leader?
  - d) What are your 'pet hates' in leaders?
- 2 Discuss your list with others. What are their views?
- 3 Use your insights to formulate an 'Advice list for leaders' from the perspective of those being led.

You will have this list to consider when you are in leadership roles yourself. It can be invaluable in helping you to understand how others respond to your leadership.

# Cultural differences in leadership

Until recently, research into leadership was based mainly on North America and Europe. Then, transnational companies found that Western models of leadership didn't work in all cultures (Aritz and Walker, 2014). Similarly, as multi-professional teamworking spread, it became apparent that even occupational groups and workplaces have their own cultures and differing expectations of their leaders. Mittal (2015) argues that transformational leadership styles are more effective in 'collectivist' cultures that value shared group goals whilst charismatic styles are more likely to succeed in individualistic cultures.

## Aspects of difference

What is interpreted as a useful sharing of successful experience in one culture can be viewed as rudeness or 'showing off' in others. Putting yourself or your ideas forward could be viewed as admirable confidence, or arrogance or excessive individualism depending on the culture.

Even when there are strong similarities (as outlined below), there can be significant differences too. Casimir and Waldman (2007) found *modesty* was valued for all levels of leader in China, and *communicative* for all levels in Australia. When working with people from different countries, cultures or occupational sectors, cultural knowledge and awareness can help avoid misunderstandings.

## Similarities

Despite important differences, some aspects of leadership appear to be valued across distinctive cultures. A comparison of Australian and Chinese leadership found both considered that high-level leaders should be inspirational, visionary, innovative, courageous and persuasive – qualities that assist strategic and risk-taking roles. For low-level leaders, both cultures valued qualities such as humour, friendliness and being a team-player – qualities useful for close day-to-day teamworking (Casimir and Waldman, 2007).

Zagorsek et al. (2004) compared leadership practices using self-ratings from over 350 MBA students in the USA, Slovenia and Nigeria. Despite expectations, few significant differences arose in areas such as the role of charismatic leadership or inspiration.

## Generational differences

Attitudes, values, lifestyles and expectations also vary between generations. This affects when and how people expect to be included in communications, given direction, asked their opinion, receive feedback and praise, and expectations for life/work balance (Al-Asfour and Lettau 2014). Being aware of such differences can help leaders in working with multi-generational teams or workforces.

## Leader self-awareness

In a global workforce, leaders need to:

- ★ be aware of their own leadership style
- ★ recognise how this might be perceived and the consequences of that
- ★ be aware of, and ready to adapt, their style and behaviours to suit different cultures, groups, generations, settings and individuals
- ★ be aware of which style of leadership is most likely to be effective in the context.

## Reflection



### Considering cultural difference

Which aspects of cultural difference are likely to be relevant for teams and projects you will be involved in whilst a student?

## Find out more

Stella Cottrell, (2019) 'Developing Cultural Competence'. In *The Study Skills Handbook*, Chapter 9.

Abramson, N.R. and Moran, R.T. (2017) *Managing Cultural Differences. Global leadership for the 21st Century*. 10th edn. (New York: Routledge).

# Seeing yourself as a 'leader'

## Matching your image of a leader

Not everyone views themselves as leadership material – even when they have ability. Your internal image or model of a 'leader' will influence the way you consider your own potential – as well as how you judge the effectiveness of others. Below are just some metaphors people use to conceptualise leaders.

- ★ A conductor leading an orchestra or choir
- ★ A general giving orders on a battlefield
- ★ An artist with unique perspectives
- ★ A sports coach rallying a team
- ★ A public servant putting the needs of others first
- ★ An architect bringing new constructions into being
- ★ A captain steering a ship through a storm
- ★ A diplomat pouring oil on troubled waters
- ★ A politician persuading others of a policy
- ★ A referee ensuring fair play
- ★ A social worker intervening to improve a situation
- ★ A nurse nurturing a healthy state into being
- ★ An actor playing the right role for the audience
- ★ A sales manager selling a vision.



Leadership appears in many guises

## Reflection



### My concept of a leader

- What is your own metaphor (or image) of a leader? What are the key characteristics of such a leader?
- What is the overall impact, on you, of such an image of leadership? Does it encourage you to think of yourself as a leader? Does it make you want to lead?
- If not, what metaphor(s) might encourage you to think of yourself as a leader?

## Activity



### Attributes of leadership

Consider the list opposite.

- With which do you identify the most – and why?
- What kinds of attributes (skills, qualities and behaviours) do you associate with those aspects of leadership?
- Which of those attributes do you recognise most in yourself?

## Taking the lead

It takes courage to lead – and wisdom to recognise when someone else might be the better leader in the situation. You can lead if:

- ★ you see that somebody needs to take action or provide a lead
- ★ you can see what needs to be done – at least as a first step
- ★ you can convince others of this – in your own way.

## Reflection



### Do I take the lead?

When somebody needs to take the lead, is that person you? If so, why is that? If not, why not?

# Your leadership style preferences

Use the charts below to rate the strength of your own preferences for different aspects of leadership style, considering the practical realities for you when you are in charge, and when you are being led or managed by someone else. Use a scale of 3 (for a strong preference) to 0 (no preference).

Example	1 Vision	Brings a strong vision	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Generates team vision
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## Chart 1: What kind of leader do you prefer to follow?

When someone else is leader, such as a student team project leader, a sports captain, event organiser or a supervisor or manager at work, how do you prefer them to be and to act?

Aspect	Style	Preference	Style
1 Vision	Brings a strong vision	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Generates a team vision
2 Objective	Achieving outcomes	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Learning from process
3 Amount of direction	Strong direction	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Promotes independence
4 Information	Controls information	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Shares information
5 Decision-making	Gives commands	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Achieves consensus
6 Level of oversight	Supervises closely	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Provides autonomy
7 Focus	Task-focused	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	People-focused
8 Consultation	Doesn't ask for views	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Invites input from all
9 Visibility	Highly visible leader	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Leader rarely seen
10 Attitude to mistakes	Penalises errors	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Looks for lessons to learn
11 Attitude to teamworking	Promotes individuality	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Promotes collaboration

## Chart 2: What kind of leader would you like to be?

Identify how you would prefer to be and to act, ideally, when you are the leader.

Aspect	Style	Preference	Style
1 Vision	Bring a strong vision	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Generate team vision
2 Objective	Achieving outcomes	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Learning from process
3 Amount of direction	Strong direction	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Promote independence
4 Information	Control information	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Share information
5 Decision-making	Give commands	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Achieve consensus
6 Level of oversight	Close supervision	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Provide autonomy
7 Focus	Task-focused	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	People-focused
8 Consultation	Don't ask for views	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Invite input from all
9 Visibility	Highly visible	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Rarely seen
10 Attitude to mistakes	Penalise errors	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Look for lessons to learn
11 Attitude to teamworking	Promote individuality	3 2 1 0 1 2 3	Promote collaboration

# Preparing for leadership

Although the best way forward as a leader is contingent on factors such as context and culture (see pages 184 and 187), there are attributes you can nurture over the long term that will be valuable in most leadership roles. The following are drawn from across the models and styles of leadership outlined on pages 180–3).

- 1 For each aspect below, think about its relevance to you in current or potential leadership roles.
- 2 Consider 'Things you can do'. Decide  which actions are useful for you.
- 3 Consider how you will take those actions forward, identifying priorities (page 192)

## 1 Deepen self-awareness

Dugan and Komives (2010) emphasised the critical importance of self-awareness for socially-conscious leadership – including heightened awareness of the beliefs, emotions, experiences and values that motivate you to action. If you have been completing the reflections and other activities in this book, then you should already be building a good foundation in this respect.

### Things you can do

- a) Re-read Chapter 2 and consider the material there from the perspective of you in a leadership role. Look especially at the values that motivate you.
- b) Ask others what kind of leader you would make. Note down their comments. Consider what these tell you about where you could excel and where you might need to change or develop further.
- c) Consider for yourself where you think your limitations would be as a leader. If you are honest about these, it will help you to find a way forward to address them.

## 2 Develop self-confidence

Refuse to let a lack of confidence or fear of failure stand in your way. Challenge yourself to step up in ways that suit you – either gradually taking on more responsibilities and seniority, or just having a go. Be aware that other leaders are probably not as confident as they seem. Many current leaders developed their self-confidence over time, taking on tasks that seemed daunting, and learning through the experience.

### Things you can do

- a) Be your own person. Don't assume you need to be the same as other leaders. Use your ratings from page 189 to guide your actions as a leader.
- b) Think through what in particular you would bring to leadership roles.
- c) Appreciate what you do well already, and how you could utilise your strengths.
- d) Recognise aspects of leadership that you use already in everyday life, study or work.
- e) Act 'as if' you are confident (until you are!)
- f) Give things a go – even if feeling nervous.
- g) Don't interpret initial setbacks as 'I can't...'
- h) Let yourself grow and learn as a leader: don't assume you must know it all already.

### Want to know more?



Mindtools. What's Your Leadership Style? [www.mindtools.com/pages/article/leadership-style-quiz.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/leadership-style-quiz.htm)

Simon Sinek (2009) *How great leaders inspire action*. TEDxPuget Sound. [www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en) (Sept 2009).

### 3 Be more leadership-aware

Leadership is demonstrated all around us every day. People step up to lead teams, groups, events, decision-making, organising a car run, a course, a company, a political party. This provides rich models of how to do things – and how not to.

#### Things you can do



- a) Notice who makes decisions about what to do – whether in your social group or class or for the student community. What do they do well? What could they do differently, or better, in your opinion?
- b) Notice the variety of personalities and styles of people who take on leadership roles. Which of these are most like you?
- c) Observe small acts of leadership – such as when someone persuades a social group that it is time to have a coffee or get back to work. What makes others follow their lead?
- d) Identify any patterns in the behaviours or characteristics shared by leaders you observe. What do they have in common (if anything)? What can you learn from that?
- e) When you observe leadership in action, decide what you would do in that position. Would you do the same – or something different? Get used to thinking through the potential implications and consequences of any given course of action – so that this becomes an automatic response for when you are in positions of leadership.

### 4 Develop strategic ability

Most leadership roles, especially those in employment, require know-how in devising and executing at a strategic level. If you do not have opportunities for devising strategy, you can still develop component skills and ways of thinking.

#### Things you can do

- a) Consider multiple options for how to approach tasks you need to undertake.
- b) Be systematic in working through the potential implications, opportunities and risks of proceeding with tasks in particular ways.
- c) When you have a list of things to do, get used to setting priorities.
- d) Contribute to planning out the details and schedule for a large event or project.
- e) Analyse cause and effect when considering the outcomes of your actions.
- f) When things aren't working out as planned, investigate options actively.
- g) When you hear of issues that others find hard to resolve, get into the habit of thinking through how you would work out a solution. Develop that mental muscle.

### 5 Build your stamina

It is important to take good care of your physical and mental well-being, so that you can cope with the demands of leadership roles (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005).

#### Things you can do

- a) Learn to recognise your limits. Know when to say 'no' or to delegate tasks.
- b) Maintain health and well-being, so you have the physical and mental stamina to fulfil leadership roles when opportunities arise.
- c) Learn the ropes. Don't launch into major roles before testing your limits and building your skills in other roles first.
- d) Be willing to accept that you will make some mistakes – and learn from these.

## 6 Hone diverse skills

Leaders usually need to draw on a great many skills, such as those below. Identify  those that you could practise in the months ahead.

### Useful skills to learn/practise

- Listening carefully to others
- Communicating ideas well to others
- Learning to get on with diverse people
- Keeping others well informed
- Being able to 'read the room'
- Weighing up the best advice to take
- Identifying what motivates others
- Persuading others what needs to be done
- Recognising talent/potential in others
- Identifying the best person for a task
- Delegating/asking others to do things
- Letting others feel recognised and valued
- Planning a course of action
- Following through on a course of action
- Setting goals, targets or milestones
- Managing a budget and accounts
- Analysing data and reports at speed
- Writing clear, informative, succinct reports

## 7 Take on more responsibility

Leadership involves responsibility. If you are not used to that, it can feel daunting. It takes courage and moral integrity. However, you can apply your investigative and reflective skills to thinking through the consequences of your actions as a leader, reducing the risks. You can also build a good team around you and take advice.

If you are not used to taking responsibility, gain direct experience by offering to lead smaller groups, events, projects or teams at first. Build

your understanding of what is involved by taking on increased responsibility in a variety of roles and contexts. Each can help you to learn about such matters as:

- ★ the value of different roles, and their contribution to projects as a whole
- ★ the skill sets required to get tasks done
- ★ the multiplicity of perspectives that lie behind apparently simple issues
- ★ the complexities that can lie behind apparently simple decisions
- ★ the steps to take to manage different kinds of difficult situations
- ★ how well you cope in specific situations and what or who would help you manage these better.

### Things you can do

- a)** Consider the range of ways that you could take on responsibility (page 193).
- b)** Decide which are feasible for where you are now in terms of your confidence, experience and circumstances.
- c)** Try out different kinds of team roles so that you learn what these entail and the skills you will need in future team members.
- d)** Be prepared to take on different kinds of leadership, so that you gain a varied set of insights. Develop your leadership muscle.

### Activity

#### Taking things forward



- a)** Of the actions and skills you identified on pages 190–2, decide which you will act upon from today – and which ones you will come back to. Note in your planner a time to monitor and review these.
- b)** Identify ONE new role or activity that will enable you to develop a range of leadership-related attributes.

# Step up to responsibility

A version of this checklist is available on the companion site: [www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)



## Which are open to you now?

Decide  which of the following you could work on in the short term, to develop further your confidence and skill set for assuming greater leadership responsibility in the future.

### In class/groupwork/projects

- To help ensure a group or project works
- To offer ideas and suggestions
- To encourage/support others to do well
- To take on a particular role for the group
- To lead on particular aspects of a project
- To offer to lead the group

### Student/community life

- To help organise events, such as student elections and social events
- To help out at student open days
- To help at welcome events for new students
- To mentor or buddy new students
- To be a course representative
- To stand for student office
- To be a student peer support helper
- To set up a group, club or society and lead it through its early stages

### At work

- To ask for more responsibility
- To support a new colleague to settle in
- To work-shadow someone in authority
- To help to train a colleague
- To cover a leader/manager's absence
- To assist someone in a leadership role
- To go for promotion at work

## General/personal life

- To be more organised in your personal life
- To offer help when others take the lead
- To give some time to help charities, community groups or student societies
- To take responsibility for particular aspects of the life of a group or society
- To own up to your mistakes with integrity, and help to put things right
- To be better informed about important issues
- To protect those more vulnerable than you
- To follow through on what you agree to do
- To put yourself forward to lead

See also page 192 on leadership skills that can support your career development.

## Others? (State what)

## Reflection

### Taking responsibility



Consider a situation where you have had to step up and take responsibility – in any context.

- ★ What happened?
- ★ What was your role? What did you do?
- ★ What did it feel like to take responsibility?
- ★ What have you learnt from the experience that will be useful to you in other circumstances?

# Being an effective leader

A version of this checklist is available on the companion site: [www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)



At some point, if not already, you will take on a leadership role. The circumstances will be unique, so there isn't a 'rulebook' on how to lead in your particular situation. You will have to make that decision. However, you don't have to start with a blank slate. The following checklist, drawn from the experiences of many senior leaders, provides a useful starting place.

Check off  each item below when you have considered how it applies to your situation and decided what you need to do.

## Identify personal support

Although leadership can be energising and exciting, it can be isolating, draining and stressful, too. Don't assume you must go it alone. Effective leaders know the value of good counsel and seek out multiple sources of support and guidance. This is a strength. Make use of:

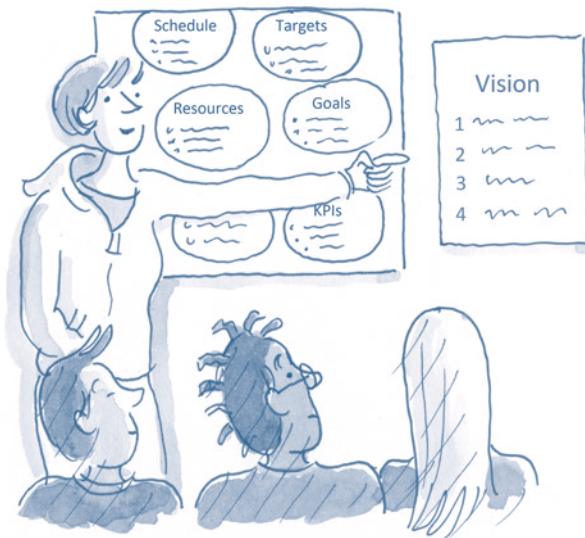
- a) 'Champions'** who support your ideas and help you achieve them
- b) 'Critical friends'** who you trust for honest criticism that will help you to learn and to avoid mistakes
- c) Peers** in similar leadership roles, with whom you can exchange ideas
- d) Emotional support** from people outside of the circle you lead, with whom you can be honest about your feelings, frustrations and successes
- e) Friends and family**, so you can step out of leadership roles at times and be yourself
- f) A mentor** who can share relevant experience and advice
- g) A coach** – a neutral experienced person who acts as a confidential sounding board for your thoughts

## Create an inspiring vision

As a leader, you need to provide your followers or those who report to you (your 'reports') with a strong sense of what they are working towards, why it matters and how they contribute. Typically, the vision of successful leaders is for the good of the project or the team (Taylor and Humphrey, 2002).

- a) Be clear on your aims** Consider this before taking on a leadership role. Think through what you want to accomplish in the role. What could you help to improve? What are your goals? What would be signs of success?
- b) Consider the appeal** Why would your vision appeal to most or all of those you need outside in order to bring it into being? What is in it for them?
- c) Sum it up** Put your initial vision into a few words and, ideally, a compelling image. Be able to state this, easily, if asked what you want to achieve.
- d) Talk it through** When in role, discuss your vision with key stakeholders before broadcasting it widely. Take advice on how best to refine and communicate it so that it is persuasive and makes sense.
- e) Enable others to contribute** If possible, involve the whole team or organisation in shaping and refining your vision from as soon as you are leader, so they feel it belongs to them fully, too.
- f) Crystallise the vision** Draw on the various inputs in order to fine-tune the detail.
- g) Communicate it** Keep the vision alive through involving stakeholders in discussing it, updating it, providing news of progress, infographics, data, etc.

'A good leader will ensure that the vision is kept in view, and does not become lost amongst a forest of targets, deadlines, and problems' (Heerkens, 2002).



## Reflection

### Setting the vision



How would your values assist or hinder you in setting the vision as a leader? (Chapter 2)

## Delegate effectively

It is impossible to do everything yourself – and it's not a good idea to try to do so. There will be a range of talents and ambitions in your team. Draw on this. It will enable others to develop and to gain job satisfaction. Conserve your energies for where you need them most.

- a) Clarify tasks** Identify what needs to be done and why.
- b) Share tasks** Decide whose abilities and preferences make them the best to take on particular roles or tasks.
- c) Clarify expectations** to avoid misunderstandings – such as for roles, targets, milestones, completion dates, and on who is in charge of tasks that fall between two roles, etc.

- d) Sharing** Agree how you will all keep track, communicate, and provide updates.
- e) Provide space** Let people get on with their jobs. Allow individuals opportunities to develop their own plans for meeting goals.
- f) Ask** When new tasks arise (as they will), don't be afraid to ask others to do these.
- g) Recognise and utilise talent.** Enable others to work to their strengths. Appreciate that others do some things better than you.

## Show appreciation

Team members will contribute better if you respect their work, ideas, values and feelings. Leaders are dependent on others – so need to show such recognition clearly and frequently.

- a) Ask opinions** Provide opportunities for the team to help you devise strategy, make decisions, set targets and evolve solutions.
- b) Respect the effort** Ensure people feel encouraged to contribute again in the future.
- c) Notice what others contribute** – so that your appreciation comes across as genuine.
- d) Close the loop** Let people know how their suggestions were considered or adopted.
- e) Specify contribution** Ensure everyone knows how they contribute to the end goal.
- f) Say thank you. Give praise** When you appreciate or admire the way someone has done something, say so. Be specific.
- g) Give public credit** Say when someone's ideas or work is significant. Draw attention to contributions that are less visible.
- h) Share the glory** When things go well, ensure everyone feels part of the success.
- i) Be fair and even-handed** in giving recognition, praise and thanks.
- j) Celebrate** Provide opportunities to celebrate milestones and achievements.



## Take responsibility

Leaders are the most prominent members of the team. They take the lion's share of the glory when things go well and need to be accountable when they don't.

- a) Lead by example.
- b) Set the ethos – establish the values and expectations of ethical behaviour.
- c) Act with integrity; aim to do the right thing; own up to your mistakes.
- d) Check that conditions enable everyone to work effectively, with due care for their well-being.
- e) Be available for others to raise important matters with you.
- f) Ensure the team functions smoothly. If not, help it resolve its issues.
- g) Where relevant, ensure that you and/or the team have access to expert advice for matters that affect security, finances, data, well-being and legal responsibilities.
- h) Follow through on your promises. Don't make promises you can't keep.
- i) If things go wrong, take the necessary steps to put them right.

## Clarify expectations

- a) Negotiate clear goals/targets.
- b) Specify how each person's work connects to the work of others.
- c) Set, or negotiate, ground rules.
- d) Clarify what would be regarded as successful outcomes.
- e) Keep uncertainty to a minimum.

## Reflection

### Leading a team



- a) For which aspect(s) of teamwork do you find it easiest to take a lead?
- b) When/where do you do that now?

## Develop the strategy

One of the main tasks of a leader is to develop the strategy, harnessing the team's ideas, talents and experience to devise and plan it. This orchestrates all efforts and resources towards the main goals.

- a) Research thoroughly: what had occurred previously, data, options, risks, opportunities, etc.
- b) With the team, identify what needs to be done in order to achieve the vision/goals.
- c) Agree a realistic overall schedule for ensuring tasks are completed in a timely way.
- d) Put communications in place to enable everyone to keep up to speed with what they need to know.

## Reflection

### Using strategy



- a) What experience of developing a strategy have you had so far?
- b) What skills have you developed in evolving a strategy for yourself or for a team? (See Chapter 9.)
- c) What opportunities could you create for yourself to become more involved in strategy or policy formation (e.g. student clubs; political groups; charities; local government; being a student representative; starting a business; setting up a new group or project)?

# Get the basics right



It is important that leaders don't overlook behaviours and tasks that might seem less exciting than other aspects of their work but which, if neglected, can make their lives more difficult and undermine their success. Three of these are considered below.



## 1 Manage reputational risks

As a leader, you are the figurehead and spokesperson for the organisation, team or project you represent. Your actions, words and behaviours have more significance and impact than usual.

In business, the leader's reputation can dissuade or encourage others to invest in the company, enter into partnership or purchase its services. In public office, leaders' current and past behaviour are closely scrutinised.

- a) Act with honest and integrity.
- b) Be sensitive to how your words or actions could be interpreted.
- c) Undertake 'due diligence': check details of partners, investors and potential opportunities carefully before taking action.
- d) Sound out experts for advice.
- e) Check your online profile. Remove material that could undermine you or others.
- f) Ask friends or colleagues to help ensure you avoid unintended reputational risks.



## 2 Manage time

As a leader, you will have greater demands made on your time – especially if you do not delegate well!

If you frequently arrive late, postpone meetings or seem rushed, you will come across as disorganised and lose respect. Such behaviours unsettle others, disrupt their day, and make them feel you don't respect them and their time.

- a) Always have your diary/planner to hand.
- b) Book 'down time' to recharge energy.
- c) Book yourself time to think and plan.
- d) Book time to keep in touch with teams.
- e) Avoid double-booking: always check before confirming invitations and requests.
- f) Have someone else ready to cover key meetings and tasks in case of emergency.



## 3 Be seen to be fair

New leaders are often taken aback at how much apparently petty matters (such as who they smile at, agree with, spend time with or help out) are interpreted as signs of favouritism. People want to be treated fairly.

- a) Treat everyone with respect and courtesy.
- b) Use objective measures or feedback to demonstrate that you are being fair.
- c) Establish fair processes to help avoid inadvertent favouritism – such as for allocating roles, hearing all sides of an argument, and sharing out resources.

## Reflection

### Getting the basics right



Which of these basic measures do you need to consider more than you do at present, in order to manage in the kinds of leadership roles you are likely to have in the near future?

What practical things can you put in train now that will help you in getting such matters right?

# Review: Develop your leadership capacity

**1 Identify personal relevance**  
Leadership is needed in many contexts and at all levels. Consider the various ways that leadership is relevant to you, whether as a student or at work, in leading teams or when being led by others.

**2 Recognise the potential of diverse leaders**  
Be aware that you and others can have great leadership potential without having to conform to stereotypes.

**3 Consider models of leadership**  
Gain a sense of what is expected of leaders by comparing current models for sectors you plan to enter. Identify skills and behaviours that will help you gain, and succeed in, such roles.

**4 Be aware of varied leadership styles**  
Become familiar with the dominant leadership styles so that you can recognise when and why a particular one might be most effective. Consider your own preferences and the impact of these for you and others, whether you are leading or being led.

**5 Consider context and culture**  
When you are in leadership roles, such as leading a student project, take on board the variety of experiences of team members, including cultural differences, that affect what is expected of you as a leader. These impact on how effective you will be in leading in that context.

**6 Be mindful of your key leadership orientation**  
Be aware that your team (or your leader) might differ from you in being either more people-focused or task-oriented. Finding out everyone's orientations can help you adopt your style and/or find ways of reassuring and supporting those of both orientations.

**7 Prepare ahead to be the leader you want to be**  
Consider your developmental needs from the perspective of being a better leader. There is always more to learn in order to be a more effective leader in a wider range of contexts.

**8 Step up to responsibility**  
Develop your leadership muscle by taking on more responsibility – to contribute to student life, academic study, everyday life, work or the community. Take on varied roles and tasks to gain a broad range of experience.

**9 Ease your role as leader with a clear plan**  
Whilst every leadership role is different, there are several core areas where you can usually take steps in order to make the role more manageable. This provides a starting place for planning a way forward on the specifics of each leadership role.

**10 Get the basics right**  
Pay due attention to behaviours that might seem obvious but which are often neglected by leaders once in role. These include managing reputational risks, time management and fairness.

# Chapter 9

# Managing tasks and projects



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ understand what is meant by task-management
- ✓ develop techniques and approaches associated with successful task-management
- ✓ develop the confidence to take on more complex tasks and projects
- ✓ become a good 'self-starter'
- ✓ use key processes involved in project management
- ✓ communicate about tasks and projects effectively.

## Introduction

When faced with a new task, project or situation, our brains tend to focus on what appears novel or unique about it. This can distract us from noticing what it has in common with what we already know or can do. It can feel perplexing or stressful. It is easy to waste time on unfamiliar specifics in the early stages, rather than stepping back into more familiar terrain and considering the tools we already have to help us manage the task.

It can be useful to remember that almost every task draws on similar processes and skills:

- 1 Strategic planning: a sense of direction, goals, priorities.
- 2 Task-management techniques, such as those outlined in this chapter.
- 3 People skills: working with others to achieve the goal (Chapters 6–8).
- 4 Self-management: using initiative and managing personal time, emotions and performance (Chapters 1–5).
- 5 Creative problem-solving: finding ideas that contribute towards a solution (Chapters 10–11).

## What is meant by a 'task'?

'Task' covers a wide range of circumstances. In this chapter, 'task' is used flexibly to refer to any project or brief you might need to undertake – from approaching your study and assignments as a 'task' to be managed through to running an event as a student or in your personal life, or completing a work-based brief for an employer.

## Activity



### Selecting a focus

Give yourself a practical focus for this chapter: identify a personal project, goal, assignment or equivalent.

Use the chapter to help you think it through, and to plan and evaluate it.

# Rate your task-management capability



## Task-management

For each of the following statements, rate your confidence on a score of 4 to 0.

**Rating:** 4 = very confident 3 = confident 2 = quite confident 1 = not very confident 0 = not confident at all/don't know

I am confident in:	Rating	See pages
1 drawing on my expertise to manage new tasks effectively	4 3 2 1 0	63-7
2 applying a strategy to guide me through the task effectively	4 3 2 1 0	202
3 conceptualising the processes involved in tasks, from start to finish	4 3 2 1 0	202-4
4 taking a positive, solution-focused approach to working out what to do	4 3 2 1 0	112-13
5 orientating myself to tasks effectively before launching in	4 3 2 1 0	201-2
6 defining exactly what the task involves without rushing at it	4 3 2 1 0	202
7 planning out a task effectively from start to finish	4 3 2 1 0	203
8 monitoring my progress on tasks effectively	4 3 2 1 0	203
9 reflecting on what I am doing whilst on task	4 3 2 1 0	204
10 reflecting effectively on tasks, so that I learn from the process	4 3 2 1 0	204
11 undertaking and applying a SWOT analysis	4 3 2 1 0	206
12 identifying priorities	4 3 2 1 0	205
13 setting and evaluating SMART-F targets (see also pages 1-28)	4 3 2 1 0	207; 386
14 drawing up and following through on an action plan	4 3 2 1 0	208
15 scheduling project time	4 3 2 1 0	209
16 my ability to get started on tasks independently	4 3 2 1 0	210
17 my ability to manage procrastination	4 3 2 1 0	210
18 my ability to stick with a task until it is completed	4 3 2 1 0	211-12
19 my understanding of what is meant by a 'project'	4 3 2 1 0	213
20 my ability to manage a project	4 3 2 1 0	214-15
21 my ability to manage assignments as if they were projects	4 3 2 1 0	202-8
22 evaluating my performance on tasks, using useful criteria	4 3 2 1 0	213
23 my ability to find creative solutions if problems arise during tasks	4 3 2 1 0	Ch.10
24 communicating effectively during tasks/projects	4 3 2 1 0	218-19
25 convincing employers I have skills to manage projects	4 3 2 1 0	219
<b>Add up your score</b>	<b>Total</b>	

### Interpreting your score

If your self-ratings were accurate, you have a score for your overall task-management skills. This is a rough indicator of how confident you are about these skills, which may, of course, be different from your actual ability. A score over 40 is reasonable, a score over 55 is quite good, a score over 70 is very good, and a score over 85 is excellent. However, interpret how good your score is depending on:

- ★ how long you have been on the programme
- ★ how much experience you have of managing large and complex tasks and projects
- ★ how much guidance you have already received for managing complex projects.

When you have completed the chapter or when you have undertaken a new project compare your score now with the score you give yourself then.

# Make the task manageable

## Don't over-complicate it

At first glance, new tasks can feel overwhelming. If so, start by building your confidence and reducing anxiety. Aim to simplify. Look for some obvious methods first and use what you already know. Use the following tips.

### Task-management top tips

- 1 Clarify the task: know exactly what you need to do and why. (See also page 252.)
- 2 Start where the energy is ... all other things being equal.
- 3 Start much earlier than you think is necessary. This gives you more room for manoeuvre.
- 4 Think several steps ahead: plan out all the steps required to take you to the end point.
- 5 Always look for several solutions ... it is easier than looking for THE one answer.
- 6 Give yourself tight time limits with early deadlines ... otherwise tasks will tend to expand to fill all the time available.
- 7 Investigate the background (what gave rise to this task being needed/set by tutors). Not only are you more likely to meet project aims, but tasks are more interesting when you feel more 'expert'.

## Task seems simple?

If the task looks easy for you, avoid complacency. Pause to reflect on whether you have grasped all details of the task accurately. It is easy to delay starting on simple tasks, assuming we can do them any time, then find they never get completed or were more complicated than first appeared. Put a time into your diary – or just do it straightaway.

## Task seems complicated?

### *Simplify*

Look for a way of simplifying it, such as finding ways that it relates to other tasks you have undertaken (see Chapter 11) or applying a structure such as the OPAL strategy (page 202). Apply your skills in reflection before and during tasks as well as afterwards (Chapter 12). Think the task through before launching in – but don't 'overthink' or create unnecessary complications.

### *Find a starting place*

If you don't know where to start, create any starting place – so you can get going, and build from there. Look for the easiest possible place to begin, such as defining the task and/or undertaking a SWOT analysis (page 206).

## Apply what you know

### *Find the familiar*

Check whether you already have expertise or a problem-solving approach that would apply (Chapter 11) or could be adapted to help you through. Draw on your expertise in other areas (Chapter 4).

### *Apply time-management*

Planning out time can be a helpful way of thinking through what is needed and where it should fit into your task schedule. Draw on strategies in Chapter 5 and, for scheduling, page 209.

### *Keep yourself on target*

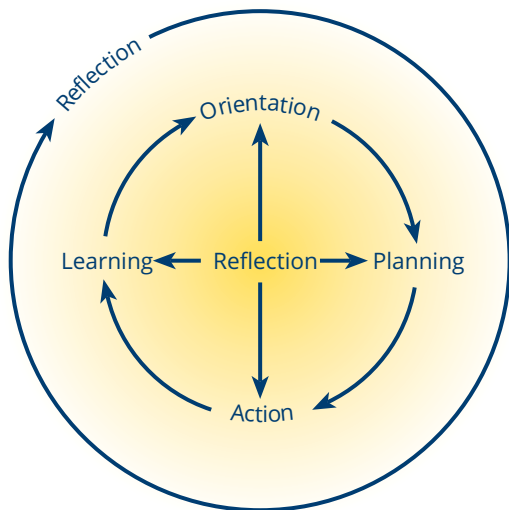
Know your own weak points or personal challenges for completing the task in hand. If self-doubt, emotions or lack of motivation hinder your task efficiency, call on the self-management material in Chapters 1–5.

### *Apply leadership*

Be your own task leader. If there are many people involved, take responsibility and use initiative for the areas assigned to you. See Chapter 8.

# OPAL strategy for task-management

The OPAL strategy (Cottrell, 2010) depicted below is one way of conceptualising complex tasks and their component parts. It can be applied both to project management and to specific tasks and to assignments. You have already seen this applied to PDP (page 6, Chapter 1). OPAL stands for Orientation, Planning, Action and Learning



Reflection is at the core of the OPAL strategy, and is undertaken as you work through a task (reflection *in* action). It is also important both before and after you start to work on a task in this way, standing back from the task to gain a clearer perspective on it (reflection *on* action).

OPAL	+	REFLECTION
Orientation		Reflection in action
Planning		
Action		Reflection on action
Learning		

## 1 Orientation

The cycle begins with orientating to the task – or finding your direction as you would when starting a journey. Before setting off on your travels, you would define your task, elaborate the detail of what needs to be done such as by considering the

purpose of the journey, its starting point, the route, mode of transport, and how you will know when you have arrived. Similarly, to manage a task, you need to do the following.

- 1 Define the task and identify its purpose** What are you hoping to achieve? Rephrase the brief so it makes sense to you. Check you understand fully what is required.
- 2 Clarify the desired end point** What precisely will indicate that you have accomplished what you set out to do?
- 3 Estimate the scale of the task** Is it easy or will it take a lot of planning, time and/or resources? Where are you now – and how far is that from your desired end point or outcomes?
- 4 Decide your route** Identify the steps (or at least the next step) from where you are now to where you need to be. If you are not clear of your route, use resources that help you work it out. For example:
  - ★ for essays, reports and case studies, a 7-step process is outlined in Cottrell (2019a) *The Study Skills Handbook*
  - ★ for a detailed step-by-step process for longer assignments, see Cottrell (2014) *Dissertations and Project Reports*.
- 5 Identify potential options** Consider whether there is another way of thinking about the task. What might be an alternative way of achieving the desired end point? How many possible solutions can you generate in order to give yourself options on a way forward?
- 6 Consider resources** What would you need to get the job done? Are such resources going to be available? Include time, advice, learning materials, specialist space and participants in your consideration.
- 7 What expertise can you bring to bear?** You might find it helpful to use the activity on page 63 to identify your expertise and consider its application to this task.

Time spent productively in elaborating the task early on in this way pays dividends later in the process, saving you time and stress.

# OPAL strategy: planning and action

## 2 Planning

Before launching into action, devise a strategy to achieve your goal and then plan out the various stages of what you need to do.

### Strategy

Consider the broad approach you will take to achieve your goal. Some or all of the following will be applicable to working out your strategy.

- ★ Are you going to apply an approach you have used before, or try something new?
- ★ Will you use a trial run, pilot or draft version first?
- ★ Will you complete the task all at once or spread it over time?
- ★ On your own or with others?
- ★ Within current resources or do you need to find additional sources? If so, will this involve fund-raising, loans, grants, practical help?
- ★ Will you apply a particular model or theoretical framework?
- ★ Are there key features to your strategy, such as a particular focus or emphasis?

### Actions, targets, deadlines

Plan what you will do, in which order, and by when.

- ★ List the main stages and tasks.
- ★ Set targets and time-scales for each of these.
- ★ Use SMART-F targets (see pages 207 and 386).
- ★ Decide what you will do to meet these targets.
- ★ Devise your plan of action (see pages 208 and 387–9).

In your action plan, identify key stages, targets (or milestones or mini-goals) and start and end points for each of these. Your plan can be elaborate – or look more like a list. It depends on how complex the problem is and what suits you.

An outline Action Plan is provided on pages 387–9 and on the companion site.



### Priorities

- ★ Identify your full list of things to do, so nothing is overlooked.
- ★ From the full list, decide the essentials (things that can't be left out).
- ★ Decide the best order – so it is clear what to work on first.
- ★ Decide what can be left out or cut back if necessary.

### Monitoring points

Set specific times for monitoring your progress as you go along. Write these into your action plan schedule and diary.

At the end of the planning stage, you should feel that you have thought through all possible angles and that you are clear about what to do.

## 3 Action

### Do it!

This is regarded as the 'doing' stage, where you execute your plan although, strictly speaking, orientation, planning, reflecting and problem-solving are all 'actions' too. Work systematically through your action plan, addressing your targets. This is the first real test of your strategy and plan.

### Monitor and review your progress

Use your action plan to check that you are on target towards your goals. Consider:

- ★ Do you need to amend your plan in any way so that it is more realistic?
- ★ Are you meeting targets and deadlines? If not, do you need to revise these?
- ★ Are you maintaining your motivation? If not, what can you do to improve this?
- ★ Are you working within your budget and resources? If not, what action must you take?
- ★ Do you need to revise your overall strategy?

# OPAL strategy: learning from the task

## 4 Learning

At the end of the task or project, before drawing a line under it and rushing on to the next one, pause to see what you can learn from the experience. This stage consists of:

- ★ reflection
- ★ evaluation
- ★ drawing out lessons for the future
- ★ keeping and updating your records.

### Reflection

#### Reflection in action

Whilst you are busy on the task, create time to pause and think through what you are doing. Check that you are:

- ★ still on task and haven't drifted from what you intended to do
- ★ doing something that is really needed
- ★ consulting and updating everyone who needs to be involved
- ★ working in the most efficient way
- ★ the best person for the task
- ★ feeling good (or do you need to listen to your feelings and change the plan? Or take a break?)
- ★ really making the best use of expertise, skills and available resources.

#### Reflection on action

Once you complete distinct parts of the task or project, stand back and take stock. See Chapter 12 for guidance on, and models for, reflection.

### Evaluation

Usually, success is measured in terms of how well you have achieved what you set out to do – your overall brief or goals and related targets. It is also invaluable (and good professional practice) to evaluate your overall strategy and how each step of the process worked. That provides you with insights to apply to similar tasks in the future.

#### Achievement

Did you:

- ★ achieve the overall goal/meet the brief?
- ★ achieve your targets and meet deadlines?
- ★ keep to budget?
- ★ maintain good working relationships?

### Strategic and operational effectiveness

- ★ What worked well?
- ★ What could be improved?
- ★ What is the evidence for what worked well?

### Draw out lessons for the future

Tease out everything you learnt from the task.

- ★ Were your strategy and advance planning both effective? Did they help you get everything done well and on time?
- ★ Were there any unforeseen consequences of what you did or the way you went about things? What can you learn from these?
- ★ Were you over-ambitious in your goals? Or could you have been more ambitious?
- ★ What went well that could be applied to future projects?
- ★ What would you do differently?
- ★ Do you need any training – or more practice?

### Keep records

- ★ Keep records of what you do and the outcomes. Gather evidence as you go along.
- ★ Maintain records (notes, screen downloads, photographs, video, examples, etc.) that you can call on to demonstrate to employers that you can devise and assess a strategy, plan, monitor progress and evaluate performance.

### Activity



### Carrying out your strategy and plan

Apply the OPAL strategy to the task you chose as a focus on page 199, using the prompt questions to help you work it through. Maintain notes as you go to help you evaluate the activity at the end and to learn from it.

# Task-management techniques

This section introduces typical techniques used for managing tasks in the workplace and which can be applied to academic and other tasks too. Some will be familiar from earlier chapters.

## 1 Clarify goals

- ★ Clarify what you want to achieve and why.
- ★ Visualise in detail what it would be like to achieve it (see page 37).
- ★ Identify how you will know when you have achieved your goal: what will be different?
- ★ Evaluate whether it is realistic.
- ★ Identify what you might have to sacrifice in order to achieve it. Is it worth it?
- ★ Is it true to your beliefs and values. Is it 'you'?

## 2 Set criteria for success

Decide at the outset of the task the criteria by which you will evaluate its success. Choose criteria that are realistic and achievable.

### *Dream solution*

Begin with the ideal solution and criteria that define this. As Chapter 1 emphasises, it helps to have a 'vision'. Use this to inspire, motivate and guide you – not as a strait-jacket.

### *Realistic option*

What would you accept as a reasonably good outcome that is both motivating and achievable? What are its main features?

### *Identify priority criteria*

If you have listed many criteria, select a few criteria that are essential (must be met). Decide which could be flexed.

## 3 Identify priorities


Common causes of project failure and procrastination are: having too many tasks competing for attention, perfectionism, fear of not getting everything done, and not wanting to disappoint others. These can all make it hard to distinguish what can be left (at least for now) and what must be addressed straight away.

To help set priorities, Neenan and Dryden (2002) suggest dividing tasks into one of four categories:

- 1 urgent and important
- 2 not urgent but important

- 3 urgent but not important
- 4 not urgent and not important

You could also colour-code these from 'hot' issues (red) to cold (blue) as in the example below.

Priority organiser (example)	
<b>1 RED</b> <i>Urgent and important</i>	<b>2 YELLOW</b> <i>Not urgent but important</i>
For example, deadlines, crises, tasks timed for today, tasks which must come first in a sequence.	These should be addressed before they become urgent. Prioritise according to when they occur in a sequence, and/or the consequences of leaving them for too long.
<b>3 ORANGE</b> <i>Urgent but not important</i>	<b>4 BLUE</b> <i>Not urgent and not important</i>
Leave these until category 1 tasks are completed. Category 3 items might not be essential, but can attract attention because they are 'urgent'. Emails are a good example. What other examples are typical of your own week?	These are often time-wasting activities. They can make us feel busy so that we do not focus on what is really needed. Reading junk mail, sorting out old papers, and using social media can fall into this category.
<b>A blank template is available on the companion site.</b> 	

## Activity

### Identify priorities



For one task or problem you are addressing at present:

- ★ Brainstorm a complete list of things you need to do.
- ★ Divide the items on your list into the four categories as above. The items top left are those of highest priority, and bottom right the least essential.

Use this to help you organise tasks into a logical order.

- ★ Reorganise your original list of priorities into the order in which you will now complete tasks.
- ★ Set SMART-F targets for each priority (see page 207).

# Conduct SWOT and TOWS analyses

## SWOT stands for:

Strengths                      Weaknesses  
Opportunities                Threats.

Typically, a SWOT analysis is laid out as below.

Simple SWOT Analysis	
Focus (Situation/Goal(s): . .	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

A simple SWOT analysis is a useful quick tool, adaptable for multiple purposes such as:

- 1 to check your readiness for a project/role
- 2 to evaluate how well you are doing
- 3 to take stock in an emergency
- 4 for an overview of a situation
- 5 to stimulate thinking or discussion
- 6 to identify priorities for action or development
- 7 to check whether all team/group members see things the same way
- 8 for presenting an overview to others.

## SWOT and TOWS

The SWOT analysis focuses on aspects internal to an organisation or personal to you. A TOWS analysis uses the same headings, but in a different sequence, and with a focus on external factors. You can make a separate TOWS analysis of external factors if these are significant, or combine it into a SWOT analysis.

## Advanced SWOT analyses

Your SWOT and TOWS analyses lay before you, in brief, four sets of factors to select from and work on in order to plan a strategy.

For an advanced SWOT or TOWS analysis, consider each of the four aspects in relation to each other.

- 1 How can I best work to my strengths?  
How can I use these to work around weaknesses, open up opportunities or manage threats?
- 2 How can I work around my weaknesses – or turn these into strengths and opportunities?
- 3 How can I use opportunities to build strengths or work around my weaknesses and threats?
- 4 How can I turn threats into opportunities?

## Activity

### SWOT Analysis



For the focus you selected on page 199, brainstorm ideas for each section.

- ★ **Strengths** List attributes – such as experience, motivations, personal qualities, skills, resources, expertise – relevant to your focus and goals. What helps you to stand out? What strengths do others see in you?
- ★ **Weaknesses** List anything that acts as a barrier or setback, such as lack of time, resources, training, practice, experience, team not yet formed, information gaps, etc. What might others consider to be your weak points?
- ★ **Opportunities** Jot down any opportunities or benefits that could arise from this situation or goal, in the near future or longer term. What new trends or expected changes could be turned into advantages for you? What opportunities are provided by your strengths (or your weaknesses)?
- ★ **Threats** Jot down anything that is of concern to you, such as the size of the challenge, anxiety about success, other people's reactions, risks that you might be taking, potentially negative consequences longer term, etc. What threats or risks are you exposed to because of your weaknesses?

Templates for simple and more advanced SWOT analyses are available on the companion site.

# Use SMART-F target setting

Most tasks benefit from SMART targets. These make it easier to see what must be done, to monitor progress and evaluate success. SMART-F targets build in reasonable flexibility, so you can plan for unexpected contingencies.

## SMART-F stands for:

**Specific** 'I will complete the first section of my essay by this evening.'

**Measurable** 'I will produce the first three draft pages of my essay today.'

**Achievable** 'This should be achievable, as I have completed the research, organised my notes, and made an outline plan.'

**Realistic** 'I should be able to write three pages as I have written up to ten pages in a day before, and have done the preparatory work.'

**Time-bound** 'I will finish by 8:30 pm'; 'this target will be achieved by 26 March'.

**Flexible** 'I will continue until 10:30 pm if necessary. If I have additional research to do, I can slot that in 9–11 am tomorrow.'

Targets should provide clarity on what to do, and be built into an action plan (see page 208). However, they are not written in stone: monitor and update them as the project proceeds so you can complete it on time.

## Evaluating targets

### Activity

#### Evaluating targets

Use the activity below to evaluate a set of targets against SMART-F criteria. This will help you recognise when your own targets are SMART-F.

## Evaluate your own targets

Before launching out on a project, stand back for a moment and evaluate your targets as above.

A resource is available on the companion site to help you do this.

### Activity

#### Evaluating targets

Evaluate  in each column whether each of the following targets is SMART-F. Consider what might be the weaknesses in each. Jot these down. Then, check your responses with those on page 212.

Target	S	M	A	R	T	F
e.g Take 3.30 train from Derby to York today.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
1 Everyone will like me.						
2 To have no mistakes in my essay.						
3 To give up smoking.						
4 Accomplish something by 9 pm today						
5 Write a 250–300-word introduction by 3:00 pm today. (Essay to be submitted 6:00 pm in two days' time.)						
6 Write a 1000-word report in the next 24 hours.						
7 Attend more lectures from October onwards.						
8 Increase my marks by 5% for all assignments this semester.						
9 Find a 3-month work placement in a retail industry before the start of next term.						
10 Gain a work placement in the BBC by September.						

# Planning project time: action plans

Managing a project typically involves using such organisational and time-management tools as:

- ★ **Action plans** These set out actions by theme and/or chronology, along with targets and contributing actions. See page 40.
- ★ **Schedules** Organise all tasks and steps in the order they must be completed. For large projects, there is software available to organise work schedules. For student assignments, a wall-planner can suffice.
- ★ **Diaries** Organise tasks more closely within a week or day.

See also pages 127–31 on time management.

## Devise an action plan

### 1 Create a table

Either create a table or use the Action Plan templates on pages 387–9. A fuller version is available for use through the companion site.



### 2 State your overarching goal(s)

Write these at the top of the action plan to help you stay focused, as on page 40. State goals precisely, in terms of exactly what you will achieve, by when.

### 3 Identify 'interim goals'

To complete your main goals, there will be several major steps or stages to complete along the way. These are your 'interim' goals. These are, in effect, staging points along the way, or milestones. Accomplishing these should indicate progress towards your final goal.

Devote a section of your plan to each interim goal. State when you will start (exactly) and when you will complete each step or stage.

Consider how you would know when each interim goal had been achieved – what would be evidence of this? Sometimes, this is self-evident, sometimes less so. Don't be satisfied with writing 'It is done' or equivalent. Consider what you would consider as a 'good enough' achievement – so that you know when to stop working on it and can move on to something else, or whether it actually needs more work.

## Example Interim goals

**Interim goal:** Write Conclusion for essay.

**Start** Monday at 5 pm

**Complete** Tuesday noon.

**Evidence:** Final draft of Conclusion written, edited and proof-read (c.200 words). It is well structured and my overall argument comes across strongly.

## 4 Identify contributing actions

Each interim goal, in turn, is likely to require several actions. You are less likely to overlook any essential step if you:

- list these, giving each a separate row on the action plan
- number them, so that you have a sense of how many things you will need to get done
- organise them in the most logical sequence for completing them
- state exactly when you will start and complete each action
- state how you will know when the step is really complete.

## 5 Sign them off

Once you have accomplished each action, interim goal, and your final goal, 'sign them off', such as by a ✓ in the 'done' column.

## Want to know more?



Skillopedia – Skills for the real world (2016) 7 *Easy ways to be highly productive at work*. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcSTGE-XxoA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcSTGE-XxoA) (Jun 26, 2016). (Useful tips for getting things done in any context.)

*DIY Development Impact & You*. <https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/diy-toolkit-full-download-a4-size.pdf>. (A free collection of 30 tools to help generate ideas for practical application.)

Fred Wilson (2019) *How to manage tasks effectively? 10 tips for effective task management*. [www.taskmanager.com/blog/task-management-skills/](http://www.taskmanager.com/blog/task-management-skills/) (Jan 14, 2019).

## Schedules and project diary

The time slots on the project schedule below are broad. Several days are allocated for some aspects of the project, to provide an overview of the time available for each task. The project diary (opposite), on the other hand, provides a detailed daily plan so everyone knows exactly what they are doing. For your projects, you might find it helpful to map out specific aspects of each task in diary format, indicating when each task will finish.

Projects often go wrong because there is no flexibility to the schedule, or no 'slack' time, built in. Final deadlines are usually strict, leaving little scope for changes at the last minute. It is useful to schedule the early stages of a project closely, in order to increase the incentive to work efficiently. Set interim deadlines so that you see early achievements and so it is easier to check that the project is on schedule. This will make it easier to flex stages and meet deadlines.

### Example of a project diary

Tuesday 2nd January	
9:00–10:00	Jane: buy coach tickets.
11:00–12:00	Jane and Miko: visit primary school to discuss proposed project with headteacher.
10:00–12:00	Paul: undertake literature search
12:00	Jane and Miko: catch the coach back to college.
12:00–2:00	Paul and Raphaela look for articles on similar projects.
2:30	Whole team meets to discuss findings.
4:00–6:00	Elaborate the problem and define the area of research.

### Example of a work schedule

Item	Jan 1	Jan 2	Jan 3	Jan 4	Jan 5	Jan 6	Jan 7	Jan 8	Jan 9	Jan 10	Jan 11	Jan 12	Jan 13	Jan 14
Group meetings	x			x	x		x		x	x		x	x	x
Elaborate the problem	x	x	x	x										
Allocate group tasks and roles	x													
Allocate research tasks		x		x	x				x	x				
Finalise strategy				x										
Research			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				
Discuss research progress				x			x		x					
Analyse and discuss data									x	x	x			
Allocate writing tasks				x					x					
First draft to group											x			
Responses to first draft												x		
Etc.														

A template is available on the companion site: [www.macmillanihe.com/cottrellskills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrellskills-for-success-4e)



# Being a 'good self-starter'

Job specifications often require 'good self-starters'. Some people find it easier to get on with tasks with minimum direction, but anyone can develop this ability.

## Self-starters tend to be...

- 1 **highly motivated** – they create a clear vision of the task and set themselves specific goals
- 2 **hopeful** – open to the possibility of success
- 3 **self-confident** – they trust they can manage the task reasonably well
- 4 **focused** – able to put aside distractions
- 5 **good at time management** (Chapter 5)
- 6 **solution-focused** – they will search for ideas, information and help in order to get the task done
- 7 **organised** – they plan well and are efficient
- 8 **able to apply strategies** for 'getting going'
- 9 **aware of their limits** – they acknowledge what they don't know or can't do
- 10 **good at asking for help** when they need it.

## Reflection

### Being a 'self-starter'



- ★ Which of the above characteristics are already strengths for you?
- ★ Which need to be developed further?
- ★ Do you consider yourself to be a good self-starter? What is your evidence for this assessment of yourself?
- ★ If you are not yet a good self-starter, identify strategies below (or from other sections of the book) to put into practice.

You could use the resource, 'Evidence of competence in working independently', to prepare for job application questions about this.



Such characteristics are usually acquired in the process of other tasks, such as teamworking, managing smaller tasks and working up to larger projects. Each time you undertake any assignment, you can practise techniques relevant to being a good self-starter

## Managing procrastination

Do you delay starting certain activities, rationalising this with excuses such as:

- ★ 'I work better at the last moment'
- ★ 'The time isn't right'
- ★ 'I want to get other things out of the way first'
- ★ 'I'll do it tomorrow'
- ★ 'I'm not sure I can do it'
- ★ 'There's no rush – I've plenty of time?'

Most of us procrastinate occasionally but it can be a chronic condition requiring professional help (Sapadin, 1997). However, unless the problem is serious, then taking some of the following steps can help you to get going earlier on tasks.

Decide  which would be useful for you.

### *Identify patterns*

- Notice and acknowledge that you are procrastinating. Say it aloud so you hear it.
- Observe the sort of things you are better at getting down to.
- Are some tasks or times worse than others?
- What do you do instead of the task?

### *Identify the hindrance zone*

- Identify the feelings** you associate with the activity (boredom, fear, anger, etc.).
- Commit** to putting up with the discomfort of these feelings until the task is done. Consider what would help you tolerate these until the task is completed.
- Pep talk** Give yourself encouraging messages about the task. Phrase these in ways that interest and inspire you.

- Make it fun** with music, graphics, social learning, etc.
- Involve others** who help you stick to the task.
- Avoid** those who encourage procrastination.
- Identify the 'level of inhibition'** (page 105).

## ... and keeping going

- Up your motivation**
  - Remind yourself of the purpose or benefits. Give yourself rewards.
  - Link tasks more closely to your long-term vision (Chapter 2).
  - If you are overwhelmed by the size of the task, or your long-term goals, break these down into smaller bites that you can accomplish in short bursts. (page 208).
  
- Commandeer support**
  - Work in pairs or a group. It is harder to avoid a task if others are involved.
  - Ask a friend to check on you. Give them permission to tell you to get started.
  - Join an action set (see page 266).
  
- Use unavoidable reminders**
  - Write 20 colourful sticky labels giving yourself instructions to get started on a particular task at a given time. Put these where you can't avoid them.
  - Write 20 sticky labels detailing what you will gain by completing the project. Put these up, too.
  - Write precise details of what you have to do on the relevant days in your diary.

### Reflection



#### Procrastination

Jot down your thoughts about why you procrastinate in doing certain tasks.

- ★ When did this begin?
- ★ What triggers it? (Fear of failure? Tiredness? Over-estimating the scale of the task? Perfectionism?)
- ★ What initial steps will you take to change this behaviour?

## Sticking with the task

The characteristics of successful people (page 44) include a willingness to 'do what it takes', even if this means working long hours, and developing patience. Thomas Edison, quoted below, is remembered today for inventions that contributed to the development of film and the light bulb. He is also famous for his adage that genius owes only 5 per cent to inspiration and 95 per cent to perspiration!

### Reflection



#### 'Stick-with-it-ness'

*Three great essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are, first, hard work; second, stick-to-it-iveness; third, common sense.*

Thomas Edison

- ★ In general, how good are you at 'sticking with' tasks so that you finish what you start?
- ★ Which types of activity or project are you most likely to 'stick with'?
- ★ For the goal you identified on page 199, consider the ways that Edison's 'three essentials' are relevant.



*As the project deadline looms, Michael finds it ever more essential to ensure that his pencils are lined up parallel to the Greenwich Meridian*

# Be a 'completer-finisher'

Carrying a task or project through to completion is a skill in itself. Some employers look specifically for people who are 'completer/finishers' as they want people who get a job done. The enthusiasm that helps people in starting tasks, or specific aspects of them, can wane: new interests, responsibilities and distractions get in the way and time runs out. That doesn't have to be the case.

## Completing a task

To carry tasks through to completion on a consistent basis involves a range of attributes, many addressed elsewhere in the book. These include:

- ★ enthusiasm, optimism and hope
- ★ ability to conceptualise the 'end product'
- ★ perseverance and patience
- ★ self-belief: confidence that you can do it
- ★ time management – and willingness to commit sufficient time to tasks
- ★ commitment to finding a way to do them
- ★ using constructive criticism
- ★ being active in keeping tasks interesting
- ★ holding goals and future benefits in mind
- ★ pride in a job well done.

## Reflection



### Complete it!

- ★ Which of the above attributes are true of you? What examples do you have of where you demonstrated these?
- ★ Which do you need to develop further?
- ★ What specific strategies do you (or could you) use to ensure you complete tasks and assignments on time?

If you continue to be unable to complete tasks, you might find it helpful to talk to a student counsellor for advice.

## Feedback on Activity



### Evaluating targets

- ★ **Target 1** This is too vague, has no time limits and is unlikely to be achievable or measurable. It isn't realistic.
- ★ **Target 2** This is unlikely to be achievable or measurable as it is hard to define a 'mistake' with respect to an essay. Few essays are perfect – so it is not realistic.
- ★ **Target 3** This may be realistic and achievable for the person. Success could be measured. No time-scales are set so the target isn't SMART.
- ★ **Target 4** This has a clear time-scale and is likely to be achievable and realistic. However, it is so vague it is meaningless.
- ★ **Target 5** This is specific, measurable, and time-bound. It is likely to be realistic and achievable, and if not, there is sufficient time before the hand-in date to adjust the deadline.
- ★ **Target 6** This is specific, measurable and time-bound. You would need to know more about the circumstances to know whether the target was achievable, realistic and sufficiently flexible.
- ★ **Target 7** 'More' is too vague. 'From October' sets an initial time-scale but does not indicate how long this will continue.
- ★ **Target 8** This is specific and measurable. A 5 per cent improvement is likely to be achievable and reasonable, unless the mark was already very high. Setting a target for *all* assignments is challenging: it has little flexibility. This target would need to be accompanied by other targets which specify more clearly how the improved marks would be achieved.
- ★ **Target 9** This is likely to be a SMART-F target.
- ★ **Target 10** This is too precise and allows for little flexibility in choice of work placement. It is not likely to be realistic or achievable.

# Characteristics of projects

## What is a project?

A project is:

*A temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service.*

Project management is:

*The application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements.*

Project Management Institute, 2000

## Characteristics of projects

Projects are characterised by:

- ★ **A goal** There is a given purpose or desired outcome. It could be researching a topic, effecting change, or creating something new.
- ★ **Outputs** A project usually has a tangible output, such as a report or artefact.
- ★ **A discrete focus** The activity is 'set apart' in some way. It is not part of the usual course of day-to-day business or events.
- ★ **Magnitude** Projects are associated with setting aside time to focus on something significant, special or important. It suggests a mustering of effort and resources.
- ★ **Time limits** A project is a temporary event, to be completed within a set time-frame. It should be clear when it is complete.
- ★ **A managed process** Projects should be well-planned and organised, to achieve their purpose within the time and resources.
- ★ **Individuality** A project is a one-off event, leading to an outcome or output that is unique in some way.

## Scale of the project

The characteristics of a project could apply to activities of any scale, including an essay, report or other student assignment. These have:

- ★ **Goals** To learn about a new topic, address the essay title and gain a good grade.
- ★ **Outputs** The written essay or report can be the output of a project-like process.

- ★ **Discrete focus** Each assignment is distinct.
- ★ **Magnitude** Assignments vary in scale but require a 'mustering' of time and resources.
- ★ **Time limits** Assignments have deadlines.
- ★ **A managed process** Producing an assignment is a process with many stages such as research, information management, writing to a brief, drafting, editing and proof-reading, all of which benefit from planning and good organisation.
- ★ **Individuality** Although all students on a course might do the same assignment, each must produce an individual piece of work.

Undertaking student assignments such as writing essays can develop skills useful for project work.

## Student projects

Whilst assignments can be treated as projects, students are often asked to undertake specific projects. These differ to other assignments.

- ★ **Goal** The purpose of a student project is to develop a more in-depth study than typical assignments. The desired outcomes include both the results of the project itself and the development of the more advanced competences needed to manage a project.
- ★ **Discrete focus** They are usually one-off pieces of work, related to the overall course but covering ground decided by the student.
- ★ **Magnitude** They are usually larger in scale than other assignments. The magnitude of the task also lies in the level of personal choice and responsibility involved.
- ★ **Time limits** The time allocations for projects tend to be greater than other assignments.
- ★ **Management** Student projects are usually larger and more complex, requiring greater planning and management of the process.
- ★ **Individuality** As you have more control over the content, methodology and outputs, student projects tend to be more distinct and varied than other student assignments.

# Successful project management

Along with the skills identified on page 200, the following factors contribute to project success. Consider  whether any of these would be useful for you to apply to projects – or to your studies or work generally.

## 'Problem-elaboration'

This means thinking through in depth:

- ★ what is being asked – the nature of the brief or problem to be solved so that you really understand the task
- ★ how that relates to other tasks or problems you have completed – for insights into what the task involves and how to address it.

This is especially important for large-scale projects as the wrong strategy wastes time and resources. Heerkens (2002) warns against 'solution jumping': 'the tendency of people to talk about what to do before analysing the situation adequately, trying to develop a solution before thoroughly understanding a problem'. See also page 252.

## Piloting the methods

Wherever possible, use a trial run or 'pilot' to test out your methods and materials on a small scale before embarking on the full-scale project. This enables you identify gaps and flaws and to adapt your strategy. This is easier to do just after a pilot than when the project is well under way.

## 'Doing what it takes'

Make a commitment to get your project finished, well, and on time. It is your decision to give 'whatever it takes'. For a major project such as a dissertation, this could mean that the majority of your time, energies and thinking are focused on it. That might be the difference between fully achieving your goal and accepting a compromise.

It is a personal decision how far you want to accept a reasonable compromise – although maintaining good health, mental health, well-being and a balanced lifestyle can be essential to maintaining the stamina and willpower to carry you through.

Because projects have firm deadlines and focus on new areas, they consume a great deal of time and thought. Be prepared for this to be more than you might anticipate. The project leader, in particular, is likely to spend significant time on it if it falls behind deadlines or if a new approach is needed. 'Doing what it takes' is hard to apply to more than one major goal at a time.

## Clarity of communication

Good communication helps everyone to work effectively. Confusion leads to additional work, puts deadlines at risk, puts the team under stress, and can increase costs. Share with all stakeholders matters such as problem elaboration, planning, results of pilots, and what needs to be done, by whom, where, when and why. See pages 218–19.

## Decision-making

When a project is under way, you might need to make decisions at speed. This is easier if you have already considered the task from many angles, planned for contingencies and thought through potential compromises and changes that could be needed. Weigh up the relative importance to your project of key criteria such as:

- ★ costs
- ★ deadlines
- ★ effects on other people
- ★ the availability of expertise
- ★ achieving good quality outputs/services
- ★ changes acceptable to the client/ tutor.

## Reflection

### Commitment



- ★ Are you generally the kind of person who 'does what it takes' to get things done? If not, why not? If so, why is that?
- ★ What kinds of activity prompt you to put in the most effort and commitment?
- ★ What conditions encourage you to increase your level of commitment?
- ★ What are your limits?

## □ Know your project 'inside out'

To make decisions under pressure, you need to know the project in fine detail. Gain a keen sense of what the 'client' (maybe an employer or tutor) will consider acceptable. Investigate the background to the project. Why was it set or needed? What is considered most important about it? Are there ethical or political considerations to take into account? Have similar projects been initiated in the past? If so, what were the outcomes? Such information can usefully inform your own planning and decision-making.

## □ Keep the vision in mind

Whilst it is important to pay attention to deadlines, budgets and the details of the tasks in hand, it is also essential to keep sight of the project's main purpose. A good leader will keep the team focused on the end point as well as on interim goals and targets.

For team projects, the whole team must be clear about the background to the project and understand the vision of the person who commissioned it (you, your tutor, a client). That ensures each person is sufficiently informed to make interim decisions in line with the overall 'vision'. All project decisions should be guided by its main goal, not by short-term targets or interim goals.

## □ Teamwork

Most projects in the workplace are team efforts. If the team does not pull together, the project becomes a 'sick' project: people are unhappy and less willing to put in extra effort to make it great. Successful managers often ascribe their achievements to teamwork and to trusting their team.

Team projects require great people skills. Hallows (1997), argues: 'Hard though it may be to admit, the people side of projects is more important than the technical side.' For more on people skills, teamwork and leadership, see Chapters 6–8.

## □ In job applications

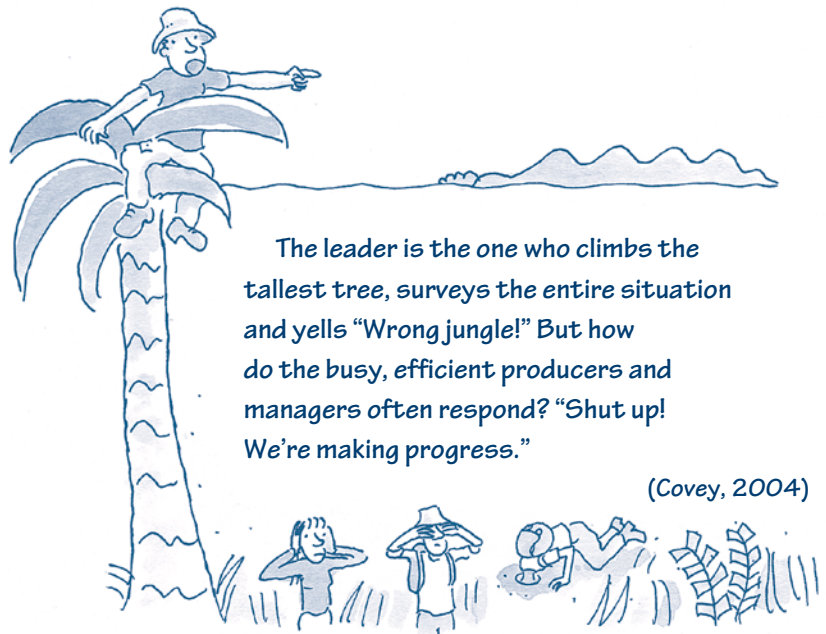
Employers like graduates who demonstrate project experience. They look for:

- ★ skills and attributes associated with successful project management
- ★ the scale of the largest project that you have taken part in and/or led
- ★ the scale of the largest project you have managed alone.

'Scale' is differentiated by such factors as:

- ★ the level of difficulty and complexity
- ★ how many people were involved – the size of the team/number of participants
- ★ the length of the report – and whether this is used/applied anywhere
- ★ who commissioned it, especially if it was a business or public service
- ★ the size of the budget
- ★ the significance of the outcomes. What was the impact of the project? How many benefit from it?

Student projects are not usually on a grand scale, but can still develop useful skills. There are also opportunities for projects at work, on placements, with the student union and in voluntary work.



# Evaluate your task/project performance

In the workplace, key performance indicators (KPIs) are used to help organisations monitor, measure and evaluate how well they are doing. Understanding these can help you to make sense of discussions and imperatives in work contexts. You can gain experience of using these by applying them to your own projects and work.

KPIs need to allow for measurement of some kind, so that you can compare performance accurately over time or against competitors. Typical examples are:

- ★ 95% of targets to be achieved by (date).
- ★ The project to be completed within budget.
- ★ At least 85% of the participants to indicate in a feedback survey that they are 'very happy' with the outcome.
- ★ An average mark of 65% to be achieved for all my assignments this year.
- ★ Attendance levels to achieve at least 95%.
- ★ Punctuality to be at least 97%.

## Meeting the criteria

KPIs should be closely linked to the criteria for success identified earlier in the project (see page 263). They are unlikely to be exactly the same because some criteria might not be measurable. You could meet the criteria of a project without performing well in all respects.

### Activity

#### Meeting the criteria

When you complete a project, return to the criteria you set near the beginning of the project (see page 263). Consider:

- ★ Did you meet the essential criteria (the 'bottom line') that you set?
- ★ Were these criteria realistic?
- ★ Would it have been more useful to have phrased those criteria differently, or to have set different criteria, in order to better demonstrate your success?

## KPIs for study

If you would like to set KPIs for your study or projects, the following examples can provide starting places for devising your own:

- ★ grades and marks to achieve
- ★ a percentage improvement over previous performance
- ★ how often you meet deadlines for assignments
- ★ the number and percentage of the times that you complete a particular action successfully
- ★ how long it takes to perform a specific activity
- ★ how often you reach your targets
- ★ feedback received from others
- ★ how many of the milestones you set for yourself were achieved
- ★ how much a project cost compared to budget.

### Activity

#### Using performance indicators

- ★ Choose one area of activity where you can practise using performance indicators.
- ★ Set yourself at least three performance indicators for the activity you select.
- ★ Make sure that the indicators you set are ones that can be measured or checked.

## Soft criteria

Soft project criteria can be of critical importance but are not always easy to measure using KPIs. It is hard to quantify 'soft' factors as:

- ★ Creativity
- ★ Innovation
- ★ Ethics
- ★ Cultural sensitivity
- ★ Flexibility
- ★ Emotional intelligence
- ★ Responsiveness
- ★ Assertiveness.

Soft criteria require you to develop skills in being an objective evaluator of your own performance. You have to develop a 'feel' or 'sense' for whether something is going well or not. Wherever possible, this should still be evaluated against specific criteria in order to get a rounded picture of how you are doing. For example, feedback questionnaires can enable others to provide a numeric evaluation that enables some measurement. Compare your personal evaluations with feedback from others.

### Activity



#### Using soft criteria

What kinds of soft criteria or performance indicators do you use to check your own performance for:

- ★ working with other people?
- ★ managing your own work?
- ★ coping with difficult situations?
- ★ being creative in some way?

How do you go about checking the quality and/or effectiveness of your performance for these?

What do other people say about your performance in these areas?

## Benchmarks

A benchmark is a point of comparison. For example, a sportsperson might benchmark their speed or accuracy against the records of people at the top of their own sport. A programme on TV might benchmark itself against audience ratings for similar kinds of programmes. Organisations and commercial projects use benchmarks to measure their performance against other companies or projects.

Good benchmarks compare like with like. For example, if your project involves writing an information leaflet for the public, the benchmarks

would need to relate to other public information leaflets and/or another project that aimed at producing a similar number of leaflets in a similar time-scale on a similar kind of issue.

The performance indicators for such a project might include some of the following:

- ★ how many readers, when asked, rated the leaflet as useful
- ★ how much it costs to produce each leaflet
- ★ an independent rating or grade (by an independent assessor or tutor)
- ★ a measure of how far the leaflet changed opinion or behaviour.

A good benchmark enables you to evaluate your own outcomes against those of a comparable project or set of benchmarks. For example, you might have wanted to achieve a 90 per cent return for a questionnaire, yet received only 35 per cent. This might feel like failure as it is far short of the target. If you compare this with similar questionnaires in comparable circumstances, you might find that a typical (or benchmark) response is only 20 per cent. This would mean that your target was unrealistic but your performance for the questionnaire was good.

One potential drawback with benchmarks is that if all similar projects are mediocre, the benchmark will be low. You might need to set targets that ensure you exceed the benchmark in order for your project to be really successful.

### Activity



#### Using a benchmark

- ★ For an activity that you are involved in currently, what would be a useful benchmark? (Consider existing statistics and written records of performance.)
- ★ How could you use this benchmark as a way of setting your own targets for improving your performance?

# Communicating about tasks/projects

## Why do this?

It can be a required element of the task – a report for the workplace or customer, or a report, dissertation or paper as part of an assignment.

Communicating about any aspect of a task, such as its purpose, outcomes or the experience of undertaking it, gives a greater sense of purpose about the task. The earlier the communication, the more others feel engaged and that their views about it really matter to you.

Communicating the results of tasks and projects helps you to clarify whether your work is really finished and your findings watertight. Thinking through what others need to know, the questions or doubts they might have and how you can convince them helps you identify gaps and weaknesses. It can also stimulate new ideas.

## Getting the message across

It is notoriously difficult to achieve excellent communications. There are many different factors involved in getting a message across in ways that others are able to absorb as you would wish. The following steps can help.

- 1 One clear message** Organise your writing, talk or message around one central topic or question. State this at the outset, clarifying what it really means and, if relevant, state a small number of contributing questions you will cover. Avoid long lists of rhetorical questions (questions you aren't going to answer!) These obscure the message.
- 2 Keep it brief** Respect the time of those who are reading or listening to what you have to say. Avoid tangents and excessive detail. Provide these as links or appendices that people can follow up later if interested.
- 3 Use a story** Listeners and readers usually can absorb a point better if it relates to a short story or case study.

- 4 Why does it matter?** State why your central message or question is important – what difference does it make? (If relevant, say to whom, why, when, under which conditions.)
- 5 Evidence of this so far?** What is the evidence that the point you are aiming to make actually matters: how do you know? For formal reports or assignments, summarise what has already been published on it and any gaps (your literature search).
- 6 What did you do?** Outline briefly what you did (your methods) to gather your evidence, outcomes or results. Why you did it that way?
- 7 What did you find out?** State briefly the most significant aspects of what you discovered. Say whether this was what you expected or not.
- 8 Explain what you found** What accounts for the outcomes? Why were results, data, experiences, products, etc. as they were? What affected them? What might have been different, better, worse?
- 9 So what?** What has been learnt? Summarise clearly what we now know that we didn't before – and what use it is.
- 10 What are you asking/recommending?** If you are asking or advising others to do something as a result of what you have found, state this precisely and briefly. It should be obvious why you are making such recommendations on the basis of what you have already said.

## Adapt to your audience

When using the points above, adapt the tone and level of detail to your audience. Your task might be to persuade a child why they need sleep – or to produce a dissertation for tutors on the impact of sleep on children's learning or health. Obviously, the communication demands of each task are distinct.

## Creating an impression

Communication of all kinds conveys more than just content. It creates an impression that might affect how others perceive you and whether they accept or reject your message.

- ★ Mistakes, errors and delays might be interpreted as lack of respect or inability to attend to detail.
- ★ A poorly structured message can create the impression of a disorganised person.
- ★ Gaps and inconsistencies in a message can be viewed as deliberate attempts to deceive.
- ★ Not sticking to the brief can suggest a lack of understanding and/or a need for others to provide close oversight to keep you on track.

If these messages are conveyed as part of a job application process, recruiters might question whether they want to spend their time addressing the problems they could generate.

## Communicating formally

If formal communication is required (such as for assignments or at work):

- 1 Check the brief** It should provide direction or clues about how to communicate.
- 2 Look for models** There will be comparable examples available online, through libraries, tutors or employers. Don't just read these. Consider carefully how they are structured, phrased and laid out. Note how they sound to your ear, the vocabulary used. Note how they orientate the reader or listener at the beginning in order to help them steer their way through (such as through a summary, introduction or abstract).
- 3 Avoid using a conversational or texting style** in formal reports. Write in full sentences and well-structured paragraphs, as you would for an assignment.

## Talks

The 10 points on page 218 provide a clear, readily understandable structure and outline for talks, presentations or podcasts. Remember:

- ★ People generally need lots of pauses when listening, to absorb what is being said.

- ★ Speak more slowly, so listeners can catch every word. Don't speed up to fit in more information.
- ★ A story, anecdote or case study can help listeners grasp the message.
- ★ Be selective in your use of data: it is hard to absorb much numerical information by ear.
- ★ Include outlines and reminders of what has been said so far, to help listeners navigate and recall the message.

## Sharing on social media

- ★ Who would want to know?
- ★ What media would they use?
- ★ How much would they want to know (for each type of media they use)?
- ★ What do they not need to know?
- ★ What questions would they want answered?

## In job interviews

Put your emphasis on what you learnt from the task that is of any use to this employer. Generalise the skills you acquired so that employers can see their value to them:

*I completed a report, sticking to the brief; I gathered and presented data to persuade an audience that ....*

### Want to know more?



For managing assignments as tasks, see Stella Cottrell (2019) *The Study Skills Handbook* (London: Red Globe Press).

For longer pieces of writing, see Stella Cottrell (2014) *Dissertations and Project Reports. A Step by Step Guide* (London: Red Globe Press).

Nancy Duarte (2011) *The secret structure of great talks*. TEDxEast. [www.ted.com/talks/nancy\\_duarte\\_the\\_secret\\_structure\\_of\\_great\\_talks?referrer=playlist-how\\_to\\_make\\_a\\_great\\_presentation](http://www.ted.com/talks/nancy_duarte_the_secret_structure_of_great_talks?referrer=playlist-how_to_make_a_great_presentation) (Nov 2011).

# Review: Managing tasks and projects

1

## Understand what contributes to effective task completion

Use the self-evaluation on page 200 to gain a sense of the multiple stages and attributes that can contribute to getting a task done successfully.

2

## Make the task more manageable

Start by grounding your sense that the task is one you can accomplish. Look for ways to simplify it and for obvious methods first. Draw on tips and your existing know-how and experience.

3

## Use the OPAL strategy to manage complex tasks

The OPAL strategy helps to conceptualise complex tasks and navigate them from start to finish, using prompt questions and reflection. OPAL stands for Orientation, Planning, Action and Learning.

4

## Deploy task-management techniques

Become familiar with some well-established methods for approaching larger tasks – such as SWOT analyses; setting goals, targets, evaluation criteria and priorities; action-planning and time-scheduling.

5

## Undertake SWOT and/or TOWS analyses

Early in a task, list your own relevant Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT). Examine these factors with respect to external factors (TOWS). Consider how each factor could benefit you in relation to the others, such as using your strengths to minimise threats or gain from opportunity.

6

## Set SMART-F targets

Set targets that are practical and motivating. SMART-F targets are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound and also Flexible, if needed, to adapt to changing circumstances.

7

## Plan your task/project time carefully

Good organisation makes tasks and projects easier. Set out clearly all that you need to do, and when you will start and finish all contributing tasks or stages. A good plan does a lot of the work for you.

8

## Be a good 'self-starter' and completer

Different stages in a task or project call upon different skills, attitudes and attributes. Develop these for each stage so that you become adept at carrying tasks through successfully from start to finish.

9

## Manage projects successfully

Understand what characterises a task as a 'project'. Consider the factors associated with successful projects and apply these, as relevant, to your own projects and to large/ complex tasks.

10

## Evaluate your success effectively

Use sound criteria to measure and evaluate your success objectively. Be aware of workplace strategies for doing this, such as using performance indicators and benchmarks. Apply these to your own tasks and projects where relevant to gain a clearer sense of how well you perform on these.

11

## Appreciate the value of good communication

At all stages of task/project completion, good communication can make a great difference. Devise a communications strategy for each aspect of the task – and for articulating your success, skills, experience and learning to others, such as employers.

# PART 3

## Extending your thinking

Academic study generally develops your thinking skills, especially if you bring an attitude of intellectual curiosity and active engagement to the debates in your subject. Reading widely, making judgements about material to use in assignments, discussing academic questions, resolving mathematical problems, tackling lab-based research, reflecting on practice, and formulating an argument in writing – all stretch the mind. They help develop the mental capacity to take on complex difficult tasks in a range of contexts.

Typically, courses of higher education require, and develop, such skills as critical analysis and reflection, creativity and problem-solving, which can be applied fruitfully to most academic and work-related tasks.

Skills do not usually transfer automatically from one context such as academic study to another such as a workplace. It takes thought to identify how to apply skills to new kinds of task.

Part 3 looks at three aspects of such thinking, all of which strengthen academic and professional abilities: creative thinking, problem-solving and reflective thinking.

Chapter 10, *Thinking creatively and productively*, looks at how you can maximise your brain capacity. It helps you to reflect upon how you think, and provides tools to help you to develop creativity, synthesis, and adventurous thinking – even if you don't think of yourself as 'creative'.

Employers are particularly eager to recruit graduates who can take a practical problem-solving approach

to their work and to new situations that arise. Chapter 11 provides tips, techniques and strategies for getting to grips with resolving problems.

Being able to think reflectively in structured, systematic ways is now an expectation in many academic and professional areas. Reflective thinking sounds simple, but many people struggle to do this well. It is all too easy to fall into superficial, descriptive, or blaming comments rather than bringing the high levels of analysis, evaluation, critique, synthesis, personal responsibility, and metacognition expected. Chapter 12 outlines diverse approaches to reflection in order to help you to understand what is required, develop reflective skills and to find an approach that works for you.

You don't need to be an expert in each method and mode presented. Rather, experiment with different approaches until you:

- ★ find the combination that best helps you to generate, organise, synthesise and fine-tune your thoughts in ways relevant to your circumstances, *and*
- ★ can apply creative, reflective, problem-solving approaches flexibly to benefit your academic and professional work.

### Chapters in Part 3

**10** Thinking creatively and productively

**11** Practical problem-solving

**12** The art of reflection

# Chapter 10

# Thinking creatively and productively



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers opportunities to:

- ✓ understand how your brain works so you can use it more effectively
- ✓ develop your natural ability to learn new things
- ✓ develop confidence in your creativity
- ✓ use strategies to generate ideas
- ✓ use creative approaches to thinking.

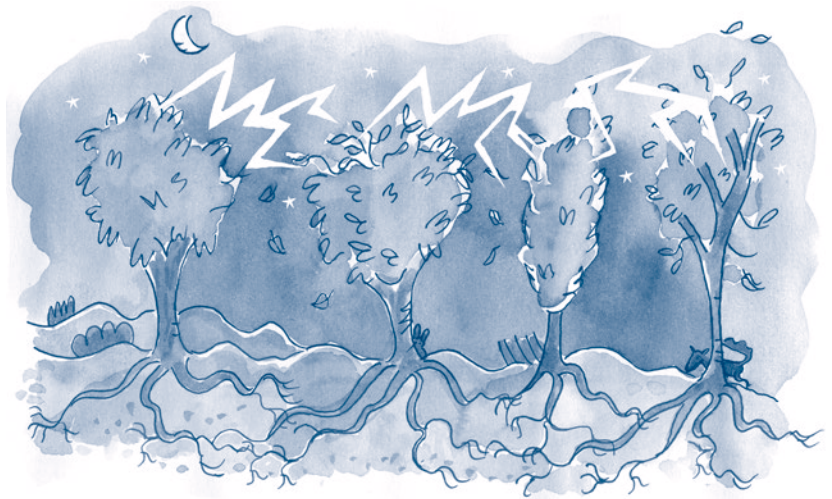
## Introduction

### *Born to learn*

Learning is a natural process. Our brains are set up to learn: they consist of approximately a hundred billion neurons, which are linked in elaborate networks. These neural networks enable us to:

- ★ transmit information from one part of the brain to another
- ★ form associations between new information and what we already know
- ★ make sense of what we experience
- ★ encode information for memory.

We can envisage our brains as billions of trees laid out in all directions, and whose roots and branches are all in contact. For any one activity, several billion contacts may be made between those branches and roots – and this happens in milliseconds. A thought is like a bolt of lightning illuminating a vast forest of connections.



*Our brains are like a dense interconnected forest,  
illuminated by electrical impulses*

# Being open to enhanced brain power

Our brains are extremely flexible and adaptable. They allow us to learn in innumerable ways, such as through:

- ★ listening, observing, experiencing
- ★ imitation, repetition and practice
- ★ taking small steps or inspired leaps
- ★ day-dreaming, imagining, reflecting
- ★ making links and connections between what we know already and what is new to us and so on.

Learning can be easy. The most complex things our brains will ever have to learn were accomplished when we did not even know what 'learning' was, before the age of five. This chapter will look at how you can make best use of your brain's amazing capacities. The earlier part of the chapter looks at some characteristics of your brain, so that you can use its natural tendencies to best effect.

Inspiration is most difficult when we think in rigid, logical ways. This chapter looks at ways of stimulating the idea-generating capacities of the brain – which may mean thinking and acting in ways that are not typical of your usual study or work habits. To begin, do the activity below.

## Activity

### Shoebox



In your reflective journal, jot down your response to the question:

*What is the use of a shoebox?*

We will return to this later in the chapter.

## Limiting intelligence

Are cleverness and creativity the same thing? If you did well at school, does that mean you are automatically a creative thinker? De Bono (2006) argues that clever people are often hampered by their apparent intelligence in two key ways:

- 1 They are very good at arguing and are usually better than others at defending their position. As they are more likely to win the argument, they tend to think they have the best solution. You might know people like this. If you think you are 'right', there is no reason to listen to other people or to look for a better solution.

*As a result, many highly intelligent minds are trapped in poor ideas because they can defend them so well.*

De Bono, 2006

- 2 It is easier, quicker, and more dramatic to prove somebody else wrong than to devise constructive solutions. Negative criticism adds to your visible 'superiority'. Being constructive can take longer and can make other people look good rather than yourself. However, negative criticism doesn't promote creative thinking.

Our views of what is 'intelligent' can prevent us from developing our minds to their full potential. If we hold negative thoughts about our own intelligence, for example, those thoughts can also limit our ability to perform well (Cottrell, 2019a). People who feel they are 'not very bright' or 'not very creative' probably will fulfil that estimation of themselves.

On the other hand, positive thinking and constructive mental activity develop the mind. Creativity is like a muscle: it gets stronger the more you exercise it.

## Reflection

### Limiting creativity



Jot down your thoughts about:

- ★ any ways you currently put limits on your capacity to think
- ★ ways you prevent yourself from achieving your full potential as a creative, imaginative person. Consider why you do so.



## Evaluate your creative thinking skills

Complete this evaluation now – and then again when you have completed the chapter or later in your programme. It is also available on the companion site. Rate each statement as follows.

**Rating:** 4 = very often 3 = often 2 = sometimes/it depends 1 = hardly ever 0 = never/don't know

Statement	Rating
1 I experiment with many ideas before I make a decision	4 3 2 1 0
2 When I am working on a project, I discuss 'work in progress' with others	4 3 2 1 0
3 I like to investigate further when I do not understand something	4 3 2 1 0
4 I have a wide range of interests	4 3 2 1 0
5 I enjoy talking to a wide range of people	4 3 2 1 0
6 I take a different route home at least once a week	4 3 2 1 0
7 I set myself new challenges, regularly, so I feel 'stretched'	4 3 2 1 0
8 I like the challenge of attempting to solve difficult problems	4 3 2 1 0
9 I look actively for patterns and trends	4 3 2 1 0
10 I look actively for similarities between things	4 3 2 1 0
11 I look actively for connections between things	4 3 2 1 0
12 I enjoy looking for the reasons that underlie patterns and trends	4 3 2 1 0
13 I like to think up new ways of doing things	4 3 2 1 0
14 I often break my routine in order to stimulate new ideas	4 3 2 1 0
15 I look actively for new sources of inspiration	4 3 2 1 0
16 I give things a go even if I think (or know) I am no good at them	4 3 2 1 0
17 If I get something wrong, I look to see what I could have done better	4 3 2 1 0
18 I like to imagine different ways of doing things	4 3 2 1 0
19 I take calculated risks	4 3 2 1 0
20 Even if I am good at something, I look for better ways of doing it	4 3 2 1 0
21 I have strategies for generating ideas when I need to	4 3 2 1 0
22 I look for solutions even when it seems as if something is impossible	4 3 2 1 0
23 I look for more than one perspective on an issue	4 3 2 1 0
24 I like to play about with different ideas	4 3 2 1 0
25 I spend time thinking about how I think	4 3 2 1 0
<b>Add up your score</b>	<b>Total</b>

# Interpret your creative thinking score

You now have an approximate score for creative thinking. This is not an exact science, but it gives you an idea of how confident you are about your own creativity. It also gives you an insight into where you could develop your creative thinking skills further.

**75–100** This is an excellent score. If your ratings were accurate, you already use the kinds of strategies that contribute to creative thinking. This suggests an invaluable approach to problem-solving and to life in general. Consider how you could develop these further, especially in relation to your course, job and/or to the career areas that interest you. It is also worth checking whether your logical, analytical skills are as well developed as your creative thinking skills. It is important to develop both kinds of thinking as each can boost and support the other.

**50–74** This is a good score. If your ratings were accurate, this suggests your creative thinking skills are already well developed. Your rating suggests that you have further creative potential that could be tapped. Check whether there are any themes in the statements to which you gave lower ratings. Consider where you might be holding back your creative thinking. This chapter provides ideas on how to develop it further.

**25–49** If your ratings were accurate, this suggests that you use creative thinking occasionally and that there is a lot more you could do to build your creative thinking ability. It is worth considering what prevents you from developing your creativity at present. It could be that you doubt your ability, or worry too much about being 'artistic' or 'doing things the right way'. It might be that you find it hard to relax and 'play with ideas', or don't recognise the value in doing so. Use the chapter to experiment with your creativity and with new approaches. It can take time to build confidence in new approaches.

**0–24** If your ratings were accurate, this suggests that you have identified that creative thinking skills are not currently a major area of strength for you. Check with people who know you well whether you have rated yourself too harshly. Identify what kinds of thinking skills are most useful for meeting the requirements of your course and career interests. Read through the comments for the score 25–49 above as these could apply to you. Most importantly, do not be discouraged. This is not a scientific test – and creative thinking skills can be developed.

## Reflection



### Creative potential

- ★ What do you think creativity is?
- ★ Where did you gain that understanding of what creativity is?
- ★ How many marks out of ten would you give yourself for your current level of creativity?
- ★ What marks out of ten do you think you are capable of achieving? On what do you base that estimation?

## Want to know more?



Benjamin Earl Evans (2017) *11 brutal truths about creativity that no one wants to talk about*. Jun 21, 2017. In CREATIVITY.

Shane Currey (2015) *Everyone can be creative*. TEDxSouthBank (Feb 25, 2015).

Isaac Lidsky (2016) *What reality are you creating for yourself*. TEDSummit (June 2016).

Navi Radjou (2014) *Creative problem-solving in the face of extreme limits*. TEDGlobal 2014 (Oct 2014).

# A dozen really useful things to know about your brain

- 1 The brain enjoys complexity and novelty
- 2 The more we learn, the easier it is to learn
- 3 The brain takes short cuts
- 4 It loves organisation and patterns
- 5 It is naturally playful
- 6 It works when you are not watching
- 7 You can send it on errands
- 8 It likes to be fed and watered
- 9 You can take it for a walk
- 10 It won't work well when it is upset or does not feel safe
- 11 It works well when it is excited
- 12 It likes to be refreshed.

## 1 The brain enjoys complexity and novelty



The mind loves complexity. Even babies get bored with simple patterns: they look at complex images for much longer. Choirs prefer more difficult tunes: these are harder to learn but retain their interest when rehearsed and delivered many times. Throughout history, people have been fascinated by riddles, puzzles, codes, mazes and labyrinths. In many ages, art has been heavily allegorical or symbolic, so that an apparently simple picture could be decoded or interpreted, item by item, to reveal a hidden message. When people succeed at one level of a game, they are keen to move on to more difficult ones. Our brain doesn't really like things to be too easy!

## Reflection



### Enjoying complexity

- ★ What kinds of complex, skilled, multi-layered or multi-sequenced activities do you enjoy?
- ★ What kinds of complicated tasks do you avoid?
- ★ What makes you seek out and enjoy one kind of complexity and avoid others?

Our brain can cope with extremely complex problems. It sets up connections between our new experiences and what we already know. It develops increasingly elaborate networks as we become more expert in an area. However, it can't do this all at once.

What we are able to learn is partly the result of what we have already learnt.

## 2 The more we learn, the easier it is to learn more

### *Developing useful mental schema*

When we encounter new situations, we draw upon and develop our existing knowledge. We then organise this into internal models called 'schema'.

If we have been on one picnic, for example, we do not know how typical that is of any other picnic. When we have been on ten picnics, we have an elaborated idea of a picnic. We know the variations that are possible, we can anticipate what to expect at future picnics, plan for such occasions, and develop criteria to evaluate whether they are 'good' or 'bad' picnics depending on our experience. At this stage, we have a well-developed schema. As we go through the day, this process is going on all the time in our brains. According to Piaget (1952), our experiences reinforce or alter what we already know.

# Stimulate your brain

## Enabling new connections

If we expose the brain to varied and complex problems at a reasonable pace, it will usually develop the neural networks we need to take on increasingly complex problems. It isn't how many neurons or brain cells we have that matters so much as the number and strength of connections between them. Those enable us to make meaningful associations faster and more easily. We develop these connections through engagement with the environment, with activity, with stimulation and with repeat exposure to similar situations.

## Novice v. expert

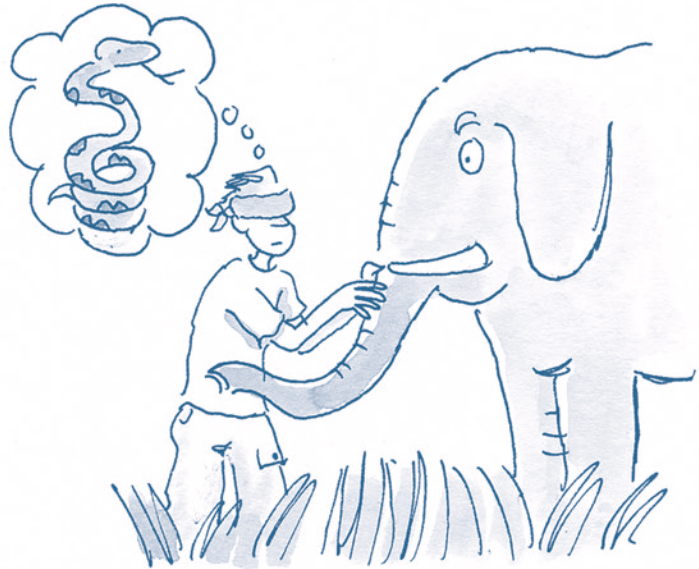
If we try to be experts when we are still novices at a task, the brain may not have developed the right schema and connections to solve the problems we encounter. That can leave us feeling that we are incapable of the task. This can seem like failure and encourage us to give up when we may simply need more practice. The longer we perform or practise an activity, the more we build the mental connections that we need to do it well. There really is sense in the old saying, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.'

We often find that the things we found hardest to do, and had to practise the most, are those for which we develop the best overall and long-term understanding.

## 3 The brain takes short cuts

The brain likes to be efficient so uses short cuts whenever it spots an opportunity. Professional magicians know this and trick the eye by encouraging such 'short cuts' in the brains of those watching them.

If the brain thinks it knows what it is seeing, it stops looking for explanations. It matches what it thinks it is experiencing with the 'schema' or mental models it has already built up. If it finds what it believes is a 'good enough' match, it uses that to interpret and make sense of the new experience. If it can't do that, then it uses the new experience to adapt its existing mental models.



## Reflection

### Stimulating your brain



- ★ What kinds of new challenges do you give your brain to keep it 'stretched' and stimulated?
- ★ For what kinds of activity do you tend to stick with the task, increasing your chances of succeeding in the long run?
- ★ What kinds of activities do you tend to give up on early (maybe too easily)?

Most of the time the brain's short cuts are useful. We refer to these as 'generalisations'. They help us to make sense of what is going on from one moment to the next, without having to start from scratch each time. We are able to tell what are 'typical' experiences, what are variations and what is new. If we can see a connection between something we are good at and the problem in hand, then we may offer the brain a short cut to solving the problem.

# Help your brain find patterns

We can also feed messages to the brain that encourage it to take short cuts. 'I have tried and cannot do this' is one such message. Alternatively, we could choose to feed it encouraging messages such as: 'There is a way to solve this', or 'Let's look at this again' or 'This is interesting', and the brain will respond differently.

## Reflection



### Spotting the short cuts

- ★ Which unhelpful short cuts does your brain take? In other words what kinds of things are you less likely to notice that other people seem better at spotting?
- ★ Which messages do you give your brain that encourage it to think it can't do things?
- ★ How could you change those messages?

## 4 The brain likes organisation and patterns

The brain organises information in many different ways. A colour, a scent or a few bars of music can evoke very detailed memories. Similarly, we can generate information quickly on the basis of the first letter of a word, the end of the word, words that mean the same thing, or any number of other similarities or differences. It is easier to remember information if we:

- ★ organise it into groups, clusters or categories
- ★ organise it into hierarchies
- ★ make links between pieces of information.

If we find links between one kind of activity and another, we are better able to perform the second activity. Looking for patterns or similarities enables us to transfer 'expertise' from one area to solve new problems (see pages 63–7).

### Expert chess players

Experts are experts because of the power of the brain in recognising patterns. Expert chess players can recall how all the pieces were arranged on a chessboard even if given only five seconds to view it.

This is not because they have superior memories. Expert chess players see the whole configuration as one meaningful whole or 'chunk'. They can only do this if they recognise the pattern as one that they have seen and used before. In effect, they are remembering only one pattern, which is easy.

Novice players have to remember the positions of up to 32 items – but the short-term memory struggles with more than 5–7 items. Novices have to work harder in order to remember more items – and are less likely to get the answer right. However, expert chess players are no better at remembering the layout of the pieces than anyone else if they haven't seen the pattern before (Chase and Simon, 1973). The effect of spending time practising, seeing and learning significant patterns over and over again, is very evident here.

### Significant patterns

Although the brain can get used to any pattern, it works more effectively if the pattern you look for has an underlying meaning. The brain likes significance and meaning. For example, it is easier to remember a set of names if they all belong to your family. Similarly, if expert technicians are asked to reconstruct a circuit board, they will do so on the basis of what each part does – its function or significance to the working of the board. Novices will try to assemble the board according to how it looks (Egan and Schwartz, 1979). This approach is superficial and recall is less effective. You can test this for yourself with the activity below.

## Activity



### Memory for patterns (1)

- ➔ Read the instructions on this page to the end.
- ➔ Write down the time – your start time.
- ➔ Learn the following sequence (such that you could write it correctly without looking).  
O h n s t i d o w t e u o r h
- ➔ Cover this page and any copies of the sequence you wrote out as practice. Write out the sequence without looking. Note the time.

Now move on to the next page.

## Let your brain be playful

- ★ Now look back at the sequence and check how accurate you were.
- ★ If you have not got it right, keep going until you do. Note your start and end time again.
- ★ Write down how long it took you, altogether, to learn the sequence perfectly.

When you have finished, time yourself learning the second sequence (on page 240) and return here.

You probably found it took much less time to remember the second sequence, even though you may never have seen it written down before. This is because you are familiar with the chunks of meaning (the words) and a single bigger chunk (the meaning of the sentence). The knowledge of experts for any task is divided into meaningful chunks, similar to words and sentences. As you become more expert in any subject, you will start to construct its 'meaningful chunks', so that you can 'read it off' as quickly as you did the second sequence in the activity on page 229.

### Activity

#### Subject chunks



Sometimes working from two or three books, seeing how the material is arranged in each, can help to develop a sense of how the information can be organised into different sets of meaningful chunks. You may find some texts organise information in ways that are easier for you to understand.

- ➔ Look at three different books for a topic you find difficult.
- ➔ Write down the headings and sub-headings used by each.
- ➔ Browse the material written under each.
- ➔ Which book organises the information in the way that suits you best?

If you work with material in this way, you may also find that seeing the same information from several different angles helps to build up your overall picture of the subject.

## 5 The brain is naturally playful

The brain makes odd, unusual and unexpected connections. This enables us to make jokes and puns, to invent, to find solutions. Children use play as their main tool for learning. They act out adult roles, explore the world around them, and experiment to find out more. As adults, we may be self-conscious about using 'play' to develop our thinking. When we allow it to be playful, the brain can provide answers we need.

However, the brain often presents information to us in unexpected ways. It may disguise the answers in riddles or give us clues to decipher. It encourages us to 'play' with information.

Our brain may spot a dinner fork on the table, make a connection with garden tools, and send us a signal about gardens. In the past, we may have associated gardening with hard work, and the brain has spotted the fork as a reminder to us to work on an essay. Sometimes we can catch hold of this odd train of connections, which is meaningful only to the person concerned. More often, the links are hidden. When the brain plays with us in this way, we can, if we play with the 'clues' it sends us, find the solutions to problems that are teasing us.

## 6 The brain works even when you are not looking

### *The brain is always busy*

The brain is working on our behalf all of the time. Most of what we do and learn, we do without even realising it. The brain does not respond well to being forced. For example, if a word or idea is 'on the tip of your tongue' you can try for hours to remember it without success. However, a few hours later, when you are relaxed or focusing on something else, the answer will seem to 'pop into your head' from nowhere.

# Help your brain find answers for you



You can use your brain to work for you in this way through the way you approach a problem. Start by focusing on the problem, analysing it as far as you can, generating as many solutions as possible, really working at it. Then leave it aside for a while. When you stop analysing and labouring over it, allowing your mind to relax, your brain will continue to work on the problem for you.

Indeed, if you change environment, your brain may start drawing your attention to clues from your surroundings without your being aware of the connections it is making. Research shows children's brains use the shape of the light bulbs, clouds, even shadows on the ceiling or cracks in the wall to resolve problems they had been discussing before taking a rest break.

You can make use of this capacity of the brain if you:

- ★ spend time elaborating the problem so the brain is absolutely clear what you are looking for; 'day-dreaming' alone is not enough
- ★ give the brain some space to work on the problem
- ★ enter a relaxed state of mind for a while
- ★ return to the problem after a break.

## 7 You can send it on errands

As the brain will work on a problem when you are not consciously thinking about it, you can give it

directions about what you want it to do. You need to be precise about what you want, and be prepared to wait. For example, if you know where the Buddha was born but are struggling to remember, the brain will often deliver the answer a few minutes or hours later. Sometimes, it sends the message in code: you may find yourself thinking about Indian film, music or food, even though the only obvious link with the Buddha is India. Be aware of this so you are ready to spot the clues.

### *Sleep on it*

Work on a problem before you sleep. Identify the core questions as far as you can. List the things that are puzzling you. Write these as questions. Focus on one or two questions that are really key.

Whilst you sleep, your brain might continue to work on the problem. It might not. However, you increase the chances of your relaxed, unconscious mind working on it whilst you sleep. Keep paper and a pen by the bed as you might wake up with lots of ideas to jot down quickly before you lose them.

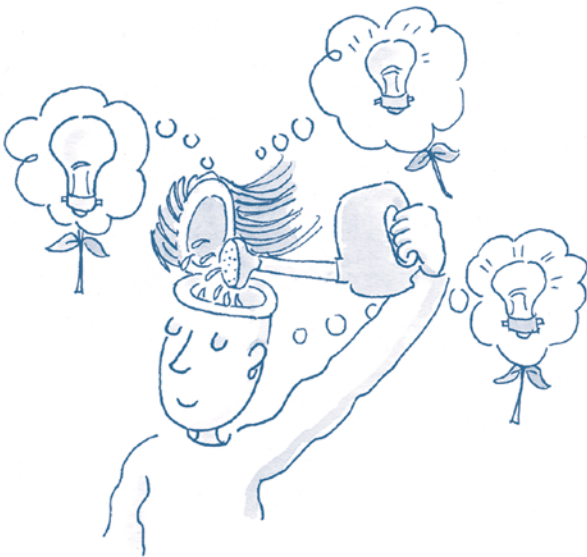


# Give it food, water, exercise

## 8 It likes to be fed and watered

Greenfield (2001) describes the brain as the greediest organ in the body. Although it is less than 2.5 per cent of our body weight, when the body is at rest the brain uses up 20 per cent of the body's fuel input. It consumes oxygen from the air we breathe and glucose from the carbohydrates we eat, burning these off at ten times the rate of any other body tissue. A good diet assists the brain. Over time, starving the body of carbohydrates will reduce the fuel that the brain needs in order to function.

Our bodies are mostly water. Water conducts electricity – and the messages our brain sends and co-ordinates are ultimately electrical impulses. These are affected by dehydration. When we are dehydrated, we reduce the efficiency of our brain as well as the general functioning of the body. Drinking water increases brain efficiency; other drinks do not have the same effect. Ideally, we need about eight glasses of water a day, consumed gradually over the day.



The brain uses energy to process food and drink. After a large meal, you can become drowsy as the brain diverts its resources to deal with digestion. A big meal or drink is best avoided just before an exam or interview.

'The brain is fundamentally a chemical system' (Greenfield, 2001). The chemicals ultimately come

from what we feed the body. Nicotine, for example, puts the body into survival mode, raising heart rate and blood pressure, whereas creative thinking is associated with more relaxed states. Various oils have also been associated with the way the brain functions (Stordy, 2000). For most people, a varied diet provides the small amounts of a wide range of chemicals that the body needs.

## Reflection



### Nourishing your brain

- ★ How well do you feed and water your brain?
- ★ How much water do you drink each day?
- ★ Does your diet help or hinder your brain? If you are unsure, speak to somebody at your student health centre.

## 9 You can take it for a walk

Our brains first developed to manage movement and to respond to the environment whilst moving. The brain is stimulated by movement. It has been shown that mice learn better after a period of brisk exercise, as the supply of endorphins and other chemicals to the brain is increased.

In humans, a very large part of the motor cortex in the brain is devoted to the fine motor movements of the fingers and mouth (for using tools, writing, playing an instrument, speaking). If you want to stimulate your thinking, take a walk, play an instrument, draw, do something.

## Activity



### Exercising the problem

When working on a problem, take a brisk walk for about 20 minutes before returning to study. Notice the effect on your mood, energy, thoughts.

Do you come up with any ideas about your study whilst walking?

## Put your brain in the right mood

If you are required to sit and listen, find ways of increasing your personal engagement. For example, in long presentations or lectures, it is natural for the mind to wander after a few minutes.

You can manage this process by:

- ★ Deliberately diverting yourself from listening for a few seconds at regular intervals. You can time this to coincide with when the speaker pauses or changes a slide. Otherwise, the brain will automatically 'switch off' but at less well-timed occasions, and without you noticing.
- ★ Listening actively, in a questioning way, jotting down your questions and opinions.
- ★ Making notes: this can be an act of 'translation' of ideas from someone else's speech into your own words and ideas. Your listening is more active if you are choosing what to note, considering how to summarise, turning the talk into a diagram, and looking at how different aspects link up.

### 10 It won't work well if upset

When we are anxious, our body releases chemicals, such as adrenaline, which put us on the alert for danger. It is a very ancient bodily response to help us survive. Our eyes look for movement at the periphery of our vision, so that we can detect danger, and we become more alert to noise, ready to react. We are easily distracted by our environment. Resources are diverted to the large muscles in the arms and legs so that we can fight or run.

If we are anxious about an essay or exam, we can have the same adrenaline and survival response. As the body is then ready for large movements, we confuse it if we simply sit still. When we read or write or use the computer, we focus our attention on a small central space whilst our eyes want to look around for danger. We give mixed messages to the brain.

When we are over-stressed, the brain is not interested in 'thinking' tasks: it wants us to move, to escape, to survive. The more distressed we become at not understanding something, the more the brain diverts energy away from the thinking brain to the survival brain. Some strenuous activity, such

as exercise, a brisk walk, housework – anything which uses the arms and legs – uses up the excess adrenaline, leaving us more relaxed and able to concentrate.



Strategies for managing stress and thinking positively can 'trick' the survival brain into believing that everything is OK, even if we do not fully feel or believe that at first. This allows us to use the parts of the brain needed to work out a complex solution. If we get too stressed, it becomes necessary to get help from somebody who isn't – and who can think more clearly.

### 11 It works well when excited and engaged

The brain likes to be stimulated and engaged. When tasks are not challenging enough, the brain finds it hard to stay focused. If tasks are too difficult for its current level of experience, the brain may become stressed. To work well, the brain needs to find a task that is stimulating but not a threat at its current level of competence.

# Calm the mind and clear mental clutter

If you look for the interest in a task, it becomes more manageable. When we are excited or frightened, similar sets of chemicals are released in the body. We can direct the brain how to interpret these. If we approach complex thinking problems as 'difficult', it encourages the brain to 'freeze' or resist. On the other hand, if we are curious and interested about how to resolve the problem, our brains are less likely to 'go blank' and better able to draw on existing expertise.

## 12 The brain likes to be refreshed

Although the brain enjoys being stimulated, the mind can become too busy and cluttered with thoughts. It benefits from being calmed occasionally. Some ways of achieving this are:

- ★ Switching off all electrical devices for a while
- ★ Changing physical activity
- ★ Building rest, relaxation and sleep into the day
- ★ Repeated meditation (such as through a daily practice) is ideal for refreshing the brain and improving its function (Cottrell, 2018). Have a go at the meditation below.

### Activity

#### Refreshing the brain through mindfulness of the present moment



Read through the whole activity first. Then just relax and be present in the moment as you breathe.

- ➔ Sit so you are upright but comfortable. You might find the activity easier if you close your eyes.
- ➔ Watch the way that your breath enters and leaves your body. Notice whether it is cool or warm; whether your breaths are long or short, easy or laboured. Avoid changing the way you are breathing – just observe – unless your breathing is noisy. Breathe as quietly as possible.
- ➔ Your mind will wander. This is natural. Don't force anything. Just notice when it wanders and gently return your attention to your breath.
- ➔ As ideas enter your mind, tell yourself to 'let go' of them. If you notice that you are getting uncomfortable, shift very slightly and slowly, and then focus on your breath again.
- ➔ You might find that really interesting ideas and thoughts enter your head, or that you have become lost in a dialogue about an event that happened recently, or remember how angry you are with someone. The brain finds it difficult to let you remain quiet with just yourself in the present moment. Don't explore these thoughts or emotions or try to remember them just now. Let them vaporise or fly away. Or park them for later.
- ➔ You may think that your brain is too smart, clever, fast-moving, idea-filled, and imaginative for you to benefit from this exercise. If you think that, you probably need it more.
- ➔ This task is almost impossible for most people. However, noting which justifications you find for not doing it tells you a great deal about yourself, if you can work it out. Simply acknowledge the frustration or other emotions, and again, just let go of them.
- ➔ Smiling gently relaxes the face muscles, making this activity easier. If you feel agitated, remind yourself that you have the luxury of doing nothing but breathing and being with your own mind in the present moment.
- ➔ Each time you 'let go', you clear and energise your mind. You give it a break. You allow it to stop worrying and give it an opportunity to relax and do nothing.

At first, you may not notice any difference. However, doing this for 20 minutes several times a week develops better mental and emotional awareness. Sometimes, the activity will leave you feeling clear-headed, relaxed and calm. You can find meditations to use on the companion site for *Mindfulness for Students* at [www.macmillanihe.com/mindfulness](http://www.macmillanihe.com/mindfulness).

# Opening up to creativity

Too often, people equate creativity with being a particular kind of person, such as an artist, designer, performer or inventor. As a result, they underestimate their own creative capacity. They ignore all the occasions when they used their minds and resources creatively to deal with novel and unexpected situations. We all have our own spheres where our natural creativity shines. This might be, for example:

- ★ knowing the right things to say
- ★ seeing the funny side when things go wrong
- ★ inventing unusual but convincing excuses for avoiding work
- ★ co-ordinating the activities of several children so that they are all entertained, occupied and safe
- ★ making patients feel at ease before an operation
- ★ cooking a special meal on a budget
- ★ smoothing the waters when people are arguing
- ★ finding perfect presents for others.

## Reflection

### Personal creativity



- ★ What kinds of creativity do you demonstrate in your own life? For example, what kinds of things seem to be easier for you than for others? Or do you have your 'own ways of doing things'?
- ★ In which areas of your life would you like to be more creative?
- ★ Do you feel comfortable with the idea of yourself as a potentially creative person? (If not, why not?)

## Helping the 'creative spark'

It is easy to fall into just sitting, waiting and hoping for inspiration, expecting an answer to fall from the sky. The magic element – the 'creative spark' – can feel elusive. A more active, practical approach can help to oil the brain and assist it in generating ideas when needed.

There are many techniques that can be used to generate ideas and they are not difficult. The right attitude of mind is the most important factor. Many people censor ideas at a very early stage if the ideas do not immediately seem sensible or useful.

## Suspend judgement

Negative attitudes strangle creativity. We often dismiss the embryo of a good idea because we will not risk appearing foolish. Creativity, however, involves risks, mistakes, and 'bad' ideas as well as good. Only one in ten or twenty ideas will lead anywhere. To be creative requires the capacity to suggest ideas without immediately worrying about whether they are 'right' or what other people will say.

Nolan (2000) cites research which shows that when people's ideas are judged or dismissed, the number of ideas that are put forward drops dramatically. We tend to become more cautious and anxious if our suggestions are not welcomed, adopting a 'survival' response to avoid being discounted again.

Suspending judgement means:

- ★ encouraging others to suggest ideas
- ★ avoiding negative self-judgements such as 'I am not a creative person'
- ★ giving all ideas a chance to flow
- ★ being willing to express 'bad' or 'silly' ideas
- ★ noting all ideas in the early stages, without immediately evaluating them
- ★ being willing to look at all ideas for hidden potential
- ★ not assuming that a good idea holds all the answers
- ★ avoiding self-criticism if good ideas do not emerge quickly.

## Reflection

### Self-censoring



- ★ Do you tend to censor your ideas to avoid appearing foolish?
- ★ What helps you to let your imagination work more freely?

# Take 'light touch' approaches

## 'Light touch' thinking

Usually, when we work on problems, we use logical, sequential, ordered thinking. Sometimes this is referred to as 'left brain' thinking, although thinking is not strictly compartmentalised in that way. Logical thinking is a necessary part of arriving at a solution to most tasks. However, such thinking tends to follow rules or predictable routes. If you do not know the answer, those routes might not lead anywhere.

Creative thinking takes a lighter touch. It does not respond well to being forced. It works well with direction and a clear goal, but not if the mind is too rigidly focused on a particular outcome. It works when you 'hover' over an idea, or play with it, teasing out possibilities. It is rather like holding a small bird in the palm of your hand: if you hold the intention, goal or idea too tightly, you might crush or suffocate it.



*Creative thinking requires a light touch*

You can encounter this when you are aware that you 'know' the answer to a question but can't recall it, or if you can't quite find the word you want to use, or you try to remember a dream. The harder you try to capture the thought, the more it seems to elude you. Sometimes, playing with the idea or letting it rest works better than forcing it.

## 'Many quickly' approaches

### *Don't stop at one – find 5, 10, 20*

Those who think they know the answer to a question rarely look for a better one. The chance of finding the best idea to a novel problem the first time around is quite remote. Searching for one solution can take longer than proposing several: we can be so concerned about finding the one 'right' answer that we block our thinking. If we look for many solutions, our thinking can be more relaxed: we will not use most of the ideas so it is safer to have some bad ones. Multiple ideas give us lots to work from. The more alternatives we consider, the likelier it is we will find the best solution.

### *Phrase brain-stimulating questions*

In the activity on page 224, you are asked to consider the use of a shoebox. This usually prompts just one response, as the wording of the question suggests there is only one use. However, if asked, 'How many uses can you think of?' people usually generate many responses. In other words, the way we phrase a task or question influences how we approach it.

## Activity

### Generating multiple ideas



- 1 Jot down as many uses for a shoebox as you can think of in three minutes.
- 2 For one problem that faces you on a regular basis, how many possible approaches to solving this can you generate in five minutes?

You probably found many more uses for a shoebox this time. Answers people give include: carrying shoes; storage; for making a doll's house or garage; a door stop; carrying things; hiding things; a sandwich box; spreading on wet floors to step on; rattling things in as a musical instrument; protection from the rain; for babies to tear up; holding desk items; a child's treasure box; to decorate as a gift box; to post items; for papier mâché; food for goats, etc.

## Reflection

### Multiple ideas



- ★ How typical is it for you to push yourself to keep looking for more answers?
- ★ When might this be useful for you?

### Just a minute

It may seem paradoxical, but it is often more productive to give yourself a short time limit to generate ideas rather than labouring over them for hours. The brain can be better at leaping into action if it knows it has a time limit – as long as it isn't overstressed. This does not usually work well if you leave important tasks to the last minute, as you need to be relaxed. Approach the task in a 'playful' way.

Try it. Give yourself just one minute to jot down everything you can think of to solve one problem you are working on currently. If you do not generate any useful ideas in that time, you have lost only a minute.

### Play with time

If an activity is likely to take three hours, leave at least four to complete it, but aim to complete it in two. If you allow more time than you need, you reduce the need to 'get it right' first time. Less stress can mean more creative thinking. You will also have more time to fine-tune your answer and deal with emergencies. The time challenge creates just enough excitement to generate adrenaline to help with the task and reduce 'sluggishness'. If you have too much time, it is tempting to delay starting or to work more slowly. Set off at a good pace, aiming to finish at an earlier target time than your absolute deadline.



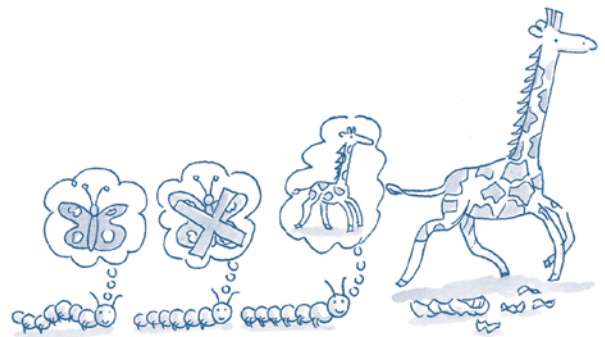
### 'What if...' questions

'What if...', 'Why not?' or 'Supposing...?' questions stimulate the imagination. The wording suggests an imaginary state that is safe to explore (it isn't real so it can't do any damage) but which might provide real answers. If you reach a point where your ideas feel stuck, use 'what if ...' questions. For example:

- ★ 'What if ... we designed a model that worked on its side/upside down/in reverse?'

- ★ 'Why not ... ask those residents what they want their town to be like?'
- ★ 'Supposing ... we ate ten small meals a day rather than any big ones?'
- ★ 'Supposing ... we drew our reasoning rather than using words and numbers?'
- ★ 'What if ... witnesses were never visible to the accused?'

'What if...' questions can open up new and unexpected areas for exploration. See also page 48.



## Activity

### What if ...



Take one problem, issue or assignment that you are working on at present.

- ➔ Generate as many 'what if...' questions as you can in three minutes. Then select your favourite three of these.
- ➔ Generate as many responses as you can for each question in just three minutes (each).
- ➔ Jot down any leads that arise from this activity. If there were none, take a walk or a break and then repeat the activity.

## Other generative thinking techniques

See Chapter 11 for using generative thinking strategies such as:

- ★ Brainstorming
- ★ Free association
- ★ Drawing
- ★ Day-dreaming
- ★ Free-writing
- ★ Doodling

# Synthesis – the heart of creativity

Synthesis plays an essential role in creativity: combining any two items creates a new entity.

## Activity



### Creating from two

#### Imagine ...

Choose one item from the Animal list below and one item from the Machine list. Imagine them combined into a new object. Include at least one characteristic or feature from each.

#### Animal

Giraffe  
Penguin  
Dolphin  
Octopus  
Monkey  
Snake  
Dragon  
Ant-eater  
Zebra

#### Machine

Car  
Phone  
Helicopter  
Motor bike  
Hair-straightener  
Freezer  
Blender  
Games console  
Vacuum cleaner

#### Experiment

Do this at least three times using two different items each time.

#### Draw it

Make a diagram or sketch of one of your creations. What further ideas or details does this generate?

#### Describe it

Describe your creation in words. What further ideas or details does this generate?

#### Apply it

Find at least three ways your creation could be of use in everyday life. Stretch your imagination!

Take three minutes to generate a list of ways to apply this strategy to your academic work / job.

## Activity



### Synthesis of life experience

Choose two activities (such as seminars, work, sport, dancing, music, travelling, being with difficult people, etc.). Write a list of the skills, qualities and attributes associated with each activity in the columns below.

List 1: activity:		List 2: activity:	
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

- ➔ Take any item from list 1 and consider a way that it could be of use in managing your second activity.
- ➔ Take any item from list 2 and consider a way that it could be of use in managing your first activity.

Repeat this until you run out of ideas.



Jot down:

- ➔ Which of these are the most practical to put into operation?
- ➔ What would be the benefits to you of transferring these skills and qualities to new situations?

## Synthesis as play

The 'Creating from two' activity invited you to play with ideas. Most of the time, ideas do not lead to earth-shattering discoveries. However, even apparently strange or frivolous ideas can create connections in the brain that one day help you find a solution you need.

When you need to come up with ideas, or have a problem to solve, you can organise your ideas in lists, chunks or diagrams and then break these up and rearrange them in new combinations – on screen, on paper, with cut-out images, with cards, with anything that stimulates the imagination.

Play is about:

- ★ having a go
- ★ finding out new things
- ★ stimulating the mind
- ★ not worrying about 'getting it right'
- ★ allowing the mind to relax
- ★ experimenting
- ★ 'letting go'
- ★ Informality and enjoyment.

Play is unpredictable. You could be playing with one idea, looking for a solution, and find that you are suddenly struck by the answer to something completely different that has been puzzling you for a long time.

### Reflection



#### On being playful

- ★ How comfortable do you feel about the idea of 'playing' with solutions to academic work – as one of many approaches?
- ★ Where in your life do you allow yourself to be most playful? Could you benefit from extending that to other areas?

## Making expert connections

In the synthesis activities on page 238, you were, in effect, looking for and making connections. Whenever we work on a problem, the early stages are best spent in looking for connections and patterns between the current problem and:

- ★ any similar problems or situations we have encountered
- ★ other problems we are working on or studying
- ★ the skills involved – and those we already use elsewhere
- ★ our areas of expertise, even if these seem far removed.

## Unlikely connections

Creative thinking can benefit from almost any set of connections. As the brain likes to be entertained, it will pay particular attention to what it finds curious or unfamiliar. It might use any change in your surroundings or experience to find unexpected connections with a problem you have been grappling with. Help your brain to do so in an active way. Be prepared to let what you see, hear or experience change your views or inspire you.

### Activity



#### Stimulate new connections

Here are some ways you can stimulate your brain to form such connections. Select  those that appeal most.

- Walk a different way round the campus or town so that you are exposed to new patterns, layouts, sights
- Go into shops that you do not normally visit
- Browse books that do not normally interest you
- Speak to students from other courses about their study
- Talk to people about their work and life experience
- Make friends with people from different walks of life
- Find opportunities to talk to people of different ages
- Take a bus journey; visit a new place
- Do something you do not usually do: draw, dance, sing, act, run, do yoga, learn a language, sail, make a film
- Look at an object from a new perspective: draw it upside down or with both hands at once
- Listen to a wider variety of music
- Draw or write with the hand you do not usually use
- Use a different medium to describe a problem (paint, model clay, use graphics, sing it, dance it).

# Form creative habits

## A daily change?

Consider how you might add some creative aspect into your daily life – so that being creative doesn't feel like something you have to work at. It could also make a difference to how much you enjoy each day – and reduce stress.

### Activity

#### Change perspective



Make a list of at least five other items to add to those suggested in the *Stimulate new connections* activity on page 239.

Choose at least three suggestions from either that list or your own new items. Apply these to a problem you are working on at present.

- ➔ Jot down your observations of any changes in your thinking.
- ➔ If there was no effect, choose three more items and repeat the exercise.

Consider how you could build some of these opportunities for making alternative connections into your daily life – so that they become a habit.

## Search for 'missing links'

When breaking your routine with a new activity, act 'as if' the answers or the clues that you are looking for are in that book, object, music, conversation, journey, etc.

Search out connections between the problem you are addressing and the new activity. Use language structures such as:

- ★ 'This is similar to my problem because ...' or
- ★ 'My problem is like this journey/statue/house because they both ...'

Do this 10 or 20 times, so that you start to draw on deeper, sub-conscious parts of the brain as well as using more logical, surface thinking. Jot down your thoughts, even if you are not sure that they will lead anywhere. Play with the ideas that come up and see whether you can shape, combine or lead them into what you need.

The least likely connection might prompt a useful solution. For example, doing a degree is like going for a walk because:

- ★ you can plan a specific route
- ★ you can select alternative routes
- ★ they can both take you to unexpected places
- ★ the end of both can seem a long way off
- ★ they both require some effort
- ★ they both stimulate the mind; etc.

### Activity

#### Connections for PDP



Complete the following phrase as in the example above. Compare personal planning to one or more of the items from the list below.

'Personal planning is like ... because ...'

Football	Climbing a mountain
Dancing	Painting a picture
Watching a film	Playing a game

## Memory for patterns (2)

This activity is the second part of the activity on pages 229–30. It is located here in order not to cause visual distraction during part 1.

### Activity

#### Memory for patterns (2)



Time how long it takes you to memorise the following set of letters – that is, so that you are able to reproduce them exactly as written without looking.

S h u t t h e d o o r n o w

Compare this result with the time it took you to learn a sequence of the same length for part 1.

Return now to page 230.

# Creating thought 'networks'

As we saw on page 223, the brain consists of neural networks, rich in connections. You can make better use of this when generating ideas or making notes to explore a problem, if you lay them out as a network of ideas. It can be faster than writing in full sentences, especially if you incorporate short phrases, images, symbols, icons, shapes, arrows and colour. You could just use images rather than any words.

## Creating network structures

Networks are liberating as there are few rules to follow. You can:

- ★ take the ideas anywhere you like, forming new connections: it is not a 'map' of what exists but a new structure you are creating
- ★ start anywhere on the paper, board or screen
- ★ move from that focus point to anywhere else
- ★ generate other focal points where one set of ideas meets another
- ★ write as much or as little as you like at each point (a word or short phrase usually works best; however, if your creative flow is stimulated by the process, go with the energy)
- ★ let your mind take you for a walk
- ★ be focused and logical or 'day-dream' and 'play', depending on what suits.

## Networks work best when you...

- ★ **Get tactile** Use paper, pens, paints, etc.
- ★ **Use 'joined-up' writing** (cursive script). It is easier for the brain to recall continuous movement in its motor memory
- ★ **Avoid capital letters** as they are harder for the brain to process
- ★ **Can scan from one direction** so you don't have to turn the page around to read it
- ★ **Avoid 'negatives'** (e.g. no, never, isn't, won't, etc.) as these are harder for the brain to process
- ★ **Make sections stand out** as distinct and interesting in their own right (using colour, etc.)
- ★ **Take pauses** to search out potential connections
- ★ **Ask 'what if ...?'** to spark new connections.

Ideally, work on the same problem more than once, designing a different network each time, to encourage new connections. Then, for your last, or working, version, see if you can shape the network into a recognisable image or shape that is easy to remember (an apple, flower, plane, etc.). Use a different shape for each topic so that you have a visual mnemonic (memory-jogger) to ease recall; see 'Expert chess players', page 229.

See the example of a network on page 242.

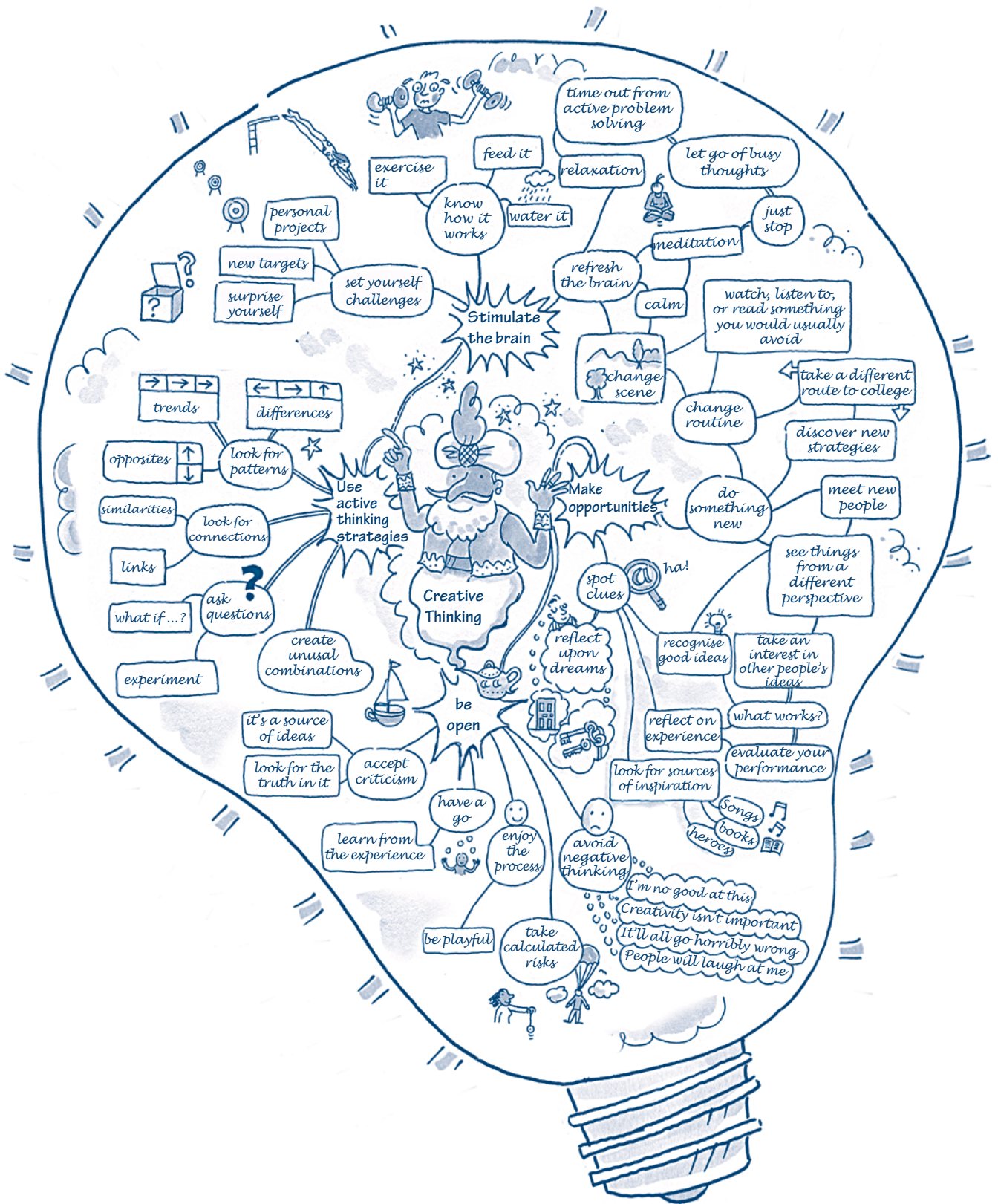
## Activity



### Networks

- 1 Prepare by doing something that relaxes the body and stimulates the mind, such as going for a walk.
- 2 Then take a large piece of paper or card and as many coloured pencils, pens, paints, stickers, etc. as you like.
- 3 Make a network for a problem or issue that you are working on at present. (See page 229 for an example.) Hold the idea quite lightly at first and let your pencil play with ideas.
- 4 Follow the Networks guidelines above.
- 5 When you are finished, consider the nearest overall shape that your map makes. Look for a real object or recognisable shape (house, car, turtle, star, castle, sock, etc.) Select a shape you haven't used in a previous network. You can draw in a few lines to help give an outline to the shape.
- 6 Alternatively, use a distinctive image or style within the network to help you remember it.
- 7 Consider how else you could make the network more distinctive, to help you to recall each section more easily.

# Network: creative thinking



# Lateral thinking

Much of the ground-breaking work on 'thinking about thinking' was developed by Dr Edward de Bono, who created the term 'lateral thinking'. He encouraged unconventional ways of looking at a problem, playing with unlikely solutions and then looking for an aspect that might actually work.

Lateral thinking values humour, looking for opportunity in the 'accidental', a willingness to do things in new ways, and exploring all ideas. For example, a De Bono statement might be that aeroplanes should land upside down, or cars have square wheels (De Bono, 2006).

By working 'as if ...' this were a serious proposition, it creates an opportunity for really examining all the taken-for-granted processes relating to cars such as tyre pressure, tyre threads, braking devices, puncture problems and so forth. Real-life advances have been made through such forms of thinking.

## Activity

### 'Crazy' questions



- ➔ Generate as many apparently 'crazy' 'what if...?' questions as you can for a problem or issue you are working on currently. Don't censor your thinking – allow curious options to emerge.
- ➔ Select one of your questions and devise as many answers as you can (as on page 240). Choose one or two of these that look the most curious to play with for a while.
- ➔ Even if the question, or the suggestions that are emerging, do not seem at all sensible, act as if they are. Work out what would need to be different about the problem or the typical solutions in order for the 'crazy' idea to work in its own right. For example, what would need to be different about roads, or the way cars move across them, or what tyres are filled with, in order for 'square wheels' to be workable.
- ➔ If possible, do this in a group, to generate more ideas. It can also be more fun.
- ➔ Tease out any insights that this lateral approach throws upon your problem.

## As if ... in the mind of others

You can also brainstorm solutions to a problem by considering them from the perspectives of various experts, characters or customers. If you can do accents, have a go at talking through the problem in their accent or style or with their body movements.

If you get into character, it can generate responses you might not have thought of when thinking from your own perspective or 'in your own voice'.

Imagine yourself 'in the shoes' of somebody who you think would have sensible things to say about the problem – who might bring a novel approach.



## Activity

### In the minds of others



- ➔ Put the 'sensible you' aside for a moment.
- ➔ Select at least three people who might bring an unusual perspective on a problem or issue you are addressing at present. You could include people you know, celebrities, characters from history, politics, sports, films, games, books, etc.
- ➔ Put yourself into their shoes. Imagine their voice talking about the issue. How would they move their hands, head and body? Would they smile or frown?
- ➔ How would they describe the problem?
- ➔ What advice would they give you?
- ➔ Jot down the ideas that emerge. Play around with these, continuing in character if you can.

# Lateral thinking

## Wear different hats

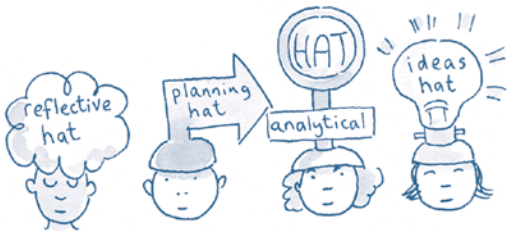
Dr de Bono (1996) devised a system of imaginary hats, each a different colour and representing a different approach to thinking. When you 'wear' each of these hats, you address an issue in a completely different way. In effect, you give your mind permission to let go of one way of thinking for a while, and explore a different approach.

### Activity

#### Design your creative thinking cap



- ➔ Imagine at least six hats that represent different types of people, occupations or approaches. If you prefer, use shoes, coats, t-shirts, etc.
- ➔ Describe or draw these to help you to imagine them clearly.
- ➔ Which kind of hats (or shoes, etc.) do you associate with each of: reflecting, planning, relating to others, analysing, finding information, writing, evaluating? Try these on when you perform these tasks: get into the role that helps you think best for the task!



Although De Bono uses a specific series of hats, you could devise whatever set of hats works for you: a practical hat, a dreamer's hat, a philosopher's hat, a mechanic's hat, a chef's hat, a poet's hat, a strategic thinking hat and so on. Alternatively, you could devise a set of coats or shoes rather than hats.

## Catastrophe and sabotage!!!

It is usually easy to think catastrophically. Most of us are quite good at imagining all the things that could go wrong! You can use this ability to good effect by playing with the idea of deliberately doing everything wrong. The more the wording is exaggerated, the more inviting this task can be, and the clearer the points that can emerge. For example:

- ★ What 20 things could I do, deliberately, to waste my time at college and have zero to show after three or four years of effort?
- ★ What can I do so I feel more pressurised, irritated, thoroughly miserable, and miss all deadlines?
- ★ What are all the things I could do and say in the seminar group to really inflame the situation and make everything thoroughly explosive?
- ★ Knowing that sleep, nutrition, rest, safety, exercise, calm and avoiding certain substances are essential to managing stress levels, how can I conduct everyday life to keep myself utterly stressed out?
- ★ How can I really work myself up into a stressful state so that I make the job interview as difficult as possible?

It is usually easy to generate a long list of items to answer such questions, attesting to our native wit in knowing what we should and should not do in most situations.

Once the list is generated, create a second list alongside it, writing the positive solution to each potentially 'catastrophic' action. It can be remarkably easy to generate ground rules or an action plan using this technique.

### Activity

#### Sabotage



- ➔ Select one problem that you are working on at present or a forthcoming event that is important to you.
- ➔ Brainstorm all the ways you could make this a miserable flop. Pay attention to the details that would ensure it all went horribly wrong.
- ➔ Then go through your list and identify the positive action that you can take to avert each method of sabotage.
- ➔ Your second list contains the ingredients for a constructive action plan.

## Working with raw material

Most of the strategies discussed above are 'early-stage' techniques. They emphasise letting ideas flow. The first stage develops a mass of material, which is like undifferentiated dough or clay. However, creative thinking does not stop here.

The next stage is to shape this into something that works. Thinking processes such as critiquing, selecting, structuring, evaluating, planning, being 'practical', unhelpful to early stages of the creative process, can now make a great difference.

### Working up an idea

- ★ **Analyse** What are the interesting aspects of each idea or suggestion?
- ★ **Evaluate** What could each suggestion contribute to an understanding of the issue or to finding a solution?
- ★ **Synthesise** Which aspects of each idea would work well together?
- ★ **Spot gaps** What is missing? For what else do you need to generate ideas and solutions?
- ★ **Elaborate** Add details to fill gaps and clarify ideas.
- ★ **Select** Which ideas do you want to take forward, and which do you want to leave to one side for now?
- ★ **Organise** Structure your ideas into a relevant pattern. This may be a diagram, flow-chart, model or piece of writing.
- ★ **Plan** Draw up an action plan to put your ideas into effect.



*Mismatches and 'bumps' along the way can be signs that something is worth investigating below the surface*

### Develop the narrative

Write down how the whole solution or plan will work from start to finish, in order to provide your initial narrative. If you prefer, record yourself talking through your ideas. Producing the narrative can, itself, encourage ideas to flow. Focus on the aim (to develop a solution) rather than on the quality of the writing at this stage.

Creating the narrative may be a stop-start process. The halts can be important to the creative process. They can indicate precisely where you need to dig deeper to ensure the idea will work well. Geologists, for example, look at the surface of the ground for signs of oddities, mismatches, things that don't quite fit or make sense. These are signs that something is worth investigating further below the surface.

The same is true for the creative process. The difficult patches that seem to be getting in the way, the 'tricky bits', when worked on, often lead to new insights, and to sound, creative solutions.

When you hit a 'bump' or the narrative stops, it is important to return to the early-stage techniques again, brainstorming, free writing, discussing, developing networks of ideas. Focus on the area of difficulty. Then return to the narrative until you hit the next 'bump'.

# Creativity and risk-taking

*Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out.*

James Bryant Conant

Creative thinking requires risk-taking. Most of us have been trained from childhood to be logical, sensible, not to act the fool. It can be hard to work against that training and to remain confident in what we are doing. It is easy to feel embarrassed or anxious about what others might think.

## Creativity and emotional management

Nolan (2000) argues that an education aimed at developing innovative, creative thinkers must begin at the emotional level. If we do not have the emotional stamina to deal with other people's opinions, then we divert our creative energies into protecting ourselves from being judged. We won't be able to risk other people's opinions of us.

Creativity carries an element of anxiety and stress. Goleman (1995) has described the physiological reasons for this: it is part of our biology to resist negative feedback. However, we can develop our mental attitudes so that we are less affected by fear of criticism. The better we are able to manage our emotions, the more we can think freely and creatively (see pages 114–26).

## Calculated risks

The creative risks we take might not pay off. In the early stages of generating ideas, the risks are only on the screen/paper.

As we move towards developing an idea, greater costs come into play, such as time, money, resources, the environment, or reputation. It is then important to limit the risks to a greater extent. This means considering such issues as these:

- ★ The consequences of a course of action: who might be affected or disadvantaged and how?
- ★ What are the possible benefits? Who will gain? How significant are the advantages compared with the disadvantages?
- ★ What are the chances of success?

- ★ Can we really afford it?
- ★ Are the risks worth it?
- ★ Can we (and others) deal with the consequences if it does not work?

Not all risks are worth it. Some will pay off; others not. Ensure that you and all the affected parties can cope emotionally and financially with the consequences if things do not work out as hoped.

## Taking responsibility

Because creativity involves risk-taking, it also involves taking responsibility for one's own actions. This means:

- ★ thinking through the needs and interests of all parties, including yourself
- ★ being able to accept the consequences of your own actions
- ★ planning safety nets where necessary, so that other people do not get hurt.

If you are being creative in the way you approach an essay or experiment, this might simply mean being prepared to accept a low grade if the tutor does not agree that your novel ideas meet the requirements of the assignment. Check the brief carefully and ask about the latitude for interpreting this 'creatively' if this is not clear. That is especially important if you need a high grade. On the other hand, you may wish to push the boundaries, no matter what the cost. That is your decision.

If, on the other hand, you are designing products for the public or making decisions that affect others, you need to take seriously those issues that will become your responsibility, such as:

- ★ health and safety
- ★ legal requirements
- ★ financial issues
- ★ ethical considerations.

### Want to know more?



R. Van Oech (2011) *A Whack on the Side of the Head: How to be More Creative*, 25th Anniversary edition (New York: Business Plus; Hachette).



## Boost your creativity

Consider how you will bring more creativity to your study or work. For each of the following means of boosting your creativity, indicate  your level of interest for trying this out.

	Action	No interest	Low interest	Some interest	High interest
1	Hold a question in my mind over time: see what emerges				
2	Change my daily routine				
3	Put time aside each week just for thinking				
4	Generate more options – so I have lots from which I can select the best ideas				
5	Keep an ideas book/file ready near me to jot down ideas				
6	Be more playful in working with ideas				
7	Be more open to new ideas – reject them less quickly				
8	Set aside time to let ideas emerge				
9	Browse more widely online				
10	Ask myself ‘what if I...?’ questions				
11	Set a creative project for myself				
12	Join a new class, group or club				
13	Spend more time with people who value creativity				
14	Be more active looking for sources of inspiration				
15	Cut out things that prevent me being creative				
<b>Add your own ideas.</b>					
16					
17					
18					
<b>Prioritise items for action</b> ★ Select a realistic number of items (3–5) which you consider you are most likely to carry out, taking on board your level of interest. ★ Circle the numbers for those items on the list above.		<b>Plan. Do. Observe</b> ★ In your reflective journal or blog, outline when and how you will implement the items you prioritized. ★ Put times into your planner or diary for undertaking these activities so that they are not forgotten. ★ Consider how these actions could have a direct, or indirect, effect on your work. Then look for signs that that is happening. If not, take a different approach.			

# Review: Thinking creatively and productively

- 1 Be open to increasing the power of your thinking**

Our brains are flexible, adaptable and capable of development. Assuming we could learn more helps us to do so; assuming we have the answers inhibits our brain's potential.
- 2 Understand your brain's needs and preferences**

Be curious about what makes our brains perform well. Recognise those key factors over which we exercise control and that make a difference to good brain functioning and 'thinking power'.
- 3 Push the boundaries of your brain**

Increase your thinking power by stimulating your brain. Feed it the complexity, novelty and challenge that promote new learning.
- 4 Encourage your brain to play, connect and find patterns**

Provide your brain with the time, space and encouragement to function in a playful way, searching out new links, connections and patterns.
- 5 Nurture your brain**

If you want your brain to work hard for you, take good care of it. Make sure it receives the rest, relaxation, play, sleep, exercise, hydration and nutrition if needs to serve you well.
- 6 Provide the brain with the right mood and environment**

The brain likes to be excited but not stressed or over-cluttered. Keep it calmly engaged. Give it breaks from time to time, including rests from electronic and backlit devices. Treat it to the benefits of meditation.
- 7 Ignite your creative spark**

Open up to your creative side, avoiding self-censorship. Give your creativity a boost through using structured approaches such as 'what if?' questions, synthesis and rapid-timed activities.
- 8 Form creative habits**

Build into your day regular times, behaviours and ways of thinking that foster creativity, so that these develop into good habits. This will help your creativity to flow more easily.
- 9 Use thought 'networks'**

Simulate the natural functioning of the brain by using easy to read, strongly structured and patterned visual networks to generate your ideas and assist recall of information.
- 10 Apply lateral thinking**

Approach tasks and problems through 'sideways' or 'upside-down' thought processes. Sometimes the indirect route promotes more radical, creative ways of thinking that generate fresh ideas.
- 11 Work up your creative ideas**

Don't assume ideas will arrive well shaped. Recognise the potential in your early ideas. Work on the raw material, building it and developing it until your ideas are fully formed and materialised.
- 12 Manage creative risk-taking**

There are risks in being creative, as you are entering new terrain and exploring new possibilities. Take responsibility both for managing any risks and for taking steps to boost your creative potential.

# Chapter 11

# Practical problem-solving



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ understand what is meant by 'problem-solving'
- ✓ recognise skills associated with successful problem-solving
- ✓ define problems accurately and produce clear problem statements
- ✓ develop techniques and approaches to help solve new problems
- ✓ use criteria to evaluate potential solutions and make sounder decisions
- ✓ use action sets for focused mutual support in problem-solving.

## What is 'problem-solving'?

This chapter considers problem-solving from a practical perspective – as an activity that involves a series of processes focused on finding a realistic way forward. Those processes are largely cognitive (thinking processes) but can draw on other processes such as:

- ★ **Social** – discussing solutions; working out how to raise difficult issues at work
- ★ **Affective** – being excited by a challenge; managing emotions if answers are hard to find
- ★ **Cultural** – following customs, laws and protocols.

In this context, it is important to separate the idea of 'problem' from that of 'difficulty' or 'troublesome'. Problem-solving is not necessarily hard, although it can be applied to difficult situations. Any situation that presents an opportunity for applying your thought processes can be treated as a formal 'problem' that requires a solution. It could be:

- ★ solving a puzzle or mathematical question
- ★ identifying the best preparation for a job interview so that you come across well
- ★ devising an approach to an assignment
- ★ working out a research methodology
- ★ deciding how to choose the best team
- ★ finding a way to raise profits
- ★ deciding how to communicate a complex message so others will understand it.

## Skills for problem-solving

Successful problem-solving typically involves some mental stretch, a desire to get to the bottom of the issue and a pinch of ingenuity. Almost every problem involves the processes of:

- 1 Defining the problem** – working out precisely the nature of the problem
- 2 Drawing on protocols** – making use of relevant existing techniques and methods
- 3 Creativity** – adapting and combining existing potential solutions to fit the context
- 4 Applying a strategy/tactics** such as a mental plan (heuristic) and/or action plan
- 5 People skills** – drawing on others' expertise
- 6 Self-management** – managing time, focus, personal issues, feelings and performance.

As a result, problem-solving is highly valued by employers. They like employees who can 'hit the ground running', able to apply skills to new situations and deal with emerging issues and tasks with minimum supervision.

## Activity

### Selecting a focus

In order to provide a focus for this chapter, identify one problem relevant to you. Refer to this as you work through the sections below.



# Potential barriers to problem-solving

Problem-solving is so prized by employers because all too often, they cannot find people who are able to get going with a problem and stick with it until they find a truly useful solution. Many people who could be good at problem-solving give up at too early a stage.

Below are common obstacles to effective problem-solving. Consider which (if any) you recognise as true of your own experience . See the bubble for recommended next steps for each barrier.

## 1 No starting place or 'heuristic'

Heuristics are just typical ways of solving problems, or 'rules of thumb'. It can be dispiriting when it feels imperative to find an answer but there doesn't seem to be any way to get started. Finding a useful starting place is key.

See pages 251–62

## 2 Over-reliance on familiar ways

It is useful to draw on familiar problems and heuristics: these enable you to find a way into new problems. However, relying only on the familiar can reduce creative thinking and even obstruct finding the best or right answer. Use the familiar as a starting place. Work from there, drawing on other perspectives and solutions.

See pages 266–7

## 3 Fixed view ...

It is difficult to step away from the familiar if we are wedded to one way of thinking, have a limited perspective, a narrow range of experience or fear new ways. Be aware of confirmation bias, the natural tendency to see what we expect to see, which then confirms initial opinions even when a better answer is possible.

See pages 261–4 and Ch 10

## 4 Mindset

Mental attitude has a huge impact on problem-solving ability. It affects self-belief – that we can resolve the problem – and our determination to do so. Otherwise, we can persuade ourselves that a problem is too difficult or we lack ability or that we can't be bothered.

See pages 251 and 110–13

## 5 Emotional reactions

Anxiety, fear, frustration, resistance to working on problems that don't immediately spark interest – all can inhibit problem-solving.

See pages 251 and 114–18

## 6 Lack of perseverance

Complex or difficult problems can take a lot of thought and many attempts, which can be time-consuming. Those who are more easily discouraged don't persevere for long enough. That also means that they have fewer problem-resolving resources and poorer habits to bring to the next problem they face.

See page 211

## 7 Poor problem definition

All too often, people solve the wrong problem or can't get started because they haven't worked out precisely what is required. This can arise from not analysing the problem sufficiently or not listening well enough to clients' needs, misinterpreting instructions, making false assumptions, and/or not expressing the problem well in one's own words before starting.

See pages 252–3

# Getting started: use your resources



## Mindset

Decide to bring the right mindset, so that you:

- ★ treat complex tasks as intriguing and curious, like a puzzle or a game that you are motivated to stick with until you win
- ★ take on the challenge of problems, tasks and projects that seem beyond your current ability
- ★ stick with a problem until you gain the answers you need
- ★ Resist defeatist thoughts.



## Time

One of the key reasons people fail to solve problems is that they give up too early. People who solve problems keep going. Don't assume that, just because you have spent a long time on a task already, this means you can't resolve it with more time and/or a different approach.



## Intellectual

- ★ Recognise that your brain can be developed to take on new mental challenges.
- ★ Use your experience of *similar* problems (page 260).
- ★ Use your experience of *different* problems (expertise metaphor, page 63).
- ★ You use skills in critical analysis for academic work. Apply these to problem-solving in other contexts. (see Cottrell, 2017).
- ★ Use creative problem-solving approaches. Be prepared to 'play' with the problem (Chapter 10).
- ★ Use your research skills: draw on published resources (journals, books, expert testimony, talks, websites, blogs, podcasts, etc.).
- ★ Present your solutions with clear, structured, logical reasoning, as you would in academic work such as essays and reports (see Cottrell, 2019a and 2014).



## Social

- ★ Share and discuss ideas – just talking the problem through can help to define it and prompt ideas.
- ★ Form or join an action set: use the support of a trusted group of people (see pages 266–7).
- ★ Ask for ideas for part of the problem. Use suggestions creatively.
- ★ Ask friends to help you stay motivated and calm.



## People skills

- ★ Use active listening – to help you identify more precisely the problems that clients and other people ask you to resolve (pages 140–1).
- ★ Use your people skills to resolve problems that arise from interactions with others (pages 150–6).
- ★ Use your teamworking skills to resolve problems collaboratively (Chapter 7).
- ★ Communicate your problems and solutions clearly (pages 218–19).



## Emotional

Emotional responses have a powerful effect on our ability to think. Aim at being emotionally calm and mentally engaged. If you feel frustrated with the problem:

- ★ take a break to establish calm
- ★ give yourself a pep-talk, reminding yourself it is just a question of time and method
- ★ use stress-management techniques (see Cottrell, 2019b)
- ★ see sections on emotional self-management on pages 114–26.

# Defining the problem

## What kind of problem?

Research shows that people who spend more time at the beginning working out what a problem really involves, resolve them more easily (Keane et al., 1989). For example, successful mathematics students spend much longer reflecting on which category of mathematical problems they have been set. They look for similarities with problems they have worked on before so that they understand the nature of problem. They weigh up various approaches before selecting and applying the best one. Less successful students launch into assignments without defining clearly what these entail.

This stage is sometimes referred to as 'problem elaboration'. It involves analysing a task from various perspectives and defining what kind or type of task you are really facing. Sometimes this is easy, especially if you recognise the problem as similar to one you have dealt with before. At other times, you have to work at the problem, such as by:

- ★ analysing it from different perspectives
- ★ researching it
- ★ playing with it creatively (Chapter 10)
- ★ drawing on your expertise (Chapter 4)
- ★ treating it as a task to manage (Chapter 9)
- ★ finding comparable problems or case studies that provide clues for finding a solution.

## 1 Clarify the core issue

Simplify the problem as far as you can in order to work out what is at its core.

- ★ **Pare down** Remove any unnecessary wording so as to distil the problem's essential features. Alternatively, highlight the key phrases so these stand out from the rest. Make it easier for you to see what is being asked and what about this, if anything, might already be familiar to you.
- ★ **Verbal sketch** State the core issue or questions in your own words and as simply as possible. This helps you to check that you really do understand what is being asked of you in this problem.
- ★ **Number** Identify how many aspects there are to the problem. If there are several, clarify the core issues or questions for each. This makes it easier for you to see whether there are several similar problems that you can draw on, each of which might provide part of the solution.

## 2 Clarify 'type' of answer

If the problem seems baffling, you could start by clarifying, in broad terms, what sort of solution or answer is required and in what form.

- ★ Would the solution take the form of an equation? A formula? A new process? A unit of measurement? A set of recommendations? An action plan?
- ★ Do you need to present this in any particular way? As a verbal report? A presentation? An entry in your diary? A written report? A short answer or an in-depth analysis of the problem and its resolution?

## 3 Sketch it

For many science-based, engineering, mathematical and other problems, a visual representation of the problem helps to clarify the problem. This could take whatever shape you find useful, such as:

- ★ **A map** to set out where people or items are located in relation to each other (such as for working out seating problems for offices/events, or where a diseased plant is growing relative to others)
- ★ **An equation, process map or chart**, which sets out the information already known for different aspects of the problem – and where the gaps lie
- ★ **A chronological chart**, to identify how a recurring event unfolds
- ★ **A graph or diagram** to represent the underlying movement or relative positions of different aspects of the problem.

## 4 Identify the gap

To help work out the nature of the problem you are facing, state the distance (or gap) between

- (a) where you are now – the existing state or current position, and
- (b) where you want to be (the desired state, outcome or goal).

Depending on the problem and context, you can do this through writing, a diagram, visual map, formula or by naming the category of problem if it is one you know.

### *Desired outcome v. obstacle*

One way of identifying the gap is by stating what you (or a client) wants and what is obstructing that. An initial sketch of that might look like:

I/they want (desired outcome)	But... (obstacle(s))
I want to swim the channel.	I can only swim a mile and am not used to swimming far in the sea.
They need their employees to work as a harmonious, effective team.	Spin-off groups work in isolation, rather than to a shared team plan. No team-building events are used.

## 5 What do you need to know?

What other information do you need to know in order to fully understand the problem?

## 6 State it

Write out clearly the nature of the problem in your own words. For guidance on writing a problem statement, see page 254. This is your focus for finding a solution. Sometimes, if you can't quite work out what the problem is, it can help to start a draft of your problem statement to pinpoint what you know already, and what you still need to work out.

## 7 Helping others/clients to define problems

Employers and other clients don't always find it easy to define the problem that they want you to help them resolve. They can be too close to the situation to gain an objective perspective, which is why they might bring in an outsider to help them find a solution.

Listen carefully to what they say and match that against what you find when investigating the problem. For example:

- ★ They might have too vague a sense of what they want to be different (their desired or ideal state).
- ★ They might have a misguided sense of who or what is at the root of the problem.
- ★ They might be bundling several problems into one, and blaming a single cause such as the IT system, an unpopular member of staff or too little investment when, in practice, a series of issues need to be separated out.
- ★ They might think they have many problems when there is a single underlying cause.

Investigate the issues thoroughly such as by:

- ★ visiting the site
- ★ viewing the website
- ★ reading their materials
- ★ interviewing those involved
- ★ understanding the business context, trends and issues typical in the sector
- ★ researching the background to the problem – when it started, why it is being dealt with now
- ★ clarifying what, precisely, the client wants to be different and for what purpose/benefit?

This puts you in a better position to understand the nature of the problem and to check where the root of the problem lies. Talk it through.

# Write a problem statement

## Why do this?

This part of the process provides important insights into the scale of the problem and the kind of solution that will be required. It clarifies the task for you and anyone else who needs to know. It is especially valuable when undertaking tasks, projects or problem-solving as part of a team or for a client, as it helps ensure that all parties interpret these in a similar way, avoiding confusion and time-wasting.

A good problem-statement can be used within a business plan, application for finance, or for conveying to managers and work colleagues the reasons for a project you wish to undertake.

## What to include

State clearly the distance (or gap) between

- (a) where you are now (the existing state or problem), and
- (b) where you want to be (the desired state, outcome or goal).

The level of detail depends on the context, such as how complex the problem is, who needs to know what and, for assignments, whether you are working within word limits. Include:

- 1 **Desired outcome** The goal, situation, future environment, conditions or type of solution wanted.
- 2 **Current situation** Outline what things are like now, and, or gaps in what is known.
- 3 **Specific gap** Clarify the distance between the desired and current situations.
- 4 **Purpose or significance** Why resolving it matters: who or what would benefit? What would be the consequences, short- and/or long-term? What exactly would be different?
- 5 **Urgency** Establish the time-scale (if relevant, such as for a business or medical problem).
- 6 **Resources** The financial, staff and other resources needed and available (if relevant).

## What not to include...

Usually the problem statement does not include the solution – as the precise nature of the problem should be agreed before going on to consider solution options. Partly, this is so everyone involved can work on the solutions together, and feel they have a say in these, once it is clear what is needed. However, it is worth checking expectations as in some companies and on some courses, the practice is to define the problem and summarise the solution.

## Template statements

**Who** Client Y (or Company X, Team Z, etc) ...

**Desired outcome** ... want ... (state what they want to see in place/the kind solution they are looking for)

**Current state** Currently, this is not the case. There is ... (state what they are experiencing that is different to the desired outcome)

**Gap** This is a major/significant/moderate distance from where they want to be. State what this is.

**Significance of the gap** The ramifications of this are that ... (state how the company/client/time/others are affected as a result of this gap. What is the impact of it on their performance, targets, future ambitions, staff morale, liabilities, lost opportunities, financial loss, and/or reputation, etc.)?

**Urgency** The client/company/team has identified that this needs to be resolved within the next... e.g. three months, by April 5th at the latest.

**Resources** State relevant resources, e.g. A company member will be allocated 2 days a month to coordinate with the project team.

## Want to know more?



See worked examples of problem statements at: <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/problem-statement-examples.html>

Tapiwa Chiwewe (2017) *You don't have to be an expert to solve big problems*. TED@IBM (Dec 2017).

# Working towards a problem solution

Once you are clear about the nature of the problem and, if others are involved, everyone is in agreement, then you can move on to working out a solution. It isn't always easy, at first, to see where the solution might lie. For complex problems, this might take some thought, analysis and creativity. If you are stuck, the following can provide some starting places.

## Work from the problem

If the problem has been clearly defined, then it is likely to be pointing in the direction of possible solutions already or at least towards starting points. Use your understanding of what the problem is to help find an answer. If that doesn't seem possible, then find out more about the problem. Investigate more deeply until insights begin to emerge.

## Current state

- ★ Look more closely at what works already in the current situation, the information that is available, and at what might help you to find answers.
- ★ Analyse what is wrong with the existing situation or missing in the information.
- ★ If relevant, ask yourself why you can't see the answer: what else do you need to know?

## Causes and maintenance

- ★ Investigate probable causes of the problem. What gave rise to it in the first place?
- ★ Why does the problem persist? Why hasn't it been resolved? What kinds of ongoing conditions or behaviours help to maintain the problem so that it hasn't been resolved? In whose interest is it that the problem remains?
- ★ If the problem is a practical one, use your observation skills: what can you see that needs to be addressed?
- ★ If it relates to a process, procedure or product, try these out for yourself to gain insights into how well they work.
- ★ If the problem is work-based, interview anyone who could shed light on the problem.
- ★ If you have access to experts in related fields, check whether they can throw any light on possible causes.
- ★ Sketch the relationship between causes, such as in the examples on pages 258–9.

## The desired state

- ★ Do specific aspects of the desired outcome make it harder to arrive at a solution? If so, look at these separately.
- ★ Decide whether these need to be worked on separately. If so, can they be left until later, or do they need to be resolved first?
- ★ Consider whether the desired outcome is practicable: does it need to be reformulated?

## Pre-requisites

- ★ What needs to be in place now, or in the future, for a solution to work?
- ★ What might need to change?
- ★ Whose buy-in or help is essential?

## What do you need to know?

- ★ What other information do you need to know in order to identify the best possible solution to this problem in this context?
- ★ What do you need to know in order to work out whether potential solutions will work in this instance?



Interview anyone who could shed light on the problem

## Observation

### Working on problems

For a few weeks, take greater note of what kinds of barriers seem to get in the way of easy resolutions of problems or issues that arise – and what then eases the situation.

# Draw on familiar approaches

## Activity

### Your current approaches



How would you go about solving the following problems? Spend a few minutes working them out, on your own or with others. Jot down the processes you went through in order to arrive at a solution that satisfies you.

- 1 You want to go on holiday to a sunny place, within your budget. You do not know where to go yet, but do know that the options are all places where you do not speak the local language. What are the things you have to consider in order to ensure you will have a good time when you arrive?
- 2 You want to cook a meal for three friends to celebrate a birthday. One of them might bring a child. Another guest is allergic to nuts. You have three days to prepare it and want it to be something they would all really like. You also have quite a tight budget. What will you cook? What else will you do to ensure that the meal is successful and within budget?
- 3 Your tutor has just pointed out that your essay must be in by Friday. You hadn't realised there were two essays to submit this week. Both must be in on time. How will you go about meeting the deadlines?

Make a list of the approaches you considered. Then compare this with the 'familiar approaches' below and on page 257.



## 'Back of an envelope'

You might have devised a quick simple strategy, sometimes referred to as solving things 'on the back of an envelope'. Typically, you would move back and forth between the steps listed below. Note that most relate to 'thinking through' before taking action. You could use a real envelope, or the template on the companion site.

Basic problem-solving	
1. Define the problem	What is the real issue?
2. Desired outcome	What do I want?
3. Options	What outcomes are possible?
4. Feasibility	What is the best option I am likely to achieve?
5. Feelings	If I follow through on this option: how will I feel?
6. Decision	What is my decision?
7. Steps	What must I do, when, with whom, where?
8. Obstacles	What might get in the way? How will I deal with these?
9. Action	Do it!
10. Evaluation	Did it work?



## Talking to others

You would probably want to ask others for ideas, insights from experience or their knowledge of people, places or processes. Informal social learning and social resources are assets for problem-solving. Such informal learning is, indeed, the dominant form of professional development for American companies (Rossett and Sheldon, 2001).

## Gathering information

You might have included approaches such as browsing the Internet, using specialist search engines, reading, collecting data, or listening to podcasts. Researching information, weighing it up and selecting what you need all help problem-solving.



## Lists

Many people organise their lives by lists. They are quick and easy tools to use and excellent starting points for any problem.



## Calculating

Many problems include a numerical component, such as working out budgets or finances or using a mathematical formula. You might have used calculations to work out how much time to allow for each stage of the two essays or how to meet the budget for the meal or holiday in the activity on the previous page.

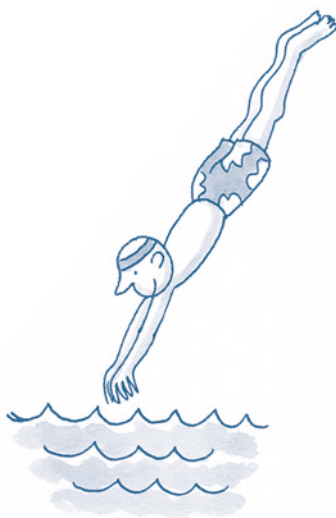
Item	£
glass	39
paint	24
glue	12
timber	53

## Following rules

Sometimes it is easier to follow accepted protocols or procedures. Mixing chemicals for a particular purpose requires precise measurements and methods. If you are not used to cooking, following a recipe is helpful. When you become more familiar with the process, you will know how and when to adapt rules in order to achieve the results you want.

## Trial and error

You might prefer to jump in at the deep end, trying out various ideas until you hit the right one. This can work well, although it is labour-intensive. You might find you are good at 'trial and error' for some areas (such as cooking) and less so in others (writing essays). Sometimes successful trial and error is regarded as 'intuition', but is typically expertise gained through time and practice.



## Visualising

You might have pictured the problem in your 'mind's eye', checking off the places where you might go on such a holiday or what the meal might be like, or how you would undertake each of the activities. Successful sportspeople use visualisation techniques to see the exact details of how they will win. This can be applied to most areas of life, including study (see page 70 and Cottrell, 2012).

## Charting

You might have used a chart, flow diagram or other graphic device to draw out the problem, so that you could work it out visually.

## Using your experience

You might have thought about recent meals that you have cooked and whether you could adapt these to suit a child or the person with the allergy. If you have already completed an essay, you might have run through the processes involved, working out the time needed for each, based on your experience. You might even have been able to work out some ways of saving time in order to meet the deadlines. For more about the Similarity approach, see page 256.

## Combining approaches

We can use these basic problem-solving strategies to help with many study-related problems. For example, to organise yourself to meet essay deadlines, you might:

- ★ ask an academic adviser or tutor for advice
- ★ negotiate with others to cover a work shift
- ★ draw on a similar essay you completed for a previous programme
- ★ use a process outlined in a study skills book
- ★ calculate the time available for each step
- ★ chart in your diary the time available to you
- ★ visualise where you noted information
- ★ draw a network of your ideas for the essay
- ★ gather more information
- ★ go for a walk to clear your mind.

# Structure the problem

## List the parts

- ★ Identify the different aspects or component parts of the problem.
- ★ List these so that you can see them as a whole set.

## Identify their relationships

Consider how each of the component parts of the problem interrelate with the others:

- ★ Is it important to resolve a particular part of the problem first, to gain information that helps you work on other segments?
- ★ If you resolved any one aspect of the problem, would other aspects become automatically resolved as a consequence?
- ★ Or is the problem comprised of separate aspects to address in turn? Do they need to be addressed in a particular sequence?
- ★ Or does the problem relate to several different blockages or weaknesses within a multi-staged process? If so, do these arise from the same or different causes?
- ★ Is it clear why there are several different issues to address and whether (or how) these relate to each other?

## Sketch the relationships

It is useful to identify relationships between causes, effects and any other parts of the problem. Map your list into a chart or diagram that shows the relationship of each part to the others. This simplifies the problem so it is clearer where to focus first, and which parts of the problem are best addressed together. Some potential models of what this might look like are sketched below. You can devise others.

### (a) Cause and effect

Check whether a multi-part problem tracks back to a common underlying cause (fig. a). Addressing the cause could resolve all effects that arose from it.

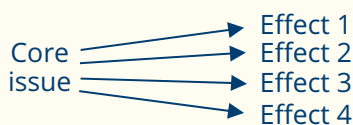


Fig. (a) One core issue; multiple effects

### (b) Sequence of causes

Cause → Effect 1 → Effect 2 → Effect 3

Fig. (b) Domino effect

### (c) Multi-level causal relationships

For complex problems, check for:

- ★ one or more prime causes
- ★ contributing causes that arise from, or feed into, those prime causes
- ★ relatively minor or subsidiary issues that arise from or feed into the contributing factors. These might need to be addressed separately, but often resolve themselves if the main issue is resolved.

In the example in fig. c, the problem was initially comprised of nine parts.

- ★ Of these, two were identified as the main causes of the problem.
- ★ Four were recognised as factors that contributed to those causes.
- ★ Three items (Related factors A, B and C) were recognised as relatively minor issues that could be dealt with by addressing the main factors.

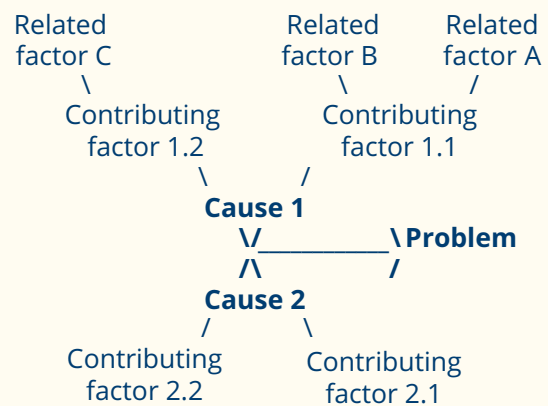


Fig. (c) Multiple, differing relationships

### (d) Several separate causes

If the causes are not obviously linked to each other, sketch them out in a 'fishbone' pattern. If you can tell which causes seem the most important to address first, note those nearer the head of the 'fish' (the problem), as below. You might find that working on these clears up some of the other apparent 'causes' or issues.

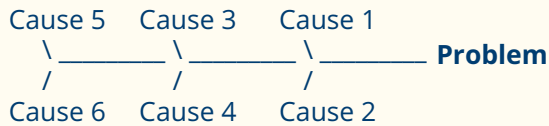


Fig. (d) Fishbone: unrelated causes?

### (e) Create a formula or equation

If you are scientifically or mathematically minded, reduce the problem to as simple a formula or equation as you can. As a simple example, the bullet points below can be reduced to the formulae in fig. e.

- ★ The price label for Fruit Z has fallen off.
- ★ Fruit Z is stamped as price code N47.
- ★ Apples are also priced as code N47.
- ★ Identifying the price of apples will indicate the price of Fruit Z (Apples cost, A = \$5).

$$Z = N47$$
$$A = N47 = \$5$$
$$Z = ?$$

Fig. (e) Create an equation

### Name it

Classifying problems makes it easier to recognise the underlying nature or structure of problems, which in turn makes it easier to recognise the kind of solution that is needed.

- ★ Is it a recognisable problem you could look up by name? If so, that helps you to research possible solutions and/or to discuss it more easily with others.

- ★ If it isn't recognisable as a problem with a given name, allocate it a memorable working title, such as one that relates to its key component parts. That helps you build your own classification of problems – and a way of recognising potential solutions in the future.
- ★ Check whether you can classify any of the parts, so these are more manageable. For example, you might recognise some parts of the problem involve processes with which you are familiar already such as defining terminology, task-management, solving equations, scheduling time, setting criteria, gathering opinion, or evaluating options.

### Best sequence

- ★ Decide whether there are aspects of the problem that are easier to resolve.
- ★ Check whether there are aspects of the problem that need to be resolved first, in order to be able to move onto later stages.
- ★ If there are several aspects to arriving at a solution, decide on the most logical order for working on these. Number these and work on them in order.

### Structure solutions

You have already encountered some ways of structuring solutions. For example, this could take the form of:

- ★ a process map, such as that which outlines the PDP process on page 6
- ★ a plan of action, broken down into interim goals and contributing actions (page 208)
- ★ a strategy such as the OPAL strategy (page 202)
- ★ an equation, formula, process, protocol, tactic or strategy that you use for other problems, or that you devise just for this one.

# Draw on analogous (similar) problems

## Why this helps

Butterworth (1992) argues that we are more likely to succeed at new tasks if we can find similarities with ones we have accomplished already. If we cannot see those parallels, then we may believe ourselves incapable of tasks well within our actual competence. This suggests that it is worth giving time and thought to what we have achieved in any one context and its applicability to other contexts.

## 1 Clarify the problem

Sometimes, you can find, straight away, points of comparison with a problem you already feel confident about resolving. That is ideal. You might not even be aware that you have recognised, automatically, a relationship between the underlying nature or structure of the two problems or tasks. That can be a sign that the problem is well within your competence, as it required relatively little mental effort.

On the other hand, if you can't immediately see an answer to the problem, or any useful match to other problems, tasks or situations, start by identifying what kind of problem you are dealing with by defining it and establishing its structure, type or category (pages 252 and 258–9). That makes it easier to find the best match with other problems that can lead you towards a solution.

## 2 Find analogous problems

Pause and reflect whether the problem reminds you, in any way, of tasks you have undertaken before. If so, note the points of similarity. Consider whether these are sufficient to resolve this problem fully. Compare the current problem with others to help pinpoint a useful focus. You could start by checking whether any of these more obvious points of comparison apply.

- ★ **Process** Does the problem require you to follow a similar set of steps in a process?
- ★ **Protocols** Is the problem one that already has set rules? For example, is it one of differentiating

one illness from another, or identifying a fault in a product, or a technological systems error? If so, there are likely to be given, recorded protocols to follow. Identify the most relevant.

- ★ **Task?** Is the problem primarily a 'task', such as one that benefits from a start-to-finish strategy such as OPAL (page 202)?
- ★ **Shared concepts or principles?** Does it have similar purposes, end points, values, ethical considerations, regulations, functions or operating mechanisms as other problems or contexts familiar to you?
- ★ **Restrictions?** Does the problem arise from similar restrictions constraints, controls, or limitations? Are there clues in other problems about how to work around these or to accommodate them?
- ★ **Success criteria?** Does it have similar criteria for how success will be measured?

If you are on a course of study, new problems you are set will often refer, in part, to those encountered previously. Look back at work or material that you have been set already. The surface content is likely to be different and might distract from the underlying similarity. Look below the surface, to find the best match with material already covered.

## 3 Identify differences

Check carefully how the current problem differs from those you are using as analogies. They are not identical so it is likely that your problem-solving strategy will need to be adapted to fit the current problem. Identifying the difference is as important as identifying the similarity.

## 4 Focus and significance

Weigh up the significance of the similarities and differences. Some might not be relevant. Focus on the comparisons in the structure of the problem as a starting point, rather than focusing on relatively insignificant points of detail.

# The 'multiple solution' approach

The 'multiple solution approach' puts emphasis on generating and analysing many potential solutions – or at least more than one. Having options increases the likelihood of arriving at a better solution.

## Propose an initial solution

Get the ball rolling by proposing an initial solution. You might arrive at this by using the methods on pages 255–60, devising a network (page 241), or through the expertise approach (pages 63–7), the OPAL strategy (Chapter 9), creative thinking (Chapter 10), or some other route. Your proposed initial solution does not need to be perfect as it is only one of many that you will consider. Jot down:

- ★ how this reduces the gap between 'ideal' and 'current' states? (See page 253, point 4)
- ★ any gaps that still remain
- ★ any weak points in this initial proposal or aspects that need to be considered further
- ★ ideas that emerge from recognising and working on initial gaps and weaknesses.

## Generate further ideas

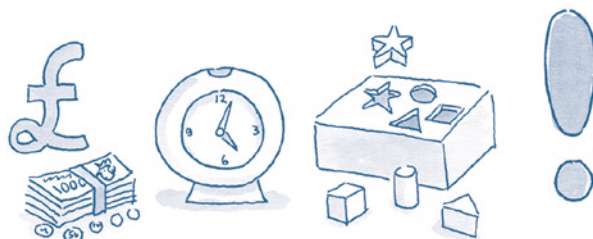
Jot down, quickly, as many other ideas as you can. Aim for around five to seven options which would be helpful in some way. Put words such as 'realistic' and 'sensible' aside to release your imagination. Draw on methods you have covered in the book, such as those outlined in Chapter 10. Brainstorm potential solutions to the 'weak points' of your initial solution above.

## Identify 'seed' ideas

For each of your ideas, tease out its possible value – any seed that might contribute to a final workable solution. Your initial idea might be maverick ('relocate to the moon'; 'win the lottery'; 'kidnap the professor') but it could hint at a workable solution. Work it for its potential. For example:

- ★ 'Relocating to the moon'. The idea of relocation might be useful – a change of room or building might help.
- ★ 'Winning the lottery'. If not lottery funding, there could be other sources of financial backing such as from a business or charity.
- ★ 'Kidnapping the professor'. Asking for some time with a professor, tutor, expert, mentor or employer to discuss your idea might help.

## Evaluate potential solutions



Weigh up factors for and against your proposed solutions, considering, for each, such criteria as:

- 1 Goal** Does it achieve the desired outcome?
- 2 Cost** Can it be afforded?
- 3 Time** Can it be completed in the time available?
- 4 Expertise** Is the necessary knowledge and skill available to achieve the solution?
- 5 Suitability** Does it suit the circumstances and people involved?
- 6 Value** Which proposed solution offers a good result with the least effort and cost?
- 7 Risk** Will it really work? What might be the unintended consequences? Can these be managed?

If you use the OPAL strategy (page 202), incorporate evaluation of multiple solutions into the orientation stage.

## Synthesise the best

- ★ Select two or three potential solutions to consider in more detail.
- ★ Identify the best aspects of each solution. Consider how you could synthesise those into a single best solution.
- ★ Check that the 'best features' still work well when brought together into one strategy.

## Identify criteria

- ★ Which criteria must be met (time, cost, design, etc.)?
- ★ Which are essential? Which desirable?
- ★ List these in order of priority.

## Make a decision

- ★ Which solution do you want to go with? Does this meet the criteria you identified as priorities? If not, what can you change or do to ensure that those priorities are met?
- ★ Select the solution that best meets essential criteria.
- ★ Fine-tune this to meet the essential criteria.

## Activity



### Multiple solutions: Solve that problem!

Use the problem you identified for 'Selecting a focus' (page 249). Consider this from several perspectives, using the outline from pages 263–4 to arrive at your best solution.

#### Orientation

- 1 Define the problem (pages 252–3).
- 2 Take a break or do something different. Without checking your initial definition, define the problem again. You could repeat this several times. Draw on any familiar problems to help you identify the nature of the problem (see page 256).
- 3 Compare your definitions to see whether the emphasis changes from one definition to another. Draw out the phrases or ideas from across your set of definitions to arrive at the clearest and most precise version.

#### Plan

- 4 Generate as many potential solutions or part-solutions to this problem as you can (see page 261), without censoring too much at this stage.
- 5 Identify what is of value within each solution.
- 6 Select two or three solutions, or part-solutions, to consider in more detail.
- 7 Evaluate each according to criteria relevant to you (cost, time, etc.). (See page 263 for a resource on the companion site that you could use to help you do this.)
- 8 Synthesise the best points from all the solutions.
- 9 Decide on a solution that best fits the priorities and adapt it to meet the criteria.
- 10 If there is the opportunity to test out the solution, do so. Adapt further if needed.
- 11 Draw up an action plan (see pages 208 and 387).

#### Action

- 12 If there is the opportunity, apply the solution to the problem, carrying out your action plan.
- 13 Set prompts and reminders in your diary to motivate you to action.

#### Learning

- 14 Identify what you have learnt from working on that problem.
- 15 How might this improve your approach to similar problems and to problem-solving in general?

# Evaluating multiple solutions

This resource can be used to weigh up each of your proposed solutions to problems you are considering, using criteria to evaluate them. It is also available on the companion site.



**Problem to be solved** (*state briefly*):

## Criteria for success

In evaluating your solution, consider such factors as those listed below. It may help to **circle** those you believe to be especially important. Then **highlight** those that are essential.

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>1</b> particular details that must be included in the solution | <b>8</b> desired finish date/ deadlines               | <b>15</b> clients' criteria             |
| <b>2</b> originality  | <b>9</b> quality issues                               | <b>16</b> health and safety issues      |
| <b>3</b> maximum cost   | <b>10</b> design features                             | <b>17</b> inclusiveness/cultural issues |
| <b>4</b> likelihood of gaining funding/ financial support         | <b>11</b> specific expertise needed and/ or available | <b>18</b> ethical issues                |
| <b>5</b> market   | <b>12</b> creates new opportunities                   | <b>19</b> legal considerations          |
| <b>6</b> sustainability   | <b>13</b> risks can be managed                        | <b>20</b> other                         |
| <b>7</b> time available   | <b>14</b> assignment criteria                         |   |

**Essential criteria** (in order of importance, drawing on the list above)

1		4	
2		5	
3		6	

Aspect	Solution number or name <input type="text"/>
Outline of this proposed solution	
Strengths of this solution	
Gaps, weaknesses or risks	
Seed ideas: interesting aspects of this solution	
Time considerations	
Costs: good, bad, resolvable?	
How far does the solution meet your other essential criteria (page 263)?	
Parts of this solution to keep and build into the final solution?	

# Deciding on a solution using criteria

When working on complex and multi-layered problems for which you have generated multiple solutions, the point comes when you must make a decision. It might not be clear-cut which potential solution to choose.

In some instances, you might be able to try out several solutions using a 'trial and error' approach. Even if that is possible, it can be unnecessarily time-consuming. At other times, it isn't feasible to use trial and error, due to lack of time or resources or because that would be too disruptive or counterproductive. This is why it is important to set clear criteria for making decisions.

## Setting criteria up-front

It is easy to become attached to a solution for the wrong reasons, such as the amount of time spent on it, the effort it required, or loyalty to the person who suggested it. This is true in many contexts, from problem-solving to evaluating the success of a project. To enable more objective decision-making, before the work is under way, set the criteria by which you will evaluate success. Decide on criteria that are achievable.

## Identify relevant criteria

For each problem, consider the relative importance of matters such as those listed in the 'Evaluating multiple solutions' resource on pages 263–4. These are illustrative of typical issues to consider but are not exhaustive, so add others as relevant to problems you encounter. If working for a client, involve them in setting the criteria. Use such a list to serve as an aide-memoire to help you decide on criteria for problems you work on. You might have just one criterion, several or many.

Jot down details for each of those criteria that are most relevant for the task or problem on which you

are working. Gain a sense of what those criteria really mean, especially if working for a client or where there are consequences for others if criteria are misunderstood. If in doubt, talk them through with clients and other stakeholders. Use these details to help you decide between solutions or to identify the best aspects to take on board from each of your potential solutions.

## Identify essentials

If you have listed many criteria, some will be essential and others desirable. It might not be possible to arrive at a solution that meets all criteria.

Divide your long-list into essential and desirable. You could also rate your criteria in order of priority to help you focus on the most important ones.

You might also find it useful to cluster alternative sets of priorities: *either* criteria x, y and z must be met *or*, if not, then x, y, b, c and d must be met. Decide which criteria could be flexed.

## Use the criteria

Be systematic in:

- ★ deciding and sharing criteria with clients and/or stakeholders
- ★ using the criteria throughout the process of devising solutions: keep these in sight
- ★ evaluating each of your proposed solutions against the criteria
- ★ deciding on a solution that meets the criteria, and especially the essential criteria
- ★ writing up your solution: state precisely how it meets the criteria
- ★ presenting your solution to others: be clear how the solution does meet the agreed criteria.

# Problem-solving using action sets

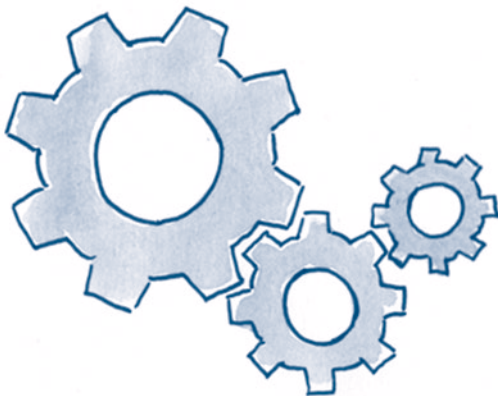
## Collective support

Some problems arise in our lives, whether when studying, in the workplace, or working with others, that seem intractable. It can feel hard to resolve problems such as:

- ★ those that seem to have no solution
- ★ when other people seem to be the 'problem'
- ★ when we are anxious about consequences
- ★ when we don't feel confident to speak or take action
- ★ when we are locked into a bad habit
- ★ when we can't see a clear path forward.

At such times, it is useful to call upon the collective wisdom of others who have no vested interest in the issue, who can help to unlock our thinking. Action sets can be a great way of doing this.

## Action sets



Action sets are semi-formal groups which offer opportunities to gain input and various options for action from others in a structured way. Often, members join action sets for a particular purpose, but form bonds and stay together for many years.

Action sets, as the name suggests, focus on getting things done. They help each person to find a solution to a problem or difficulty of their own choice. The group generates ideas and discusses solutions within a tight time-frame, and at the next meeting checks that the action was undertaken. The group itself does not carry out the action: it merely proposes and monitors action, at the invitation of each member.

## Advantages of action sets

- 1 The rules are easy to follow.
- 2 All members are equal.
- 3 They provide supportive contexts: usually, you choose to be in an action set.
- 4 You have a place where you can take a problem or difficult issue and work it through.
- 5 The process is adhered to strictly so that the meetings remain focused, leading to productive outcomes.
- 6 They offer a range of perspectives on a problem you choose to bring.
- 7 They generate ideas to help resolve problems.
- 8 They require rapid decision-making, and so assist decision-making skills for all members.
- 9 They give practice in arriving at solutions quickly.
- 10 They offer an additional source of motivation: reporting back to the group at the next meeting encourages you to take action.
- 11 Members can get to know each other well and know what works for each member.
- 12 They enable you to learn how others address a wide range of problems, increasing your exposure to new situations, strategies, and insights into what works.

## Choosing members

It is useful to include people in similar situations to yourself – or whose experiences are relevant to your own in some way. However, that is not essential. You might like to select an action set according to different experiences, skill-sets, and preferred team roles (see page 163).

If so, bear in mind the aims of the group. What types of people are likely to work best together for the kinds of problems that arise from your programme or workplace? Would it help to work with outsiders for a more objective viewpoint?

## Action sets are not...:

- ★ emotional support groups (however, an action set could decide to make them so)
- ★ discussion groups: talk is circumscribed
- ★ social groups, although a set could opt to meet up socially before or after if it wished
- ★ project groups: they do not 'do' the work needed to solve an individual's problem outside of the meeting.

## Guidelines for meetings

Ideally, leave at least 15 minutes for each member. If you have only an hour a week for such meetings, a set of four people is probably best. If you have two hours, a group of six is probably the optimum size. An even number will work best.

The timing below assumes six people in a two-hour slot. With around 15 minutes for a break, that gives each person 17 minutes.



### Stage 1 (3 minutes)

Each person reports back on actions they have taken since the last session. The group encourages them to notice successes so far as well as actions that weren't completed. If the person has not followed through on what was agreed, this might be their focus for the session.

### Stage 2 (3 minutes)

- ★ The first person has three minutes to outline a problem or area for improvement. Time is limited so each person needs to get to the point quickly.
- ★ While that person is speaking, the group listens attentively, without interrupting, asking questions or seeking clarifications.
- ★ One person keeps the time.
- ★ Once the time is up, the speaker must stop. If they don't, everyone supports the time-keeper in reminding them that time is up.

### Stage 3 (2 minutes)

The group asks one or two short questions to clarify any points not understood, or asks for particular details. The person who has brought the problem must keep all responses brief so that the group can ask the questions they need.

### Stage 4 (3 minutes)

The group then brainstorms possible solutions and ways of thinking about the problem. The person whose issue is being considered listens without speaking or clarifying. Whilst listening, they might find that particular angles sound interesting, or they might recognise the solution they need. Again, a limited time is allowed.

### Stage 5 (4 minutes)

In this stage, the person whose problem or issue is being considered and the rest of the group have a few minutes to clarify and discuss the options together – albeit briefly.

### Stage 6 (2 minutes)

The person whose problem or issue is being discussed has a set time to state which actions they will undertake before the next meeting. All members note what has been agreed. It is agreed that they will ask for progress on the agreed actions at the next meeting.

## Running the action set

Ideally, action sets are meetings of peers where everybody takes equal responsibility. Tasks are rotated, or allocated to individual strengths:

- ★ organising the room
- ★ sending reminders of meetings
- ★ time-keeping in meetings
- ★ keeping the group strictly to each stage and focused on the problem under discussion
- ★ maintaining a supportive atmosphere
- ★ ensuring everyone contributes and has equal time
- ★ rotating the order in which people speak, so that the same person isn't always first or last.

You may find action sets work better if roles are allocated to each team member. (See page 163.)

### Want to know more?



I. McGill and L. Beaty (2001). *Action Learning Sets: A Practitioner's Guide*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge).

# Review: Practical problem-solving

1

## Understand potential barriers and draw on your resources

Be aware of what, typically, hinders effective problem-solving. Recognise that you have a plethora of resources, mental, intellectual, social, emotional and inter-personal to call upon to help overcome these.

2

## Define the problem first

Before launching into finding a solution, making recommendations or taking action, take the time to work out exactly what the problem involves. Be sure you are tackling the right problem.

3

## Write a clear, brief, precise problem statement

Specify the precise nature of the problem. In particular, clarify what you (or a client) want as a desired outcome, what exists currently, and the gap between the two. Agree this with stakeholders, if relevant.

4

## Work towards a problem solution

Don't worry if you can't see a path to the solution straight away. Assume that you will resolve the problem if you work at it. The answer often lies within the problem, at least in part, so analyse carefully all the information you have and decide what further information you need.

5

## Start with familiar approaches

Although you might need to research or design solutions, it is likely that you can derive at least part of the solution from approaches, techniques, strategies or formulae with which you are already familiar.

6

## Simplify the problem

Pare problems down to their core structure or key issues so that it is easier to see what you need to do. Check whether a simple solution would work – one that might fit on the back of an envelope!

7

## Structure the problem

List all parts of the problem. Work out how each part relates to the others, such as whether they are causes, effects, contributing factors or separate issues. Check whether resolving one part is needed before proceeding with other parts, or whether resolving one aspect could resolve the whole.

8

## Draw on analogous problems

Check through your toolbox of experience and resources to find problems that are similar, even in part, to the one that you are attempting to resolve. Use their solutions to help you move forward in devising a solution to the new problem. Draw on several problems if needed to find the solution you need.

9

## Generate multiple solutions

Give yourself options. Don't stop at the first set of ideas you have. Generate other ideas. Let your brain work on the problem. Be inspired by your potential solutions and synthesise the best from each.

10

## Use criteria to decide on the best solution

Set criteria at the outset. Use these to keep you focused whilst generating solutions and in deciding on which solution to use.

11

## Gain the benefit of an action set to resolve problems

Join or establish an action set to gain the benefit, over time, of resolving tricky problems and learning how others go about resolving a wide range of problems.



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ understand what is meant by 'reflection'
- ✓ understand the importance of reflection to evaluating and improving personal performance
- ✓ identify different kinds of reflection for a variety of purposes
- ✓ develop methods for improving your reflective skills
- ✓ consider Kolb and Schon's models of reflection – and devise your own model
- ✓ consider how to communicate the results of your reflection to other people.

## The value of reflection

If you had a fleck of bright green paint between your eyes, or egg on your chin, you wouldn't be able to see them. When you are too close, without a mirror or a comment from other people, you could pretend there was nothing to see. This won't, of course, prevent others from seeing what you cannot.

Similarly, we are usually too close to ourselves to be aware of the things we most need to know. We can easily fail to recognise what is evident to other people. Fortunately, we can stand back occasionally and reflect. Well-developed skills in reflection can help us to:

- ★ gain an in-depth, honest picture of ourselves, including our hidden motivations, fears and doubts, and how these help or hinder us
- ★ understand what affects our own performance and progress
- ★ acquire insights and make better decisions
- ★ increase control over our own thoughts, emotions, responses and behaviours, so that we are in a better position to achieve what we want to achieve.

## Reflection in everyday life

Reflection is a natural activity. To a greater or lesser extent, we all spend time rethinking events, rehearsing diverse ways of approaching a situation, or wishing we had said or done things differently. With hindsight, we have the benefit of seeing how even an apparently minor comment, look or action was more significant than we realised at the time.

This is reflected in everyday expressions:

- ★ *'If only I knew then what I know now ...'*
- ★ *'With hindsight, I realise ...'*
- ★ *'I could never have imagined that doing X would result in Y ...'*
- ★ *'If I had the chance, I would do it all over again.'*
- ★ *'It was worth it/It wasn't worth it'*
- ★ *I wish I had ...'*

In other words, we review what was said or done, weighing up the consequences and considering what the alternatives might have been. We evaluate whether we would do things differently if given the chance again or whether we were right first time.

# Why engage in reflection?

## Developing independent judgement

At university level, you need to take responsibility for your own progress. Students are expected to develop into independent thinkers, capable of evaluating their own performance, drawing conclusions about what they did well and how to improve. Your success will depend, to a large extent, on yourself.

You need to be confident in your own judgements of your work. The feedback you receive from tutors and other students gives you a rare opportunity to compare your own evaluations with those of other people.

Your evaluations should be based upon sound criteria rather than a general feeling that you are right and others wrong. Consider the differences between your own evaluations and the feedback you receive from others: these may hold important clues about how to achieve better grades and to improve your performance generally.

## Reflection and personal development planning

All British universities are required to provide personal development planning (PDP) for students as a 'structured process of reflection'. By the time you leave university, you are expected to know how to use structured reflection to understand:

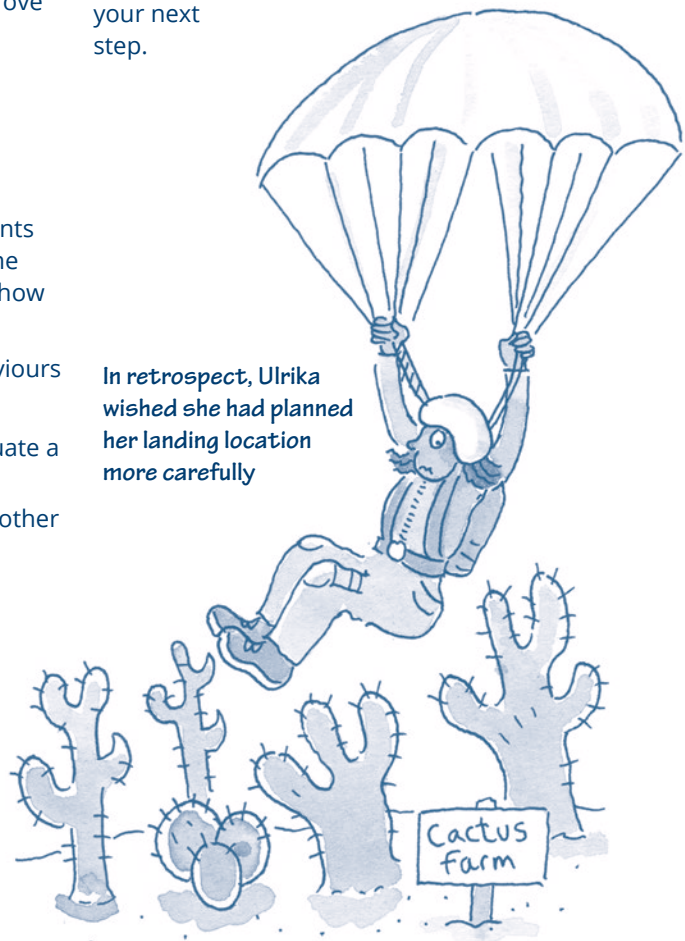
- ★ yourself, your motivations, choices and behaviours
- ★ what you want to achieve
- ★ how to plan, follow through, review and evaluate a course of action
- ★ how your responses and performance affect other people
- ★ how to take action to improve your work or learning to the benefit of yourself and/or others.

## The 'reflective practitioner'

Many occupations take a 'reflective practitioner' approach and build this into the work cycle, such as through staff reviews or appraisal. Typically, it involves taking personal responsibility for:

- ★ your continuing professional development (CPD)
- ★ evaluating your personal experience, strengths, qualities and skills
- ★ identifying ways of using your strengths well, within your professional area
- ★ identifying personal limitations and areas that could be improved through training, practice or informal learning
- ★ recognising the effects of your own responses and behaviour and taking responsibility for these
- ★ making useful contributions to team discussions
- ★ improving individual and team performance
- ★ identifying your own contribution to the results of a task, project or outcome.

Your course might include reflective activity. If not, the self-evaluation questionnaire on page 273 can help you to decide your next step.



*In retrospect, Ulrika wished she had planned her landing location more carefully*

# What is 'reflection'?

Reflection is a thinking skill. It is associated with deep thought aimed at better understanding. It includes such factors as the following.

## **1 Making sense of experience**

It is important to note the difference between 'experience' and 'learning'. Experience can be the basis for learning and development. However, just because we have been through an experience does not mean we have understood all there is to learn about it – or even that we have learnt anything at all. Reflection is an essential part of learning. It is where we analyse experience, actively attempting to 'make sense' or find the meaning in it.

## **2 'Standing back'**

By 'standing back', we gain a better view or perspective of an experience, issue or action. It is not easy to reflect deeply when caught up in the midst of activity.

## **3 Repetition**

Reflection involves 'going over' a situation, perhaps even several times, in order to look at it critically from several points of view and to check nothing has been missed.

## **4 Deeper honesty**

Reflection is associated with a striving after the truth. Honest and open reflection helps us to acknowledge things we find difficult to admit in the normal course of events.

## **5 'Weighing up'**

Reflection involves a sense of even-handed judgement and critical evaluation – it usually involves 'weighing things in the balance', taking all things into account rather than just the most obvious.

## **6 Clarity**

Reflection can bring greater clarity, as though seeing things reflected back in a mirror. This can be useful at any stage in the process of devising, carrying out or reviewing activities.

## **7 Understanding**

Reflection is associated with opening up to learning and understanding at a deeper level, including gaining insight into theories, concepts and experiences that are difficult to access by other means.

## **8 Making judgements**

Reflection involves an element of making judgements and drawing conclusions.

## **Reflection as challenge**

The reflective process is challenging. We do not always like to discover the truth about ourselves: it can be embarrassing to find we have been talking to others with a dab of egg yolk on our chin. We would rather believe it wasn't there or that nobody could see it.

The same is true of the reflective process. When it works well, we discover things that make us feel uncomfortable. Our natural reaction is to pretend they do not really matter, or to look for an excuse, or to blame someone else. The things we most need to know can be the hardest to hear.

It takes time and practice for people to develop good reflective skills. Don't be discouraged if you think reflection does not come naturally to you. This book structures reflection on a wide range of issues. If you have undertaken some of the reflections and activities, then you will already be developing a good sense of what is involved.

## Activity



### The relevance of reflection to me

Circle as many of the following as are relevant and of benefit to you. Use the empty circles to add in any others of importance to you.

To consider how I could get better marks

To think about how what I am learning all fits together

To see how I could do things differently at work

To manage my emotions better

To put time aside to consider my life plans

To check I am on track with what I need to do to get a job

To check I am on track with what I need to do to gain promotion

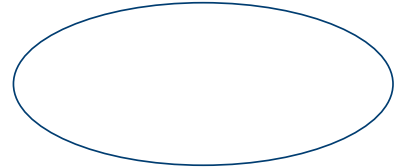
To check that I am taking things in on my course

To apply theories to my work

To make sense of what I am learning

To be more efficient

To be more mindful of how I do things



To make me slow down and think

To become more self-aware

To see how I change over time

To be more professional in my approach

To think about how my actions affect others

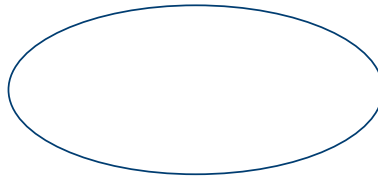
To take on board feedback from other people

I need to do it for my course

I need to do it in my job

To gain a broader perspective

For staff appraisal



For better self-understanding

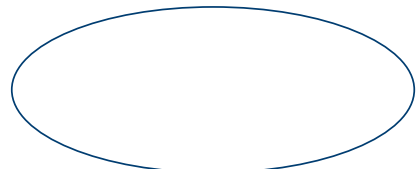
To consider what training I need

To avoid getting into a rut

To find out where I could introduce more variety to the way I do things

For space to think about what matters to me

To take on board new ideas



Highlight the one that is the most significant for you.



## Reflective practice

For each of the following statements, rate your responses as outlined below. Note that the rating for 'strongly disagree' carries no score.

**Rating:** 4 = strongly agree 3 = agree 2 = sort of agree 1 = disagree 0 = strongly disagree

'I am very confident that I ...'	Rating
1 know how to use reflective journals, logs or blogs	4 3 2 1 0
2 understand myself very well	4 3 2 1 0
3 challenge my own thinking sufficiently	4 3 2 1 0
4 spend sufficient time looking for relevant links between experiences and theory	4 3 2 1 0
5 spend sufficient time 'making sense' of what I learn and experience	4 3 2 1 0
6 spend sufficient time thinking about the significance of what I learn	4 3 2 1 0
7 spend sufficient time thinking about how to improve my academic performance	4 3 2 1 0
8 spend enough time thinking about the effects of my actions and behaviour	4 3 2 1 0
9 make an accurate evaluation of my own strengths	4 3 2 1 0
10 know how to apply my experience and skills to novel situations	4 3 2 1 0
11 am aware of my personal limitations	4 3 2 1 0
12 am aware of my own personal development needs	4 3 2 1 0
13 always consider all options before arriving at a decision	4 3 2 1 0
14 am always aware of all the motivations underlying my behaviour	4 3 2 1 0
15 always take full responsibility for my own part in events	4 3 2 1 0
16 think in depth about how to improve my skills in dealing with other people	4 3 2 1 0
17 spend enough time thinking about how to contribute better to groups/teams	4 3 2 1 0
18 spend sufficient time thinking about the significance of other people's actions	4 3 2 1 0
19 spend sufficient time thinking about the significance of what other people say	4 3 2 1 0
20 can reflect accurately about my emotional responses to events	4 3 2 1 0
21 could draw upon my reflections well for assessment purposes	4 3 2 1 0
22 spend sufficient time thinking about how to use the feedback I receive from others	4 3 2 1 0
23 know how to use reflection effectively when applying for jobs	4 3 2 1 0
24 am clear about the different kinds of reflection that are open to me	4 3 2 1 0
25 use reflection well to plan for my future.	4 3 2 1 0
<b>Add up your score</b>	<b>Total</b>

### Interpreting your score

You have a score out of 100. This is a rough guide to your strengths as a 'reflective practitioner'. If the score is less than 100, then there is more work that you could do to develop your reflective skills.

- ★ Using your ratings, what are your priorities for improving your reflective thinking skills?
- ★ Which one thing could you do this week in order to develop your reflective abilities?

# Nine steps for improving self-reflection

The following steps help to produce useful, focused self-reflection.

- 1 Small regular bites** Keep a regular journal, log, blog or vlog. Little and often is better at first, so that you develop the habit. Seven minutes every weekday evening is all that is needed. Alternatively, you might prefer to put aside a longer regular slot once or twice a week.
- 2 Be specific** Choose one particular situation, habit, skill or feature of your day/week as a focus for each entry. This allows for deeper thought rather than a superficial record.
- 3 Aim at improvement** Choose something you found difficult, confusing or disappointing. Think through what gave rise to this, and how you might approach things differently in similar contexts. Do note anything that went unexpectedly well, and consider why that might have been the case.
- 4 Focus on yourself** Don't use reflection as a way to blame or take out anger on others, even if you feel they deserve it. Focus on your own role, and how you can make a similar situation more manageable next time.
- 5 Use prompts** Select an activity from the book and use this to structure your reflection. See pages 290–1, on the 'Core Model for Reflection', for ideas for prompt questions.
- 6 Be critical** and evaluative rather than descriptive. Weigh up strengths and weaknesses, costs and benefits, decisions and outcomes. These are thinking skills required for most academic work. Avoid simply reciting what happened, or who said what, unless there are particular reasons for doing this, such as for clinical notes. For critical, analytical thinking, see Cottrell (2017).
- 7 Have a purpose** Reflection should be directed to a purpose. It is better to write a short, meaningful entry than pages of description. Find a topic that is useful to your life, work, studies or interests. What do you most need to improve? What would it be helpful to think through?
- 8 Ask useful questions** Consider the right questions for structuring your reflection. It is easier, when you start out, to answer questions that give shape to your thinking. See page 275.
- 9 Review** After a few weeks, read back over your entries. Look for the main themes in what you have written and consider the significance of these for you. Decide what action to take next.

## Example

### Brief critical entry aimed at improving performance

#### How good were my people skills today?

*Today was useful as I realised I am still interrupting people when they are talking. I cut right across Mary today during the seminar break. I realise this was not very skilful or considerate. Mary looked annoyed. I just ignored this at the time because I was embarrassed. It would have been better to have apologised as soon as I realised. I will next session. I have to take more care not to burst in when other people are talking. Maybe I could ask Joe and Ali to point it out to me for a while so I notice it more.*

#### Descriptive entry

The following is an example of poor reflection. It simply describes what happens and focuses on other people. The writer doesn't take personal responsibility for actions or plan to improve performance.

*In the seminar break today, Mary was talking and I wanted to say something. She had been talking for a few minutes already and I hadn't said anything. I was interested in what she was saying but then just interrupted. It was a simple mistake. I didn't mean to upset her. Mary carried on talking for a moment and then decided to stop. She looked angry. Everybody just looked at me as if I was in the wrong. I didn't even talk for very long. Peter said I had an interesting point. Then we went back in the seminar and Mary avoided looking at me all the way through.*

# Question-based reflection

There are many ways of approaching reflection:

- ★ question-based
- ★ open
- ★ synthetic
- ★ developmental
- ★ evaluative

Each can be useful for a different task or for specific stages of one – and there are overlaps and connections between these. As you develop your reflective ability, you will move more easily between these approaches to suit the task or issue. Your tutors can guide you on approaches most suitable for your course.

## Benefits

Question-based reflection provides clarity, focus, structure and direction. You might have noticed that it is used throughout this book. It has a number of advantages:

- ★ it prompts and guides you through the reflective process
- ★ it helps ensure you don't miss out any essential elements
- ★ it can give shape and direction to the subject of reflection, reducing vague discussion and 'waffle'
- ★ it enables everyone in a group to reflect on the same set of issues in a particular way in order to make direct comparisons on specific issues
- ★ questions increase motivation to produce a response and can sharpen thinking.

## Who does it suit?

Question-based reflection is associated with analytical, serial thinking. It tends to suit people who like or need to work in a logical, ordered or controlled way, and who appreciate some external direction. It is useful for people who find it difficult to structure their thinking.

*But why did I ... ?*

**Could I have ... ?**

**At what point did ... ?**

*What was the best ... ?*

**Did I ... ?**

**Which ... ?**

## Example

### Question-based reflection

#### Question

*How did I make use of feedback for my coursework?*

#### Response

*I read through it, I accepted most of it, I identified themes that need to be addressed.*

#### Question

*Did I make the best use of feedback I got for my report?*

#### Response

*At the time I thought I used feedback well. I read it and set priorities for action. Now, looking back, I don't think I took it seriously enough. I wondered if the tutor had been too harsh on me, so for my essay for the next tutor, I didn't really follow through on the advice I had been given. I then got some of the same feedback again. I realise I ignored my own priorities.*

#### Question

*How can I make more effective use of feedback?*

#### Response

*I need to set myself a realistic target. I tried to take on too many changes at once last time and then got discouraged. I need to speak to my tutor to work out one or two changes that would make the most impact. Basically, I need to be more focused and accept that I can't change everything at once.*

## Activity

### Setting questions



- 1 Jot down a list of at least ten questions to structure your reflection about one aspect of your work that you find difficult or want to improve.
- 2 Answer your questions.
- 3 Note at least three things you clarified about your performance.

# Open reflection: generating ideas

Open reflection methods encourage you to 'let go' of some concentration, and 'go with the flow' rather than trying to control the process too tightly. Open reflection can seem 'unstructured'. However, there is usually a structure of some kind to the method, such as working from prompts, working through several stages in a process or following semi-formal rules.

## Benefits

The benefits of open reflection are:

- ★ it makes it easier to get started on a task as it helps you to generate thoughts and ideas
- ★ it allows the imagination free rein so that a relatively uncensored set of associations can be formed
- ★ unexpected ideas might emerge, which can be energising and exciting
- ★ it can be more personally relevant than working through questions set by somebody else.

Open reflection is good for generating ideas, but not always for structuring and making sense of them. It is useful to combine open reflection with other approaches that help to structure your emerging thoughts effectively, so that you derive more meaning from your experience.

## Who does it suit?

Open reflection suits people who like to work in organic ways, where ideas evolve in new or original ways. It can be conducted in an orchestrated way (a tutor guides the process) or can be personally controlled. Some methods of open reflection are discussed below.

## Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a very simple and quick technique – you might already be familiar with it. You can brainstorm on small screens, although it often works best when using a flip chart, a large sheet of drawing paper, a whiteboard or other large surface.

Jot down the problem or question at the top or centre of the page (or wherever suits you). Give yourself a few minutes to write down quickly every idea or related solution that comes to mind. Don't censor 'bad' ideas or judge what emerges at this stage – just let the ideas flow.

This is one of the most widely used techniques for generating ideas quickly. You can use it to start the process of reflection, and for generating ideas for problem-solving or writing course assignments.



# Open reflection: multiple routes

## Activity

### Brainstorming



- ➔ Select a topic, problem or issue that you need to think about this week – or brainstorm ideas about an ideal birthday gift for someone you know.
- ➔ Write down the topic in one colour.
- ➔ Using a different colour, take a maximum of five minutes to jot down as many ideas as you can. Draw on the creative thinking approaches outlined on pages 235–46.
- ➔ Avoid judging your ideas as you go along; just write down whatever comes into your mind.
- ➔ Once you have finished the brainstorm, consider each suggestion in turn. Cross out the least useful. If other ideas emerge as you do this, jot them down for consideration too.

### Discussion

Discussion can be a valuable form of reflection. It has the advantage of offering multiple perspectives. Paired or group discussions can raise challenging questions that you, as an individual, might wish to avoid. Such questions are often the ones we most need to address – so discussion-based reflection can keep you on your toes.

Discussion, unless strongly steered, can tend to drift in many directions. For a more open-ended, creative discussion, use a limited number of prompt questions or statements – possibly just one. This allows the discussion to wander broadly over the topic and enter into unexpected areas.

For a more controlled discussion, set a higher number of questions and time limits for responses. If there isn't a great deal of time, three open questions is usually adequate. The higher the number of questions, the more time you need or the less open these need to be – otherwise it will be hard to cover them in any detail.

If the discussion veers away from the agenda, don't dismiss the tangents straight away. The tangents could be giving you important clues about the target subject, or about how well the group is working together, or how you might approach a particular problem. Do check, though, how the tangent is helping the group and, if it isn't, whether it is better to re-focus.

### Day-dreaming

Without forcing the issue, let your mind drift over the target subject. Day-dreaming about the target subject is more likely to occur if we give the subject serious and detailed consideration, and then do something different for a while. It is not something that can be forced, but it can be encouraged and nurtured. Use your phone, laptop or ideas notebook to capture ideas as they occur. Reflections that arise in this way are easy to forget. Sometimes, there is a natural movement from this more relaxed reflection towards more analytical questioning, as you become aware of what you are discovering.



### Drawing and doodling

Drawing and doodling can be used to distract you from controlling your thought processes too closely, allowing your mind to take you where it wishes. You might find that the drawing and the reflection have little in common. On the other hand, you could analyse your drawings for clues about how your mind is working.

Caricatures, cartoons, paintings, networks (page 241), or other graphics might be your preferred methods for reflection. Have a go, as below.

## Activity

### Doodle



- ➔ Select a new topic for reflection.
- ➔ Take a piece of paper and scribble in the middle.
- ➔ Either doodle as you think about the subject or draw a picture, diagram or network of it. The image does not have to be of good quality: it is simply a tool to distract you from concentrating too hard on the topic.
- ➔ If ideas emerge that you want to jot down or develop, then let yourself do so.
- ➔ After you have finished, consider whether this helps your thinking process.

# Open reflection: free-writing

## Free-writing

Writing as a reflective tool is different from writing intended for an audience or tutors. Its aim is to stimulate thinking, not to communicate a message to others. This means that the writing might look, sound and flow differently from other writing that you do.

Your method will be quite different from any other person's. You might just open your keyboard and type. Or open a notebook and let words flow. You might write in short phrases or long paragraphs. You might scribble and draw as you write, or use verse. In other words, you assess the value of this writing and your approach for yourself, in terms of whether it helps you to reflect and achieve your own aims.

### Example

#### Reflective free-writing

*A good day. Enjoyed the session. I made more contributions than usual – starting to feel more relaxed with group, more confident. Really liked it when we saw and discussed the video. I got very involved in the debate, which surprised me. I hadn't thought I felt so strongly. Maybe a bit dismissive of other people's ideas (???) I really didn't like the design of the bridge. Ugly. Not sure why I got argumentative about it at one point, though. Was it because I don't get on that well with Aiden anyway? Or because something reminded me of history lessons at school – rather than doing engineering which I usually love. I hadn't really thought about not liking Aiden much. Was I rude to him? What's that really about? It would be better for our project if we got on better. What can I do about that? We have very different likes and dislikes when it comes to design.*

The above example may not make much sense to you, but it did to the person who wrote it. They knew the issue they were trying to explore in this first draft. Try for yourself the free-writing activity below.

Reflective free-writing, like other free-writing, can benefit from more than one draft, especially if the theme or issue is important to you:

- ★ an initial rough draft to generate ideas
- ★ a draft that explores some issues in more detail, going off at tangents and with more details
- ★ a later draft with more structure, as you begin to draw out key themes, observations and conclusions. This final stage is important if you are required to write up your reflections for others to read, such as for a reflective essay or for assessment for professional practice.

## Activity



### Free-writing

Choose a focus for your reflections this week. This can, if you wish, be one you are using for other activities in this chapter.

- ➔ Give yourself ten minutes to write down, as fast as you can, any thoughts that come into your mind on this subject.
- ➔ Unlike brainstorms, where you just jot down any phrase, for free-writing aim to link the thoughts to some extent. Consider how one idea connects to others. Monitor, lightly, where your thoughts are going. This can help to stimulate your thinking further.
- ➔ As in the example below, you don't need to be too concerned about matters such as style, grammar or flow, as long as you can make sense of what you wrote when you come back to it.
- ➔ When you have finished, read through what you have written. Look for one key theme, idea or insight that emerges for you. Highlight or underline this, or jot down a summary of it if needed.
- ➔ Give yourself a few minutes to write down your thoughts just about that.
- ➔ Then highlight a second theme (if there is one) and write about that.
- ➔ Use the writing process to allow your ideas to develop. If you get stuck, either use the question approach (page 275) or take a break to let your brain work on the theme without pressure.

## Generative thinking

The strategies suggested above are associated with generative thinking styles. The approaches developed in Chapter 10 support this way of working.

# Synthetic reflection

Synthetic reflection involves a 'bringing together' or a 'synthesising' of different aspects and perspectives. It is useful for giving shape to a series of reflections or making sense of earlier stages of reflection. It helps you find the meaning behind your reflections, thoughts and actions. It also stimulates creative thinking. It is an important stage to add to other forms of reflection, in order to give your reflection purpose and significance.

## Benefits

Synthetic reflection is useful for:

- ★ seeing links and connections
- ★ gaining a sense of the 'bigger picture'
- ★ gaining a concrete overview from where to begin more detailed analysis
- ★ giving shape or structure to the reflective process
- ★ drawing the most useful reflections together into a meaningful, coherent whole.

## Who does it suit?

Synthetic reflection is associated with gestalt or holistic thinking. It suits people who like to spot clues, solve puzzles or put things together into new forms. Artistic endeavour and synthetic processes are closely associated.

Linking can be made in both logical and creative ways, so synthetic reflection can suit those who like order and those who like to work organically. The importance of developing these modes of thinking is highlighted in Chapter 10, *Thinking creatively and productively*.

As synthetic reflection helps to draw things together, it can be used to follow up reflection based on free writing or discussion.

## Look for links and themes

Synthetic reflection is an active type of reflection. You are looking for links, connections and leads in material you have already produced. Use it to search out hidden themes that are there on the page but which you may not yet have noticed.

Going over the material, re-writing it, colouring it, highlighting it, organising it, illustrating it, narrating your thoughts about it, discussing it, anything that makes you engage with it, will help you to focus on each theme.

### Activity

#### Synthesis



- ➔ Select one theme that you began to explore in a previous activity.
- ➔ Identify themes and links in this.
- ➔ Check for links with thoughts or ideas you have had in any earlier reflections you have undertaken, or that have emerged for you in discussions.
- ➔ Organise your thoughts so that the main themes and links stand out clearly.
- ➔ Draw out what you have gained by making such links. What is their significance for you or the task you are undertaking, or your professional practice, etc.? What have you learnt about yourself? Or about situations that you find yourself in? How can this help you?

## When using self-evaluation questionnaires

Self-evaluation questionnaires and checklists (such as those in this book) are useful:

- ★ to help you pinpoint where specific issues lie for you
- ★ to identify priorities
- ★ for using 'before' and 'after' you take action, to make comparisons over time
- ★ as easy-to-use starting points to stimulate thought.

They are best combined with other reflective methods that then take you deeper into considering the significance of your self-evaluations.

# Developmental reflection

Whilst any method of reflection can assist the process of personal development, the following methods focus specifically on understanding and improving your performance and achievement.

## Activity



### Developmental reflection

If you have not done so already, complete the activities on page 273 to identify your developmental priorities.



Jot down your thoughts about one of your priorities. For example, you might find it useful to consider some of the following questions.

- 1 What made you select this as a priority? What is really the key issue for you?
- 2 What is the goal? What do you hope to gain by developing this area?
- 3 How does this contribute to achieving your long-term or short-term goals?
- 4 What are the problems you are encountering?
- 5 What have you tried already? How successful was this?
- 6 What (else) could you change or do differently? What will you do first?
- 7 What would be a realistic time-scale to address this successfully?
- 8 Who else would benefit if you addressed this priority?
- 9 What might get in the way of your making a change? How can you prevent this from happening – or work around it?
- 10 How might you sabotage your success in achieving this? (See page 244.)
- 11 What are your feelings about this priority? What emotions, if any, does it bring up for you?
- 12 Who else needs to know about your developmental plans, to support you, encourage you, provide training or to be aware of your career ambitions?

## Monitoring performance

You might be asked to keep a log, blog or journal as part of your course and to use reflections in this to evaluate for yourself how well you are making progress on your developmental priorities.

Even if this is not a requirement, it is a useful practice. Many employers require logs to be kept of actions taken, along with the rationale and outcomes. You might be asked to contribute extracts or ideas from these as part of staff reviews or to demonstrate that you are active in maintaining your professional development.

### Example

#### Monitoring performance

Project Group: reflection

20th February

I chaired the project group meeting again today. This went better than last time. I was able to keep the group to the agenda. Unlike last time, this time I did not let people just bring up new topics as they felt like it. I was quite tough, for me. I summarised points well and got good feedback.

Unfortunately, the meeting still ran over time. I did find it difficult to break in to interrupt the flow when Carla and Ian started arguing. I am not sure whether I should speak to them before the next meeting, or whether I should just cut across them, which might seem rude. I am worried because they speak loudly and it would look bad if nobody could hear me if I try to interrupt.

Because I didn't keep these two in check, we ran over time. Time-keeping looks like my big challenge, but really the issue is about knowing how to interrupt people. There might also be an issue for me about being afraid not to be liked – something for me to think about further. Time-keeping is my next priority. I have arranged to speak about this to my tutor for a few tips.

# Reflecting on transferable skills

## Transferable skills

Chapter 3 demonstrated that expertise can be used in diverse contexts. However, skills do not translate automatically from one context to the next. They are likely to be 'transferable' only if we:

- 1 identify the range of skills involved in an activity, noting the wide range of sub-skills we integrate even into everyday experience
- 2 make specific attempts to draw parallels between one activity and another, searching out the comparisons
- 3 are able to see how one situation is similar to the other. If we cannot see those parallels, then we tend to believe ourselves incapable of dealing with situations that are well within our actual competence (Butterworth, 1992).

It is worth giving time and thought to what we have achieved in any one situation and considering its applicability to other situations, as in the examples that follow. The self-knowledge gained may help us later in new situations.

### Example

#### Transferring skills 1: academic skills

I was very anxious about writing an essay as I hadn't written one before. My programme mainly uses report writing. Reports are very structured whereas I couldn't see how essays fitted together.

I spoke to a third-year student who talked me through the process. He pointed out that the discussion part of my reports is quite like an essay. If I take out the different sections of the report, such as the method and results sections, and remove all headings and tables, I have the core of an essay already.

I find it easier to write the main part of an essay as if I was writing a report. I use headings and write a paragraph under each of these. This helps me see the structure of my writing. I have noticed I need to check my paragraphs are linked because sections of essays flow into each other more than sections of reports. I then remove the headings when I am ready to hand in the essay.

### Example

#### Transferring skills 2: communication

I have been working with children in a local school, helping them with their mathematics. The main developmental points for me were in taking responsibility for others and in using 'plain English'. However, I am also much better now at organising information so other people can use it.

The teacher pointed out that when I first started at the school, I launched straight in and tried to finish as much of the worksheet as I could. Now, I focus more on ensuring the children know what they are supposed to be doing and learning. This is partly about explaining things more clearly. However, I am also developing skills in structuring information; I am better at breaking down instructions into small chunks that the children can take in at once. They don't like it if I have to repeat instructions.

I have found that this is useful when talking to adults too. In my part-time job, I now do this when giving guidance on technical problems. I find I don't have to go over information so many times. This way of thinking seems to be helping me to plan and structure my written assignments, too. My tutor says my writing is clearer and more structured.

## Reflection

### Spotting your skills



Jot down your thoughts about any one new activity that you have undertaken recently. Consider things such as:

- ★ What skills did you already have that you used for the new activity?
- ★ How did you adapt your usual ways of thinking or doing to help you with the new task?
- ★ What did you discover about yourself by doing something new?

# Reflecting on academic development

Take time to stand back and look at the big picture regarding your academic development. Consider:

- 1 Are you sufficiently motivated to achieve well academically? How could you increase your motivation?
- 2 Are you bringing the right amount of drive and impetus to keep going and improving? Or are you coasting along, without pushing yourself sufficiently? Or burning yourself out?
- 3 Are you making good academic choices? Are these giving you a strong enough specialist base? Will your choices make you stand out as distinctive with interests and capabilities beyond your subject specialism?
- 4 How coherent are the choices you are making for options, electives or other units of study? How will these choices help you achieve your longer-term ambitions?
- 5 What are the most stimulating aspects of your current learning?
- 6 What is blocking your progress in any area? Are your study strategies still relevant or do they need to be reviewed and changed?
- 7 How have you developed academically and intellectually since starting your course? What has changed?

## Example

### Academic choices

I wanted to study nothing but chemistry as that interested me most but I am concerned that this will look boring when I go for jobs. I am also interested in travelling abroad. I couldn't see how the two could fit together as I imagined myself in a large factory near where I grew up.

The Careers Service showed me some case studies of career paths that people from my programme had taken, and I was struck by the opportunities that are available through some big companies for working in international branches. I am not sure yet whether to study a language, which I could start from scratch. This would make it easier to get picked for a placement abroad in the future. However, a specialist IT option might be more useful.

I also need to look at whether I would have better or worse opportunities if I took a subsidiary in a subject such as health science or nutrition. I have put time aside next Thursday to look through materials in the Careers Service library, and on its website.

You could reflect on differences in your performance from one topic or option to another. For example, you might experience a sudden drop or increase in your marks, or find you are more successful in some areas than others. You can begin to investigate this by techniques such as:

- ★ listing how you approached subjects or topics differently
- ★ free-writing about your attitudes or approaches to each subject
- ★ brainstorming differences between the topics and how you will manage these.

## Example

### Reflection on assignments

I spent a long time on my last assignment and was disappointed with the marks. This time I spent less time and yet my mark was better. It seems to me the main difference is that I really thought a lot about what the question meant this time. All of my work was very focused on addressing the title. It felt like I really knew what I was doing – so it took less time. I spent more time, though, just working out my initial plans. I think I have made a breakthrough in the way I go about my assignments.

What I need now is to know how to work out what is needed for my land-surveying option. I can't really see how to work out the problems in the same way. I suppose I haven't actually tried applying my 'breakthrough' method to surveying yet, so I don't know if it will work or not.

# Reflecting on professional development

Take time occasionally to consider your short- and long-term professional development.

- 1 What skills are you developing? Are there obvious gaps in your profile of skills and experience? Will these matter when you apply for jobs and/or promotion?
- 2 Are your course choices, whether undergraduate or post-graduate, right for the type of career, or career progression, that you have in mind?
- 3 Are you focusing too much on study at the expense of other experience which would help your career?
- 4 Are you making the best use of all that college or university has to offer to develop your skills, experience and CV?
- 5 Are you making the best use of all the training, supervision and networking opportunities available through your workplace?
- 6 Are there particular kinds of work experience, new roles or work shadowing that you could undertake to further develop your people skills in work contexts?
- 7 Are you making good (and early) use of your institution's Careers Service and its resources?
- 8 Would it be useful to have a mentor from the area you are considering for your future career?

## Example

### Professional development: skill awareness

I have noticed that many job adverts require good team-building skills. There is not much opportunity for teamwork on my course nor in my current job. I am worried that this will be a weak point when I come to apply for jobs. I have heard that there are volunteer activities that involve teamwork so I will follow this up this week.

Another alternative for me might be to study an elective that includes teamwork in its skills profile. Unfortunately, I haven't found one that interests me. I could choose one that is not especially interesting, but I would rather be in a team involved in real-life activities rather than study, such as through volunteer work as I think employers would prefer that ...

## Reflecting on your personal development

Reflection isn't useful only for academic or work-related contexts. You can use it to look hard at any area of your personal development. For example:

- ★ Are your life ambitions changing in any way?
- ★ Are your values and beliefs undergoing any changes? What is influencing such change?
- ★ Are you giving sufficient time to friends and family?
- ★ How are you taking care of your health?
- ★ What are you doing to manage stress and to promote your well-being?
- ★ What are you doing to ensure a good 'work/life balance'? Do you get time to enjoy yourself without undermining your work and study?

## Example

### Personal development: managing well-being

I have been working long hours at college and at work recently. I added this up to 65 hours last week. I was supposed to go to my brother's birthday party but in the end had to work an extra shift as it was double pay. This was good for the money, but my family was disappointed. I know I am not getting the right balance.

I need clear breaks with no work or study. I have to start planning out my time so I get time to rest and enjoy myself occasionally. Just stop. I have noticed that I am not sleeping well. Studying late just keeps me awake at night, rattling it all round in my head. And just processing stuff, I suppose, as there is no space to do so in the day. It would be better for me to start studying earlier and then finish off earlier in the evening.

I know it is good to relax for at least an hour before bed. At present, I can't imagine how I will find that time, but I have to own up that this is essential for me now. I'm going to look at how I can reschedule my day and week – and consider where I could save time.

I am also neglecting my interest in music. I would really like to spend more time listening to recent releases. I could do this in that hour before sleep.

# Evaluative reflection: critical events

## Critical events

One good way of finding out more about yourself is through an in-depth analysis of a single event. Select an occasion of some importance to you such as:

- ★ the first time you ...
- ★ the last time you ...
- ★ a difficult situation
- ★ a test of your values, abilities, determination
- ★ a turning point in your life
- ★ when you realised something unexpected about yourself or others.

## Reflection



### Critical event/incident

Select one event, as indicated above. Jot down your thoughts on some or all of the following, depending on what is relevant to the event you describe and what you could learn from it.

- 1 **The context** What was the background?
- 2 **What happened?** What occurred during the incident/event? Provide a brief summary.
- 3 **Your role** What did you do/say? What was the impact of this?
- 4 **Immediate response** How did you react at key moments during the incident? How did you interpret what was going on during it, and immediately afterwards?
- 5 **Outcomes** What were the outcomes or consequences of your actions (positive or not)?
- 6 **Feelings** How did you feel before, during and after?
- 7 **Longer-term impact** (if known) How did this incident or event make a difference to you, to others and/or to how other events played out longer term? Has it had any impact on your values, beliefs, habits, attitudes, motivation or behaviours?
- 8 **Inputs** What useful comments or feedback have you received? How will you make use of these?
- 9 **Alternatives** What alternative actions could you have taken?
- 10 **Gains and losses** What did you lose through the incident (e.g. Trust? Support? Other things?) What did you gain from the experience?
- 11 **Lessons** What have you learnt from this incident/event that will be of use to you in future?
- 12 **Change** What is the one main area where you need to focus to improve and/or change, highlighted by this event or incident? What will you do in order to take this forward?
- 13 **Difference** How might you prepare and/or act differently when dealing with a similar situation in future? What difference do you think that would make?
- 14 **Application** How have I applied learning from this event (if at all)?

Write down your answers to each of the above questions so that you have a record to which you can refer on future occasions.

NB If anyone else will see these reflections, check first that you have not included names or other information that identify people, departments or organisations without their express permission.

A template is available on the companion site for you to write up critical events.



## Drawing out themes

Undertake a similar analysis of other events over a period of a few weeks or months. This can provide you with a rich database of material to support your developmental reflection. When you have accumulated several such reflections, consider:

- ★ What themes emerge?
- ★ What noticeable areas of improvement are there in your performance over time?
- ★ What areas did you highlight for further action that you did not then attend to? What do you think is preventing you from doing so?

### Example

#### Critical event

**The context** I undertook a student project that contributed to a larger project at Company X, spending one afternoon a week with their research and development team. The project was important as the company had gone through a period of financial loss. I was responsible for designing a social media strategy to help attract new client bases.

**What happened** There was a huge argument between two of the sub-teams. It blew up fast and was very loud and heated. Other teams joined in, either arguing to support one of the teams, or shouting for everyone to keep quiet.

**My role** I listened for a while. I tried to tell people to calm down. No one was listening so I found I was shouting louder. At one point, when a team-leader turned on one of my friends, I heard myself say: 'Leave him alone! It's not his fault!' The team-leader turned and shouted at me to shut up or get out. Other people then shouted at him telling him not to take it out on me.

**My immediate response/feelings** I felt upset by the scale and loudness of the argument. I also got involved because two of my friends from college were on the sub-team and I was shocked that they were being shouted at like that. When we were shouted at (to shut up), I felt angry, upset and powerless. I felt as students we shouldn't have to put up with this.

**Outcomes** My shouting just added to the general noise and fuelled the heated situation. It drew in more people and didn't help to end the argument.

**Longer-term impact** The incident shook me up at the time. I would want to avoid being in that kind of argument or fuelling it. However, the team-leader and several others apologised to each other and everyone else. We spent some time talking it through together and how we felt. We went out for a pizza and we have been fine since. It showed me that such events can be survived and people can still be good colleagues afterwards. That has added to my sense of resilience, and reduced my fear of workplace conflict. I can survive being told to shut up (even if it isn't polite!)

**Inputs** My friend from college told me that though he appreciated the sentiment of me supporting him, he didn't need me to fight his battles. He said he then began to worry about me, rather than being able just to focus on what his sub-team needed to hear.

**Alternatives** I would do what I could to diffuse such a situation, maybe by moving away and not adding to it. I would check afterwards whether anyone needs support getting over it. I want to manage my own emotions better when there is conflict, staying calm, and not fearing the worst.

**Lessons learnt** I surprised myself that I allowed myself to get drawn in and worked up. I imagined I would have acted more wisely. I think I will be more self-aware in this respect. I also hadn't really thought through that I can't assume what kind of support others would find helpful. I realised that it is important to ask rather than wading in. Just because I want to help doesn't mean that I won't make things worse. I can see that could apply to a lot of situations!

# Using feedback

As a student, you will receive regular feedback on your work in ways you might never experience again. Such feedback, provided by experts who want you to succeed, is an extremely valuable resource. Be open to all feedback, irrespective of whether, in your opinion, it is fair and accurate or not. Keep bringing your thoughts back to what you can learn from it.



*Latifa could always find constructive use for her tutor's feedback*

## Use it in reflection

You can use feedback as a basis for reflection on your development, personal, professional or academic.

- 1 Keep it!** If it is written down, store it where you will find it. If it was given verbally, note it down!
- 2 Read it!** Read it again a few days later: you might not be objective the first time you see or hear it.
- 3 Contextualise it** Consider why these particular comments were given in this context. If they were unexpected, work out why that was the case. What prevented you from seeing that you might receive such comments?
- 4 Evaluate it** Consider whether you agree with the comments. If not, what are the grounds for your disagreement? Be honest in your evaluation. You don't necessarily have to agree with them, but there should be good grounds for rejecting them outright.
- 5 Decide** Decide whether you want to see similar comments on future work. Use that to commit to action (if any).
- 6 Make a change** If the comments were good, how will you build on your success? Bear in

mind that just doing the same kinds of things might not draw the same positive feedback a second time. If you disliked the feedback, what steps can you take to improve that area of your performance?

- 7 Use support** Consider sources of support available to you (books, web pages, talks, tutors, support services) to address areas for improvement.

Put time aside at least two or three times a year to go over written feedback that you have received. Note any emergent themes that indicate where you could be losing or gaining marks on a consistent basis. Jot down guidance for yourself on how you will address those points so that you really gain from having received this feedback, whether it pleased you or not.

## Varieties of feedback

Bear in mind that much of the feedback that you will receive both as a student and in life more generally is not written out as individual comments at the end of an essay. If there are comments that apply to most of a class, it can make more sense for the tutor to provide these to the whole class verbally, through a group handout, or on the course website. This is still important feedback for you to consider.

Look out for feedback that may be available to you in a wide range of formats depending on your course or at work, such as:

- ★ passing comments that provide verbal feedback on your performance during lab work, on the wards, in the studio, in class, etc.
- ★ comments provided on your ideas or on an early draft of an assignment, in seminars, in work meetings, during coffee breaks, etc.
- ★ opportunities created for you to receive feedback from other students, employers, clients, patients, or other stakeholders
- ★ comments during a taught session which provide insights into what is expected of you as a student or for that module of study
- ★ feedback from supervisors on work-placement
- ★ comments during work-based reviews or appraisals.

If feedback is not provided in written form, consider how you will capture this and record it in your own words so that you will be able to make use of it later.

# Models of reflection 1

A model is just a simplified, abstract, proposed outline of how a process works. Models can also guide you through a process such as reflection.

## The underlying concept

Reflective models, in summary, assume we can:

- 1 think about our experiences
- 2 understand them at a deeper level
- 3 learn from that thinking and understanding so as to effect change.

## Staged models

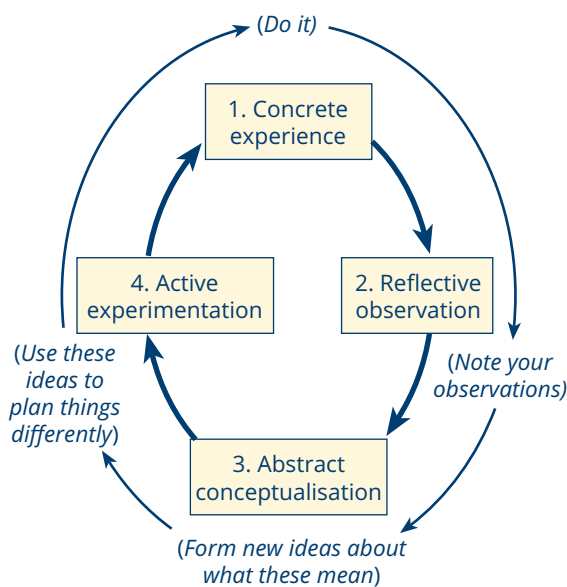
Some models of reflection break down the various reflective processes into steps or stages. Typically, these are represented as a cycle, the idea being that we can apply what we learn from active reflection, bringing greater understanding and better planning to future experiences next time round. The reflective process can be conceived in various ways. Depending on where attention is focused, this can give rise to a model with fewer or greater numbers of steps highlighted.

## Kolb's four stage model

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) has been particularly influential on developments in thinking about experiential learning. It consists of four stages:

- 1 **Concrete experience** – the experience or action
- 2 **Reflective observation** – actively taking note of what you are observing about that experience
- 3 **Abstract conceptualisation** – forming ideas about what you have observed
- 4 **Active experimentation** – putting those new ideas into practice.

The third stage, *abstract conceptualisation*, gives significance to the act of drawing generalisations – an important cognitive step in identifying how one experience could relate to others.



Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

## Multi-stage models

Other reflective models use either more, fewer or alternatively conceived stages that focus on aspects such as

- ★ awareness of initial responses
- ★ feelings and emotions
- ★ consideration of issues and theories.

Cottrell's *Core Model* (2010) uses five stages. It emphasises making good decisions for the focus of reflection, accurate reconstruction of events, close analysis, extrapolation of learning, and preparation for practical application. It encourages the selection of relevant prompts to personalise the model to fit your own experience (see page 290). Atkins and Murphy (1994) use six stages, incorporating steps such as awareness of thoughts and feelings, describing these and the broader situation, analysing them, and challenging assumptions.

## Reflection

### Working with staged models



How useful do you think the concept of 'stages' would be for your own reflection?

Are you likely to work better with:

- ★ a model that has few stages, and you elaborate the details and prompts yourself?
- ★ a model with more stages, with prompts provided that you select from as needed?

## Models of reflection 2

### Schön's model (1983)

Schön draws distinctions between reflecting:

- ★ **in action** – reflecting on what you are doing whilst in the process of doing it, such as when experts call upon pre-existing knowledge as they work, and
- ★ **on action** – making sense of an action or event once it is over, so as to learn from it for the future.

Many models refer back to this distinction. There is also a case for reflection:

- ★ **before action** – drawing on knowledge, theory, experience and input from others.

It is generally easier to reflect:

- ★ **Before action** Put aside time for good forward planning. Find useful information and examples of good practice; refresh relevant skills; simulate difficult scenarios; practise what you are going to say or do; weigh up and mitigate risks; consider the most efficient routes; plan a course of action, etc.
- ★ **On action** Put time aside after the event in order to think significant events through in detail (such as page 285).

### Reflection



#### 'Before action' and 'in action'

Your response for the 'Critical event' reflection above (page 284) was an example of reflection on action – so if you managed that, you know what that kind of reflection feels like. What kind of reflection do you think you could also undertake:

- ★ *Before action?* How would you plan differently for that kind of scenario?
- ★ *In action* – whilst you are actually in the midst of the scenario? What would you be able to call to mind and do differently whilst 'in action'?

### Alternative focal points

Depending on what is important to you and your context, other themes could be used as a focal point for reflection. Some models include an explicit stage on 'feeling' or 'thinking' whilst others assume these are integral components of all stages. If you decide to devise your own model (page 289), you could consider including stages in the process where you reflect on one or more of the following:

- ★ Behaviours
- ★ Feelings
- ★ Knowledge
- ★ Thoughts
- ★ Theories
- ★ Local practice
- ★ Systems
- ★ Structures
- ★ Policies
- ★ Procedures
- ★ Ideas
- ★ Ethics
- ★ Values
- ★ Feedback
- ★ Personal histories
- ★ Interactions with or between others
- ★ Broader issues (e.g. history, ideology, economics, politics, culture, media).

### Activity



#### Focus points for reflection

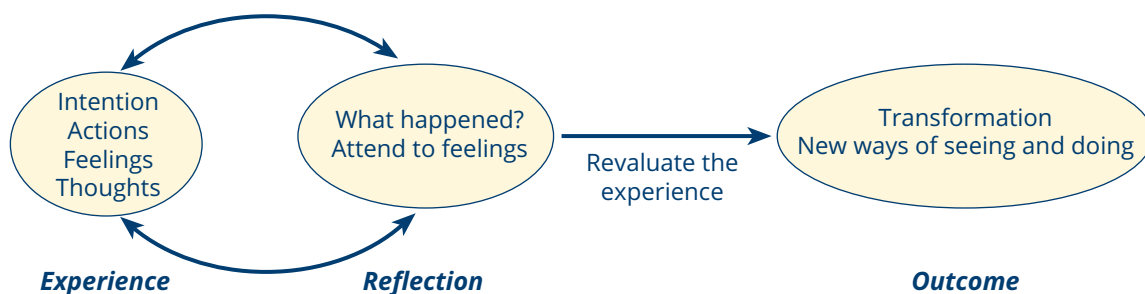
- ➔ Which of the items above are of most relevance and interest when considering your own experiences?

### Example: focus on feelings

Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) emphasise that experience, and reflections on experience, are both influenced by unconscious aspects such as emotions as well as conscious ones such as intent.

Boud et al. argue that emotions tend to override our rational thinking without us being fully conscious of this, making us less aware of how and why we are acting as we do. If we re-evaluate an event, focusing on feelings and their impact, this helps us to identify how to manage similar events differently in the future.

## Models of reflection 3



Inspired by Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985)

### Developing your own model

#### Your current model?

Does your current model for action and reflection sound at all like the following?

*I usually launch into action with a rough idea of what I think is needed. I work out my next steps as I go along, adapting to the evolving circumstances, using ideas that come into my head, or memories of doing something similar in the past. I might listen to suggestions, or think on my feet as I read the situation and calculate what is needed. Often, I don't know why I did exactly what I did but it all works out pretty well anyway. Sometimes, if someone compliments me, or maybe if I feel things didn't go well, I find myself mulling over who did or said what, or what I should have said or done. I might remember this next time I am in that situation – but then again, I might not.*

If you recognise this scenario, then you are in good company. Much of the time, this approach works well enough. Depending on the task, we form unconscious expertise in a variety of ways, from training, practice, hearsay, reading, media or being around experts. However, this model doesn't include setting time aside specifically to focus in a structured, systematic way that helps us for the future.

### Reflection



#### My current model

- ★ Jot down a brief outline of how you go about thinking or reflecting on your work or study at present.
- ★ Is this generally true of you in most areas of life?

### Why develop a better model for yourself?

We saw above that reflecting on your learning and experience is regarded as a means of deepening your understanding of how and why things work out the way they do for you. This can help you to make better decisions and exercise more control over the outcome of events.

Unless you are required by your work or course to use a particular model of reflection, then there is value in devising a model that:

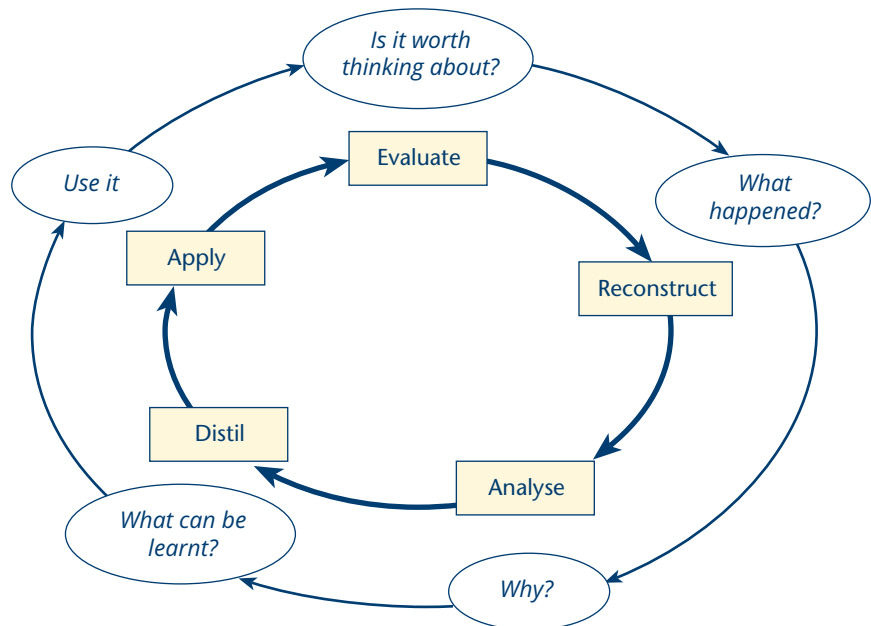
- ★ makes sense to you
- ★ with (or without) prompt questions
- ★ with as many stages as you find useful
- ★ adapting existing models, or starting from scratch if you prefer.

The 'Core Model for Reflection' below is designed to be easy for you to adapt, selecting those steps, or focal points, that are most pertinent to your experience (see page 288).

# The Core Model for Reflection

The Core Model was devised to help people formulate their own reflective model, to suit their own way of thinking and working. It identifies five key practical components.

- 1 **Evaluate significance** Is it worth reflection?
- 2 **Reconstruct the experience** What happened?
- 3 **Analyse** Why did it happen that way?
- 4 **Distil learning** Draw out lessons for the future.
- 5 **Apply** Prepare for future situations.



Core Model for Reflection (Cottrell, 2010)

A template for creating your personal model is available on the companion site: [www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)



Select those components you find appropriate, either as stages in their own right, or combined into a stage. You can also choose from prompts for each component (see below).

## 1 Evaluate significance: Is it worth reflection?

Before launching into reflection, it is worth making an initial evaluation of the relative value of that experience as the focus of your reflective energies. Consider, for example, the following prompts:

- ★ Will I encounter this kind of experience again?
- ★ Could it provide lessons for the future?
- ★ Does feedback from others suggest this would be useful?
- ★ Were there things I did really well that I could apply in the future?
- ★ Would working this through help me understand concerns I have and how to deal with them?
- ★ Is this a key aspect of my job that merits reflection from time to time?

- ★ Would reflecting on this experience lead to positive outcomes for other people?
- ★ Is there an aspect of my life, work or study that I take for granted that merits refreshed thinking?
- ★ Does thinking about this experience arouse strong emotions suggesting it merits reflection?
- ★ Is this the issue that most merits deeper reflection now? Is it a priority?

## 2 Reconstruct the experience

This is the stage where you go through surface aspects of the experience, identifying where you consider it 'starts' and finishes'. Inevitably, this is an act of reconstruction, not an exact record. Draw out what you decide are the most salient points. These prompts can help.

- ★ **Events** Is it helpful to go through the storyline of the experience point by point, identifying who did what and when? Sometimes this uncovers details that prove significant; sometimes not.
- ★ **Intent** What was the purpose of your involvement? What were you aiming to achieve through your actions, words, silence or inaction?
- ★ **Feelings** How did you feel during the experience? Do the feelings evoked in reconstructing the event throw any further light onto your own behaviour?

- ★ **Your role** What role did you think you were playing at the time? In retrospect, what role did you play? What was the impact of your involvement? What might have been different if you had not been present, or if someone else had taken the part you played?
- ★ **Other people** What part did others play? What could you have done to change the flow of interactions for the better?
- ★ **Surface outcome** What was the outcome? Did it end well? Well enough? As a disaster?

### 3 Analyses: Why did it happen that way?

In the analytical stage, you dig deeper for greater understanding of what goes on below the surface. Consider such questions as:

- ★ What interpretations, explanations and theories help me to make sense of it?
- ★ What was really going on for me? For others? On that day? In that place?
- ★ Were the final outcomes as intended? If not, why not?
- ★ Which actions, words, or omissions were most significant in the way events unfolded – or on the final outcomes?
- ★ What made the situation better or worse?
- ★ Did the scenario have roots in something that predated that occasion?
- ★ Is it really ‘finished’ or are there loose ends and bad feelings that could be addressed?

### 4 Distil: What lessons can be learnt?

What can you learn from all this? For example:

- ★ Any tips or advice to yourself for the future?
- ★ Trigger points that could be better managed?
- ★ Skills and qualities you demonstrated that you could apply to similar situations?
- ★ Specific actions that you, personally, could take or omit in similar situations so that things run more smoothly, harmoniously or with better consequences?
- ★ Ways of tracking and managing your emotions and responses differently?
- ★ Areas for training or practice?

- ★ Awareness of other people’s needs or issues and how these could be addressed differently?
- ★ Would different preparation, planning, or timing produce better outcomes?
- ★ Could any theoretical models help?

### 5 Apply: Prepare for future situations

Give active consideration to how you will apply what you learnt from reflection so it has a positive impact. For example:

- ★ **Identify your wish list** What do you want to be different?
- ★ **Identify potential scenarios** In what kinds of situations will you apply what you have learnt?
- ★ **What will you do differently?** (Focus on what you personally can do – as this is under your control.)
- ★ **Identify consequences** What could be different as a result of changes you will make?
- ★ **Identify beneficiaries** Who will benefit from such changes? What will be different for them?
- ★ **Identify personal benefits** – that motivate you to act. What will you gain?
- ★ **Advance planning** What preparation do you need to do now so as to respond differently in such situations in future?
- ★ **Plan memory-joggers** Once such situations arise, what will trigger your memory about what you wish to do?



Take personal responsibility

# Devise your own model for reflection

Decide which stages you want to include in your own model. In doing so, give thought to:

- ★ specific parts of the reflective process that you want to focus on – either because they suit the material, or your way of working, or because you want to be sure you don't omit them
- ★ whether you prefer a simpler model with fewer stages but where you have to remember the underlying detail, OR a more detailed model that takes you step by step through the process.

## Drawing on the Core Model

Use the 'alternative focal points' on page 288 to help you decide whether to merge some stages so that you have a simpler model, OR whether you would prefer to divide some of the stages of the Core Model so that you have more steps. You might want to use one or more of the prompt questions as a stage in its own right within your model.

Once you have decided on your stages, and the best sequence for these, name the stages and their purpose in your model. This, in itself, may cause you to reconsider how many stages are really useful for you. Then decide on the prompt questions you want to use for each stage. Use the prompts in the Core Model as a starting place. If you wish, select from these, adapt them or add to them to suit your context and reflective material.

## Activity



### Test your model

Identify one event, situation or issue as a focus for your reflection, using Step 1 of the 'Core Model for Reflection'.

- ➔ Use your own model to reflect on this, working through your set of stages and prompts.

As you work through your model, and afterwards, consider how well it is working for you, and whether there are any aspects that you wish to adapt for the future.

Draw up a record of your stages and prompt questions, such as by using the layout suggested below or using the template on the companion site to add or delete rows to suit the number of stages you have decided upon.

- ★ Use the first column to number your stages.
- ★ Use the second column to name each stage.
- ★ Use the third column for 'prompt questions' to structure your reflection. Prompt questions are provided on the companion site for you to paste in or adapt for your own model.

Stage number	Name of this stage	Prompt questions

A template is available on the companion site for you to adapt for your own use.



# Presenting your reflection to others

## Raw reflection: phase 1 reflection

Most of us engage quite naturally in deep reflection when we do it in our own time and way. It is important to capture such reflections in a way that suits our personal styles. These are the reflections we make such as when we sort out our thoughts through writing in personal reflective journals or logs.

Such 'phase 1' reflections are in raw form – thoughts are not organised in a logical order. We might express our emotions in ways that are most useful for us, but are not for others to read. The free associations we bring can help stimulate our thinking but do not necessarily make our reflections accessible to others. First phase reflection is the 'raw material' with which we work in a more analytical and structured way when we need or wish to present our reflections to other people.

## Worked reflection: phase 2 reflection

Second stage reflection is what you would use, typically, when you are ready to post your thoughts such as within a blog, vlog or podcast, or use in a seminar, reflective essay or similar assignment.

Phase 2 reflection is characterised by:

**Time** Leaving time between the initial reflection and the current stage of reflection.

**Summary** Second phase reflection seeks out and summarises key themes and salient points, noting down where more detailed evidence can be found in the portfolio.

**Insight** Identifying what has been learnt – especially the less obvious learning. This will refer to broad themes rather than specific subject knowledge. It will bring out issues of relevance and significance rather than focus on data. During second phase reflection you come to appreciate the deeper and subtler aspects of your learning. It is a good point to draw on relevant theory from your course.

**Communication** It is at this point that you are ready to consider presenting the results of your

reflection to others. The context will determine what it is appropriate to show to others. For most purposes, you will need to remove:

- ★ material about your personal life you wish to keep private
- ★ personal details about other people
- ★ repetitive or irrelevant material
- ★ unnecessary examples or excessive background detail
- ★ materials produced by other people, such as guideline materials, tutor notes, copies of background reading, lecture notes, etc.

## Submitting reflections to tutors

You could be asked to submit your reflections to tutors either as part of an assessment, or for more informal monitoring. If so, you might be asked to submit either raw or worked reflections, or both. For example, you may be asked to submit a journal, log or extracts from a blog as part of a portfolio of materials.

Alternatively, you might be asked to draw on your reflections as the basis of work undertaken in class or to provide material within an assessment such as an essay, case study, position paper or observation, without there being a requirement to submit your journal.

## Confidentiality

**NB** If anyone else will see your reflections, check first that you have not included names or other information that would enable others to identify people, departments or organisations without their express permission. The details you provide should not enable people, including tutors, to make a good guess at who is being referred to in your reflections or assignments.

If you have received permission to include other people's details or information, it is a good idea to have this in writing and attach it, otherwise it would be assumed that you were not clear about maintaining confidential boundaries.

# Selective reflective portfolios

As reflection tends to be word-intensive, for assignments, you are likely to be asked to use it as:

- ★ selected extracts within an essay, case study or report
- ★ and/or to provide reflections as an appendix, and refer to them in passing within the assignment
- ★ and/or to provide your reflection as part of a portfolio. Depending on the assignment, you might be asked to include such material as:
  - ☆ a reflective piece of writing such as an essay
  - ☆ a reflective journal (either as phase 1 or phase 2 reflection)
  - ☆ an evidence base for your reflections, such as feedback on your artwork, clinical practice, work experience, or equivalent.

## What do tutors look for?

If your tutors are going to assess reflective work as part of a portfolio, they would normally indicate in the marking criteria what, in particular, they are looking for. Always check these carefully and use them as the basis of your assignment. Typically, these are factors that are taken into consideration.

**How well it meets required learning outcomes** These are usually specified for the unit of study and for the course. Check these before you start to put your portfolio together. They are usually provided in a handbook and/or on the course website. Your assignments are usually devised so that, in completing these well, you meet the objectives for the course as a whole.

**How well you summarise your insights into your learning** Your grades are likely to be based primarily on how well you integrate reflection into a thoughtful, well-researched, coherent piece of reflective writing. Although there might also be grades awarded for raw reflections and supporting documents, typically these are a requirement that authenticates your work (so essential) rather than graded in their own right.

**How well you select and edit relevant information for inclusion** It is how you use reflection that really matters on most courses. You don't usually gain better grades just because your portfolio is larger or longer. Bulky unedited portfolios that contain all the information you could possibly gather on a subject are unlikely to impress.

The tutor is likely to award marks specifically for skills in selecting relevant examples, good editing (cutting out unnecessary or repetitious material) and clear cross-referencing.

**How well the evidence and examples you refer to in the portfolio really do support the point you are making** If you say the evidence demonstrates a particular skill or insight, it must be a clear example. Specify how skills or the application of theory were demonstrated in the examples you provide. Don't assume these are obvious to the tutor.

**How well the portfolio is constructed** Make your portfolio easy for tutors to navigate. Provide a clear Contents page. Label all documents. In your writing, for every point you make for which you have evidence or reflective material, provide exact cross-references to the page(s) where these can be found in the portfolio. Use highlights and/or number the lines to indicate exactly where the tutor should look. If you are submitting work electronically, use editing and reviewing functions (such as those for inserting comments). Avoid making vague references to long free-ranging reflections, leaving the tutor to guess which parts of these you are referring to.

**How well you select one or two good pieces of evidence for each main point you make** Keep extracts within your work short. For longer reflections, use a cross-reference to the appendix, and summarise the point briefly in your writing.

**How well you draw on relevant theory as part of your reflections** For an academic assessment, it is generally assumed that you will demonstrate that you are aware of which reading material and theories are relevant and how these provide insights on the issues you address.

In other words, good guidance for portfolios is:

- ★ include a contents page and a strong summary document (e.g. position paper or essay)
- ★ label and signpost clearly
- ★ think through which points you really want to make and check these come across clearly
- ★ back up your points with good evidence
- ★ cross-reference your argument clearly to evidence in the portfolio or appendices
- ★ include only essential evidence
- ★ keep it as succinct as possible.

# Reflective essays

## Purpose

Some courses set reflective essays as marked assignments. The contents of these will vary depending on the focus of the course and the purpose of the essay. For example, some courses ask for a reflective piece of writing at the start of study, in order to encourage students to focus on their goals and learning needs. Others set an essay at the end of a module for students to draw together their learning and identify next steps.

Usually, you will be given specific guidance on what is required. If not, the guidance below outlines features typical of reflective essays. The overall structure is similar to that of other essays you might be asked to write but the content and style are distinct.

## Structure

Like any other essay, a reflective essay will have:

- ★ **a specific title** – you must structure your essay to respond to the question contained within the title
- ★ **an introduction** that identifies your overall position and prepares the reader for what to expect from the essay
- ★ **a main body** divided into paragraphs – this does not usually contain any headings or bullet points
- ★ **a conclusion** that sums up the main points – this does not introduce any new material
- ★ **citations** of source materials within the text
- ★ **a reference list** of all materials used and cited in the essay.

## Contents (for a PDP essay)

Typically, a reflective essay will contain a selection of the following elements. To provide a focus, the sections below are those typically expected for an essay on personal development planning.

### *Personal aims and goals*

- ★ Why did you choose this course? What were your aims and objectives?
- ★ Have these changed since starting the course? If so, how and why?

## *Expectations*

- ★ What were you expecting from the course?
- ★ What did you expect from yourself?
- ★ What led you to form these expectations?

## *Programme learning outcomes*

- ★ What are the learning outcomes for modules/units you have taken so far?
- ★ What skills development is associated with these?
- ★ How do these outcomes and skills correspond to your own aims and goals?

## *Other activity*

- ★ What else do you do outside of your course in order to achieve your personal/professional goals or to supplement your learning?

## *Learning goals and targets*

- ★ What are your current areas of strength in relation to your course, career or life ambitions? What relevant experience, skills, training or qualities did you bring?
- ★ Which areas do you need to improve?
- ★ What are your priority areas for improvement as 'learning goals'?
- ★ What are your targets, milestones and time-scales for meeting these learning goals?

## *Use reflection*

- ★ Which methods have you used for reflection?
- ★ How do you use reflection?
- ★ Which books or theories help you to make sense of your developmental needs?
- ★ Provide a detailed example of how you developed and evaluated your performance in one area, drawing on structured reflection.

### *Use of feedback*

- ★ What kinds of feedback have you received from tutors, students, employers or other people?
- ★ How do you feel about this feedback?
- ★ How have you made use of this feedback?

### *Evaluation of personal choices*

- ★ In practice, how far does your course meet personal goals and interests?
- ★ Would any other course or set of modules/units be more suitable for you?
- ★ What other subject choices, additional modules or supplementary qualifications would help you to meet your personal goals?

### *Evaluation of learning*

- ★ How well are you achieving the learning outcomes of your course?
- ★ What else have you learnt through your course?
- ★ What are you gaining, additionally, from your course or from college/university that was not part of your original goals?

### *Evaluation of your course*

- ★ How do the modules or particular aspects of your course contribute to your professional and personal development?

### *Evaluation of personal performance*

- ★ How well are you achieving your personal goals?
- ★ How well have you engaged with your course? (Attendance? Punctuality? Level of interest? Contributions made in class? Efforts to make personal meaning of the course material? Additional reading or work undertaken?)
- ★ How far do you consider you have taken responsibility for improving your own learning?

### *Personal development*

- ★ How have your opinions, attitudes, beliefs or values changed since starting at college/university?
- ★ In what ways have you changed as a person since starting at college/university?

### *Critical incident*

- ★ Identify an incident that illustrates your approach to your learning.
- ★ What does this incident demonstrate about you?
- ★ How does this incident relate to any theories of learning you have covered on your course?
- ★ What did you learn from this incident?
- ★ See the Reflection on page 285.

## **Use of theory**

A reflective essay is still an academic piece of work. You should draw on your background reading for the subject, relating your own experiences to the theoretical perspectives relevant to your course.

Consider:

- ★ Does your experience support or exemplify theories you have covered in class or through your background reading?
- ★ Or does your experience run counter to those theories? If so, why might that be the case? What is different about your experience that might account for this?

## **Style**

Reflective essays are about your own experience. This means that it is more acceptable for these to be written in the first person ('I', 'We').

# Personal statement

Personal statements are important tools for making real use of ongoing observation, reflection and evaluation. They are characterised by:

- ★ being written in a more formal manner than reflection for personal purposes
- ★ drawing together learning that has taken place
- ★ identifying themes (from a portfolio or journal) and summarising these
- ★ identifying the overall path that developmental work has taken over a period of time
- ★ identifying the lessons that have been learnt

- ★ evaluating current performance
- ★ making recommendations for future improvement
- ★ identifying action that needs to be taken.

The emphasis of a personal statement may differ depending on whether it is written:

- ★ at the beginning of your course
- ★ as developmental work within your course
- ★ for assessment or submission at the end of your course
- ★ for a specific purpose such as a job application.

## Example

### Personal statement

*This semester, I took three modules in Business Studies. These covered project management, business communication and entrepreneurship. I was able to draw out several themes that ran across the three modules.*

*First of all, the communication skills were important in identifying ways of varying a message so that it comes across to different audiences: client groups, bank managers, the buying public, products aimed at different age groups and at people who purchase for those client groups. We also focused on communication within teams.*

### Communication skills

*Communication skills were important to my entrepreneurship project as I was part of a team that took a product (light-weight collapsible bikes) through from idea to design to market. We drew up a business plan that we presented to a funding panel. There was an accountant on the panel who gave us feedback on our presentations. Although our group did not win the funding, we were given valuable advice on what a business plan should look like and how to communicate its strengths when asking for funding.*

*The entrepreneurship students were not all from a business background: some were from product design, fine art, engineering, marketing and multi-media. One important lesson was in discovering that students from each discipline use different ways of describing their work process and the product than we expect from a business perspective. Although we learnt that we have to find a common vocabulary, a shared way of communicating, we could have approached this in a more organised way and avoided some misunderstandings. Communication for team work across disciplines is an area that I would like to investigate further.*

### Teamwork

*The product designers and engineers, in particular, approached their work in ways that the business students found challenging. This meant that we had to establish ground rules for working together as a team. This took several attempts because our starting points were so different. We had not anticipated this... In the beginning, each of us was unwilling to compromise on methods we had been trained in.*

*However, as the deadlines drew closer, we made a choice to develop a hybrid way of working that met the needs of the project rather than what we thought we should do as 'business students' or 'design students'. This felt like a risky strategy but we were encouraged by our tutors, who gave us some useful tips on how to negotiate a strategy...*

# Position papers

## Purpose

A position paper is a 'snapshot' of where you are now, which draws together reflections on your personal development. You might be asked to write a position paper:

- ★ as part of a reflective portfolio for course assignments
- ★ as a way of demonstrating learning if you are applying for exemption from part of a course of study
- ★ as an early assignment on a new course, so that tutors gain a sense of what you want and need from the course
- ★ when undertaking a workplace project, either as part of arguing a case for training or to undertake a project, or to report back at an interim stage on a longer project
- ★ as part of a reflective annual work-based review or appraisal system.

## Format

You are usually expected to:

- ★ look back over past experience and identify what you have learned from your experience
- ★ evaluate your current position
- ★ project forward to where you wish to be
- ★ decide a plan of action that takes you from where you are now to where you wish to be in the future, using your past experience
- ★ identify how you will be able to recognise when you have achieved your goals.

To write a position paper, you can draw upon such material as entries from your reflective journal, responses to activities in this book, self-evaluations and action plans. A possible structure is suggested below, organised through a series of questions. You can use these to guide you, selecting relevant questions. Where possible, include references to texts you have read in order to support your reasoning.

## Orientation

### **Aspirations and motivation: where am I going?**

- ★ What are your aims for your future? Where would you like to see yourself in five or ten years' time? (Be imaginative and bold.) See page 39.
- ★ In what ways do you think your course will help you to achieve those aims?
- ★ What skills and attributes do you want to develop whilst in higher education?

## Review

### **What do I bring from my past?**

- ★ What has led you to the present stage in your study or career? Focus on what is relevant to your vision or goals.
- ★ What has inspired you? (Give references where possible.)
- ★ How has your past learning and life experience equipped you for this course and for being a student now? Evaluate the knowledge, qualifications, skills, attitudes and experiences that you bring with you and which are relevant to your study and goals.

## Appraisal

### **Where am I now?**

- ★ What skills and abilities will be required of you as a student on this course to achieve your goals?
- ★ What are your main strengths and weaknesses as a student on this course to achieve your goals?
- ★ What will you need to improve in order to do well?

## Planning

### **How will I achieve my aims?**

- ★ How do you plan to achieve your ambitions and study aims? What are you going to do, when and how?
- ★ What targets have you set as milestones (to what time-scales)? See page 207.

- ★ What difficulties might you encounter?
- ★ In what ways might you sabotage your own success? What steps will you take to prevent yourself or others from sabotaging your success?
- ★ How will you keep yourself motivated?
- ★ What other preparation and planning do you need to undertake?

## Evaluating progress

### What have I achieved?

- ★ How will you be able to recognise that you have achieved your aims?
- ★ What changes do you expect to see in yourself, your work, and in the attitudes of others when you have achieved your aims?
- ★ How will you be able to demonstrate to others what you have achieved?

## Extrapolation

### What have I learned?

- ★ What have you learned about yourself or your learning that was unexpected in some way?
- ★ How might this learning help you more generally with your studies, life and work?

## References

### Which source materials have I used?

Include references to books, films, music or other sources that have inspired you on your journey to where you are today. Include references to all materials you have used in writing the position paper. Remember to use the correct referencing system, such as the Harvard or Vancouver system, as recommended by your tutors.

## Example

### Sample introduction to a position paper

*In this position paper, I demonstrate how my past experiences and future objectives are influencing my current study on a degree in media technology. The paper is based on an in-depth consideration of my previous life and learning experiences, and shows the ways in which prior learning has provided me with skills, knowledge and personal qualities that are relevant to my present studies. In particular, I draw attention to the range of skills and insights I acquired through working as a volunteer on a children's educational project in the USA last summer and how these, unexpectedly, have provided me with starting points for design work on the degree.*

*My main aim is to use this qualification to advance my professional career as a designer. This position paper outlines both the areas I need to investigate in order to improve my career prospects and my reasons for the module choices I have made for next year. It also looks at skills I need to improve next year to improve my course marks. In addition, I demonstrate how the media technology course I am on and the decisions I am making will help me to achieve my goals.*

## Give it time!

Reflection is not something that comes easily to everyone. However, reflective abilities develop over time and with practice, and are then useful for life.

- ★ Put time aside on a regular basis to reflect upon your performance.
- ★ Use a structured approach. Make use of activities in the book if you are not sure where to begin.
- ★ Read back over your reflections on a regular basis. Look for themes.
- ★ Consider regularly how far you have achieved personal goals.
- ★ Find approaches that suit you and your programme.
- ★ Look for changes in yourself, your actions, goals or values.
- ★ Notice and celebrate your achievements.
- ★ Be positive about the process: over time, you will see the benefits.

# Review: The art of reflection

1

## Value and nurture your reflective abilities

They will serve you well in all walks of life. Be able to trust better in your own judgement and decision-making through being able to think deeply, creatively and analytically about any situation.

2

## Learn more from every context and experience

It is skilled and timely reflection that enables us to draw the most benefit from our experience. Although it takes time to develop a reflective habit, once this is established, taking a reflective practitioner approach helps us to avoid repeating mistakes and to enhance our situational wisdom.

3

## Flex your approach

Become adept at using diverse approaches to reflection. Learn to recognise which will suit you best for the situation, issue and/or time available. Be able to move flexibly between approaches and to combine them.

4

## Reflect on your own development

Put a little time aside every now and then for deep, structured thought about your own development, academic, personal and professional. It will become easier the more you do this. You deserve that time.

5

## Choose the right reflective model for you

Be aware that there are various models for reflection – not everyone agrees on one best way. Decide what you need and how to make the time you spend in reflection most productive for you and others. If you can, devise your own model and/or your own set of prompt questions, to help you focus most usefully.

6

## Distinguish between first and second phases of reflection

Not every thought and reflection that is useful for you is right to share with others. Use raw reflective material to free up your thinking and emotions, so you can get to the heart of the matter. Use second phase reflection to extract what is then most useful for you and right for sharing with others.

7

## Consider your audience

If presenting your reflection to others, don't just 'dump' it on them in raw form. Shape it to fit the audience, such as for a blog, podcast or assignment. Structure your reflections so they are meaningful for your audience and purpose.

8

## Understand how to use reflection in assignments

Don't become so attached to your reflections that you miss the point of the assignment. Stay focused on what you have been asked to do. For longer assignments, take steps to help your tutors navigate the material quickly and easily, so that they can absorb the important points you wish to make.

9

## Bring it back to the learning

It is easy to be fascinated by our own experiences and thoughts. They are great resources and can bring back interesting memories. However, for your reflection to be really useful, keep bringing your awareness back to what there is to learn from the situation. What changes will you make? How will these make a difference to you or to others?

10

## Give it time

It can take time to become really effective at reflection. Our natural reaction can be to focus on the wrong things, drift into a description of events or to rush it. Give yourself the time, space and practice to really reap the benefits.

# PART 4

## Employability: enhancing your career prospects

Getting a good job is high on the list of priorities for most students.

Whilst some know exactly what kind of work and career they want, many have only vaguely formulated ideas or even no idea at all. Whether or not you know what you want to do, you can still start to prepare ahead now, so that, when the right job comes along, you are ready.

The likelihood is that, sooner or later, you will be competing with others for a job, placement or internship that you really want. At that point, you will want to feel confident that you understand what is required of you and that you are well-prepared both for the appointments process and for the requirements of your new role.

Whilst it is not impossible to gain a great job with minimum effort, it is unusual. It is much more likely that you will succeed in your application if you have put some time into preparation and into understanding the field. This means:

- ★ Understanding the appointments process from the perspective of a recruiting employer
- ★ Understanding what you really want from your next, or first, job
- ★ Knowing how to manage the appointments process, from first contact through to acceptance, or rejection, and beyond.

This section looks at employability from the angle both of the employer and of you, the potential job applicant. It can help you to clarify such things as:

- 1 What employers look for in job applicants
- 2 What is meant by employability
- 3 Whether you should apply for a particular job or placement
- 4 How to make the best possible application
- 5 The kinds of appointments processes that you may encounter and what employers look for when they use these
- 6 How to keep records, prepare and practise so that you feel more confident and more in control during the appointments process
- 7 How to make good use of placements and current employment, in preparation for the future
- 8 Whether you want to work for yourself rather than for anyone else and, if so, where to start.

### Chapters in this section

- 13 What do employers really want?
- 14 Getting the job you want
- 15 Building a professional identity: reputation, personal profile and records



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers opportunities to:

- ✓ understand what is meant by employability
- ✓ develop insights into employers' needs and interests that will help you when applying for jobs
- ✓ identify the skills and attributes that employers value
- ✓ think through how skills that you have acquired as a student translate into the skills needed in the workplace
- ✓ consider whether you want to work for yourself or another employer.

## Balanced consideration

It is natural, when looking for a job and reading job advertisements, to look at how each role would suit us. Matching the job to our own needs is, of course, important, at least where there is some choice, and this is addressed in Chapter 14.

However, you are more likely to be successful if employers feel that you are mainly interested in them and understand their business. Think about each potential job from the employer's perspective. Aim to balance your own interests with the business needs of the prospective employer.



## Understanding employers

This chapter helps you to understand employers so that you are better placed to take on board their needs. It provides guidance on:

- ★ What is meant by 'the labour market'
- ★ Generic attributes, such as work-readiness, that employers say they want
- ★ The skills and other attributes most in demand by employers
- ★ Continuities over time in what employers say they want from graduate appointments.

## Translate your skills

You will have developed a wealth of skills through your course of study. That is a bonus, but is not necessarily sufficient in itself. Your job applications will be more powerful if you can articulate your skills in ways that make sense in terms of the workplace. This chapter helps you to look at your skills from an employment perspective.

## Yourself as employer

There is an alternative to working for someone else. It is worth considering whether you would prefer to run your own business, either now or at some time in the future. This is an exciting option and many new businesses and start-ups have been formed by students and new graduates. You will have a chance to consider some of the pros and cons of this option.

# What is 'employability'?

## Employability

Employability is a concurrence of:

- ★ capability
- ★ preparedness for employment
- ★ and the relevance of these to the current job market.

The term can be used:

- 1 in general terms, to mean that you have the abilities needed to gain a job and keep it, or
- 2 in a narrower sense, with reference to your readiness for a particular range of roles, such as graduate jobs, or specialist posts in a given field, or
- 3 in relative terms, to indicate how strong your chances are of gaining a job compared with the competition.

## Capability

In this context, your *capability* is the sum of your skills, knowledge, experience, habits, understandings, attitudes, qualities and personal attributes. These are relevant to gaining a job, keeping it, and making it work for you.

## Preparedness

*Preparedness* is the outcome of the time, thought and practice you have put into developing and nurturing your capability from the perspective of future employment and for the appointments process itself. It includes your readiness, and ability, to make use of the opportunities that present themselves and/or to create opportunities for yourself.

## Employability capabilities

For students, developing skills for employability involves the following.

- 1 **Career development** Being proactive and self-directing in gaining a portfolio of qualifications, attributes, experiences, networks and contacts that either enable you to pursue a given career path, or open up a range of future career opportunities.
- 2 **Labour market awareness** Knowing what kinds of work are likely to be available, and being able to match your strengths, qualities and interests to these.
- 3 **Articulation** Being able to recognise, evidence and demonstrate your strengths to employers during job application processes.
- 4 **Self-awareness** Developing insight so that you are able to recognise your own strengths and preferences, as well as the significance of these, when making choices and decisions that have an impact on your career path.
- 5 **Self-management** Building the perseverance, resilience, confidence, beliefs, motivation and attitudes needed to manage the demands of applying for work, responding constructively to setbacks, and presenting yourself at your best.

## Reflection

### Employability capabilities

- ★ Which of these capabilities are strengths for you already?
- ★ Which do you need to investigate further?



# Put yourself in employers' shoes

## The employer's WIIFT

You are much more likely to impress an employer if you come across as having the business's interests in mind. Bright and Earl (2007) recommend that when applying for jobs, candidates should always keep in mind 'an employer's WIIFT'. WIIFT stands for 'What's In It For Them?'

- ★ **Use the information available** If the employer has provided background information and a job description, look at this in detail.
- ★ **Investigate** Find out about the company, such as from its website, Companies House, LinkedIn, or their presence on social media.
- ★ **Use common sense and empathy** Give some thought to why the employer is likely to be advertising for this post. What do they really need done? What would make life easier for them in looking for the right candidate?

## Minimum effort, minimum cost

When employers advertise a new post, clearly they have work that needs to be done. Naturally, they want to get that work done with minimum costs, training and lost time. They will want someone up to speed with the job as soon as possible in order to avoid additional work for existing staff and to reduce any delays or disruption to clients and other stakeholders.

Generally, that means they look for applicants who, as far as possible:

- ★ already have the skills, knowledge, experience, qualities, and desired behaviours outlined in the person specification for the job
- ★ demonstrate a good understanding of the role and the business
- ★ inspire confidence that they can get on with the job straightaway, with minimum direction, supervision and training
- ★ share the values of the business.

## Do employers all want the same things?

Every employer is different. The requirements of the first few employers you contact might not be the

same as those of the next. Just because you were not a match for one employer it does not mean that you won't be exactly what the next employer is looking for. If one employer was impressed by your course or your skills, these might not be relevant to the next. Such differences mean it is essential to investigate the requirements of:

- ★ the occupational sector
- ★ individual employers
- ★ each job.

## Do they all want experience?

- ★ Some employers recruit only people with previous work experience and practical expertise in the field.
- ★ Others are keen to recruit recent graduates that they can train into the culture of the organisation. They look for candidates who could learn quickly on the job and meet their essential criteria. Some offer training or graduate schemes; others do not.
- ★ Some employers prefer to focus on attitude, values or behaviours.

You should be able to tell which approach an employer will take by looking at their website and reading the material provided about the job.



# What employers want: large employers and SMEs

## Research the labour market

The jobs available in the labour market at any given time vary depending on such factors as location, the economy, demand for specialist skills and changes in technology. Whichever job sectors you prefer, it is wise to check on recent changes in demand and expected future patterns. Some useful starting places are:

- ★ **Global trends** – reports from the OECD (2017); the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Eurostats
- ★ **National reviews** of graduate vacancies and starting salaries for your country, profession or type of institution – such as the British Chambers of Commerce or the Australian Labour market information portal
- ★ **Graduate reports and surveys** such as High Fliers' (annually).
- ★ **Recruiting companies** – [prospects.ac.uk](http://prospects.ac.uk); [80000hours.org](http://80000hours.org) or [graduate-jobs.com/jobs](http://graduate-jobs.com/jobs)
- ★ **Jobs by location or sector** in your country – such as [milkround.com/](http://milkround.com/)

## What do graduates do?

According to Greaves (2019a, b), patterns of graduate employment changed significantly between 2012–13 and 2017. In 2017, 29% more UK students progressed to further study. The proportion entering professional jobs rose from 66% to 74%. Around 70% of graduates went to work for large employers, especially in public sector jobs such as the NHS. Most found work through employer websites and recruitment agencies rather than through social media or personal contacts. Growth areas for graduate employment, including at Masters level, were in engineering, computing, legal and creative.

## Popular employers

Large multinational companies are popular with graduates worldwide. You can keep track of which employers graduates most want to work for through surveys such as:

- ★ Top 50 Graduate Employers: (June 2020) [graduate-jobs.com/scheme/top50](http://graduate-jobs.com/scheme/top50)

- ★ *The Times* top 100 graduate employers [top100graduateemployers.com/](http://top100graduateemployers.com/)
- ★ The UK 300: the most popular graduate employers for 2019/20 [targetjobs.co.uk/uk300](http://targetjobs.co.uk/uk300)
- ★ 2020 Top 100 most popular graduate employers, Australia [top100grademployers.com.au/](http://top100grademployers.com.au/)

As there will be a high volume of applicants for jobs with such companies, make sure your application is likely to be competitive for the field.

## SMEs

Most businesses are small or medium enterprises (SMEs). In the UK, there were almost 6 million SMEs in 2019, more than 40,000 of which had over 50 employees (DBEIS, 2019). There are many good opportunities for graduates with SMEs; around 15% are in professional, scientific and technical areas. SMEs vary a great deal, not least because there are so many, so it can be hard to find generic information about them. Check sector skills councils, professional organisations and trade magazines for information about SMEs in particular occupational areas.

The ideal SME employee needs to be adaptable, creative, open, proactive and able to multi-role (mukundkrishna.com, 2018). Miller (2014) identified top attributes of SME employees as:

- 1 Bringing a 'can do' attitude and willingness to work beyond the core job description
- 2 Welcoming new opportunities and looking for opportunities to develop their role
- 3 Holding ambitions for the company such as seeking entrepreneurial opportunities for it
- 4 Working well in small teams
- 5 Being innovative, coming up with new ideas and ways of doing things better.

### Activity

#### Which characteristics?

Browse job adverts for SMEs in occupations that interest you: check the attributes wanted.



## Most wanted characteristics

Based on a survey of over 200 employers, large and small, Pennington et al. (2013) found employers gave their highest ratings to the following four, out of eleven possible, items:

- (a) Interest in role
- (b) Organisational fit
- (c) Skills
- (d) Work experience.

These findings are not untypical of various surveys of employers. However, each employer will weight such characteristics differently so it is important to research them individually.

## Work placements

Over four-fifths of top graduate employers offer paid work experience or internship schemes for students and recent graduates. Increasingly, employers use student placements to decide who to recruit into entry-level positions, often offering these during the second year of study (High Fliers, 2019). In 2018–19, over one-third of such employers reported that they were unlikely to offer jobs to graduates without any work experience.

Such experience gives a head start in gaining work with a company. However, it may also be reassuring to note that if you didn't get a placement with your first choice of employer, the large majority of their job opportunities do not go to those who have worked for them already.

## Evidence of career planning

Employers value students' extra-curricular activities. They expect students to have firm career ideas by their final year and evidence of career planning, yet say students don't take these aspects seriously (Pennington et al., 2013). Most employers are not aware of schemes such as the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR).

## Degree classification?

Uffindell et al. (2020) found that students thought employers placed highest value on applicants having a degree classification of 2.1 or above. Employers themselves rated this only as sixth highest (of eight factors given). Similarly, Pennington et al. (2013) found both large companies and SMEs rated a good degree only as fifth in importance of 11 selection criteria.

## That extra 'edge'?

Keen candidates look for clues as to what might give them an 'edge' over others. Although every job is different, some useful starting places are:

- 1 Understanding how recent advances in technology, Artificial Intelligence or social media could advantage your chosen field in the next few years
- 2 Demonstrable comfort in changing to new processes, systems and ways of working
- 3 Surprising employers by your in-depth research and knowledge of their company
- 4 Being able to get across clearly to employers how your own skills and experiences are relevant to them
- 5 Having a compelling personal 'back story' – if you have one, use it.

## Educational institution?

Overall, 74% of employers state that their decisions to offer jobs are not influenced by a graduate's institution. This was more pronounced for large companies (91%) compared with only 64% of SMEs. Because of costs, many employers target a small number of institutions with relevant courses or in their geographical area (Pennington et al., 2013).

## Mobility and flexibility

Employers seek graduates prepared to be mobile to take up work, and in moving between sectors and job roles early on in their career. Docherty and Fernandez (2014) note that this may come as a surprise to graduates and HE providers, for whom advice has emphasised a focus on developing skills and experience in a particular subject or sector of employment.

Also, as up to 95% of students say they search for jobs in or near the capital or largest city (Uffindell et al., 2020), then looking for work in other regions opens up broader opportunities.

# What employers want: work-readiness

## What is work-readiness?

Employers say they want students to be work-ready. Having any work, whether paid or voluntary, part-time or full-time, helps to develop an understanding of what this entails. 'Work-readiness' is hard to define precisely, but includes the following attributes.

### 1 Attitude

Employers want to take on new staff who identify with the needs of their business. Generally, employers are more likely to employ you if you can show that you:

- ★ **bring a 'can-do' attitude**, undertaking reasonable tasks when asked (rather than when you feel like it or finding excuses not to)
- ★ **take pride in your work**, going the extra mile when needed and being professional in all you do
- ★ **use time effectively**, being punctual for work and meetings, and getting work done efficiently
- ★ **spend work time on task**, remaining focused on your job rather than texting and phoning family and friends, browsing the Internet for personal use, running personal errands, sorting out relationship issues, day-dreaming, writing your novel, playing computer games, taking long breaks, etc.
- ★ **are generally helpful and flexible**, taking on additional paid hours or changing work hours, or working in a new location, if needed.

### 2 Professionalism

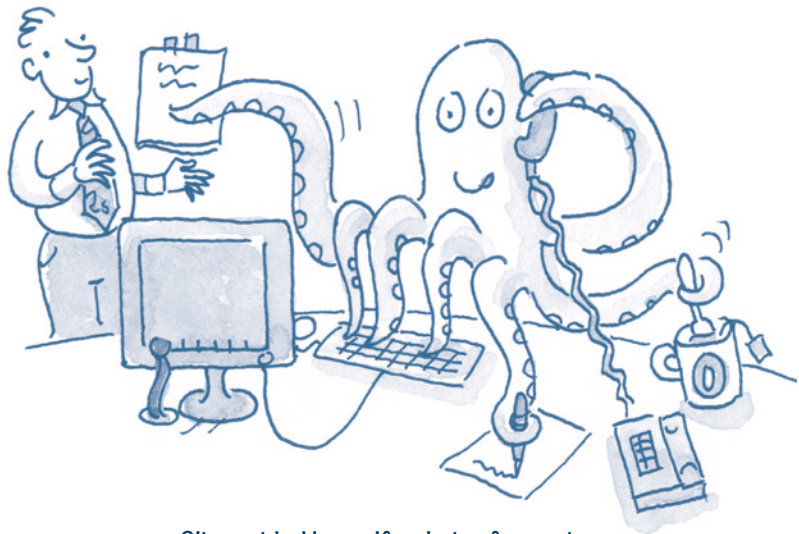
**In a professional role** This means having the abilities and skills to undertake the specialist work associated with the role, to the required professional standards and adhering to relevant codes of practice.

**In general** For any role, this is about the way you approach your work at all times. It involves setting out to produce work of a consistently high standard, with attention to such things as accuracy, precision, timeliness, punctuality, courtesy, sensitivity, and respect for the dignity, safety and well-being of others.

### 3 A 'safe pair of hands'

Employers value staff who they can depend on to:

- ★ get the job done as they would want
- ★ make sensible, workable decisions, suitable to the context
- ★ meet deadlines and other given requirements
- ★ avoid reckless, unprofessional, risky or unwanted behaviours.



*Olive prided herself on being four pairs of safe hands for her employer*

### 4 'Customer service' approach

Employers tend to prefer staff who are able and willing to 'put the customer first', even when this might be inconvenient or difficult. The same is true if the 'customer' is a client, student, patient or member of the public making an enquiry. Attitude and professionalism matter.

## 5 Initiative

Using your initiative in the workplace means:

- ★ **working independently** – getting on with your job with minimum direction
- ★ **being resourceful** – using imagination and inventiveness to address a problem or issue in a practical way
- ★ **being proactive** – taking action or asking how you can help, rather than waiting to be asked or told
- ★ **looking for improvements and alternatives** – thinking beyond the immediate task to consider how the overall outcome or process could be improved, and then taking your idea forward through the correct channels for the organisation
- ★ **knowing when to act** – developing a fine sense of when it is appropriate for you to come up with your own ideas and ways of getting things done, and when it is more important to follow protocols exactly
- ★ **seizing opportunity** – being able to spot occasions for advancing the business interests in the moment, often in a small but appropriate way, and getting on with it.

## 6 Understand how organisations work

Although it is unlikely that you will need to answer direct questions about how businesses operate, employers will look to see your general commercial and business awareness. They will notice if you don't seem to understand the basics.

- (a) Browse employers' websites and financial reports online to get a feel for how businesses are run and the kinds of things that concern them.
- (b) Become familiar with concepts such as
  - ★ 'end-users', shareholders, stakeholders
  - ★ vision, mission, strategy and business plans
  - ★ company values
  - ★ financial sustainability, profit and loss
  - ★ company performance, performance indicators, targets
  - ★ staff appraisal, performance management.
- (f) The checklists 'Make effective use of your experience of work' (pages 339–41) provide a structured way of thinking through such issues.

## 7 Understanding 'time = money'

'Time is money' is a well-known adage in business. Broadly speaking, employers have a range of costs such as salaries, pensions, accommodation, maintenance, insurance, utilities and investment, all of which they have to cover even if they have less money coming in because of time wasted. When taking on new staff, employers look for people who can use time efficiently.

## 8 Commercial/business sense

Increasingly, employers are asking for 'business acumen' or commercial understanding, especially for graduate jobs and management or team leader roles. They look for interest in the kind of issues relevant to their business. This might be such matters as market pressures, the impact of economic changes; customer demographics; likely new competition or opportunities overseas; logistics; technological changes or recent innovations and their impact. If you are interested in the company, then you should be able to give sensible answers based on research, thought, and common sense. You can build your commercial awareness for the kinds of business that interest you by:

- ★ taking optional modules in business, enterprise or entrepreneurship
- ★ reading trade or professional magazines
- ★ taking a relevant work-placement or internship
- ★ browsing questions and answers on LinkedIn
- ★ using news apps
- ★ asking your Careers Service for relevant resources.

### Want to know more?



Law and Broader (2017) *Law: Commercial Awareness: What It Means and How to Ace It!*

# What employers want: specialists or generalists?

## Subject specialism needed?

Almost all employers have graduate jobs open to students of any degree subject. This is true even in sectors that may appear specialist, such as finance, management, accounting, HR, law, marketing, communications and advertising – especially for those who achieve a good degree classification or GPA.

Some roles do require a particular degree subject and specialist knowledge and expertise. That is especially the case for professional and technical roles such as in medicine and health, engineering and languages.

Even when a specialism is required, this is used as an initial filter to cut down the field of applicants. After that, employers look at all the other attributes a candidate might bring. For specialist roles, an applicant with the right specialist degree, a rounded portfolio and who meets the person specification will have a good chance of being short-listed.

## Rounded applicants

Not all employers value subject specialisation. Increasingly, and especially in the international labour market, employers like graduates who can draw flexibly across a range of disciplines and experiences. This position was articulated in the report *An Avalanche is Coming*:

*The trend in the academy towards specialisation, which is at least a century old, continues unabated, but citizens of the world now cry out for synthesis – synthesis now provided largely outside of the academy by organisations such as OECD. (Barber et al., 2013, p. 17)*

There is a growing interest in employees who demonstrate soft skills, a breadth of knowledge and experiences, who can connect these up and contextualise them (Glazer, 2019). Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, wrote that, for the field of design and technology, it was essential for employees to be able to draw on as wide a range of experiences as possible (Beahm, 2011). Like many innovators, he saw the value of a broad education rather than a narrow focus on a particular specialism alone.

## Ability to innovate and integrate skills

Employers look for people who demonstrate that they can come up with soundly based ideas and then carry these through. Shell (2014), for example, stated:

*We're looking for people with the intellectual, analytical and creative ability to learn quickly, identify issues and propose solutions. Can you reach informed conclusions through broad thinking? Can you work with incomplete or conflicting data and take well-calculated risks?*

Shell stated on its website (2020) that it wants candidates who show drive, resilience and self-confidence, and are good at working in teams, communicating and respecting others. You might like to consider how you would develop and demonstrate such qualities.

## Broad approach to development

Typically, employers will be interested in your broad personal development. That is why universities and colleges encourage students to take part in activities outside of the formal curriculum and to start to build their CV as early as possible.

### Reflection



#### Being a strong generalist

If a job that interests you required good generic abilities, how would you demonstrate that you could draw on a wide range of experiences?

What could you do to broaden your knowledge, expertise base and abilities further to better match the descriptions outlined above?

# What employers want: how does this change?

It is reasonable to wonder whether skills you are developing now will still be relevant in a few years' time. A comparison across the decades suggests that similar skills remain valued over time, although their relative importance varies a little, and new skills and attributes become added to the list.

## Activity

### Changes in demand?



Compare the skills that occur in the 1998 CVCP Report with those identified in reports below and by Miller's (2014) on page 306. Note:

- ★ which skills needs remain constant
- ★ additional skills that have appeared recently
- ★ where your own strengths and gaps lie with respect to these.

## 1998 TMP Research

Research by TMP Worldwide Research found the top five skills valued by employers were: (1) oral communication (2) teamworking (3) listening (4) written communication, (5) problem-solving.

## 1998 CVCP Report

In 1998, the Committee of University Vice-Chancellors (CVCP) commissioned research by Coopers and Lybrand to identify 'employability skills' for graduates. This report outlined four categories of graduate attributes. These are still in demand today.

### 1 Traditional intellectual skills

The ability to: evaluate evidence critically; argue logically; apply theory to practice; model problems qualitatively and quantitatively; challenge taken-for-granted assumptions.

### 2 Core or key skills

Communication; application of number; working with others; information and communications technology; improving one's own performance.

### 3 Personal attributes

Self-reliance; adaptability; flexibility; 'nous'; creativity.

### 4 Knowledge about how organisations work

Business acumen; commercial sense.

## 2009 CBI report

The 2009 CBI report, *Future Fit*, showed the skills identified in 1998 were still needed. New skills in demand included cultural awareness, self-management, a 'can do' approach and business and customer awareness.

## 2011 Lowden report

This report of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and 22 leading employer organisations such as the CBI, the Association of Graduate Recruiters, and the Council for Industry in Higher Education (CIHE) identified the top attributes most sought in graduate employees as:

- ★ teamworking
- ★ self-management
- ★ literacy and numeracy skills relevant to the post.
- ★ problem-solving
- ★ knowledge of the business

## WEF (2016)

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), as well as the skills traditionally in demand, the future workforce would need social and emotional skills. Its list of sixteen '21st century skills' included cultural and civic literacy, collaboration, leadership, social awareness and critical thinking as well as creativity, persistence, curiosity, initiative and adaptability.

## LinkedIn 2020

Anderson (2020) looked at the soft skills most in demand and least in supply on LinkedIn. Emotional Intelligence was new to the list and most in demand, with creativity, persuasion, collaboration and adaptability also featuring in the top five.

## Bright Network Report 2020

Bright Network asked employers to rate the importance they placed on eight attributes when recruiting graduates. Communications topped the list followed by passion for the business, problem-solving, resilience, commercial awareness, a good degree, teamwork, leadership and organisation/team management (Uffindell et al., 2020).

# What employers value

## Employers value graduates

Each year, employers invest time and money in visiting HEIs to talk to students about job opportunities in their businesses, in creating placements, internships and graduate training schemes, advertising for graduates, setting up assessment centres for graduate recruitment, and interviewing students and new graduates. All this indicates that employers value graduates.

## Leadership and management

Employers usually want graduates who can step up quickly into managerial and leadership roles. That is why they are keen to see evidence of skills covered in this book:

- ★ **'Academic'/intellectual skills** – strategic thinking, making good decisions, exercising good judgement, analysing information, finding solutions, bringing a creative or innovative approach.
- ★ **People/inter-personal skills** – managing relationships in the workplace, teamwork, communicating clearly, inspiring, encouraging and supporting others to get things done well and efficiently, understanding customers, clients and competitors.
- ★ **Task-management/operational skills** – organisational skills, managing projects, setting goals, developing systems and processes, monitoring performance, using resources efficiently, managing money, all with attention to detail.
- ★ **Self-management/intra-personal skills** – the ability to manage your own needs, emotions, motivation and development so that you are able to work well under pressure and focus on your responsibilities.

## Skills for particular jobs

Advertisements usually list the most important features of the job, including skills requirements. Browsing through the job advertisements associated with career areas that interest you will help you form a picture of the relevant skills for you to develop.

## Activity

### Job advertisements



Find at least 20 advertisements for jobs in career areas that interest you. To find these, you can look in locations such as the Careers Service vacancy bulletin, national newspapers, professional publications that advertise jobs, and leading websites for graduate recruiters (see pages 381–2).

- ★ For the kind of jobs that interest you, which skills and attributes are mentioned most often?
- ★ How strong are your own skills in these areas?

On the companion site, there is a wide range of templates to record your competences and examples of experience – ready for when you need them. See pages xi and 374.

## Articulating skills clearly

Although employers and job adverts may use the same words as HEIs when speaking of skills, the terminology often means something different in a work context. Employers do value the skills developed by a university or college education, but do not always understand or value examples of these drawn from academic contexts. They like to see examples of those skills being used in work and 'real-life' contexts.

Pages 313–19 can help you to break your skills down into some of their component parts, and to identify how these might be articulated in ways that make more sense to employers.

# Translating academic skills for the workplace

## Do employers value academic skills?

Although employers tend to consider that having a degree indicates that a job applicant is bright and intelligent, many underestimate the skills and attributes gained through academic study. They might be sceptical about time spent in study rather than work – or just uncertain or unclear about the kinds of skills students gain. It can take some thought to find ways of presenting the value of your academic skills in ways that appear relevant to their business.

## Which academic skills?

Most businesses could benefit from workplace application of academic skills such as:

- ★ Research skills
- ★ Information management
- ★ Synthesising ideas and/or information
- ★ Writing up and presenting reports
- ★ Critical reflection on practice
- ★ Analysis, criticism and evaluation.

You might find it helpful to break key academic skills into their component sub-skills, as in the self-evaluation opposite – to show such how sub-skills could be applied to a workplace.

## What employers say

*More than anything, I value critical, analytic thinkers. I need to know staff can handle complex information, make sense of it for themselves, and present it in ways that make sense to me and my company. I need them to do the thinking, and be able to explain to me clearly why they are recommending a course of action. (CEO of a UK national charity)*

*We look for people who combine academic excellence with common sense. (Recruitment brochure; Travers Smith LLP)*

## How are your academic skills relevant?

I can

- Undertake advanced searches for information
- Find relevant material at speed
- Make good judgements about which material is most relevant
- Synthesise information from multiple sources quickly to find what they have in common and where they differ
- Summarise relevant material succinctly
- Synthesise material to arrive at a new solution, position or approach
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of a case or position accurately
- Analyse numerical data to identify trends
- Analyse evidence well in order to derive accurate conclusions
- Make sensible judgements, using a range of data/information
- Undertake complex, multi-level tasks with little supervision
- Apply knowledge in order to solve problems
- Translate complex material into everyday language so that it can be understood by diverse audiences
- Communicate a well-evidenced argument in writing
- Communicate a well-evidenced argument at an informal meeting
- Identify relevant material to prepare management briefings
- Communicate a well-evidenced argument as a formal presentation, such as to funders and clients
- Reflect on my own work, identifying for myself how I can make improvements

# Writing skills for the workplace

## The value of academic writing skills

For most courses in higher education, writing tasks play an important part. Depending on the kind of tasks that you undertook for your course, it is likely that you will have developed written communication skills that are highly relevant to the workplace.

## Writing skills – for work and study

Ideally, by your final year, you should be able to write accurately, at speed, to deadlines, selecting the most salient points, structuring these and clarifying their significance, drafting copy and proof-reading it, to produce a fluent, well-styled, relevant piece of writing for specific purposes and audiences. If you have developed such writing skills, then you are likely to do well in your studies. Such skills are real assets in employment. Conversely, if your written skills are weak, then it is worth fine-tuning them.

Note that, even if this is not specified, it will probably be assumed that you have perfect grammar, spelling and punctuation, and that all aspects of your application will be well proof-read and error-free.

## What employers say

*Communication, both written and verbal, is really important and I look for people who have an energy and spark about them.* (Danella Bagnall, Vehicle Architecture Planning Director, Jaguar Land Rover)

*If I see silly mistakes in an application, even in a covering email, I bin it. I am not going to have time to correct their work if I appoint them.* (Managing Director, SME)

## Make opportunities

Experience of writing for audiences outside of your academic studies enhances your CV. Businesses, charities and community projects may appreciate help with producing materials such as the following:

- ★ **Summaries** of press clippings, position papers, government documents, research papers, and information about funding proposals
- ★ **Informational literature** such as posters, leaflets, web-materials, articles in a trade magazine or community newspaper
- ★ **Promotional materials** such as fliers, webpages
- ★ **Social media writing** such as for a special interest community, twitter feeds in a professional context, team or manager's blog, Facebook or LinkedIn pages
- ★ **Staff literature** such as compiling or updating manuals, the staff handbook, a website, or policy documents.

There may be good opportunities in your institution, workplace, place of worship, a student society or for a local community group. Some starting places would be:

- ★ Student Union
- ★ Careers and Employability Services
- ★ Chaplaincy and student mentoring services
- ★ Volunteering Services on campus or in the local community
- ★ Community centres
- ★ Enterprise and Innovation Centres.

## Reflection

### Written communication



- ★ How could you gain experience of adapting and developing your writing skills for work and non-academic contexts?
- ★ Complete an evaluation of your writing skills for the workplace on page 315.

You might also find it useful to complete the written communication competence sheet provided on the companion site.

# Communication skills for the workplace

## Activity

### Writing skills in context



Employers frequently rate communication skills at the top of their list of preferred graduate attributes (see pages 311, 316 and 321), so they are well worth developing.

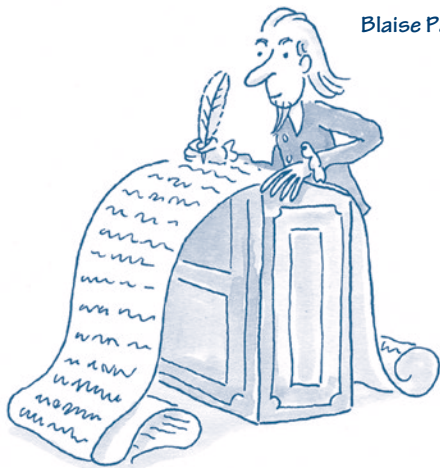
**1** Take at least seven different pieces of literature or information written for the public. These could include company websites, newsletters, podcasts, public information leaflets or posters, advertisements, trade magazines, factual information provided by banks, building societies or company marketing. Browse through these, comparing the writing style with that used in higher education.

- ★ What are the characteristics of such writing?
- ★ What writing skills would it take to produce them?

**2** Collect literature from occupational sectors or professional areas that interest you. Browse these, comparing their writing styles with that you use for your course: how do they differ? How might you need to adapt your style to suit what employers need?

*I have made this letter longer only because I have not had time to make it shorter.*

Blaise Pascal (1655)



## Where do your writing skills lie?

I can

- Spell, punctuate and use grammar correctly, proof-reading carefully for these aspects (For a graduate job, these should be excellent in all your written communication)
- Write clearly, making it easy for the reader to grasp the point
- Write with fluency, structuring my writing well so that it carries the reader through easily from one point to the next
- Produce good writing at speed, to deadlines
- Adapt my writing style to the needs of the task and to different audiences
- Communicate well with diverse audiences
- Summarise documents accurately, such as for briefing papers for management teams
- Use language precisely
- Present a strong, clear, reasoned argument
- Write balanced evaluations (and I am able to differentiate evaluation from description)
- Draft formal letters
- Draft or fine-tune papers for committees
- Take down and write up succinct, accurate minutes of meetings
- Produce web-based text, suitable for different audiences
- Write promotional material
- Write guides, handbooks or other informational literature for particular audiences
- Write concisely to a given brief
- Assist with writing a company blog
- Write social media posts suitable for business needs

# Oral communication skills for the workplace

Good oral communication skills are real assets in the workplace. For most jobs, such skills are required continually in day-to-day work, whereas written communications may be used less frequently.

## Evidencing your oral skills

Students often cite 'presenting a seminar paper' as an example of 'oral communication'. Leading a seminar is a valuable experience and does develop public speaking skills. However, formal presentations are not typical of everyday working life.

It is probable, at work, that you will need oral skills for meetings, formal and informal, to contribute as a team member to discussions, or to explain matters to clients, customers and colleagues. Employers will be interested to hear about how you have communicated with different kinds of people, fielded difficult questions or contributed to discussions in workshops, projects, online or in work contexts.

## What employers say

*I need my front line staff to be able to provide clear, accurate information to the public. They need to respond quickly to what they are hearing, adapting the message to suit the customer. Team leaders and managers must excel at communication in order to resolve difficult situations quickly and effectively. (General Manager, call centre for large, international utility company)*

## Reflection

### Oral communication skills



- ★ Which oral communication skills do you have that will be useful in work contexts?
- ★ Of the skills above, which do you need to find out more about and/or develop?

You might also find it useful to complete the oral communication competence sheet provided on the companion site.

## Where do your oral communication skills lie?

I can

- Convey information accurately and clearly
- Give clear directions and instructions
- Speak confidently with colleagues
- Communicate well with colleagues at different levels within the organisation
- Make useful contributions to meetings
- Take turns when speaking, leaving gaps for others to contribute
- Get to the point quickly
- Present the essential information concisely
- Listen attentively to others, taking on board what they are saying
- Represent corporate views accurately through what I say
- Negotiate my own position and that of my team or organisation
- Offer verbal criticism constructively as and when appropriate
- Adapt my verbal communication style to suit different audiences and situations
- Communicate well with particular audiences, such as children, patients, trade unions, customers
- Make customers and clients feel their views are respected
- Inspire confidence through what I say

# People skills for the workplace

## Skills in a team context

At university, because you are working towards a qualification that is awarded on an individual basis, you are judged primarily on your individual effort. In the workplace, whilst individual input is still valued, the team and wider company goals are usually more important points of reference.

When employers refer to creativity, communication, problem-solving or any other skills, they tend to assume that you understand that it isn't just about whether you shine at these things alone. They want to know how well you can apply skills and draw on your knowledge and experience when working with colleagues, clients and other people – and to encourage and bring out such skills in others, too.

They will also be looking to see that you understand that your development of such skills is not just about your personal satisfaction, but has relevance and adds value to the work of the team and the organisation.

## What employers say

*I need to feel confident that every member of my staff exhibits my charity's values in all of their interactions with our children and young people, their parents and carers and with their colleagues too. Valuing diversity and respect for all is at the heart of our work and I want to be able to see that through things such as taking the time to listen to what children and young people want, advocating on others' behalf and making sure that everyone who has contact with my organisation is treated in the way they would like to be treated themselves. The tougher the task, the more I need to know that they can stay connected with what really matters to us. (CEO, charity for disabled children and young people)*

## Where do your skills lie?

I can

- Establish rapport easily with work colleagues
- Make others feel included and respected
- Respect other people's dignity
- Respect other people's time
- Work well in a team, contributing appropriately
- Win people's trust and confidence easily
- Work collaboratively with other people
- Take on board other people's ideas
- Share well with others
- Recognise quickly what others need
- Explain things well to other people
- Deal well with difficult people
- Deal well with awkward situations
- Maintain professional boundaries
- Remain patient
- Demonstrate good customer service
- Encourage and support others to do well
- Develop or train colleagues
- Accept the leadership and authority of others
- Take the lead when appropriate

## Reflection

### People skills

- ★ Which people skills have you gained that will be useful in work contexts?
- ★ Of the skills above, which do you need to find out more about and/or develop?

You might also find it useful to complete the people skills competence sheets provided on the companion site.



# Task-management skills for the workplace

## Task-management skills

Good task-management or 'operational' skills are essential at work. Employers tend to assume that graduate employees will have developed these skills already.

Student life often involves a great deal of independent study, with most time left unscheduled. If you already manage your time well, working in a systematic way, with well-established routines, then you have a good basis on which to further develop operational skills needed in employment. If not, then start now to build such skills.

- ★ Establish a daily routine.
- ★ Develop systematic, planned approaches to larger tasks and assignments.
- ★ Fine-tune underlying functional skills in literacy, numeracy and information technology.
- ★ Find or devise projects where you can help with aspects such as management and organisation. (You may find it useful to use Cottrell, 2014.)

## What employers say

*As well as looking for graduates with potential, we want to recruit the technical leaders of tomorrow. These are individuals who can lead teams in designing and supporting the projects upon which we can continue to build the business. (RDS, rig design and engineering specialist)*

*I want someone who is going to keep a sound grip on our projects. I want to feel reassured that the projects would be well managed, that I would be given early warnings of potential risks or problems, preferably with realistic proposals for resolving these. (CEO of UK national charity)*

## Where do your skills lie?

I can

- Manage a project from start to finish
- Identify priorities
- Find solutions to work-related issues
- Manage a budget
- Identify resource requirements
- Manage resources well
- Undertake a health and safety assessment
- Work in a systematic way on work tasks
- Map processes
- Write instructions/procedures for others
- Identify which work tasks are priorities
- Scope tasks, identifying how long they will take
- Manage my work time to meet all deadlines
- Use work time effectively, avoiding distractions
- Draw up schedules for myself and others
- Maintain organised records and files, retrieving information quickly as needed
- Identify who needs to receive which kinds of communication, by when, making sure they receive them
- Identify my own training needs
- Pick up the IT skills I need to complete a task
- Use software to present data
- Use project management software (state which)

## Reflection

### Task-management skills

- ★ Which task-management skills have you gained as a student, either through your course, work placements or co-curricular activities?
- ★ Of the skills above, which do you need to find out more about and/or develop?

You might also find it useful to complete the task-management competence sheets provided on the companion site.



# Self-management skills for the workplace

## Why is self-management valued?

### Independence

It is an obvious advantage to an employer if an employee can work out quickly what is required of them at work and then just get on with the job without much guidance. If an employee is well-organised, responsible, and manages their time well, they are more productive. This saves on staff costs or opens up new opportunities for using that staff member as a resource.

### Coping with change and challenge

The labour market is changing so quickly that it is a real advantage to be able to manage change and uncertainty well.

Change can be experienced as exciting, or stressful, or both. It requires you to move from known and safe terrain into the unknown. You may have to alter ingrained habits, adapt your preferred ways of working, learn new skills, adopt new working patterns, assimilate into a new team, move site and change your home or your travel plans. You may have to cope with disruption.

Employers value candidates who can demonstrate that they have encountered difficulty and challenge and managed these well, learning from experience.

## What employers say

*... so you won't expect to be spoon fed. You'll be eager to throw your ideas into the mix, shoulder your fair share of responsibility and prove you know how to put customers first.* (Heinz, 2014)

## Where do your skills lie?

I can

- Take the initiative to ensure work gets done
- Motivate myself to produce high-quality work
- Maintain my motivation well even when things aren't going well
- Work out sensible solutions to problems
- Take care of my health and well-being so that I can perform well
- Cope well under pressure
- Manage stress effectively
- Respond well to challenge
- Raise difficult issues if need arises
- Ask for help when needed
- Work well independently, with little direction
- Juggle tasks flexibly to meet changing circumstances
- Be flexible in working hours and taking on new tasks to meet changing business needs
- Use direction and instruction constructively
- Balance independent working with teamwork
- Deal well with uncertainty
- Use feedback and criticism constructively
- Put my own needs aside when other people's requirements are more urgent
- Make good use of arising opportunities, to the benefit of the business
- Identify my training needs effectively and undertake professional updates and training

# Employer case studies: skill sets in the workplace

## What employers say

Below (pages 320–4) are the views of professionals with responsibilities for recruiting new employees or who are self-employed. Each brings a different perspective about attributes that are important to working life and their own work contexts. Many of the points they make have general relevance.

It is recommended that you read them all, even for occupational areas that don't appeal to you currently. Consider how the advice in each might be useful to you.

### Government/Civil Service

Civil service 'policy officials' do a wide range of jobs, including developing new ideas, planning and managing their delivery (setting up new systems, overseeing contracts, taking legislation through Parliament), reviewing progress and then completing the cycle by working on changes. All of the above skills are important – though what matters most will vary with the task at hand.

Critically, policy officials need to process and evaluate complex information quickly and present clear conclusions (familiar from university work), but must also be able to respond to it, whether by speaking to stakeholders or developing solutions to problems. Roles can change rapidly in response to new priorities, so officials need to be able to learn complex detail quickly.

Good people skills are essential, to work effectively with colleagues, stakeholders, end users – and Ministers, whether face to face, by email or over the phone/Skype. Policy teams are frequently small, so officials need to show initiative and self-motivation (which means making a direct difference to people's lives) and will need good personal relationships and clear communication to lead 'virtual teams' which may change from week to week.

*Civil service team leader (former Fast Streamer),  
UK Government Department*

### Health Service

Making the transition between being an Allied Health Profession (AHP) student and a qualified professional can be both exciting and challenging. Most NHS employers recognise this and provide preceptorship programmes to support you through the first year post qualifying. These tend to focus on developing those essential skills students don't always get a chance to fully work on during training placements. For example, even as a newly qualified member of staff you will be expected to take responsibility for your own caseload so good organisation and time management skills are key.

Developing assertiveness skills so that you feel able to ask questions and appropriately raise concerns is particularly important when working with vulnerable people. It's also never too early to work on your leadership skills, as even at this stage you will need to take responsibility for small service improvement projects and may be supervising support staff.

Working within teams and wider services it is inevitable you will experience some conflict, so understanding why it occurs and developing diplomacy and negotiation skills to handle it are important to managing your wellbeing. This is where all your reflective skills you developed as a student will come in handy and you can use your supervision to learn from what has happened and set personalised objectives for what you need to work on.

Finally, whilst there will be areas you still need to develop don't forget there are many skills you bring to your employer as a new graduate. For example, good IT skills are highly prized in our teams, as is an up-to-date knowledge of the latest research.

More than anything I value the enthusiasm and curiosity our new graduates bring, essential for any organisation looking to provide the best service it can for its customers.

*Gemma Dorer,  
Professional Lead Occupational Therapist,  
Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust*

## Communications

All of the skills in the book are essential in varying degrees – some become more crucial the more senior you become within an organisation. Here are three skills that are especially valuable in the current working environment – and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

**Ability to develop a strong network** By that I don't mean in the traditional sense of 'networking' or online connections. Its more about developing a diverse rich support network to help you to be resilient, succeed and thrive in a role. Your network usually starts with the people you work with every day. But as it develops, it is the people who you choose as mentors, other professionals who may be doing the same role in a different organisation or sector. It can simply be people outside of work but with different life or professional experiences – people you can go to any time to give you different perspectives and be a sounding board – and you do the same for them.

**Curiosity** is an under-rated skill which I look for in anyone I am interviewing for a role. As a communicator I spend my life asking questions in order to be able to give colleagues the best advice about how to communicate a policy, an idea or a service. There is a brilliant (if dated) book by Simon Sinek 'Start with why', which talks about how curiosity is all part of developing resilience and is the heart of creativity – not being afraid to challenge constructively and build on your ideas.

**Active listening** – being able to really listen to your audience and demonstrate that you are listening is a really great quality. A lot of interviews involve a presentation of some kind and it is always tempting to come overly prepared and ready to 'talk', when listening is just as important. It's the listening that really helps you to connect. In my profession, we learn how to develop communications that are tailored to an audience, based on evidence and gleaned from insight... If you can show you are interested in people by listening to their views, you will establish a much stronger connection.

*Helen Mason Head of Strategy and Engagement,  
Cornwall Council; former Deputy Director for  
Communications at the Department for Transport,  
UK Government*

## Engineering Consultancy

We are an engineering consultancy, so part of the job is working with people to consult and advise, with the other part being the engineering itself. Lots of presentations, managing expectations of clients etc.... Our work is project based which means there are a lot of engineering deadlines. Employees must be able to manage their time in order to complete tasks to deadline... As consulting engineers, we are always trying to think outside the box and suggest new and innovative ideas to our clients.

*Resourcing dept., Engineering  
Consultancy Company*

## Local Government

At our assessment centres, we're looking for graduates who:

- ★ Communicate effectively and build strong relationships;
- ★ Demonstrate resilience and an ability to adapt to fast-changing priorities;
- ★ Have the self-confidence to challenge appropriately the way we do things;
- ★ Seek to continually improve and innovate.

At interview stage, we measure our candidates against the Kent County Council Values, which are:

- ★ Be open;
- ★ Invite contribution and challenge;
- ★ Be accountable.

*Kent County Council, UK*

## Creative

**Self-management** is essential as a self-employed person. You are Creative Director, Head of Finance, (Business Manager), HR, all rolled into one. Without being able to motivate yourself to do the work of all of those roles and more your business will fail. Allocating appropriate time to the various roles is easier said than done. Often the same things (...will otherwise...) get left to the last minute or be neglected altogether ...

**People skills** are essential as a photographer. I always reference my time photographing at the ... Racecourse during the hectic week of Royal Ascot. Within one mile of the track you encounter all types of people... including those in the Royal Enclosure where I would have to photograph various members of the monarchy. The ability to converse and develop a rapport within a small window of opportunity with whomever I needed for a shot was a must. These are life skills that you pick up over time but certainly help me as a freelancer as I have to speak to lots of people from all walks of life.

**Good record keeping** One core lesson I learnt ... was the necessity to follow everything up in e-mail as an insurance policy. I was often caught out by this when I first started work as I couldn't see the relevance of writing down a conversation I was having with my line manager sat next to me in the office. When a task was not completed or something slipped that was not my fault, my inability to prove my innocence was undone through 'he said, she said'.

**Organisation and planning** Over time this skill has developed into ensuring shoots are as meticulously planned in advance as possible, which in turn makes my quote for the work as accurate as possible for both parties and there are no nasty surprises on the shoot.

**Business acumen** The world of photography is very competitive. For the large part there are a great number of equally skilled people who could cover the briefs... Perhaps every shoot should really be taken on with a competitive mindset?

**Work experience** After graduating... I worked at an agency for seven years and left to go freelance with a far more confident understanding of running a business than if I went straight into self-employment from University and I am incredibly grateful for it.

*Patch Dolan, [patchdolanphotography.com](http://patchdolanphotography.com)*

## Manufacture/ Engineering

Attitude is key for us. We look for candidates that are hungry for a job within our company. By that, we mean that it is evident from the care they took to research our company, to consider what we are looking for, and provide us with strong evidence that they can deliver what we need.

*General Manager,  
manufacturing and engineering*

## Activity

### Note useful advice

Browse the employer views on pages 320–4, this time noting:

- ★ What do employers value about graduates?
- ★ Which skills and other attributes recur across a range of professions?
- ★ What advice, lessons or tips can you draw from these employers? How will you put these into action?

## Marketing/Advertising

Social media marketing is a fast-paced and competitive industry ... You need to adapt well to change and thrive off the pressure of a deadline.

Marketing and advertising used to be all about big egos but in more progressive agencies that attitude doesn't go down well. Instead we look for people who can collaborate. Young people entering the industry typically have more day-to-day experience of using new social platforms because, culturally these are significant to their peer group. This is a great opportunity for collaboration: you bring the platform or audience knowledge; a more senior person brings the expertise and craft of making a campaign. As a result, we make a great piece of work – culturally relevant but also sophisticated and effective.

Both creative and critical thinking skills are essential in this industry. An idea can come from anywhere, but you need to be able to rationalise why the idea is good, to persuade your team and client to go with it.

You may find yourself in a situation where you have a great idea but the client doesn't like it. You might think they're wrong, or stupid, or just being difficult, and you may be right. Perhaps you will convince them to change their mind but often you won't. What do you do? Well, you keep your cool and manage your professional conduct. You need to use emotional intelligence to determine whether to argue back or if that would be detrimental to the agency-client relationship. You listen to client feedback; analyse it; ask questions if you need clarity. You don't take criticism personally: it's the idea they don't like, not you. You have to be resilient, spark your creativity and bring positivity into your work. It's OK to get something wrong if you can work to find a solution. Showing you have the ability to do this, with grace and good humour, will build strong relationships with your team and client.

It's good if, as a junior member of staff, you understand there is a commercial objective to a business...You won't be expected to understand the details but recognising the financial obligations of how a business works provides perspective on why certain things are important (such as timesheets) or why certain decisions are made. Big-picture thinking like this is impressive – and can help remove emotion from a difficult situation.

*Charlie Cottrell, Group Creative Director and Head of Editorial for We Are Social (global creative agency)*

## Teaching

As a head-teacher, when reading application forms for newly qualified teachers, I am looking for what they can bring as well as their teaching. This is so that I can bring different skill sets that will drive school improvement.

The way that a range of skills and responsibilities could be integrated into new staff experience is exemplified by a recently appointed teacher with a Masters in Creative Media. Our newly opening school wished to create a media hub with radio station, YouTube channel, interactive technology, etc. She was asked to write a School Action Plan identifying how she was going to project manage, meet deadlines and address training needs. This required strong organisational skills and good self-management.

As part of delivering the plan, she called on many people skills, visiting other schools and contacting multiple professionals for expertise and support. This required her to form a good rapport with them all. Problem-solving skills were also important: each time she came across a barrier, she was proactive at finding solutions and holding people to account.

Two months into the job she has completed 50% of the Action Plan, inspired a host of colleagues, used a range of skill sets and is a very respected and valued member of staff.

*Shazia Sarwar-Azim, Headteacher, Mill School, Bury*

## Nuclear Research

For me, it really is curiosity, open-mindedness and a willingness to learn combined with a strong desire to grow, a good technical foundation and a clear motivation that are key. CERN's core values are integrity, commitment, professionalism, creativity and diversity – and when students and graduates join our multinational and multidisciplinary environment, they will be able to add far more in addition to the incredible technical know-how of being at the forefront of technology to their CV.

*Anna Cook, Deputy Group Leader – Talent Acquisition, Conseil Européen pour la recherche nucléaire (CERN), Switzerland*

## Publishing

I always look for proactive individuals who will be able to manage their time independently and take responsibility for the tasks assigned to them. They must be self-motivated and display a determined attitude in all facets of the job, even those that might be more administrative in nature. Taking a solution-oriented mindset in such situations will allow them to get through the more mundane side and progress quickly to more creative, fulfilling aspects of the role. New recruits must be flexible and organised in order to juggle work on several different projects, often with competing deadlines, and prioritise their workload effectively. However, people skills are equally important; they must develop relationships with both external clients and internal colleagues to play an effective part in the overall team dynamics.

*Niki Arulanandam, Head of Development, Red Globe Press*

## Creative/digital

We need people who can manage the realities of today's workplace, who can juggle many projects at once, delivering all to a deadline. In a new graduate, we would want to see that they have experience of working on complex projects, have a good eye for detail, can cope with stress, get along with others and be flexible as needs arise. They will need to take on responsibility straight away, so we need to know they can handle that.

*Chief Executive, SME, creative and digital sector*

## Observation



### Skills in the workplace

If you have a job of any kind at present, take some time in the next few weeks to observe the range of skills that are used by yourself and your colleagues. Note the way that different skill sets are integrated within a task, in order to get the job done.

## Want to know more?



L. Glazer (2019) *Employers increasingly prefer generalists over specialists*.

B. Anderson (2020) *The Most In-Demand Hard and Soft Skills of 2020*.

[www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/looking-for-a-job/commercial-awareness-understand-it-develop-it-use-it-to-your-advantage](http://www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/looking-for-a-job/commercial-awareness-understand-it-develop-it-use-it-to-your-advantage)

Department for Education (2017) *Employer skills survey 2017: UK findings. Main report and data tables on UK employers' reported skill needs and training activities*.

[careers.govt.nz](http://careers.govt.nz). *Skills employers are looking for*. Updated 26 Feb 2020.

World Economic Forum (WEF) (2016) *New Vision for Education: Fostering Social and Emotional Learning through Technology*. [weforum.org](http://weforum.org)

# Being your own employer: pros and cons

So far we have considered what an employer might want when that employer is someone other than yourself. There is also the option of being your own employer, whether as a sole-trader or micro-business, freelance professional, small to medium-sized business owner, or growing a small business into a large company.

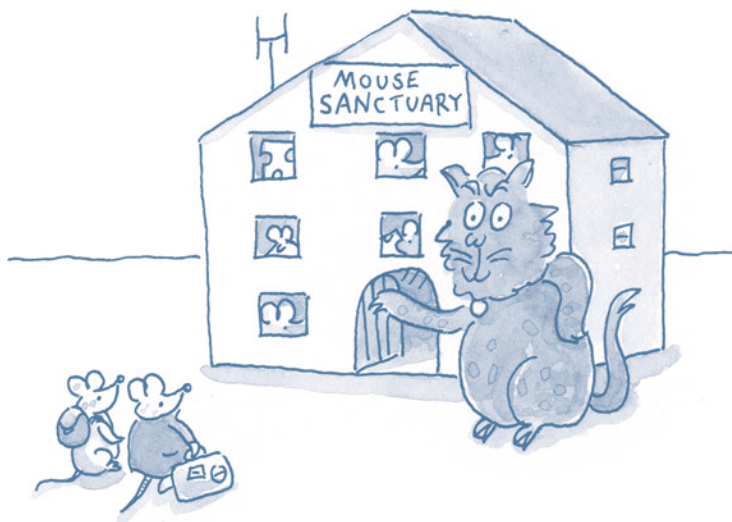
There are a number of professional areas such as in law, finance, accounting, psychology and architecture where, once you have experience and chartered status, you can set up your own practice.

If the idea of having your own business appeals, then it is essential to think this through in meticulous detail.

## The benefits

If you have a good idea for a marketable service or product, and can sell it at a profit, then you can reap many benefits from self-employment.

- ★ You can follow your own vision and take forward your own ideas with fewer restrictions.
- ★ You have more control over your own destiny, more responsibility for success or failure.
- ★ You can work to your own values: you have a larger say in the culture, ethos and lifestyle associated with your workplace.
- ★ It suits those who want to work in creative, design, digital and performance industries, and also in retail, consultancy, coaching, counselling, therapies, translation, hospitality – and many other areas.



Self-employment allows you to work to your own values

- ★ You may be able to choose your own hours, so you can combine work flexibly with creative, leisure or family commitments.
- ★ It can be really exciting and rewarding to take an idea to market and see it succeed.
- ★ If the business is successful, you may take a larger share of the profits.

## Realities

### *Working your own hours*

In general, to make your business work, you have to be prepared to work very long hours, especially in the first few years. Most entrepreneurs are so passionate about their concept that they don't count the hours they work.

### *Being in charge*

Being in charge does not mean that you get to do everything your own way. You have to listen carefully to your potential market and to anyone who invests, whether friends, family, partners, banks, or crowd-funders, taking their views on board. You may have to adapt your concept, product and plans to suit the market and investors.

### *Making money?*

It is possible to make a great amount of money if your business is a success. Some companies, especially some on-line start-ups, have been overnight successes. When starting out, and especially if borrowing money to invest, be realistic. Most businesses are small and remain small. You may make small profits – or a loss. It is essential to manage loans and debts.

# Being your own employer: pros and cons

Being an employer carries specific responsibilities, and these increase depending on the size of your workforce and your turnover.

- ★ The first responsibility is finding out what are your responsibilities and liabilities – you are in charge, so you are expected to know.
- ★ If you borrow money to get started or to invest in development, you are responsible for making sure your investors get their money back as well as agreed returns on their investment.
- ★ For your goods and services, you have a responsibility to deliver on what you promise.
- ★ You are responsible for the health and safety of employees, those visiting your work premises, and anyone using your goods and services.
- ★ If you have employees, you have responsibilities to them, such as payment of pensions, employee national insurance, the minimum wage, and adhering to employment law, etc.
- ★ It is up to you to ensure that you meet all legal and financial requirements, including those relating to taxes, the environment, equality, health and safety, data protection, charity and/or companies law, staff malpractice, goods and services, etc.
- ★ You need to arrange insurance cover, to meet all your liabilities.

## The risks

A high proportion of new enterprises fail. In some sectors, this is as high as 90%. Make sure you are aware of the likely pitfalls. Here are some reasons why businesses fail.

**They spend too much on start-up costs** assuming that they will make bigger profits in the early years than is likely to be the case. For example, they invest heavily in refurbishing premises and in new plant rather than making do with serviceable and affordable options, such as recycled or second-hand plant.

I want *everything* to look shiny and bright



... and then just a few other bits and pieces which shouldn't amount to much more money



**They don't undertake a full cost analysis** that covers all the incidentals such as insurance, energy, distribution costs, maintenance, wastage, slow markets, and myriad other things. All of the small items can add up to a significant amount, and total more than the obvious, larger items. They can eat into cash flow.

## They don't watch cash flow

Without available cash to pay salaries, invest in stock, etc., even a large business can fold.

**They don't understand the market** This may be because they don't conduct the right kind of market analysis, select the right kind of focus groups, or interpret their findings correctly. Generally, people love their own business idea, so they think others will too. They can assume a larger market for the product than is actually the case and/or underestimate competition.



I think it is a *great idea* and my mum says so too. I really believe it will sell!



# Being your own employer: eight essentials

**1 A concept.** Your starting place is having an idea for a product or service. This must be yours to sell, so check first whether anyone already holds the patent. If so, consider whether your concept could be adapted to be made sufficiently different for patenting in its own right. In the UK, find out about patents and intellectual property at the Intellectual Property Office at [www.ipo.gov.uk](http://www.ipo.gov.uk).

**2 A brand and selling point.** What makes your product or service stand out in the market? What does it have that would make customers choose that over others? How would people recognise your product and your promotional materials and messages as yours rather than a competitor's?

## Great idea – will it really work?

*Be enthusiastic for your idea, but also be hard-headed: can it really work?*

**3 A market.** However brilliant your concept looks to you and your friends, it has to be one that will sell. Your sales have to generate sufficient income to cover all costs, including your salary.

Investigate your market carefully and thoroughly. Have similar projects been tried already? If these were successful, have competitors captured most of the potential market already? If they failed, were there particular reasons? Think carefully about what lessons you can learn from the existing market, looking at successful business ideas and those that haven't captured a market.

**4 A route to market.** Even if there is a potential market, you need to think through how potential customers would find out about your business and be able to purchase your goods and services. How would you promote your products? If online, how could customers check the product is right for them? Where are your products manufactured

and/or the business located? How would you distribute your product and at what cost? What might restrict you in getting your product to market, or in scaling up your business? The answers would be different depending on whether you are trading in ice-cream, digital services, logistics or acupuncture.

**5 Finance and financial planning.** You will need to obtain finance to get started, though it is possible to start and keep businesses afloat with a good idea, a small initial outlay and plenty of hard work.

- ★ Use any free financial advice available. See page 382.
- ★ Consider taking an enterprise course.
- ★ Produce a business plan, including a detailed financial plan. See [www.startupdonut.co.uk](http://www.startupdonut.co.uk).

**6 An exit strategy.** Take advice on how to manage the business finances so that, if the business does not succeed as planned, you can afford to pay your debts, cover any losses and not go bankrupt.

**7 Skills and mindset.** You need the motivation, skills and drive to 'make it happen'. You have to be: prepared to work long hours; systematic in planning; disciplined in sticking to targets; willing to keep yourself and others focused and on task; able to negotiate with others and persuade people to believe in you and your product. If you can, find a good mentor as a sounding board, and partners or employees whose skills and qualities complement your own – then value what they offer and listen to what they say.

**8 A first step.** All businesses have to start somewhere. If the idea excites you, then speak to an expert adviser. There is a wealth of free advice and support available for entrepreneurs, including students. Visit the Employability/Careers Service or see page 382.

# Review: What do employers really want

1

## Understand what employability means in your context

Be aware of the capabilities you have, their relevance for the current job market, and how to prepare to be work-ready for jobs, sectors or career advances that interest you.

2

## Do your research

Research the labour market, your professional area, and each employer whose jobs interest you. Use your research to prepare your applications in ways that demonstrate to employers that you understand their needs.

3

## Consider the full range of employers

Don't limit your choices by assuming you need a job with a large employer. The great majority of jobs are with medium and small enterprises. Even specialist companies tend to have jobs for non-specialists.

4

## Look at things from the perspective of the employer

Put yourself in their shoes. Consider what you would want in an employee if you were in their position. Also, examine carefully the words employers use to state what they need. Consider how you can demonstrate to them that you understand their needs and have the abilities and experience to meet them.

5

## Be aware of the skills employers need

Investigate the range of skills that employers in all sectors require, especially soft skills that open up a wide range of jobs. Research job advertisements to note new skills that are in high demand.

6

## Appreciate the range of skills and qualities you have developed

Appreciate the wide range of skills and attributes you have probably developed as a student. Don't underestimate these. List and consider how your academic skills can be of value in contexts beyond your degree.

7

## Value your academic skills

Employers can struggle to see the relevance of core academic skills. Consider for yourself the worth of your intellectual skills such as thinking, problem-solving, criticality, analysis, evaluation and research so that you are confident about describing how these can be of benefit in work contexts.

8

## Articulate your skills in ways that make sense to employers

Re-interpret your skills and qualities in ways that fit the workplace and the role you are seeing. Use similar vocabulary to that used in the job advertisements and employer websites. Sound like a prospective employee rather than a student.

9

## Consider self-employment – or becoming an employer yourself

Many people prefer to work for themselves as freelancers or to set up their own company. As for other work, research the benefits, risks, responsibilities and sources of support carefully – before launching your business.

# Chapter 14

# Getting the job you want



## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ reflect on four key stages in career planning, identifying where to focus your energies
- ✓ decide what you want from your first, or next, job
- ✓ plan, and act, ahead in order to put yourself in the strongest possible position when applying for jobs
- ✓ extract the most value from work placements or current employment, to benefit your future job applications
- ✓ make strong job applications, managing the appointments process effectively from start to finish.

## Introduction

Applying for jobs is an art in itself. It is no longer sufficient to send a CV to a host of employers and hope that one will notice you. For almost every job, expect strong competition – others will want that job just as much as you do. Some applicants might have planned ahead for several years towards just such an application, building an excellent CV based on a range of experiences. You can do that too.

It pays to start the process of thinking about employability and careers planning in a systematic way from your first year of study – or else as soon as possible. That includes doing the following.

- ★ **Aspire** to the best possible jobs and career routes for yourself, whether short-term or longer-term.
- ★ **Act** now so as to improve your chances of getting the jobs you want.
- ★ **Apply** for the right jobs for you in the most effective way possible.
- ★ **Achieve** the grades, skills, confidence and experiences that will, in turn, help you to attain well academically and gain a good job.

That takes time, thought and experimentation, so the sooner you start thinking and planning, the better. It also takes perseverance. Surveys show that many students give up on applications when the process seems long, difficult or unclear (Bright Network, 2018): it is worth persevering with such tricky applications, bearing in mind that others are likely to feel the same way.

The opening chapters encouraged you to consider what ‘success’ meant for you. That should help you to set life and career aspirations that are meaningful for you. This chapter helps you to put your career planning journey on a good footing, with guidance on how to act, apply and achieve successfully.

## Useful apps

There are apps available to help with the processes of applying for jobs. See page 380.

# What students and graduates say

## Make a start

What I have to say is probably what everyone says: 'I wish I hadn't waited so long before starting to think about planning my career.' So my advice is, just do it. Get on with it. You have to eventually, so it might as well be now.

**Gloria, 3rd-year student**

## Get experience

I am really glad that I joined lots of societies. Being president of one student society and treasurer of another made it much easier for me to answer questions at interview. I could talk easily about a long list of things – such as using my initiative, taking the lead to get things done, discussing things in meetings, making sure we had records of meetings and that we followed through on what we agreed, managing budgets, taking responsibility for making decisions, having to account for my actions, all the sorts of things you have to do in work all the time. I think this would be good for all students, taking on any roles where they can show they took some initiative and have some drive.

**Imani, recent graduate**

I couldn't get an internship that I really wanted. I was very dejected at first. On the advice of the university careers service, I looked for other work instead. I did two part-time voluntary jobs, and then got some paid part-time hours at one of these. I then found another part-time job which I thought would be a dead-end. That employer asked if I had good writing skills and asked me to help out with some office work. After that, the manager asked if I would write material for their website. A partner company then offered me a job in their communications office, and now I am a trainee manager there. One thing can lead on to another, so if I hadn't taken what was available, I probably wouldn't have got this chance.

**Basha, graduate**

## Keep your options open

I left a job to start university and was convinced that when I got my degree I would go back to my old company. When I finished, I realised I didn't want to do that, and wished I had bothered to check out other businesses and what was required for management entry roles at these. I could have done much more to prepare my curriculum vitae, to be more interesting as an applicant. I don't look as if I have done anything except study in the last three years.

**Raheem, final year student**

I didn't think I would work for an SME but the Careers Service was sent the option of a placement and asked me if I would be interested. I thought, 'why not?' and I am so glad because it has been amazingly helpful. There are only eleven people in the company and we all just pitch in as needed. I work with everyone and have a go at everything – almost everything. It has been good for me because I wasn't sure what it would be like working with colleagues at work and not just students. Because we work so closely as a team, I have learnt a lot very quickly, how to get on with people at work and how to handle clients too.

**Shuang, 3rd year student**

## Think of all options

I just assumed that I would work for a big company and that that is where the jobs were. That is all I heard about. I didn't even think about most being in smaller companies, although it is obvious when you think about it. I was disappointed not to get a job with a major corporate but it has been interesting joining a micro-company. Everyone knows who I am at work, and I feel like I really count.

**Duncan, recent graduate**

## Reflection

### Applying for jobs



- ★ What can you learn from these students' experiences that could help your own career planning?
- ★ What advice would you give to others? Are you following this advice yourself, currently?

# Career planning: **Aspire, Act, Apply, Achieve**

Planning your career is like planning for a journey:

- ★ Your planning can help to make the experience more enjoyable and, ultimately, successful.
- ★ You can't plan for every eventuality, so be prepared for the unexpected, too.

## What is 'career planning'?

Career planning is mainly about thinking ahead to optimise your opportunities. It is about opening up possibilities rather than, necessarily, precise outcomes.

Career planning matters even if you are on a career path already – or if you have no idea of what to do, or intend to pursue further study. It is acknowledged that:

- ★ career paths are hard to predict
- ★ many students have little fixed idea about what they want to do when they graduate; those that do may change their minds along the way
- ★ life circumstances pan out differently than expected and personal interests change, so particular career routes close down or open up
- ★ the labour market changes, with old jobs disappearing and new jobs appearing.

## Aspire, Act, Apply, Achieve

Broadly speaking, there are four stages to career planning; these could follow on from each other although, depending on when you start and when opportunities fall for you, they may run concurrently.

### Aspire

- ★ **Aim high** Whilst it is sensible to aim for jobs within your reach, it is just as important to be ambitious, aspiring to the best possible jobs and career outcomes for you.
- ★ **Consider leadership options** For whatever field of work appeals to you, a leadership role might be open to you on graduation or in the future. Take steps to enable this possibility – even if you decide later that this is not for you. See Chapter 8.
- ★ **Expand your options** rather than limit them.
- ★ **Be proactive** in your aspiration, rather than just 'wishing and wanting' or thinking 'if only...'

### Act

Act now so as to improve your chances of getting the jobs you want. That includes:

- ★ **Active self-reflection and self-evaluation** so you know which strengths you can play to, and which areas to work on further.
- ★ **Active planning** so you know when you will fit in different aspects of careers development.
- ★ **Active engagement** in activities and experiences that build your CV and profile.
- ★ **Active decision-making** to provide focus for your career development and job applications.

### Apply

- ★ **Use the available work opportunities** to build your experience; don't just wait for the perfect job or placement.
- ★ **Gain practice** in applying for jobs, using workshops and mock interviews and through real applications.
- ★ **Tailor your application** Select carefully where to apply, then fit your application to the employer and job.

### Achieve

- ★ **Academically** Develop skills and habits that will enable you to gain the best possible grades, for their own sake and to improve your career options.
- ★ **Professionally** both short-term and long-term.
- ★ **Personally** Develop in confidence and self-reliance; attain your own goals for success in life.

### Activity

#### Career planning: decide actions



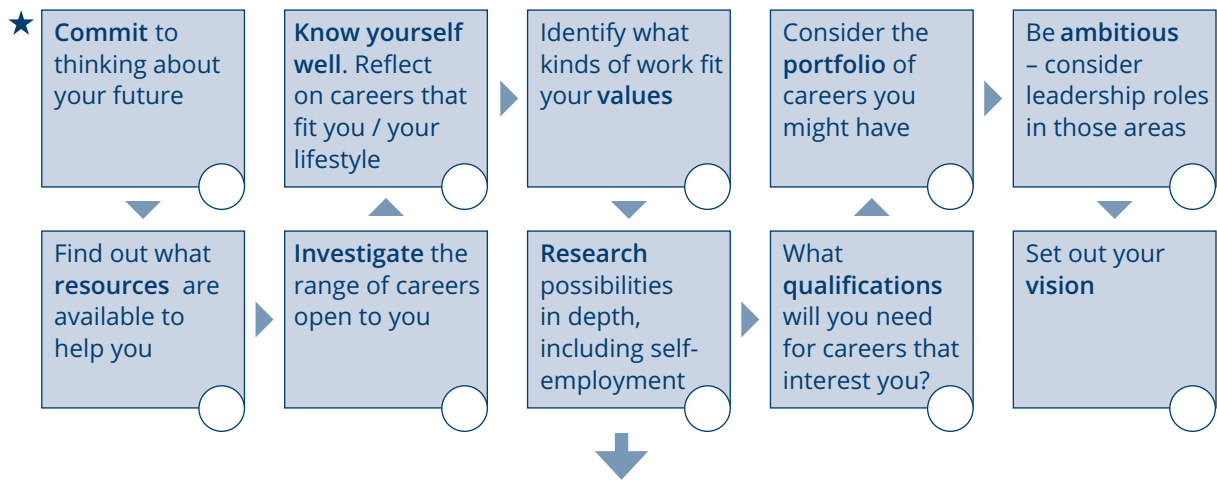
- ➔ Use the Career Planning Journey evaluation on pp. 323–32 to identify areas for action in your own career planning.

# Career planning journey: Aspire, Act, Apply, Achieve

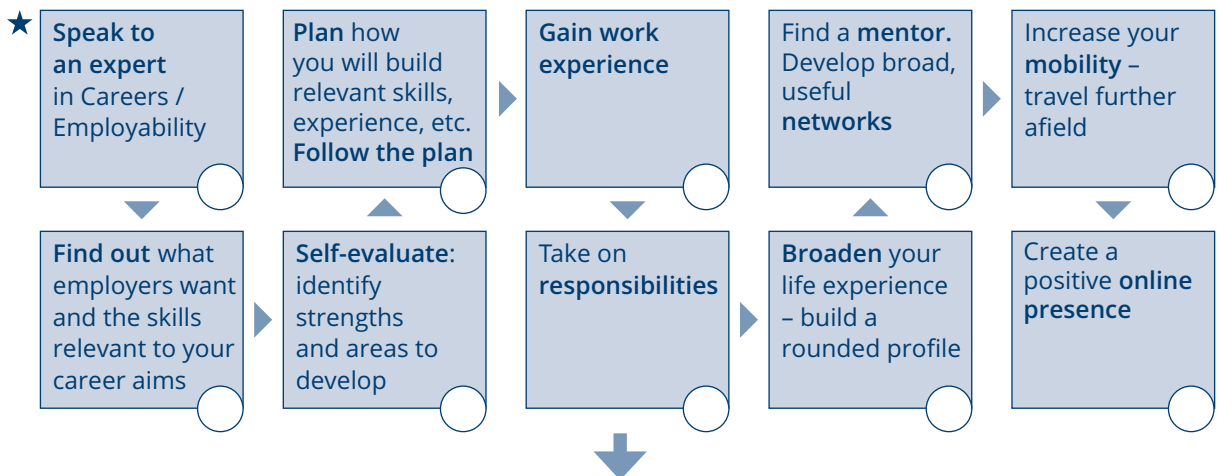
For the four stages below:

- ★ Starting at the box nearest the star, check your progress on your career journey. (NB You may find that you need to skip some steps or complete some later steps ahead of earlier ones.)
- ★ Identify areas that need your action now by highlighting the relevant circles. ●
- ★ Identify steps you have completed already by checking  the relevant box.

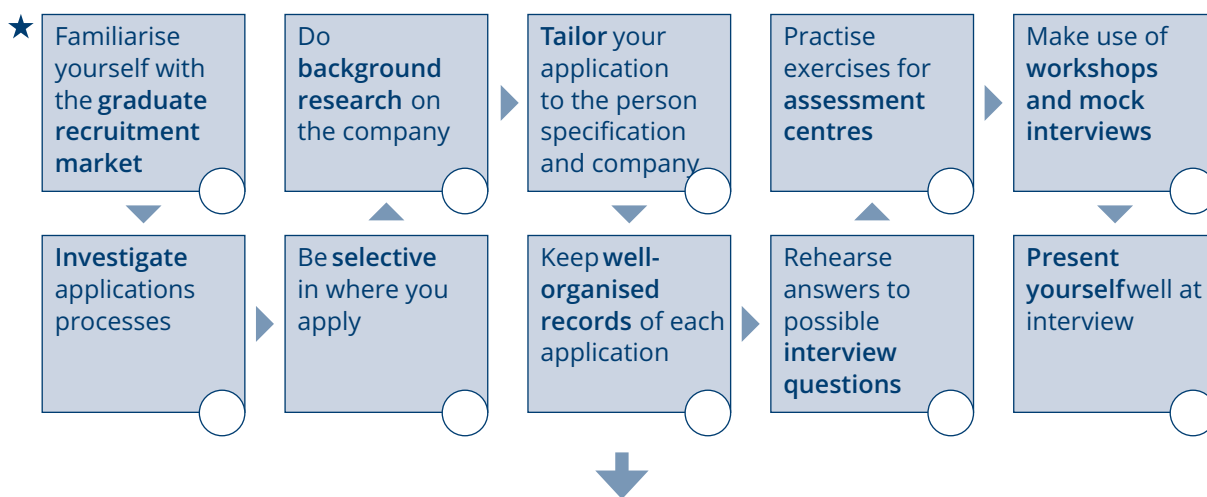
**1 Aspire: Aim high, developing an ambitious vision for your longer-term future. Consider how current opportunities can serve as steps towards your goals. Don't restrict your options too early.**



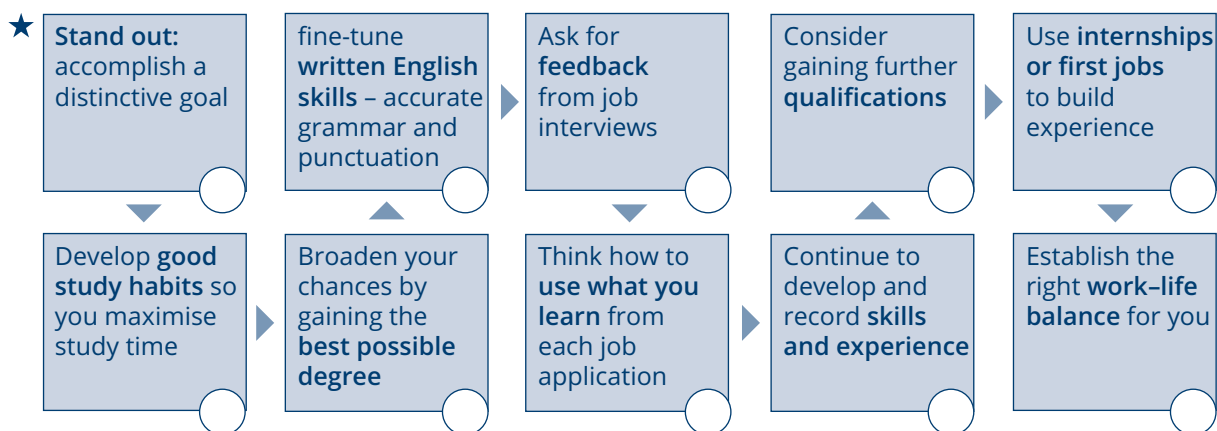
**2 Act: Be proactive in investigating, planning, finding and using opportunities. Make decisions, so that you provide a focus to your career planning and action.**



**3 Apply: Continue to research, prepare and practise thoroughly even once you start to apply for jobs. Be selective, tailoring your application as closely as possible to the best, most likely roles for you.**



**4 Achieve: Be aware of the close connection between academic achievement, accurate use of English and successful job applications. Be mindful, too, of your broader happiness and life-work balance.**



## Reflection

### Career planning journey



- ★ Are you giving sufficient time and attention to your career planning?
- ★ Are you being proactive in gaining experience, work and skills that strengthen your job applications?
- ★ What is the next step for you in planning for your career?

# Models of career development

'Aspire, Act, Apply, Achieve' (pages 332–3) is one model of career development and planning. There are many others, some of which are outlined below. Real life rarely follows models exactly, but these can help to clarify thinking about what to do next. It can be useful to select one model as your guide or map for moving forward with your own employability, professional development and career planning.

## Typical features

You can find many visual representations of career development models online, such as the collection by Heart at Work Associates on [pinterest.co.uk](https://www.pinterest.co.uk/heartatwork/). It is worth browsing these and drawing out for yourself the features they share. Use these to devise your own approach, as relevant to your situation. Note recurring themes such as:

- 1 Knowing yourself** Assess your own values, ambitions, interests, needs, etc.; Recognise personal change; Self-reflection; Self-awareness.
- 2 Career awareness** Explore options; Research jobs, companies, labour market trends.
- 3 Focus** Create a vision; Make decisions; Set goals; Formulate a plan; Make a commitment.
- 4 Action** Develop skills; Gain job-search skills; Network; 'Market yourself'; Gain experience.
- 5 Adapt** Recognise and use unexpected opportunities; Flex plans to circumstances.

## The Career EDGE model

Formulated by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), this identifies components that enhance employability:

- 1 Career** development learning, plus ...
- 2 Experience** (work and life)
- 3 Degree** subject knowledge, understanding and skills
- 4 Generic** skills
- 5 Emotional** intelligence.

In the model, reflection and evaluation build the confidence, efficacy and self-esteem that lead to employability.

## Reflection



### Experience of work

What would you find useful about the Career EDGE model?

Experience on its own doesn't necessarily produce relevant knowledge and understanding. How do you think people could make use of work experience to make it most meaningful for their own career advancement? (See pages 339–41.)

## The Career Management model

Bridgstock (2009) argues that, as well as gaining skills that employers require, it is also important to gain and use career management skills. These help you to direct your learning and skills development in ways that will prove meaningful.

This model recognises the importance of:

- 1 Career-building skills** such as using labour market intelligence, developing the right networks and relationships for gaining work
- 2 Self-management skills** such as evaluating your skills, qualities and values
- 3 Underlying 'traits and dispositions'** such as being open to new experience, beliefs about your employability, your vocational interests, or willingness to develop career skills.

Such career management skills help you to direct your energies appropriately, so that you then make best use of the career-related opportunities available through your course and elsewhere. An important aspect of this model is the 'intentional management' of work, learning, and life. It calls for active reflection and evaluation.

## Reflection



### Career development model

- ★ Does this model make sense to you?
- ★ How focused are you on developing career management skills in the planned, intentional, reflective manner it proposes?

# Responsive career planning

## Responsiveness to change

Even the best laid plans do not always work out as expected. So many factors affect our lives – in our health, finances, relationships, family, the labour market as well as in our interests and needs. New opportunities can suddenly arise, and expected paths can close. In the 21st century, responsiveness to change is especially important. We need to take account of chance, change and complexity, as part of our thinking and planning (Schlesinger and Daley (2016). Businesses want employees who are ‘flexible’, ‘adaptable’, and can cope with change.

## Changes in narrative

Our approach to career planning reflects the story we tell ourselves about our lives (see Chapter 3). As we go through new experiences, meet new people and become aware of changes on the horizon, our sense of our place in the world can be transformed. Our personal narrative also adjusts. If you look back over older self-assessments and reflections, you are likely to notice subtle (or even major) shifts in what you value, want and need, and in how you view yourself and your life.

Being alert to changes in our personal narrative helps us to keep our plans and actions aligned with what matters most to us and makes sense to our psyches. We may also choose to formulate a new narrative – one that helps us move forward in a way that supports our well-being in a meaningful working life.

## Gain from ‘happenstance’

In today’s labour market, it is a useful attribute to be able to embrace the unexpected as a source of new opportunities rather than as a hindrance to our plans. Krumboltz (2009) argues this means learning to take action in response to chance and unplanned events (happenstance), rather than expecting to make a single career decision for life.

Throughout our working lives, new opportunities will arise for promotions, secondments, changes

of role, forming new partnerships or relocating. Seemingly small interactions can radically alter our career perspectives and opportunities (Pryor and Bright, 2014). At any time, we might gain the spark of an idea that makes us decide to start a business, become an artist, or find a more caring, creative or financially rewarding path. It might happen several times across a lifetime. Recognising and accepting this reality can:

- ★ open us up to unexpected possibilities
- ★ reduce stress associated with change
- ★ help us to take steps throughout our lives that make us readier to act constructively in response to the unexpected at any time.

## Annual review

Whilst clear plans help us forward, it doesn’t help if we cling to plans once they have outlived their relevance. It is useful to stand back at least once a year, either during study vacations or as part of annual workplace reviews, and check out:

- ★ whether what we have been telling ourselves about our lives still holds true
- ★ any recent or expected changes to the environment in which we work/intend to work
- ★ whether our vision, goals and plans are still fit for purpose
- ★ how we can best adjust our plans to respond to any such changes

### Activity

#### Recognise personal change



Using self-evaluations, memory and reflections, note changes in yourself in the last few years. If you wish, use the *Recognising personal change* resource on the companion site.

# Which careers and jobs would suit me?

Choosing the right career is an intensely personal decision. You have to weigh up what will best suit you for now and/or for the longer term. There are free tools online (some listed below) that can help you decide on what would suit you – or whether your current career path is the best for you.

However, bear in mind that these are only guides and depend a lot on how well you know yourself and how accurate you are in the information you provide. They also apply, of course, to careers that existed at the time they were designed. New careers come into being all the time, whilst others disappear. Your options, as well as your interests, qualifications and circumstances might well change over the next few years.

## Online self-evaluations

**Career explorer** A free comprehensive career test that looks at 140 traits and finds your best match from over 800 career options.

[www.careerexplorer.com/career-test/](http://www.careerexplorer.com/career-test/)

**Buzz Quiz Careers test** A fun free online assessment from UCAS to find out some careers that might suit you. The responses also suggest which celebrities you are like.

[www.ucas.com/careers/buzz-quiz](http://www.ucas.com/careers/buzz-quiz)

## Make an informed decision

### *Investigate the labour market*

Find out about the range of jobs on offer now. Check for expected future patterns of demand. Investigate how technology is expected to affect the nature and availability of work in your chosen field.

### *Employability positioning*

Mohammed Hussain, Academic Guidance Officer at the University of Leeds emphasised the importance of 'positioning' yourself against the unknowns of an uncertain job market. This means continually updating your skills, being open to change and new roles, and generally keeping an eye on what might change, personally, politically or technologically.

## *Genuine interest*

Dr Bob Gilworth, Director at the University of London Careers Group, argues for the importance of sounding authentic in applications. Which kind of jobs, roles, sectors or organisations can you talk about with most enthusiasm? If your applications reflect where your interests and energies lie, your answers will be stronger and more authentic.

## *Experiment*

Try out different roles before committing to a career – or consider whether an existing career path is really your only and best option.

- ★ Use your networks to ask about opportunities to work shadow, gain mentors and to ask questions about what work is like in their sector/roles.
- ★ Use work experience, placements, internships or voluntary work to test your assumptions about different organisations and roles and how well these would suit you.

## *Consider what you want*

- ★ What do you want or need from your first or next role (page 343)?
- ★ Reflect on multiple options (page 344).
- ★ Think through what you want from an employer (page 345).

## Want to know more?



What Job Would Suit Me? [www.prospects.ac.uk/planner](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/planner).

Careerpilot.org <https://careerpilot.org.uk/information/help-and-support/quizzes-that-match-your-skills-and-interests-to-jobs>.

# Gaining experience of work

## 'Must have experience'



*Treat all placements as a source of business knowledge and learning*

Job advertisements often state that experience is needed, but it can be tricky to find an initial job that provides this. If you are caught in this conundrum, don't despair. You can gain experience.

## You can make any job work for you

Any employment experience is usually better than none. If the right placement does not come along, take the work that is available and use it strategically (see pages 339–41).

## Where to find work

**Part-time work** Check whether your university/college has jobs available and/or runs a recruitment agency on site. Use your networks: friends and contacts might know of jobs where they work. Register with online and local agencies. Check local newspapers. Local shops, religious bodies and community organisations often display job advertisements.

**Work placements and internships** These come in various packages, paid or unpaid, short or long, part-time or full-time. Ask at your careers or employability service. Look for a placement that

provides you with the experience and skills that are most closely aligned to your career aims, but be open to accepting what is available.

**Voluntary work** This can be a great starting place. Your Student Union or Careers Service might organise volunteer experience and/or this might be organised through your course. If you approach charities directly, be clear about the time, experience and skills you can offer.

## Treat all placements seriously

It is likely that you will have to compete for placements and internships as well as for mainstream jobs. Approach the appointments process for every role as a meaningful opportunity for sharpening your job application skills.

Many placements and internships lead to a job within the company, so make a good impression from the outset. Even if you think at first that the company is not for you, you might find you want to stay there to gain more experience.

## Create opportunities: Ask

Let your work supervisor or manager know that you are keen to take on responsibilities (useful for your CV!) Ask if you can have a meeting to talk through what you might be able to offer the company. Find out how promotions work and whether mentors are available.

## Create opportunities: Tell

Let your supervisor or manager know of skills you have that could be useful. Look for occasions to demonstrate your skills to the benefit of the company. For example, you might spot ways that employers could use new social media or make use of student volunteers to run events or otherwise help their business or service.

## Create opportunities: References

It is essential to present yourself well in every role as, when you apply for your next placement or job, you must provide a complete work history, including details of all previous employers, placements and internships. Future employers will be interested to hear what former employers have to say about you and will contact them for a reference.

# Work placements and internships: the benefits

If you haven't yet had a job or held a position with responsibility, then it is important to consider taking on either a placement or an internship, whether paid or unpaid. As Fanthome (2004) noted, 'work experience is becoming an essential component of an applicant's CV within the post-graduation employment market'.

## What will I gain?

The key purpose of placements and internships is to gain experience and work-readiness to support general employability. You can also gain some, or all, of the following:

- ★ payment – some provide a wage or accommodation or other benefits; some don't
- ★ skills – opportunities to learn skills, or to fine-tune and apply them in new contexts
- ★ application of theory – the chance to test out, in practice, what you have learnt in class
- ★ work-readiness – practice in developing the attitudes, habits and life-skills needed to hold down a job
- ★ understanding – insights into how organisations work (see pages 339–41)
- ★ personal insights – greater clarity in what you want from your working life
- ★ experience and personal references to help with future job applications.

## Reading the work culture

Above all else, you can learn about how to interpret the work culture and 'read the room'. Part of being a good employee is fitting into the social and cultural life of the organisation, especially your department or team. You can start to gain a sense of how workplace politics and conventions operate. These vary from one company to another, so being able to compare workplaces is invaluable to building your general understanding.

### Reflection

#### Experience of work



What do you think you could gain from a work placement or internship in the near future? What kind of placement or internship would you want?

## What students say

I had become used to a student way of life. I worked hard as a student, very hard actually, but I could do this more or less on my own time schedule. It was a real shock to my system to have to work the same hours every day, Monday to Friday. After three days, I thought I would have to give up, that I couldn't cope. I don't know how I got through the first week but I did. I got used to the routine and realised I could survive it! I am glad I found that out!

Hassan

It was compulsory to do a work placement on my course. I was sent to a nursery 20 miles away. I had to get up at 6.30 a.m. to arrive for 8.30. I was not pleased about that! What I gained from the placement? It was all the organisational skills for managing my own life. I had to apply for financial support for the train fare, and then make sure I didn't spend it on anything else. And sort out my travel, smart clothes etc. It was hard getting myself organised to be in work on time, looking presentable. I had to prepare what I would do all day with the different age groups in the nursery – and the legal requirements – there was a lot of responsibility involved. I really needed all that experience.

Jade

I'd say get any experience and as much work experience as you can. If you can get a paid job in a relevant field, great! If not, just take any work and look at it through professional eyes. So, if you want to be an accountant or a lawyer, look at everything at the placement through the eyes of a legal or financial expert. Think about what they would notice, the advice they would give, and the opportunities they would see...Think and speak like a professional – and network hard!

Maisha

# Effective use of your experience of work

## Learning from experience

However good a match your current employment, internship or placement is to your preferred career, make the most of the experience.

Senior staff find they learn a great deal about an organisation by working 'undercover' in junior roles. It helps them see how things operate at every level of the business. If CEOs can learn from junior roles, so can you. Use whatever role or job you are in as a rich opportunity to observe, reflect and learn about work environments and your developmental needs. You can use your insights to gain jobs or promotions and to inform your thinking when in future leadership roles.

A template to collate your insights is available on the companion site.



## Activity

### Learn like the boss



Use episodes of Undercover Boss to see the kinds of insights bosses gained by taking on diverse roles – and how they used what they learnt.

[www.channel4.com/programmes/undercover-boss/episode-guide](http://www.channel4.com/programmes/undercover-boss/episode-guide)

Many networks in other countries, such as Channel 10 in Australia, also run versions of the programme.

## Be systematic

Take a systematic and structured approach to reflecting critically and analytically about your workplace. Use your insights to help you to prepare for more senior roles. The following sets of questions can help to guide your thinking.

Jot down your observations. However, unless you have workplace permission for keeping notes about this, keep these private for personal use.

## 1 Appointment process

- 1 What did the appointments process involve?
- 2 How typical is that likely to be of appointment processes more generally?
- 3 What did you do well? How do you know?
- 4 What could have gone better? What could you practise or prepare better for future applications?
- 5 If you were appointing a member of staff, would you do anything differently from those who employed you?

## 2 Induction

- 1 Did you receive an induction to your workplace? If so, what did this cover?
- 2 How much were you able to remember of your induction afterwards?
- 3 Do you have an information pack, staff handbook or website to follow up information?
- 4 Do you make use of the staff information that is available to you through such means?
- 5 How useful was your induction to you? What were the most useful aspects?
- 6 Were you introduced to your colleagues?
- 7 Were you made to feel part of a team?
- 8 What do you think an induction process should cover – and be like?
- 9 What would you do differently if you were in charge of induction?

## 3 Organisational structures

- 1 How easy is it for employees to find out who everyone is and what their roles are?
- 2 Do you know to whom you are meant to report?
- 3 Do you know to whom other key people with whom you work report?
- 4 Is there an organisational chart that illustrates the line management structure to employees?
- 5 What difference does it make to your working day to know the people around you?
- 6 Why do you think the organisation is structured in this way?
- 7 In your opinion, do these structures help the business run effectively – at least in relation to processes you can observe?

## 4 Health and safety

- 1 How were health and safety considerations communicated to you?
- 2 How thoroughly were they covered?
- 3 Was this sufficient for understanding how to work safely in your own role?
- 4 Did your work colleagues take health and safety matters seriously? How aware were managers of employee attitudes and behaviours?

## 5 Understanding your role

- 1 Do you understand how your job contributes to the final product or outcome?
- 2 What difference does it make to your working day to know the people around you?
- 3 How clear is your job description? What does it say you must do?
- 4 How closely does the work you undertake match the job description?
- 5 Is the work what you expected from the information you had received in advance?
- 6 What initial training did you receive for the role? Was this pitched at the right level?
- 7 How effective was your employer in settling you into your role so that you used your time efficiently as soon as possible?

## 6 Management communication

- 1 What methods are used for communicating with employees (such as general discussion, meetings, newsletters, blogs, etc.)?
- 2 From what you see, hear and experience, do these methods seem broadly effective?
- 3 If they seem to work reasonably well, why is that?
- 4 If they don't work well, why does that seem to be the case? What could be done more effectively?
- 5 Do employees get a chance to give their point of view on how things work?
- 6 If so, do they make sensible and well thought through suggestions?
- 7 If you were in charge, would you do anything differently to improve communications?

## 7 Training and development

- 1 What training and development opportunities are open to you at work?
- 2 How did you find out about these? Were these communicated to you clearly enough?
- 3 What training is compulsory? Why is that?
- 4 How effective is the training you receive? Does it do what it should?
- 5 Do employees seem to value the training they receive? If not, why is that?
- 6 Are there are other training needs that are not currently addressed? What difference do you think it would make if such training were provided?
- 7 Did you make good use of the training opportunities that were open to you?
- 8 If so, how could you present this training to best effect in future job applications and interviews?

## 8 Values

- 1 Does the company have a set of shared values?
- 2 How did you find out about these?
- 3 How are they communicated and promoted?
- 4 Are those values much in evidence in the day-to-day work of the company?
- 5 Do staff put the values into practice? If not, why do you think that might be the case?
- 6 Are the values interpreted differently within your team?
- 7 How do customers (or clients, patients, pupils, etc.) benefit from such values?
- 8 If you were in charge, what, if anything, would you change to embed company values effectively?

## 9 Organisation and culture

- 1 Is your workplace friendly?
- 2 Would you say staff morale is good?
- 3 Do people get on reasonably well?
- 4 Do they offer to help each other out as needed?
- 5 Is it professional in the way it conducts its business?
- 6 Would you want to use its services?
- 7 Would you recommend it to others as a place to work?
- 8 How would you describe the culture that you find around you at work?
- 9 Is the work culture one that you find motivating? Does it encourage you to do your best?
- 10 If you were in charge, what would you do differently, if anything, to improve morale, motivation or professionalism?

## 10 Skills and personal development

- 1 What skills have you developed that would be useful in a future role?
- 2 In general, what kinds of understanding of the workplace have you gained?
- 3 What have you learnt about work politics and culture that would affect your future approach to settling into a job?
- 4 What have you learnt about organising yourself for work?
- 5 What insights have you gained about the world of work that would help you in applying for jobs in the future?
- 6 What insights have you gained about the kind of jobs that would, or would not, suit you in future?
- 7 From your observations and experience as an employee, what have you learnt about leadership and management that could be of value to you in future management roles?

## Relevance to your preferred career path

- 1 When observing in, and reflecting on, your workplace, what considerations tended to rise to the fore most often and easily? For example, did you find you were more interested in matters related to Human Resources (HR)? Finance? Legal issues? Management? Policy? Customer service? Design? Quality assurance? Operations? Other things? What does this suggest to you about future work that would most suit your interests?
- 2 What commercial awareness have you picked up through this work? How could you make this relevant if asked about your commercial understanding in a future job interview?
- 3 What have you learnt about your ability to get on with people in the workplace? How could you make this relevant if asked about your people skills in a future job interview?
- 4 Looking at the competence sheets on the companion site, which examples could you draw upon from your recent experience of work to provide evidence of competences employers look for?

### Reflection



### Understanding personal preferences

Use the following prompts to jot down some thoughts about your current work preferences and the reasons that lie behind these.

Check off  each item once you have considered it.

- Would I prefer to get a job on graduation – or take a break?
- Would I prefer to work in teams – or on my own?
- Would I prefer to work for a private company, the public sector, a charity, family business or for myself?
- Would I prefer to work for a large, medium, small or micro company – or no preference?
- Would I prefer full-time, part-time, or flexible work?

# What do you want from a 'graduate' job?

Once students finish their course and gain a qualification, they usually want to gain a new job or role that reflects the investment they made by studying. For some, this will happen straight away. For others, the route to a graduate-level job will be more circuitous. If so, that does not mean that the experiences, whatever these are, cannot be invaluable in their own ways.

Before launching into job searches, it is worth giving thought to what your work history might look like over the next few years (or decades) and what kinds of work experiences will help to take you forward in the right direction.

## Career portfolio

Whatever career or job you enter first, it is unlikely to be for life. It is more typical, now, to have a 'portfolio' of jobs, roles and careers across a lifetime – or simultaneously. That reduces the pressure on 'getting it right' straight away. Look for the potential for skills, learning, networking and experience to be gained in what is available rather than panicking if the perfect opening doesn't arise straight away. Draw out the ways that each role develops you and could, in some way, advance your longer-term aims.

## Designed for graduates?

Your first few jobs might be 'entry level' or 'graduate' or a graduate scheme. Entry level can be open to non-graduates, though many are aimed at recent graduates with some experience such as internships. Graduate jobs usually involve skilled work, training, higher levels of responsibility and salary, and recognise the value of a degree. Graduate schemes offer more structured training and development for a set amount of time. These are highly sought after although they do not necessarily guarantee a job at the end.

If you want a graduate job, then you need to apply early, preferably starting that process in your penultimate rather than final year.

Waiting until after graduation to apply for work reduces the likelihood of starting in a graduate job.



Chris was delighted to discover that there really was such a job as 'professional sleeper'

## More experience first?

Many graduates opt to enter the wider workforce with the aim of gaining experience and building their skills. This is especially true in creative professions, where it is expected that graduates will enter at a lower rung and plan for the longer term – or run their own business.

## How can your next job help you?

Your first step is to think about what it is you want to gain from your first jobs after graduating, whether this is 'learning the ropes', personal projects, travel, trying out different occupational sectors, or developing expertise. You might prefer to work part-time on more than one job, or use agency work to build additional skills. If your plan is to walk straight into a particular job, make sure you have contingency plans. Be open to other jobs that could carry your career or life plans forward.

### Activity

#### What do I want from the job?



Use the self-evaluation on page 343 to consider what you want from your first job as a graduate.

## Activity: What do I want from the job?

- ★ Below, indicate with a tick  any aspect you would like to gain or develop in the next job that you take. Use more than one tick for aspects you find especially important.
- ★ Then, go through the items you selected and rate them in order of importance (1 for the most important, 2 for the next in importance, and so on).

From my next job, I want to . . .	Important to me?	Order of importance
1 Gain work experience in a new field		
2 Enhance career opportunities		
3 Earn more money		
4 Increase my job satisfaction		
5 Work in accordance with my values and ethics		
6 Work better hours		
7 Work in better surroundings		
8 Work near home		
9 Work with people who are like myself		
10 Take on more responsibility		
11 Broaden my mind		
12 Give myself more challenge		
13 Know myself better		
14 Develop technical skills		
15 Develop my personal networks and contacts		
16 Work with a wider range of people		
17 Develop problem-solving skills		
18 Develop inter-personal skills		
19 Develop a broader set of interests		
20 Make friends		
Other things:		
1		
2		
3		

### Reflection

#### What I want from my next job



Note down your thoughts about:

- ★ what you really want from your next job;
- ★ what would most persuade you to apply for a particular job.

# Choosing a job

## Right for you?

Your Careers Service will have a wide range of paper and electronic resources, including psychometric tests, which will enable you to pinpoint the kinds of work that suit you. The activities in Chapters 1–3 can also help you think this through. When applying for jobs, consider:

- ★ How could this job advance, in the short or long term, my professional aims?
- ★ How could this job advance, in the short or long term, my life vision?
- ★ Is it consistent with my values and beliefs? (It will be hard to come across well in interview if the job contravenes your basic beliefs and values.)

## Know all your options

Too many graduates select only the most obvious jobs.

- ★ Talk to the Careers Service so that you know the range of jobs open to you. More than two out of every five jobs are open to any graduate, whatever their degree subject.
- ★ Find out about the labour market (see pages 306–12).
- ★ Identify which jobs have fewer applicants and whether any of these would suit you. They might provide easier entrance routes to the job you prefer over the longer term.

## Consider indirect routes

Popular jobs receive thousands of applications, so the reality is that almost every applicant will be disappointed. The most obvious route isn't necessarily the only, or best, route to the profession that interests you.

Consider alternative routes to your desired destination. Indirect paths through other roles can provide experience, contacts, networks, personal references, skills and resilience that are advantages later. Plan longer term and broaden your portfolio: making good contacts, working abroad, holding responsibility, or gaining skills in short supply can all provide alternative routes.

## Starter posts

Companies tend to be loyal to their own personnel. It is worth thinking about entering at the bottom or in a less competitive post, and aiming to work towards the job you want from inside the company. Consider interim jobs that you could fill for a few years and that would provide a sideways route into the job you want.

## Choose jobs you can really do

Employers receive lots of applications that misinterpret the job description or do not address the person specification fully, often because the applicants lack experience for the job. If you have few of the qualifications, skills and experiences required, you will not be short-listed. You could have spent your time creating stronger applications for jobs within your competence.

## Consider smaller companies

Many students apply only to the kinds of large companies that are invited to careers fairs at universities. However, many small and medium-sized companies recruit graduates (see pages 306–7). These can provide excellent opportunities to rise quickly within a company.

## Reflection

### Routes into work



Jot down your thoughts on the following.

- ★ What kinds of jobs most interest you?
- ★ Broadly speaking, what are the statistical chances of your gaining that job as a first job? Your Careers Service will give you details of what to expect and ideas of alternatives.
- ★ Brainstorm alternative routes into that job. Which of these would you consider? Which are you most likely to succeed in gaining as your first job?

# What do you want from an employer?

For your first job as a graduate you might want to work for a specific kind of employer – or just get a foot on the employment ladder. Local and personal circumstances will affect your choices. However, the following points are worth considering.

## Investors in People (IiP)

If a company has 'Investors in People' status (or other countries' equivalents), it has demonstrated a commitment to the training and development of its staff. It is more likely to welcome questions at interview about how it develops employees and to ask candidates about steps they take to further their own professional development.

## Equal opportunities

Equality legislation is aimed at protecting against unfair practices and discrimination, especially on grounds such as race, sex, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion. If an employer states that it is an 'equal opportunity employer', it is keen to be regarded as fair in its practices – although discriminatory practices might not yet all have been recognised and addressed. Consider whether you would feel more comfortable at a company that has an equal opportunities policy that extends beyond the basic legal requirements. For more information, see [www.equalityhumanrights.com/en](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en)

## Career opportunities?

Some employers enable new graduate recruits to move on to new roles quickly; this can mean lots of travel, international working, variety and the chance to gain broad experience. Larger companies usually detail such opportunities in their graduate literature. Smaller companies can offer different kinds of opportunities, such as playing a more central role in the business, and progressing faster to a senior role. Consider what would best suit you. It is reasonable to ask questions at interview about how you could develop your career in the business. For information about different kinds of companies, see:

- ★ [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house) (lists details of all UK public companies)
- ★ [www.b.co.uk/the-lists/](http://www.b.co.uk/the-lists/) (lists the top companies to work; there are separate lists for large, small and not-for-profits).
- ★ See also the websites on pages 381–2.

## Graduate apprenticeships, internships and company schemes

Some companies offer internships, apprenticeships, graduate programmes and other work-related schemes to help develop work-readiness and to spot talent as future employees. Internships might be paid, although sometimes these are offered unpaid as an opportunity to learn the business, make contacts and prove your worth. Increasingly, companies provide schemes for students too, such as working on a project for them whilst under supervision from the university. Ask your university or college Careers or Employability Service for details.

## Your 'bottom line'

A first job can offer experience and training that are invaluable for future applications. However, you should be clear in your own mind about what is and what is not acceptable to you, whether that is about level of pay, location, attitudes, being the only person of your colour, sex or background, or something personal to you. Decide where you will or will not compromise on issues such as:

- ★ personal security
- ★ health and safety
- ★ disability access
- ★ culture and values
- ★ working hours
- ★ travel requirements.

### Activity

#### Compare with others



Check out the annual Bright Network reports to see what students say they want from employers. See [www.brightnetwork.co.uk/employers/bright-network-research-report/](http://www.brightnetwork.co.uk/employers/bright-network-research-report/)

## Plan ahead

### Make opportunities

Ideally, career planning should not start with applying for jobs in your final year at university. Employers want people who know how to spot and use opportunities, think on a broad front, and can plan ahead for the good of the company.

They will look to see how you spotted, created and used opportunities on your own behalf. If you did not do this for yourself as a student, they will be less convinced that you could do this on behalf of their company, clients, patients or customers. Ideally, your planning should start in your first year, so that you are in a strong position by the time you apply for jobs.

### Develop a rounded portfolio

When people invest in stocks and shares, they are advised not to put all their money into one investment, but to develop a rounded portfolio that includes different kinds of investment. If one type of company fails, others may still provide returns on the investment.

Your time at university is a similar kind of investment. Your energy can be invested entirely in study or spread over a wider portfolio. Your degree is likely to be your most important investment at present, but it does not have to be the only one. Furthermore, there are 'smart' ways of putting a degree together so it counts for more.

A rounded student portfolio will contain 'investment' in at least three of the following:

- 1 the degree subject, to indicate 'depth' and specialism
- 2 complementary subjects that indicate 'breadth' or a speciality
- 3 a broad set of skills that could be transferred to the workplace
- 4 technical expertise that is in demand
- 5 work experience
- 6 experience of how businesses work
- 7 volunteer activity and/or contributing to the community

- 8 networking and gaining useful contacts and job references
- 9 a position of responsibility
- 10 general career awareness
- 11 research into the professional field and/or the companies where you want a job
- 12 evidence of taking responsibility for personal development needs or training.

When applying for a job, you need to consider:

- ★ How have I used my time?
- ★ What have I done that makes my application stand out?
- ★ What will make this company consider me rather than somebody else?
- ★ What evidence have I got that I can deliver the skills they are asking for?
- ★ What experience can I offer?

The subject and grade of degree are relevant, but are only a small part of the story for most jobs. You will not get a job simply because you have a 'first class' or '2.1' degree or a high GPA. That might be a consideration but not necessarily the most important factor for the employer.

### Reflection

#### Developing your personal portfolio



- ★ How are you currently planning ahead so that you have a better chance of gaining the job you want after you complete your degree?
- ★ For jobs that interest you, what are employers likely to look for apart from your degree?
- ★ Which aspects of the 'rounded portfolio' are you working on already?
- ★ Which aspect will you work on next? How will you go about this? Who will you speak to first about this?

# Finding a job

## Careers Services

Many college and university Careers or Employability Services have 'job shops' or equivalents to help you find jobs whilst studying. They will have local contacts and know about work available on campus.

## Careers fairs

Look out for fairs and events that invite employers onto campus to support student employment.

## Recruitment agencies

There are lots of recruitment agencies to help find work. Some to start with are:

**Graduate Recruitment Bureau (GRB)** UK specialists for graduate jobs and schemes. [www.grb.uk.com](http://www.grb.uk.com)

**Adecco** Large international recruitment agency that covers all kinds of jobs. [www.adeco.co.uk/jobs?display=5](http://www.adeco.co.uk/jobs?display=5)

**Graduate Coach** compiles a list of recruitment agencies for graduates. <https://graduatecoach.co.uk/recruitment-agencies-graduates/>

## Job sites online

There are hundreds of these. Useful places to start your search are:

- ★ [monster.co.uk](http://monster.co.uk)
- ★ <https://targetjobs.co.uk/>
- ★ [gradunet.co.uk](http://gradunet.co.uk)
- ★ [jobhunter.co.uk](http://jobhunter.co.uk)
- ★ [www.prospects.ac.uk/](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/)
- ★ [indeed.com](http://indeed.com), for jobs that match your qualifications

## Trade papers

Find out which newspapers, trade papers, professional publications and specialist magazines run advertisements for jobs that interest you. Most will run the ads online too.

Note their website addresses and check for jobs on a weekly basis.

## Use your contacts

- ★ Ask friends and acquaintances if they know of places that are hiring.
- ★ If you already have a job, ask about other opportunities with that employer.
- ★ Network with your set of contacts.

## Get involved

Be active in local activities, such as volunteering, community or church events, arts, performance, environmental work – to broaden your contacts and so that you hear about work that arises locally.



## Enhance your online profile

- ★ Join LinkedIn: state what you are looking for and locations that would suit you.
- ★ Put your CV online.
- ★ Make good links to your CV and personal profile (see page 368).

## Want to know more?



Jake Butler (2019) 'How to find a job using recruitment agencies'. In *Jobs & Careers*. Updated by Jess Aszkenasy. 4 June 2019.

# Making a job application

## 1 Use the documentation

Read everything you are sent. Pay attention to details.

### General information

This covers such factors as company information, work conditions, pensions, holidays, and bonuses. Check the company website or contact their Human Resources or Personnel department for further information.

### The job description

This outlines the responsibilities of the post and what the post-holder is expected to do. Check that this matches the advertisement and that you are still interested. Highlight all the tasks or responsibilities you can manage successfully. Few candidates will be outstanding at them all, so do not be discouraged if there are one or two areas which are not yet strengths. Decide whether you could undertake all essential aspects of the job.

### The 'person specification'

The person specification lists the qualifications, experiences and attributes wanted in a successful candidate – both 'essential' and 'desirable'. If many candidates meet all 'essential' specifications, employers will then use the 'desirable' items to short-list people to interview. It is unlikely that many candidates will meet all the 'desirable' requirements. Make a judgement about your overall suitability. If you lack the formal qualifications, for example, it is not usually worth applying unless you have significant experience in that area.

Ensure that your overall application refers specifically to every item on the person specification, ideally in the order they are listed. Typically, an employer will score each specification that has been addressed successfully. If you merge several items into a single paragraph or example of your experience, some might not stand out clearly enough to show you meet each specification. That could rule you out.

Person specifications usually include:

- ★ **a requirement for qualifications** – 'educated to degree level', 'preferably a degree in a business subject', 'a degree in a care subject', 'preferably with a higher degree'
- ★ **skills specific to the job** – 'experience and ability in managing a team', 'experience of working with the public', 'at least two years' experience of working in X'
- ★ **general skills** – 'ability to work as an effective member of a team', 'excellent communication skills', 'ability to work independently', 'a good self-starter'
- ★ **willingness to accept particular work conditions** – 'able to work flexible hours', 'able to work across several sites', 'must be willing to travel'.

## Competence-based applications

Some employers ask candidates to provide evidence of their competence to undertake a particular list of tasks or roles. This means briefly outlining a tangible example of an occasion when you undertook such a task, what happened, and how you dealt with it – in order to demonstrate the skills listed in the person specification (see page 375).

Such roles tend to be open to people from diverse sectors rather than only those with experience in one professional area. This can be an advantage if your experience is outside of paid employment or in a different sector. They tend to attract many applicants, so provide strong examples in your own application.

*It's always worth as an undergraduate looking at the list of competences required for any prospective job interview you are undertaking – and do that well in advance of an interview. It can give you a really good idea of the culture of the organisation you are hoping to join.*

*Helen Mason, Head of Strategy and Engagement, Cornwall Council*

## 2 Research the company

Employers tend to be proud of their business and expect job applicants to be aware of what they do, their brand, values, policies and achievements. Look carefully at their website – take notes. Check for any plans or recent strategies and financial statements that are online (such as via [companieshouse.gov.uk](http://companieshouse.gov.uk)). Google the employer and the field of business to see whether it has been in the news recently. If you can, visit the workplace. Ensure that you are happy with what you discover about work conditions and the company's ethos and prospects.

## 3 Follow directions precisely

Follow precisely any directions for completing the application and for attaching a CV, personal statement and any other information. The employer is likely to process only applications that are completed correctly. Failure to follow instructions reflects poorly on applicants' ability to pay attention to details. Many companies use software to help grade responses for the first round of eliminations, then select those with the highest ratings. Ensure you complete every box, using key words used by the employer.

## 4 Complete the forms

- ★ **Provide tailored answers** Ensure that all your answers to questions are clear, specific, well-structured, proof-read and provide the detail this specific employer is looking for.
- ★ **Be honest and accurate** Employers will check information provided, either immediately or at a later date.
- ★ **Avoid gaps** Check you have not missed out responding to any question. Avoid writing 'see response to question above' as this could cost you a score for that item. Do not leave gaps in work or recent educational histories as employers might assume you have something to hide. Give reasons for work breaks. Complete all requests for information.
- ★ **Sell yourself** Refer clearly to all relevant skills, qualities, qualifications, training and experience.

- ★ **Clarify qualifications** Provide the names of qualifications in full: the employer might not be familiar with abbreviations. If you are applying abroad, indicate the local equivalents.
- ★ **Equal opportunities form** This information is not usually available to the selection team. It is used by employers to monitor the effectiveness of their equality policies and processes over time.

## 5 Use your records and evidence base

Writing out applications can be time-consuming, so maintain accurate, updated personal records that enable you to identify information quickly – and as a reminder of your best examples of recent experience. See Chapter 15.

### Preparing your application



On the companion site, there are planners to help you prepare applications and interviews in a structured way. There are also competence sheets and other templates to help your record-keeping so that you always have personal data and good examples ready.

## 6 Include a covering letter

Include a brief covering letter with your application. It should:

- ★ demonstrate real interest and passion for the job
- ★ be clear, to the point and business-like; avoid waffle and anecdote
- ★ tailor the content to the job for which you are applying, including any reference number provided
- ★ state where you saw the job advertised
- ★ be well-written and proof-read
- ★ demonstrate with confidence how you meet the requirements of the job – and/or state that this is outlined in your personal statement.

# Covering letter

## Example

Your name	Kuldip Evans
Your full address	1111 Apple Avenue Berryfield, London
Your postcode	BB1 11B
Your contact details	Phone: 22222 0303030 Email: Kevans55@freemail.happy
Date	31 August 2021
Employer contact name	Ms Samantha Browne
Employer address	Alpha Conferences 222-228 Olive Grove Berryfield BB1 XXX
State the name of the post, its reference, and where and when you saw it advertised	Dear Ms Browne I am very interested in the post of Assistant Conference Manager (ref. AAP/223/01) advertised in the Guardian on 27/8/2021.
Give brief details of your experience and suitability. Look at your competence sheets for examples that support your claims	I have recently graduated with both a degree and an MA in Business management. As part of my degree, I undertook a project for an events company that mounted conferences for employers locally and nationally. As well as gaining experience of event planning, I thoroughly enjoyed the atmosphere and the opportunity to meet a wide range of people. I have worked part-time in sales and with the public for over 5 years. I hope my ability to speak and write several languages including Welsh and Punjabi will be of additional benefit in the conference world.
Indicate that you know something about the company and why you feel it is the right appointment for you	I am particularly interested in working in a new and growing organisation with an international dimension such as Alpha Conferences. I would like to feel I had contributed to the development of a new company in its early stages. Your commitment to employee training is impressive and I would be keen to further my own professional development.
Indicate when you would be available for work	I live locally and would be ready to start work at short notice. I attach my CV, as requested, and would appreciate the opportunity of an interview to discuss the post further. I look forward to hearing from you.
Use 'sincerely' when you address a named person	Yours sincerely
Sign the letter	<i>Kuldip Evans</i>
Type your name beneath	Kuldip Evans

# Write a personal statement

Your personal statement provides an opportunity to reveal more about yourself, your reasons for applying, and especially your passion for the job. You can let some of your personality shine through. It is worth thoughtful consideration and careful phrasing. Structure it well so the main points stand out. Include your statement with your response in the area provided or attach to your CV. It should not be longer than 1–2 sides (or a paragraph on a CV).

## Good personal statements

Good statements make it clear to the employer:

- ★ that you know what the job will entail
- ★ that you understand what they are looking for in the new employee and can deliver this
- ★ that you know something about the organisation or company
- ★ why you want the job
- ★ how your skills, qualities and experience match what they have asked for, in ways that are relevant to the job that you will be doing
- ★ exactly where you are addressing each item in the person specification (you can use headings that mirror the person specification)
- ★ that you have tailored your application to this particular job rather than sending a standard response
- ★ that you can write well, clearly, and succinctly and can proof-read accurately: this is a demonstration of your written communication skills
- ★ that, through the way you have laid out information so that key points are easy to find, you value the employer's time.

## Provide best examples

If you maintain good records such as those recommended in Chapter 15, it will be easier to select appropriate information to complete your personal statement. Read through your records to remind yourself of your strongest competences and the best examples of your experience.

Employers want to know what you are capable of achieving, so it is important to showcase your successes. If you have held positions of responsibility, clarify what was involved in the role. If you had a post in a student society or have held down a job, identify your achievements during that time. For example, turn a sentence such as:

*As Social Secretary, I was responsible for organising social activities for the student body.*

into a more detailed statement such as:

*As Social Secretary (2013–14), I was responsible for organising activities for a student body of 14,000 people. I successfully ran 10 events involving 3000 people in total. These all received satisfaction ratings of over 90%. I also increased the annual income by six per cent.*

## Address the 'person spec'

Go through the job outline and person specification in detail. Use each item in the person specification as a separate heading. Write a succinct paragraph on each, providing at least one good (but brief) example of your experience. Provide precise details.

### Example

#### Specification: 'ability to work as an effective member of a team'

As part of my current part-time job, I am a member of a team of ten. This requires me to work towards common goals to strict deadlines. I feel I am a good team member as I am ready to listen and act upon other people's ideas and am confident in making my own suggestions. I attended two training days on team-working. I have been asked to stand in as deputy team leader on several occasions, which attests to my team-management skills. Additionally, as part of my degree, I gained extensive experience of problem-solving in small groups and completed a successful group research project on the impact of ABC on XYZ. My strengths were in organising communications, sharing information and keeping the team motivated to help keep the project on schedule.

## Why this job?

Clarify in a few sentences why you are interested in this job and company and what you have to offer to the employer. Select three or four of your attributes that you think could be of particular benefit to the company. This will indicate that you are serious about this particular job. It suggests you have thought about it and selected it on the basis of your own suitability.

# Curriculum vitae (CV)

## Why do I need a CV?

Many employers and recruitment agencies require you to attach a CV as part of your application. This is just a brief summary of key information about you. CVs are also useful introductions if you are approaching employers about the possibility of unadvertised work. It is good practice always to have a detailed, up-to-date CV prepared for when needed. Always tailor this to fit each employer and the specific requirements of the job.

As an employer might spend less than a minute reading it, your CV should showcase you well to help you get selected for the next stage in the application process. Use a pleasing format. Ensure key details stand out and are relevant to the employer. Be rigorous in checking that your CV contains no typos or other errors.

## CV format and content

There is a wide variety of acceptable CV formats. If you are devising your own, include:

- ★ your full name
- ★ home address
- ★ brief personal statement
- ★ contact details (phone, email; LinkedIn; social media)
- ★ educational history and qualifications
- ★ employment history
- ★ key interests and other information (relevant training, languages, certificates, driving licence).

## Free CV templates

Many sites offer a choice of good free templates. Using these, you can experiment with different designs, work on several CVs at once, and update your information later. See, for example:

- ★ [cvhelp.co.uk](http://cvhelp.co.uk)
- ★ [Zety.com](http://Zety.com)
- ★ [cvmaker.uk](http://cvmaker.uk)

## Presentation

Employers can receive hundreds of CVs and might conduct the first selection on the basis of presentation skills. If so, they are more likely to eliminate CVs that are too long, unstructured, repetitive, omit essential sections, or are poorly typed.

Your CV should be:

- ★ headed by your name (don't include 'CV' as a header)
- ★ the equivalent of 1–2 sides of A4 paper
- ★ structured into clear sections with headings
- ★ easy to read and error-free
- ★ consistent in its use of font styles and sizes, such as for headers and text
- ★ professional – avoid unusual or hard-to-read fonts, 'gimmicks' or special effects.

## Use the right language

Use words that emphasise action (verbs). Look for opportunities to include words such as:

*achieved, contributed, co-ordinated, organised, established, demonstrated, accomplished, applied, implemented, initiated, created, set up, developed.*

Use words and phrases that demonstrate qualities that employers will value, such as:

*attention to detail, positive outcome, achievement, success, effectively, efficiently, care, creativity, teamwork, meeting deadlines, co-operation, value for money, time-saving, problem-solving, self-starter, coping strategies, negotiating, networking, flexibility, versatility, innovation, entrepreneurship, profits, decision-making, priority setting, competitiveness, commercial awareness, communication skills, leadership.*

## CV: example

### Kuldip Evans

Highly-motivated, reliable business graduate with 5 years' experience in office and retail environments (part-time). I enjoy responsibility and have experience as team supervisor and organising community projects. I am keen to progress to a management role, ideally where I can draw on my expertise in business analytics. My strengths lie in being a good self-starter and in developing effective teams.

#### Experience

**Aug 2019-present**

**Sales Supervisor, RRR, Camford**

- ★ Supervisor for five part-time staff
- ★ Organising online sales promotions
- ★ Dealing with the public
- ★ Responsible for £20,000 daily cash

**May 2016-Feb 2019**

**Office Administrator, JJJ Services, Camford**

- ★ Managing enquiries at Reception Desk
- ★ Support for public events
- ★ Responsibility for petty cash
- ★ 2019 Promoted to part-time supervisor
- ★ 2018 Promoted to assistant supervisor

**Oct 17-Present**

**Volunteer Camford Voluntary Projects**

- ★ Supported 5 projects, co-leading on two
- ★ After-school reading project volunteer
- ★ Voluntary business admin support.

#### Educational History

**2021**

**M.A. Business Management with Analytics (Univ of Camford)**

- ★ Specialised in using data to enhance team and company performance
- ★ Ran successful performance data project for TTT Engineering, Camford
- ★ Young Entrepreneur Award

**2019**

**B.Sc. Business Management**

- ★ Work experience (3 months) at TTT Engineering, Camford July–Sept 2018)
- ★ Included business technologies, marketing with social media, and team dynamics

**2016**

**A levels (Albertina Sisulu School, Berryfield)**

- ★ Maths (A\*); English (A); Geography (C)

#### Personal Information

**Address**

1111 Apple Avenue, London BB1 11B

**Phone**

22222 0303030

**Email**

Kevans55@freemail.happy

**LinkedIn**

LinkedIn/in/kuldipevans

#### Skills

- ★ Familiar with wide range of office software (Sage, Microsoft Teams, Microsoft Office Xero, Quickbooks)
- ★ Problem solving: quick thinking, well-organised, and calm in a crisis
- ★ Able to make sense of complex information, such as business data
- ★ Good at explaining complex data to non-experts
- ★ Team-working, both as a team member and team leader

#### Languages

- ★ Welsh (bilingual)
- ★ Punjabi (fluent)
- ★ French (GCSE)

#### Other

- ★ Clean Driving Licence

# Using your CV

## Academic CVs

Academic CVs tend to be longer than those for other employers. If you are looking for an academic job, then include conferences and seminars to which you contributed a paper or workshop, all research projects with details of who funded these, and all your publications. State your research interests and aims. Be clear about your contribution to joint research projects.

## Competence statements in CVs

Bright and Earl (2007) argue that candidates who include a brief competence statement within a CV have a better chance of being short-listed. They found that there was no particular place on the CV where it was better to position the competence statement. See page 348.

## Sending uninvited CVs

Some employers file and make use of CVs sent to them when they have not advertised for a post. Most equal opportunities employers prefer to recruit from advertised posts. If you have rare and marketable specialist skills, then the opportunistic CV can be particularly useful. If you send your CV on an opportunistic basis, include a strong covering letter, clarifying:

- ★ the kinds of job that interest you – using job titles if possible
- ★ whether you wish to work full- or part-time
- ★ an indication of the salary level you expect
- ★ locations or sites where you are willing to work
- ★ when you would be free to start work.

## Email etiquette

If you send an application by email, remember that the employer might use this to help them form a judgement about your professionalism, communications and attention to detail. It should be clear, brief, to the point and free of errors. Be polite and not over-casual. Don't make demands of the employer. State how many attachments you have made (usually just your CV and a covering letter or personal statement). Email responses can be signed off as 'Best wishes' rather than 'Yours faithfully'.

## Putting your CV online

If you are looking for work, it is a good idea to have your CV online so it is easy to find. Link to it from several sites such as LinkedIn, your website, Facebook page and blog. See also page 368.

## Using agency sites

Recruitment agencies and large employers provide facilities for you to create a CV online. This is not simply a question of putting up the CV as you have typed it because, if you do that, you can lose most of the presentational features such as font style and layout: it may look fine on your screen but look messy or bizarre when viewed on the employer's. You will usually need to write in your details for each website. This takes time so it is worth researching the best recruitment sites for the jobs that interest you. Use a plain-text version to 'cut and paste', using the same font throughout and without using tables or formatting. This will save you time. Leave at least half an hour to do this for each site.

## Get feedback on your CV

- ★ From your Careers/Employability Service
- ★ From a mentor
- ★ From recruitment agencies
- ★ From your Student Union/Guild
- ★ From your current employer
- ★ From employers you apply to for jobs.

# Prepare for assessment centres

## What is an assessment centre?

Assessment centres are used by many companies as part of recruitment, either as an initial selection tool or for additional information between first interviews and final selection. Sessions typically last one or two days.

## What do I have to do?

Selection tasks vary. You may be assessed through a combination of the following.

### Written exercises

These can range from speed reading comprehension, critical thinking and reasoning, problem-solving, writing letters, maths calculations, etc.

### Group exercises

These are used to assess listening and communication skills, ability to work with others, etc. See page 175.

### In-tray exercises

These assess your ability to manage complex information quickly, make decisions and manage your time. They are based on realistic work scenarios.

### Presentations

These assess your ability to structure information and convey this to other people. You may receive details of the presentation topic in advance of the assessment centre or on the day itself.

## Psychometric assessments

These are standardised evaluations carried out by licensed professionals.

### 1 Ability tests

These look at specific skills and knowledge such as memory, problem-solving, verbal reasoning, hand-eye co-ordination.

### 2 Personality assessment

Usually conducted through questionnaires, there are two main types:

- ★ **Traits:** these focus on behaviours, checking our probable actions in a given context. Scores are likely to change over time as we gain experience. A typical test is the OPQ32.
- ★ **Types:** these focus on preferences for thinking, interacting, learning and working. These are believed to be more stable over time. A typical test is the Myers Briggs Type Indicator.

## How to prepare

- ★ Research the company website, taking note of any information on recruitment processes.
- ★ Build your confidence by getting as much practice as you can. Check for practice opportunities through your Careers Service.
- ★ It is a good idea to brush up on basic skills such as using spreadsheets and calculating percentages in case these form part of a test.
- ★ Draw on skills you use on your course, in life or at work, such as thinking clearly, finding solutions, being organised, working well with others.

Assessment centres can feel quite daunting, but bear in mind that a range of skills are assessed so it is likely that you will find some tasks easier than others. Don't panic if you don't do well on some tasks – your overall performance might be fine.

- ★ Focus on your own performance rather than on how well other candidates seem to be doing. It isn't always easy to tell what the employer values most.
- ★ Stay focused. Even though assessment can be tiring, maintain your motivation levels and attention to detail as the employer might be testing these.

## Resources to help preparation

Many websites provide information about the types of assessment tasks used by employers, with opportunities to try these out.

- ★ [www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres)
- ★ <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres>
- ★ <https://psychometric-success.com/>
- ★ [www.youthemployment.org.uk/young-prof-article/problem-solving-exercise-try-this-quick-logical-reasoning-test-to-see-how-you-do/](http://www.youthemployment.org.uk/young-prof-article/problem-solving-exercise-try-this-quick-logical-reasoning-test-to-see-how-you-do/)
- ★ [www.assessmentcentrehq.com/logical-reasoning-test/](http://www.assessmentcentrehq.com/logical-reasoning-test/)

# Referring to disabilities

## Should I tell the employer?

Many students with disabilities are unsure whether to mention this at interview. If you need particular help for the application process, the interview or the job, then you need to disclose it. If you do not, then it may not be relevant and it would be an individual decision whether you say anything. You must ensure that you would not leave employers in a position where they could not meet their health and safety responsibilities to you or the public if you do not disclose.

## How should I bring up the subject?

If you have not needed to change the interview in any way because of your disability, then the employer might not be aware it. Personnel usually keep this information confidential. Assume that the employer might know little about what the disability means in terms of the job.

Choose a positive way of introducing your disability – such as the additional skills and qualities you have acquired because of it and use when studying or working. This may have become such a way of life that you underestimate how many skills you have developed in this respect. For example, you might have:

- ★ technical skills (knowledge of how to make electronic material more accessible, which the company might need in order to meet disability legislation)
- ★ people skills (familiarity in dealing with other people's discomfort, embarrassment or rudeness; awareness of how people respond to 'outsiders'; greater ease in dealing with people with disabilities, who form a large minority of the population)
- ★ creativity and problem-solving skills (you will probably have had to find new ways of performing a range of tasks, some of which called for ingenuity)
- ★ self-management skills (disabilities usually call for greater application, determination, self-motivation and endurance).

## Be clear about your abilities

The employer might underestimate what a person with your disability can do. Outline, briefly, your achievements. For example:

*I gained excellent feedback from my work placement, where I helped to design a new door operation system. I was able to call upon the design and IT skills that I had developed through my degree as well as understanding the mobility needs of various disabilities. I feel these would be an asset for this job too.*

*I worked as a volunteer technician for three years for a local theatre group. This brought me into contact with a wide range of people. Many community groups used the theatre. I feel this experience has developed my expertise in finding technical solutions at very short notice and on a tight budget. It also showed me that I enjoy working with older people. These skills and qualities should stand me in good stead for this post.*

## State your needs

Outline briefly how the disability affects you. Present this in the context of what you can do, or strategies you use. For example:

*I organise my time so that I change between tasks every few minutes if I can, so as to change the groups of muscles I am using. I tend to keep two or three different tasks on the go at any one time. This is usually very efficient because I do not get bored and it fills in the natural pauses that occur when awaiting responses from clients.*

Mention ways that the disability will affect you at work and what your needs will be.

- ★ *'I need to jot down verbal instructions and then I can work through them.'*
- ★ *'The wheelchair requires a width of X cm.'*
- ★ *'I am sensitive to light and will need to work in dimmed light or wear glasses with tinted lenses, which I will provide.'*

# Preparing for the interview

## Mental preparation

Most applicants are not invited to interview so, if you are, you now have a good chance of gaining the job. Review all the information about the job and employer. Remind yourself of your interest in the job and of what you have to offer in the role. Sound convincing. It is natural to feel some anxiety but don't feed it: focus on being calm, positive and prepared.

## Prepare for likely questions

Preparing for the more obvious questions will help you feel more confident about answering at least some questions well. This gives you room for error on other questions. Here are some useful aspects to prepare.

### *Two-minute answers*

When preparing answers, aim to provide rich detail in under two minutes. Interviewers might wish to ask eight to twelve questions in around 30 minutes. If your answers are long and they can't ask all their questions, you will be disadvantaged if they award points for each answer.

### *Identify strong points*

Before the interview, identify the strongest points to make for each likely question, drawing on experience and evidence of your competence. Be specific: give at least one example. Clarify your own role and the scale or significance of the achievement.

### *Prepare points to include*

Before the interview:

- ★ list your strongest five achievements, qualities or attributes
- ★ summarise each in around 20 words
- ★ consider questions you could be asked where you might raise these
- ★ be ready to bring them in elsewhere if they do not arise naturally.

### *Sense of time*

Practise speaking aloud and timing yourself so that you develop a sense of how much you can say within 1–3 minutes without sounding rushed. You can include many relevant details if you are precise and to the point.

## Activity



### Speaking time

How long do you think it would take to deliver the following answer? Time yourself reading it aloud at a reasonable speed, with expression.

Q: 'Have you worked in a caring post before?' (The candidate has not done so.)

A: 'My most relevant work experience has been in acting as a student tutor to three young children in a local school. Those children were very vulnerable, and I had to develop skills which are typical of those needed in care posts. For example, I focused on building a rapport with the children, watching for non-verbal cues, and being sensitive to their feelings. I had to be prepared to wait and work at their speed. I also had to consider the wishes of the teacher and carers. I feel I achieved a good relationship with the children and their teachers. I negotiated work schemes with the teacher and each child. The teacher said that they all made an improvement and I received very good feedback, so it seems to have worked well. I think that gives me a good foundation for this post, and I particularly look forward to working with children and parents.'

- ➔ What do you think are the strong points about this answer?

## Presentation

Employers expect candidates to be smartly dressed and presentable: you will be the public face of their company at some stage. Pay attention to details such as clean hands and nails, polished shoes and a smart bag. This is true even if you will not be expected to dress smartly in the job.

# In the interview

## First impressions

Although the whole interview is important, you can make it run more smoothly if the first minute is well managed. This requires only a few simple actions.

- ★ Be there ahead of time – so you aren't rushed.
- ★ Take three deep breaths before going in – to establish calm.
- ★ Move calmly – don't rush things.
- ★ No matter how you feel, appear relaxed. Smile and look pleased to meet the interviewers.
- ★ Look them in the eye, and listen when they say their names. If you are in a country that shakes hands, ensure your right hand is free to do so and shake hands firmly.
- ★ Sit upright, alert and interested.

## Maintain inner calm

You do not need to be magical, a super-brain, or word-perfect. Everybody stumbles on some words and questions. Avoid apologies and regrets. Don't dwell on anything that goes wrong. Stay focused instead on thinking through what the employer needs rather than about how you are performing. If you feel yourself getting anxious, take a few deep breaths and re-focus on the needs of the panel rather than thinking about yourself

## Be 'personable'

The interview is partly about meeting you and seeing what you are like. Remember that those short-listed for interview are usually well matched for skills and experience. Possibly, none meet all the requirements. Often, the employer's choice will be influenced by the behaviours, personality and interpersonal skills demonstrated in the interview.

Be natural, listen to what is said and show genuine interest. Many candidates do not do this – and can ruin a potentially good interview by trying too hard to impress. Candidates can sound stilted and awkward if they try too hard to provide 'perfect' answers or to 'sell' themselves.

If possible, relax and imagine you are being interviewed by friends. Avoid gimmicks, 'hard sell' and theatrics. If you are talking too much, just acknowledge this calmly – and stop. Observe how the panel responds to what you say. If they seem frustrated or to be losing interest, ask if there is anything in particular that they would like to know more about.

## What does the employer look for?

Employers tend to favour candidates who:

- ★ can do the job with minimum training and supervision
- ★ answer their questions, rather than deliver a sales pitch
- ★ seem reasonable, sensible, friendly – likely to be easy to work with
- ★ suit the work temperamentally and will generally 'fit in'.

## Help the panel

Put yourself in the interviewers' position. They could be interviewing several people in a few hours, and possibly dozens over several weeks. It is tiring. Time is pressurised. There is a lot of information to take in. Make it easy for the panel to spot your strengths.

### Do

- ★ provide brief answers: stick to the point
- ★ provide clear, relevant examples
- ★ give exactly the information requested
- ★ be prepared for predictable questions so that you can answer promptly.

### Avoid

- ★ long, winding answers and unnecessary detail
- ★ 'interesting anecdotes'
- ★ several examples if asked only for one
- ★ giving a long background to your answers.

# Questions to prepare

## Opening questions

The first question is usually intended to settle candidates.

### 'Did you have a good journey?'

A few words will suffice. A good time to indicate a sense of humour.



### 'Tell me about your programme'

Two or three sentences will suffice. Draw out features relevant to the employer, or that highlight useful knowledge and skills.

### 'Tell us about yourself'

Don't narrate your life story. Prepare 3–4 sentences that sum up who you are, your passions in life and how these are reflected in your education and/or desire to do this job. This is a question where personality and enthusiasm can shine through. Keep it brief. The interviewers might be more interested in how aware you are of listeners' needs rather than in your life.

### 'What attracted you to this job?'

Be specific. The employer wants to know you have researched their business, thought about the job, and chosen it. Tell them what you like about the company (such as specific values or projects it is involved in). Don't say you are just desperate for a job. Indicate what you think you can offer to the company.

### 'Where do you see yourself in 3/5/20 years' time?'

The employer wants to know whether you are realistic and a good match to its needs – and not likely to leave soon after appointment. You don't need definite plans: indicate what you want to achieve longer term. Refer to the kind of experience you hope to achieve through the job and how that could further your ambitions. Your answer should suggest that both you and the employer could benefit if you are offered the job.

## On the person specification

Most questions will relate to the person specification. Employers might ask similar questions to ones you answered in your application. This can be for several reasons.

- ★ Final decision-making might be based solely on the interview. Even if you have already given information in your application, provide it again so that you receive scores for all answers. Don't just refer the panel to your written answer.
- ★ They are looking at your people skills. They know you know the answers to most questions, but want to see how well you communicate to others.
- ★ They are verifying the authenticity of your answers – checking that your verbal answers are consistent with what you have written.

## Competence questions

For competence-based applications, questions usually relate to the competences in the person specification, so you can prepare for these with reasonable confidence. Think of unusual angles for the question as these could be phrased in many different ways. For example, a question on dealing with difficult people might be phrased as:

- ★ 'From your life and work so far, give the best example of a time when you had to deal with a difficult member of the public.'
- ★ 'Can you give us two or three examples of a time when you ...'
- ★ 'What professional development have you undertaken in recent years to improve your capability in dealing with members of the public?'

- ★ 'Think of an example when you dealt badly with a member of the public. What did you learn from it –and how you would approach a similar situation differently now?'
- ★ 'What advice would you give new staff who haven't dealt with the public before?'
- ★ 'What is the worst example of your dealing with a member of the public? What did you learn from this experience that would help you in this job?'

## Catch-all questions

A number of questions tend to appear in many job descriptions, and mean different things depending on the type of job.

'Teamwork' could mean:

- ★ strong inter-personal skills
- ★ easy to get on with
- ★ takes on board colleagues' needs
- ★ has specific skills in negotiating with others
- ★ has experience of working in project teams.

'Leadership' could be used to refer to:

- ★ willingness to speak on behalf of the group
- ★ a strong vision that motivates others – such as shown through directing plays, leading student societies, community projects or raising money for charity
- ★ being chosen or appointed to lead groups
- ★ experience of leading at a specific level relevant to the job.

'Good self-starter' may mean:

- ★ enjoys working on their own
- ★ will accept a job that offers little support
- ★ works well independently
- ★ can start a new job without supervision
- ★ has good problem-solving skills
- ★ can take on major projects in almost any area
- ★ is a responsible worker.

'Flexibility' may mean willingness to:

- ★ fit in
- ★ work with a wide range of people
- ★ work unusual or long hours
- ★ change schedule at short notice
- ★ respond quickly to crises
- ★ work at different locations
- ★ travel
- ★ help out different departments in emergencies
- ★ change department, role or workload
- ★ find solutions to a wide variety of problems.

It is important to work out, from the level and nature of the job, what kind of interpretation to use. It is also important to gain a balance, so that you can show that you are able to work with and listen to others, but are also able to work alone, take responsibility, and give direction to your own and others' work.

## Consider all angles

Consider each item on the person specification from multiple angles, in line with the job description. Prepare ideas on:

- ★ Your best example. What is good about it? What worked well? What was your own contribution?
- ★ Two or three brief examples. What do these suggest about the breadth of your experience? (Employers might check whether your first example is just a 'one off' or represents your everyday experience)
- ★ An example from which you learnt something that improved your current performance. If you are asked for your 'worst experience', emphasise what you learnt that benefits your current performance.
- ★ How you would advise somebody else to do the tasks/skills.
- ★ Professional development you have undertaken in relation to the tasks/skills.
- ★ Skills and personal qualities involved in your experience of the task
- ★ How regularly you exercise/demonstrate the skill or competence: Is your experience a one-off? Recent? Up-to-date?
- ★ At what level of responsibility? (Size or scale of the project? Significance of getting it right?)

## Other typical questions

### A highlight from your life/career?

Be prepared to describe briefly what happened and why you consider it a highlight. It could be an occasion where you took on a challenge or a higher level of responsibility and proved your capability. Ideally, prepare an example that developed experience useful to the job.

### Your worst mistake?

Use this as an opportunity to demonstrate ability to learn from mistakes. Select the kind of mistake that anybody could make – not one that would worry employers about appointing you. Employers will want to see you take responsibility for your actions, rather than blaming others (even if it was someone else's fault, in your opinion). See the Competence Sheet on the companion site.

### Commitment to personal development?

You can expect this kind of question from employers who have 'Investors in People' status, professional organisations and posts related to public office.

### What have you got to offer?

OR 'What contribution can you make?' Refer to 3–5 of your strongest attributes (experience, skills, qualities, networks, etc.) that are relevant to the role and the business. If possible, refer to feedback you have received from others such as employers or team members.

### Relevant personal qualities?

Be able to give 2–3 sentences to demonstrate the quality you consider most relevant to the current post and why. Be able to list 3–5 qualities and a few words to summarise why you find these relevant. Leave it to the interviewer to ask for more details. Be prepared to give examples of each if questioned. See pages page 373.

### A critical event?

This can be another way of asking about 'worst mistakes' or 'highlights', depending on how it is phrased. This question is looking for evidence of levels of responsibility you have held, your coping and problem-solving strategies, your ability to reflect upon and learn from experience and to apply learning to new areas. For caring professions, it might be used to explore your ability to describe and work with emotions and feelings; in creative fields, to see how you use experience as inspiration for your artwork; for management posts, to see how well you manage complex and difficult situations. See page 284.

### What you learned from . . .

You may be asked why you chose a particular study option or job, and what you learned from these. Consider, for example, whether you learnt to be flexible, to work with difficult people, to maintain high levels of concentration, pay attention to detail, to think analytically, to be a stronger person emotionally, or to deal with the unexpected. Indicate how the subject or experience drew out your natural strengths and abilities. Focus on those aspects that are relevant to the job for which you are applying.

### Activity

#### Practise interviews



Find a few friends to practise 'mock panels'. It can feel embarrassing at first, but it is ideal for learning to answer personal questions in brief.

- ➔ Tell your mock panel about the kinds of jobs you want, so it can devise relevant questions. It can use questions from this chapter.
- ➔ Give at least 15 minutes for each person's interview.
- ➔ Afterwards, panels should feed back what went well and what could be better. Ask which answers the panel found weakest – and why.
- ➔ Note down feedback that you and others receive. Use it to prepare for real interviews.

# Closing the interview

## General interest questions

Sometimes employers ask general questions at the end of an interview so candidates relax and reveal a different side to themselves. For example, the employer may ask:

**Q:** 'I see you are keen on Mexico. What is the interest there?'

Remember that you are still being interviewed. The employer is still looking to see what you are like and can offer the company. Your answer should reflect this: it is not an opportunity to talk in detail about special interests. Emphasize qualities or experience useful to the company. For example (depending on the circumstances):

**A:** 'I am keen to develop my Spanish.' *(Useful if the company has Spanish-speaking offices or customers.)*

**A:** 'I wanted to find out about a different culture and have always been interested in Mexican art.' *(This suggests a breadth of interests and confidence to find things out for yourself.)*

## Do you have any questions?

You do not have to ask a question. Employers don't usually like to be asked many questions that extend the interview: select just one or two. These could be, for example:

- ★ about recent reports about the company in trade publications, especially if it allows the employer to make a positive response
- ★ about training and professional development opportunities
- ★ whether there is a mentoring scheme for new employees
- ★ what would the employer consider to be a sign of your success after two years with the company? What are their expectations of you as a new employee?
- ★ opportunities for travel, or for secondment
- ★ what the next step will be. When are you likely to hear the outcome of the interview?

## Questions to avoid

Avoid asking questions:

- ★ about information provided already in the job details or on the company website
- ★ that you could have checked with HR/Personnel before the interview
- ★ that you should have checked before applying – to make sure it is the right job
- ★ about whether advertised terms and conditions can be changed just for you
- ★ that start with 'Will I have to ...?' (Use instead: Will the job involve ...?)
- ★ that are common sense.

## Is there anything else . . . ?

- ★ Employers are aware candidates can be anxious and don't always give great answers. If you feel that you didn't answer a question well and so prevented the employer gaining important information about you, say so and provide it now.
- ★ Before the interview, you may have rehearsed skills and qualities that you feel are important to this kind of job or company. If these have not been referred to in the interview, raise these now.

## When could you start?

Be clear about your personal arrangements so you can answer this.

### Activity

#### (Don't) sabotage the interview!



- 1 Make a list** of ways to really mess up an interview and convince employers you are utterly unprepared and unsuitable. Consider such things as presentation, poor advance research, punctuality, poor responses, etc.
- 2 Give good advice!** What advice would you give a friend or family who sabotaged interviews in this way? It might seem obvious yet many people neglect the basics. If you don't know, check back over the chapter or speak to a careers adviser.
- 3 Write a preparation list.** Ensure you are ready for your interview.

# After the interview

## Learn from the process

After the interview, you will probably remember all the things you didn't say or wish you had said differently. Don't dwell on these – but draw on them to list any advice for yourself for future interviews. Use the experience to learn more about your performance so that it was not a waste of time, no matter what the outcome.

## Analyse the questions

Jot down all the questions you were asked. Were any unexpected or worded in ways you didn't recognise at the time?

- ★ Note how many questions you were asked. How long was your interview supposed to last? Subtract ten minutes (for interviewer speaking time) and divide the remaining time by the number of questions. How long did the employer expect each answer to be?
- ★ Were your answers too long? If so, practise punchier responses for the next interview.
- ★ Were your answers too brief? If so, think of a good example of your experience that you could use to develop that answer more fully.

## Analyse your performance

- ★ Which examples did you use? Were these your best? Remind yourself of your best example so that this stays in your mind next time.
- ★ What went well about the interview? Use this to boost confidence before your next interview.
- ★ What could you do better? Write this down for future use.

## Ask for feedback

Some companies offer brief feedback to unsuccessful candidates. It is worth asking for this. However, be prepared for general comments such as 'the successful candidate met the criteria best'. Some companies refuse to give any feedback, in order to avoid legal repercussions.

## Offered the job?

### *Taking the call*

- ★ Your initial response can affect how your future employer regards you – so do sound pleased, grateful and enthusiastic (even if you decide to turn it down).
- ★ If you have genuine questions that determine whether you want the job – now is the time to ask these.
- ★ Ask where you will work (if there is more than one site) and who you report to.
- ★ Ask when you will receive the terms, conditions and contract.
- ★ Check the starting salary. If it is lower than advertised, say what you understood the salary to be. Note how they respond. If it is at the lower end of the advertised scale and you have good experience, remind them of it and ask if they would consider more.
- ★ The employer might ask when you can start, so be ready to respond.

### *Consider the terms*

- ★ Check the contract and terms and conditions carefully. If in doubt about any details, check with the company's Personnel or HR department.
- ★ Check your costs. Make sure that you can afford the job once travel, accommodation and other costs are factored in.
- ★ Decide carefully whether the job is for you. If not, why not?
- ★ If you decide against the job after further consideration, let the company know straight away. Let them know the reasons.

A template to collate your thoughts and insights is available on the companion site.



# Review: Getting the job you want

1

## **Aspire, Act, Apply, Achieve**

Thinking and planning ahead can help to make the experience more enjoyable and, ultimately, successful.

2

## **Understand the process – to manage it better**

Research and practise different stages of the processes for gaining placements, internships and jobs, so these become more predictable, manageable and successful for you.

3

## **Be strategic**

Apply a problem-solving strategy to finding a job. Good preparation is similar to the 'problem elaboration' referred to in Chapter 11.

4

## **Investigate all your options**

Research these. Know the full range of opportunities open to you. Consider how more indirect routes could benefit you and take you towards your long-term goals.

5

## **Make best use of work experience and current jobs**

Whatever jobs you take on, milk the opportunities to develop business acumen, gain good references and contacts, acquire new skills and a professional, work-ready attitude.

6

## **Be selective**

Choose well. Unrealistic and unsuitable applications are a waste of time. Rather than sending out hundreds of applications, focus on the best options for you.

7

## **Research the employer(s)**

Know what they do, their values, performance, ambitions and competitors. Be ready for questions at interview intended to check whether you have bothered to find out about the company and role.

8

## **Tailor your applications**

Fine-tune your personal statement, CV and covering letters so that they are precise, informative, clear and relevant to each job.

9

## **Practise! Practise! Practise!**

Keep refining your CV and applications. Form mock interview panels with friends to practise interview responses. Use the Careers Service and online sites to practise assessment centre tests.

10

## **Prepare well for interviews**

Prepare for likely questions. Be able to articulate how your skills, competences, values and experience are relevant to the role. Demonstrate that you can think intelligently about the job.

11

## **Treat all applications as developmental opportunities**

Whether successful or not, use the experience to become a stronger, more compelling candidate. Record what you learn about the process and how to do well in it – to benefit future applications.

12

## **Manage the outcome graciously**

If offered the job, consider terms and conditions carefully. If you accept, be enthusiastic: create a good initial impression. If not successful this time, ask for feedback to help future applications.

# Building a professional identity

## Reputation, personal profile and records



### Learning outcomes

This chapter offers opportunities to:

- ✓ create a strong professional identity and reputation that supports your career for the short and long term
- ✓ create an online profile that works for you
- ✓ maintain an updated profile of your skills, qualities and competences in preparation for job applications and interview questions
- ✓ maintain an organised portfolio of documents to draw upon when preparing for jobs or new roles
- ✓ maintain personal reflection records to support your ongoing professional development
- ✓ keep records that serve multiple purposes throughout your working life.

### Reputation matters

Whether you work for yourself or others, your reputation counts. For employers, every new employee offers new opportunities for the business but is also a risk. They won't want to risk recruiting anyone who seems potentially dishonest, deceitful or untrustworthy. If there isn't trust, then it is hard to form constructive working relationships, to develop strong teams or to maintain public confidence.

If you are self-employed, your personal reputation will affect that of your company. Customers and clients want to be confident that they can trust the company and its ethics.

### Why maintain records?

Good record-keeping is essential to ensure that the information you provide to employers, customers, patients, clients, insurers, government and others is full, accurate and honest. You will draw on some key information for many years.

### *When applying for jobs*

Whenever you apply for jobs, you benefit from having excellent records so you can:

- ★ provide authentic documents
- ★ ensure dates and details are accurate
- ★ provide up-to-date, rich examples of attributes and experiences
- ★ prepare excellent answers for interviews
- ★ ensure information about you in the public domain shows you in the most positive way.

Updating records to include recent examples of skills and experience increases the chance of your remembering these and having them to hand when needed for applications and interviews.

Bear in mind that employers will use any information they can acquire to form judgements about you, your reputation, work ethic, attitudes, character, coping strategies and ways of relating to others. They will consider how well you created opportunities for professional and personal development and learn from experience – and how all this would benefit the role and company.

# Cultivate your professional identity

## Do

Be active in cultivating the right professional identity for your field.

- 1 Claim your identity** Decide for yourself how you wish to be regarded – and think through the behaviours, actions and speech that will then reflect that to others, whether in person or online.
- 2 Be honest with yourself** Be aware of aspects of your behaviour, speech or personality that could let you down and be active in working on these.
- 3 Treat your reputation as an asset** Be aware that a good reputation can take years to develop, but can be undermined in an instant. Nurture and protect it.
- 4 Build a strong profile** Keep detailed up-to-date examples of experiences and skills needed in your field and in roles to which you aspire. Keep data that indicate your level of success (where feasible). This is your 'track record', upon which you can call when needed.
- 5 Act with integrity – always** If personal integrity matters to you, this will lead you to do the right things, even when you think no one will know. It does get noticed – and it helps avoid potential problems. You will have more confidence if you are not worried about being 'found out' about past acts at some point in the future.
- 6 Champion your field** Speak positively about your profession and colleagues. If you recognise areas for improvement in the ways things are done, be active in contributing to making it better – constructively.
- 7 Step up** Be prepared to speak out, respond positively to change, and take on challenges that develop your field. Show you are serious about your work.
- 8 Show respect** – to yourself and others. Be kind. Treat others with dignity and expect that for yourself.

## Avoid

Avoid behaviours that could affect your reputation long term.

- 1 Cheating** – in competitions, sports, exams, using essay mills, paying others for assignments, copying others' work, plagiarism, etc.
- 2 Inflated claims** Make a strong case for your strengths, but don't claim anything that is untrue and which you couldn't evidence.
- 3 Lies/deception** Don't claim experience, qualifications or skills you don't have.
- 4 False documents** Never use forged certificates, references, etc.
- 5 Poor attendance** Employers follow up candidates' past records of attendance and punctuality.
- 6 Poor collegiality** Beware of appearing to be someone who constantly complains, blames, disrespects others, gives little praise – or anything that suggests you might not be a good colleague.
- 7 Bullying and harassment** – whether in person or online.
- 8 Complacency** Don't assume your reputation can rely on a good degree or early successes. Those are great to have as long as your track record has current examples.

## Stand out – for the right reasons

In a competitive job market, it is important to make a good impression. However, some candidates try so hard to 'stand out' through exaggerated statements and over-inflated self-claims, that they undermine their own case. Such applications are likely to be weeded out early on. False claims can lead to dismissal from a job and/or prosecution.

### Wrong ways to stand out

- ★ Using clichés such as 'I would give 150%'
- ★ Inflated self-boasting: 'I am literally the best there is!'
- ★ Emphasising how much you want the job (rather than what you can bring to it)
- ★ Gimmicks – such as setting teasers, using garish graphics
- ★ Poor applications – leaving gaps, errors, giving too few precise details, using long-winded, pompous, or over-complicated writing, etc.

### Your 'value-added'

Mention any experience that the employer has not listed in the person specification but which could be useful to the business. Some areas worth mentioning are:

- ★ languages, experience of living abroad and/or other cultures
- ★ legal, HR, financial, technical, or media expertise, especially if already applied in a business context
- ★ experience of responsibility – from student or sports leadership, being a young carer, or managerial roles, school governor, being on the board of a charity
- ★ flexibility – about hours or place of work
- ★ experience of supporting a member of a senior team, as a personal assistant (PA), on research tasks, etc.
- ★ business acumen – entrepreneurship or enterprise projects, undertaking a project for a business
- ★ having followed a 'non-traditional' route into higher education/a professional area.

### 'Personal brand'?

Trought (2012) advocates developing a personal 'brand' to market yourself to employers. This is true to the extent that you need to consider how your application will compete against others. It helps if a winning personality and something of your life journey comes across, too.

However, bear in mind that employers are more interested in their own brand, company style and values, and will be looking to see how well you will 'fit in'. Present your strengths in ways that make sense in terms of their brand and values. If you simply 'sell yourself' or your 'personal brand' you may come across as only interested in you.



What makes you stand out from the rest?

### Knowledge of them

#### Use company websites

Be well-informed about the company's aims, plans, achievements and values. Look at what it requires of employees in general, not just for this role. Read company reports in the public domain.

#### Use LinkedIn

This is an easy way of doing initial research on:

- ★ the company in general
- ★ how it communicates to others, and what it chooses to communicate about
- ★ key people who work for the company
- ★ recent developments in the company.

Click on 'see connections' to see who company personnel connect with professionally. This can identify similar companies, opening up further job and networking possibilities for you to explore.

# Shape your online profile

## What will they find?

Most employers will google you and use other searches before deciding whether to interview or employ you. They want to gain an impression of the kind of person you are, your values and attitudes, whether you seem trustworthy, hard-working, enterprising and likely to be a good colleague. They will use social media to consider your personality, attitudes, how you spend your time – and what that means for their business.

## Can they find you?

Many employers will not interview you if they cannot trace you online, so it is important to have an online identity – one that highlights your best qualities. Use a different identity for personal accounts.

## Show who you are

Choose at least one site such as your preferred social media, personal website or blog where you provide a more personalised 'About me' section than you would in a professional profile. Imagine you have under a minute to describe yourself: What is most important to know about you? What matters most to you in life? What stands out about your skills and experiences? What do you want to do in life? What is your dream job? What are your passions?

## Create a professional profile

Create this online using sites such as LinkedIn and/or relevant employment agency sites.

- ★ Include your work history, life experiences, capabilities – with links to further details.
- ★ Provide details of education and qualifications. Mention any specialist courses you took that would be relevant to employers.
- ★ Give details of special achievements and any impact you made. Ideally, provide quantifiable measures or details that recruiters can check for themselves (e.g. *I ran a social media campaign for Company Y during my placement, and increased traffic to the site, from x000 to y0000*).
- ★ See also pages 366–7.

## Create interesting links

Link your professional profile to sites where employers can find richer details about you if interested. For example, in the 'About me' section of your profile, link to picture galleries of your work, websites or games you created, your blogs or podcasts, videos that showcase your skills, articles that you have written or charities you are involved in. Remove trivia. Let your strengths and your personality shine through.

## State what you seek

State clearly what you are looking for – whether this is a job, part-time work, internship, mentoring, offering voluntary opportunities or mentoring to others – and in what field. Make sure that employers could use your links to find you through their searches by location, qualification, skills, field of work, etc. Keep your profile up to date – and date it.

## Push your profile

- ★ Put your professional profile on as many sites as you can.
- ★ Create links to it from all your social media.

## Good photo finish

Add a good photo to your professional profile so your personality shows through. Ensure it suits the ethos of the field of work you seek. Use the same photo across all your media: it creates a sense of a 'personal brand' and helps to make your image more memorable.

### Want to know more?



Doyle, A. (2019) 'How to Create Professional Online Profiles'.

Doyle, A. (2019) *How to Ensure Employers Can Find You*. The Balance Careers.

# Keep yourself organised

## Organising personal records

The contents of your personal records or portfolio will be particular to you. You might want to focus these on your course and employment, or include medical documents, records of travel, and others. Whatever your approach, it is useful to do the following:

- ★ Divide material into sections. Number and label all items as well as the sections, to help you find and update material easily.
- ★ Number the items in each folder or section rather than from start to finish. This will enable you to update sections without having to renumber everything.
- ★ Set specific times (3–4 a year) to update your employment history, skills and competences so these are always ready to use.
- ★ For paper records, a sturdy box or folder is useful for including bulkier items such as your passport, contracts, licences and payslips.
- ★ Include a detailed list of contents to help you find what you need quickly and easily. See pages 371–7 for guidance on what to include.

## Records for job applications

Chapter 14 looks at the process of applying for a job, and making the best use of information about yourself. A good application will be tailored to the particular job and person specification, and this takes time to put together well. Good interview answers may require you to reflect upon your experience from quite different angles.

It is typical for people to emerge from an interview saying, 'Why didn't I say that?' 'Why didn't I use

this example rather than that?' Similarly, it is easy, once the envelope is in the post, to remember information that could have been included to strengthen a job application.

The answer is in the preparation. That gives you more control over your responses at both the application and interview stages. Your memory will be better primed to call upon examples you really want to use. Moreover, knowing that you are well prepared can increase your overall confidence, so that you appear to be a stronger candidate.

## PDP or CPD records

Employers often ask questions about, or for evidence of, your personal development planning (PDP) or continuous professional development (CPD). They are interested to see that you take your ongoing learning, training and development seriously, the process you underwent, and whether you can learn from experience.



## Useful resources

Templates on the companion site that can help you clarify your thoughts on this and prepare good answers for use in interviews are:

- ★ Record of education and training
- ★ Evaluating progress on learning goals
- ★ Improving personal performance.



## Organised records



- 1 Are all your paper records held together in one place? YES/NO?
- 2 Are your electronic records well organised? YES/NO?
- 3 Can you find personal information quickly? YES/NO?
- 4 Are your personal records fully up to date? YES/NO?
- 5 Do you update records with recent good examples of skills/competences? YES/NO?

# Portfolios; Progress files; HEAR

## What is the purpose?

A portfolio or progress file is just a file or folder to hold relevant information about yourself for ease of use. You might be asked at your institution to maintain one of these or a Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) or equivalent.

Some employers like to see a portfolio, especially in creative fields. Most do not have the time to look at them. However, the main purpose is to help you prepare well for work.

Use it...

- ★ to monitor your progress
- ★ for sessions with personal tutors, careers advisers, support staff and others
- ★ for preparing for work-based appraisals, supervision and equivalent
- ★ as evidence of CPD required in your field
- ★ to help staff write your references
- ★ to write your CV and job applications. See pages 348–54.

## Personal summary

Include a personal statement or position paper (see pages 297–9 and 351). Be selective and specific, identifying key themes. Clarify what you have learnt. Refer precisely, but very briefly, to evidence contained within the portfolio.

## Formal documents

- ★ Certificates (birth; qualifications; training)
- ★ Degree or course transcript
- ★ References and testimonials
- ★ An example of a recent marked assignment can be useful when seeing support tutors.

## Developmental documents

- ★ Completed self-evaluations and activities (dated) such as those in this book
- ★ Copies of work-based appraisals or notes from supervision sessions
- ★ Feedback from tutors and peers for past assignments and your commentary on these.

## Planning documents

- ★ Your current goals and aspirations (such as what you want to achieve from the course, where you see yourself in five to ten years' time, who or what inspires you, what motivates you, etc. – see Chapters 2 and 5).
- ★ Your updated action plan to achieve academic and/or other goals.
- ★ Details of priorities you have set, including milestones, targets and deadlines, and how far you kept to these.

## For future job applications

- ★ A profile of vocational, technical, academic and other skills you have developed
- ★ An updated summary of your education and training (see page 372)
- ★ An updated list of all employment and/or work experience (see page 372)
- ★ A curriculum vitae (CV) – Careers Advisers can help with this. See pages 352–4.
- ★ Examples of experiences that demonstrate typical job competences. See pages 371–2.

## Personal material

You might like to include photographs, letters, school reports, poems, quotations, job descriptions or articles. These may relate to:

- ★ sources of inspiration, affirmation and motivation
- ★ charts of your progress to date and reminders of what you wish to achieve
- ★ things you find reassuring when stressed.

# Contents list: portfolios/personal records

Available on the companion site: [www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)



Below is an example of a potential contents list for your personal records or portfolio. You do not have to include all of these. To save you time creating your list, a version is provided on the companion site for you to adapt to suit you.

## Educational history

- 1 Record of education and training
- 2 Certificates for all qualifications
- 3 Degree transcript
- 4 Evidence of learning.

## Employment history

- 1 Record of employment history
- 2 Contract for current employment
- 3 Names, addresses, job titles and other contact details for at least three referees
- 4 References and testimonials (if any)
- 5 National Insurance number (or your national equivalent)
- 6 P45 or P60 (or your national equivalent)
- 7 Pay slips (for several years)
- 8 Pension details for all jobs
- 9 Analysis of learning through work.

## Other experience

- 1 Positions of responsibility in clubs, societies or organisations
- 2 Achievements (from sports, leisure, social life, etc.)
- 3 Travel
- 4 Languages
- 5 Voluntary and community work
- 6 Mentoring experience
- 7 Life experience that developed skills or personal qualities
- 8 Health and safety training
- 9 Equality and diversity training.

## Attributes/competences

- 1 Personal profile (skills, experience, personal qualities)
- 2 Evidence of skills and personal qualities
- 3 Critical event/incident reflections
- 4 Competence sheets for specific skills
- 5 Analysis of personal qualities
- 6 Competitiveness audit.

## Personal development

- 1 Self-evaluation questionnaires
- 2 Reflective documents and activities
- 3 Extracts from reflective journal/log
- 4 Quotations that motivate or inspire
- 5 Drawings, photographs and personally relevant documents.

## Overview documents

- 1 Position statement
- 2 Personal action plan
- 3 Curriculum vitae (CV)
- 4 Analysis of knowledge and experience.

## Personal material

You might wish to include for personal use (and remove when sharing with others) such items as: birth certificate; medical records; insurance; evidence of citizenship; driving licence, etc.

## Record storage

There are apps available to help with organising and storing personal records. See page 380.

# Records to support applications

## Education and training

It is likely that every job you apply for, as well as any future courses, will ask for details of your education, qualifications and training, such as:

- ★ details of your highest level qualification (e.g. a degree, a master's degree)
- ★ details of schools, college and/or university courses and qualifications – and, if successful, the original certificates
- ★ informal learning such as on-the-job training
- ★ evidence that you can apply what you learn, in your personal statement and at interview.

## Work history

Be ready to provide accurate records of your work history. This could be maintained as an up-to-date list within your CV. If the job details ask you NOT to send a CV, you can copy or paste these details into the required application forms. Always check that you include ALL the details that the employer requests and be truthful: they will probably check the details they request.

For each job and period of employment you have undertaken, keep an accurate record of:

- ★ exact dates you start and finish the job/role
- ★ the employer's name, address and contact details
- ★ the job title and key responsibilities
- ★ your final salary (or wages) and any additional benefits provided by that employer
- ★ the experience you acquired, skills or qualities demonstrated, and what you learned from doing that work which is of value to your current aspirations
- ★ your reason for leaving
- ★ details of relevant managers or supervisors for potential future job references.

### *Gaps in work history*

Employers expect to see a continuous record and will ask you to account for any gaps in your work history. Keep details of time spent travelling, studying or otherwise out of employment.

## Skills and attributes

You will be asked about your skills and personal qualities on many occasions, such as:

- ★ when applying for jobs, work placements, new roles or promotions, or to be listed at employment agencies
- ★ for work-related social media e.g. LinkedIn
- ★ when applying for professional courses
- ★ for voluntary work or roles in the community
- ★ as part of annual work review or appraisal
- ★ for skills audits undertaken by organisations.

It is likely that you will be asked how you applied those skills or demonstrated your qualities in particular situations. You might be asked when or how you developed them or how others would describe them if asked. Such details are easy to forget, so it helps if you have kept good records as you go along. The resources on the companion site can help you to do this.



## Resources for record-keeping

These templates on the companion site can help you clarify your thoughts on this and to prepare good answers for job applications and interviews.

**Record of education and training** Organise items so that your most recent courses and qualifications are at the head of the list.

**Record of work history** Organise so your most recent work is at the top of the list.

**Current skills and personal qualities** A summary record.

**Evidence of learning:** to analyse any piece of learning in depth.

**Learning through work** to analyse a piece of work-based learning in depth.

**Evidence of skills and personal qualities** to analyse one or more skills in depth.

**Competitiveness audit** Consider your current competitiveness in the job market

**Competences:** See pages xi and 374 for more detail.

# Current skills and personal qualities

Available on the companion site: [www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e](http://www.macmillanihe.com/cottrell-skills-for-success-4e)



## People

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to get on with people from diverse backgrounds | <input type="checkbox"/> Consideration of others' feelings           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding other people's points of view            | <input type="checkbox"/> Caring for others                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sensitivity to cultural differences                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting and motivating others            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dealing with the general public                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding others' body language         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork and collaboration                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Coping with 'difficult' people              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Networking   | <input type="checkbox"/> Conveying messages clearly and to the point |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Managing or supervising others' work                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Audience awareness                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching, training or mentoring others                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Taking direction from others                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Negotiating and persuading                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Giving constructive feedback                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Helping others to arrive at decisions                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership skills                           |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:                                      |

## Activities and tasks

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creativity, design and layout          | <input type="checkbox"/> Technological skills                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Innovation and inventiveness           | <input type="checkbox"/> Using social networking tools         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to see the 'whole picture'     | <input type="checkbox"/> Working with numbers                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Argument and debate                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Selling                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seeing patterns and connections        | <input type="checkbox"/> Problem-solving                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attention to detail                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Practical skills                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Researching/finding information        | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding quickly how things work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Classifying and organising information | <input type="checkbox"/> Seeing practical applications         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Making decisions                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing reports/official documents    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Managing change and transition         | <input type="checkbox"/> Languages                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Setting priorities                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Interpreting/translating languages    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Working out agendas                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Enterprise and entrepreneurship       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Organising work to meet deadlines      | <input type="checkbox"/> Business and financial skills         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitating meetings                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Managing difficult situations/crises  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Analysing/interpreting complex texts   | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:                                |

## Personal

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Setting my own goals                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-reliance                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Working independently                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Recognising my own needs                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maintaining a high level of motivation   | <input type="checkbox"/> Taking care of my health and well-being       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taking responsibility for my own actions | <input type="checkbox"/> Staying calm in a crisis                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Learning from my mistakes                | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional intelligence                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Willingness to take risks and experiment | <input type="checkbox"/> Coping skills, resilience and managing stress |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assertiveness                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Determination and perseverance           |  |

# Records of competences

## What is a 'competence'?

To be competent means to be able to perform an activity reasonably well and on more than one occasion. When competent at a task, you can be relied upon to undertake it successfully on most occasions without instruction or supervision.

Competence is associated with repeat performance. Simply doing something once is not usually a sign of competence. Competence involves proficiency in a set of relevant skills. If you can train, advise or supervise others in doing the task, this is also usually a sign of competence.

## Employers and competence

When you apply for a graduate job, you will receive a 'person specification' that includes, amongst other things, details of skills and experience required for the post (see page 348).

### *Person specification*

Employers want to know, as closely as possible, how competent you are in skills relevant to the job. They will look for evidence in your application that indicates to them whether your experience means you could cope with the demands of the job well. That can relate to how much experience of those skills you have had in how many contexts with what kind of responsibility, with what results.

### *Competence-based applications*

Some employers use competence-based application forms or tools. These ask specific questions about competence rather than requiring a personal statement or CV.

For either kind of application, it is useful to have detailed examples to draw upon that you have prepared in advance.

## *Interviews*

It is typical for some or all of a job interview to be competence-based. You could be asked about competences from one of many perspectives, such as your best example of demonstrating them, or how you see them as relevant in other work contexts, or how you learnt from mistakes (see Chapter 14).

In interviews, you may be given time only to describe one example in detail. It is not untypical to hear people say after an interview that the wrong example came to mind. For instance, they may have prepared to answer a question giving a 'recent example' but been asked for the 'best example in relation to the current job' – or vice versa.

## *Recording and selecting examples*

Whether for writing applications or answering questions at interview, it helps if you have maintained good records from which to select at speed. This requires a little discipline in making time to jot down some notes of examples as they occur. Reflect in advance on potential answers to the kinds of questions you might be asked about these – and jot down brief answers so that you speak about the competence succinctly and confidently. See page xi for resources to help.

## **Building your competence**

You do not need to excel in all areas – though obviously the wider your competence, the more confident you will feel and the more employable you will be. If you do not have good examples of competence in any one area, then decide:

- ★ Is it a competence required for the kinds of jobs that interest you? If so, develop it further.
- ★ If not, do you want to feel competent in that area? If you do, then develop it further.

Students have many opportunities that are less accessible once student life is over. Seize these for developing a broad range of competences whilst you have the chance (see pages 337–8). Ensure you have a good portfolio of skills and experience by the time you leave.

# Recording your competence

Having well-recorded examples of your competences significantly enhances your responses and boosts confidence during the application process. It also saves a great deal of time when making each application.

## Using templates

You can find a range of templates on the companion site that you can use to assist you in making a reflective analysis of your competences. See page xi for details. These provide prompts for you to record material that will help you answer typical questions raised during the job application process. Select those that are relevant to your employment or the types of position that you are likely to apply for.

### *Draw on multiple examples*

In completing the records, it is worth taking time to jot down all the occasions you can think of when you exemplified the competence in action. This will give options for deciding best examples.

### *Call on others*

It can help to have a friend or relation to prompt you if you struggle to find examples.

### *Demonstrate breadth*

You can draw upon the same experience for more than one competence, but it is best to use at least three separate experiences or examples overall.

### *Keep it brief but specific*

You will be required to give clear, precise and succinct responses to employers. Do the same when using templates on the companion site.

### *Own responsibility*

Show you can take responsibility for your own actions. Avoid excuses and blaming others. Identify what you have learnt from your mistakes.

### *Reflective analysis*

The following are useful angles to reflect upon in detail for each competence. These are incorporated into the templates on the companion site.

- 1 Your best example** A few words to summarise this. Ideally, this should have been in the last year. Be clear why you think this is a good example.
- 2 Context** Brief details to help you recall the example and present it in a convincing way.
- 3 Personal contribution** What exactly did you do or say?
- 4 Who else was involved?** (and how).
- 5 Your level of responsibility** Record whether you had lead responsibility, if you were part of a small or large team, covering an absence, etc. Employers want to know the level of responsibility you have had, so record how central were you to events.
- 6 Scale or scope** How large or high profile was the task? How many were involved?
- 7 Outcomes** What did your actions achieve? Ideally, include details of success or significance. Why did it matter?
- 8 Contribution** If relevant, indicate the significance of your action to a larger project or teamwork. Being able to contribute to projects led by others may be as important as being the leader, as both teamwork and leadership are prized qualities.
- 9 Approach/process** How did you organise and plan to make the action a success/to meet targets? Why did you take this approach?
- 10 What worked well?** List 2–4 best points.
- 11 What lessons did you learn?** What would you do differently, if anything, in retrospect?
- 12 Other examples** Have other examples to refer to (in brief). Employers might want to check that your success wasn't a 'one off'.
- 13 Broader applicability?** How could you apply this skill in other roles/ situations?
- 14 Measure of success?** How do you measure your success for the competence? Who or what do you measure yourself against?

# Records of reflection

## Why keep a journal?

The term 'reflective journal' is used here to refer to all kinds of reflective logs, blogs, diaries, journals and notes. Reading through selected passages in such a journal can:

- ★ show you how you have developed over time – and made more progress than you had noted
- ★ reveal changes in your goals and interests
- ★ reveal trends and patterns in your behaviour and issues that it would be useful to address
- ★ remind you of occasions when you demonstrated skills and attributes needed for jobs you are applying for – which helps you to provide more authentic and convincing responses.

## Keeping it going

Keeping a reflective journal can be challenging, especially staying motivated to make regular entries. It takes determination, good planning and a far-sighted approach. It also means having a strong sense of responsibility for your own development over time.

Keeping a journal requires the 'stick-with-it-ness' Edison referred to above (page 211). The benefits tend to arrive gently and might not be noticeable for some time. Even if you cannot detect them easily, the benefits are likely to be there. Chapter 12 provides support and guidance on developing skills, methods and thought processes that underpin reflective practice.

## Make it easy

- ★ Use a notebook that is easy to carry around or use your phone or a portable device.
- ★ Number or name entries to help you to find them again easily. Include headings and dates.

## What should I write?

Your journal should reflect what matters to you – and help tell your story. You could write about:

- 1 All aspects of a particular experience, such as the fine details of an observation or experiment or how you designed a product.
- 2 Daily or weekly entries on a chosen theme.

- 3 Influences, inspirations, sketches and thought processes that led to a final product or outcome – such as a piece of art or personal achievement.
- 4 Thoughts to share with others such as through a blog.
- 5 What you learnt from your course, jobs, work experience, events, exhibitions, field trips, etc.
- 6 What you find most stimulating in your current study.
- 7 How your studies are of benefit to your work, employers or others.
- 8 How theory covered in class is relevant to practicals or case work you are undertaking.
- 9 What you are learning about yourself through your interactions with others.
- 10 Tips and strategies you are gathering.
- 11 What you are learning about how you manage your emotions.
- 12 Progress you are making on your current goals. (A resource is available on the companion site.)
- 13 See also page xix (PDP) for ideas and details.

## Critical incident or event

During the job application process, employers often ask if you can give details of an important event or experience that had a major impact upon your life or work – or 'critical incident' (see page 284). In particular, they are looking to see what kinds of things you regard as important (your values), how you managed transition and change, or how well you learn from experience and mistakes. It is useful to be prepared for this question. A 'Critical Incident' template to complete is available on the companion site.

Even if you are not applying for work or a new job, this is a useful exercise to work through from time to time, either using the same incident, or comparing your responses to different events.

# Reflective material

If you have undertaken the structured reflections, self-evaluations, observations and activities in this book and/or on the companion site, you will already have a wealth of material upon which to draw. You might also have material from work reviews and your course. Highlight, flag or bookmark the most relevant pieces or extracts from them. Consider drawing these into a single folder for ease of reference. Below are some items you might like to include.

## My personal development

- ★ Do I need personal development? page 18
- ★ What are my PDP priorities? page 19

## My vision of success

- ★ Spectrums of success – what I want page 30
- ★ My personal definition of success page 31
- ★ My personal values page 33
- ★ My needs and wants page 34
- ★ My long-term vision pages 38–9
- ★ My short-term goals page 40
- ★ My sources of motivation page 43
- ★ My personal qualities (for success) page 46
- ★ Extending my experience page 45

## My strengths/areas to develop

- ★ My top forty strong points page 58
- ★ Seven areas for improvement page 58
- ★ My best failure page 62
- ★ How I dealt with setbacks to my 'vision' page 62
- ★ My personal expertise pages 63–67
- ★ SHAPES, personal performance profile and formula pages 71–8
- ★ My Personal Performance Formula (PPF) page 92

## My self-management

- ★ My emotional intelligence pages 15–18
- ★ My primary level for improvement pages 105–9

## My people skills and leadership

- ★ How good are my people skills? pages 136–7
- ★ Contributing to a team pages 172–3

- ★ How I behave in teams page 166
- ★ Personal assertiveness page 147
- ★ Dealing with a difficult person page 150
- ★ Changing a recurring situation pages 147 and 156
- ★ Leadership: personal relevance page 178
- ★ Seeing myself as a 'leader' page 188
- ★ Taking responsibility page 193

## Task management

- ★ SWOT analysis page 206
- ★ Self-evaluation: task management page 200
- ★ My priorities page 205
- ★ Action plan pages 208 and 287
- ★ Performance indicators page 216

## Creative thinking/problem-solving

- ★ Self-evaluation: creative thinking skills pages 225–6
- ★ Taking the initiative pages 101–2

## My use of reflective thinking

- ★ Self-evaluation on reflective practice page 273
- ★ Developmental reflection page 280
- ★ Recognising my skills page 281
- ★ A critical event page 284
- ★ My personal statement/position paper pages 297–9

## Employability and careers

- ★ Skills for the workplace checklists pages 313–19
- ★ My experience of work pages 339–41
- ★ What do I want from the job? pages 343–3
- ★ My career planning journey pages 332–3

## Review: Building a professional identity

1

### Keep yourself organised

Make life easier and save time by keeping your personal records well organised. Store, sort, label and number them in such a way that you can always find and update them easily.

2

### Understand the purpose of good personal records

Recognise the relevance to you of maintaining accurate and complete records so that you are able to draw on the information you need when applying for courses and work.

3

### Maintain an updated contents list

A good contents list will save you a lot of time. A template to adapt to suit your own purposes is available on the companion site.

4

### Maintain a complete educational record

Maintain an updated list of educational establishments attended since age 16. List all your qualifications and training, along with dates, grades and where they were achieved.

5

### Maintain a complete work record

Keep a list of every job and role you undertake so you have a continuous record. Be able to account for any gaps. Include start and end dates, job role and responsibilities, salary (or wage) and your employer's name, address and contact details, and the name of a suitable person for a reference.

6

### Audit your skills and personal qualities

Do this at least once a year. It is useful for reminding you of skills you have already, and for prompting you to develop new skills and qualities, too.

7

### Understand what is meant by 'competence'

Recognise that employers want employees who can demonstrate that they are competent in skills relevant to the job. Be aware of which competences are most in demand in your fields of work.

8

### Undertake reflective analyses of your competences

Think through in detail how you demonstrate competence in different skills – and how to best persuade others of this. Keep records of these so you can draw upon them easily when applying for jobs and preparing for interviews.

9

### Use a reflective journal as a personal record

A reflective journal or log can be a great reminder both of experience relevant to job applications, and for answering questions about how you use reflection to learn from experience.

10

### Detail the significance of at least one 'critical incident'

Prepare at least one detailed analysis of a critical incident that demonstrates your skills and general competence in action – so that you can call upon this if asked in job interviews.

11

### Draw together your reflective material

If you have undertaken reflection whilst working through this book, on your course and/or at work, look through this and draw out the main themes. Highlight, flag or bookmark the most relevant sections – or collate them into a summary document.

# Appendix 1: Applications for success

All of the apps listed below were accurate as of December 2020 and, at the point of publication, were free to download. Some apps may require payment to access all of the features available.

## Creating your life story

**Remente** (iOS and Android) – Remente allows you to create both a life vision for yourself and goals and steps within these. It can help you with this by suggesting steps and offering advice on how to reach your goals.

## Setting and managing personal goals

**Habitica** (iOS and Android) – Habitica takes a game-based approach to setting and achieving personal and work-based goals. You create a character and carry out goal-related tasks in order to earn ‘rewards’.

**Strides** (iOS only) – Strides is an app that allows you to set a personal goal or challenge and break this down into manageable steps. It then allows you to track each step you take. You can share your goals with others, who can help to motivate you and reward your achievements.

**Coach.me** (iOS and Android) – Coach.me allows you to set goals and monitor progress. It will store information on how long you have spent on specific tasks or behaviours. This is useful if you are trying to develop habits such as reading for 20 minutes a day. In the premium version of the app you can pay to access professional coaching support.

## Developing and maintaining good habits

**ATracker** (iOS and Android) – ATracker allows you to monitor the time spent on various tasks and to track progress as you establish new habits.

**Way of Life** (iOS and Android) – a simple-to-use app which allows you to set and track habits you wish to develop. If you are a fan of charts and graphs you can use the app to generate these to show your progress.

## Task and time-management

**MyLifeOrganised** (iOS and Android) – this app helps you manage tasks across different aspects of your life, such as study, work and home. It helps you prioritise tasks and measure your progress towards completing these.

**Microsoft To Do** (iOS and Android) – helps you create, organise and manage ‘To do’ lists. The app synchs across your mobile devices and computer.

**Toggl** (iOS and Android) – the basic version of this app is free and allows you to time how long you spend on different activities. This can be very useful if you suspect you may be spending too long on activities such as social networking.

**RescueTime** (iOS and Android) – the basic version of this app is free. It runs in the background of your phone or computer and produces a report on how you have used your time. If you subscribe to the full version it allows you to track time away from the computer, and can send you alerts if it thinks you are spending too long on an activity.

**Focus@Will** (iOS and Android) – this app selects background music, which, it suggests, can improve your ability to focus by up to 400%.

## Motivational apps

**Fabulous: Daily Motivation** (iOS and Android) – this app takes a broad approach to motivation, linking it to habit formation and self-care to shape your behaviours towards healthier routines and ‘nudges’ when you need them.

**Think-Up: Positive Affirmations** (iOS and Android) – this app helps motivate you through developing a positive mindset and using positive self-affirmations and self-talk.

**Forismatic** (iOS and Android) – this app provides a collection of inspirational quotes from others on a wide range of topics.

## Creativity

**Brainsparker** (iOS only) – this app uses random ‘prompt cards’ of exercises, words or phrases to inspire you and prompt your imagination.

**Thoughtback** (iOS and Android) – this app makes use of notes and ideas you input, to email you suggestions of where to go next and inspirational quotes to motivate you.

**SimpleMind** (iOS and Android) – an app for brainstorming ideas and creating pattern notes and maps from these.

## Mindfulness and stress management

**MyLife Meditation** (iOS and Android) – this app will teach you meditation and help you develop a more mindful approach to life.

**Headspace** (iOS and Android) – build your mindfulness and meditation practice day by day with this app. Whilst you need a subscription to access many of this app's features, it is (at the time of writing) free for students and with certain premium apps, such as Spotify.

**Mindfulness Bell** (iOS and Android) – this app rings a 'mindfulness bell' at several points during the day. The sound of the bell is a prompt for you to stop, and focus in on what you are doing at that point.

## Record keeping

**Microsoft OneNote** (iOS and Android) – this app allows you to gather together thoughts, notes, documents, photographs and other media in a single place.

**Evernote** (iOS and Android) – create notebooks in which you can store and search all your ideas, photos, documents. Your notebooks can be accessed across all your computers and mobile devices.

## Job applications and interviews

**Career Builder** (iOS and Android) – this app allows you to search for jobs and upload your CV on the go. You can tailor it to receive job notifications from specific types of employers or in specific locations.

**Indeed** (iOS and Android) – this app allows you to search for jobs, upload your CV and apply for jobs directly from your mobile device.

**LinkedIn** (iOS and Android) – LinkedIn acts as an employment-related social network. In addition to getting information about jobs and uploading your own details you can join discussion groups and track the activities of companies or individuals you are interested in working with.

**Interview Questions and Answers** (iOS and Android) – this app generates practice questions for a wide range of possible job interviews.

## Appendix 2: Useful websites

### Assessment centre guidance and practice

<a href="http://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres">www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres</a>	An introduction to preparing for assessment centre activities and psychometric tests
<a href="https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres">https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres</a>	General advice, and activities used in some specific occupational areas
<a href="http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/">www.assessmentday.co.uk/</a>	A chance to practise a range of tests used by employers
<a href="http://www.graduatesfirst.com/">www.graduatesfirst.com/</a>	Practice tests, some of which are free
<a href="http://www.assessmentcentrehq.com/assessment-centre-introduction/">www.assessmentcentrehq.com/assessment-centre-introduction/</a>	Advice and practice tests

### Career guidance

<a href="http://www.prospects.ac.uk/">www.prospects.ac.uk/</a>	Advice and jobs for graduates
<a href="http://www.brightnetwork.co.uk/">www.brightnetwork.co.uk/</a>	Free network, advice and guidance
<a href="http://www.targetjobs.co.uk">www.targetjobs.co.uk</a>	Advice and jobs for graduates
<a href="http://www.agcas.org.uk/">www.agcas.org.uk/</a>	Advice and information for graduates. Useful section on what to do with your degree
<a href="http://www.ucas.com/careers-advice">www.ucas.com/careers-advice</a>	Careers advice and quiz
<a href="http://www.postgrad.com/advice/postgraduate_careers/career_planning_tools/">www.postgrad.com/advice/postgraduate_careers/career_planning_tools/</a>	Careers resources for post-graduates, including international students

### Employment: information about companies

<a href="http://www.linkedin.com/company/greatplacetoworkuk/">www.linkedin.com/company/greatplacetoworkuk/</a>	Information about, and ratings of, named companies in the UK and worldwide
<a href="http://www.ratemyplacement.co.uk/">www.ratemyplacement.co.uk/</a>	Search for work placements and jobs, based on the reviews and recommendations of other students
<a href="http://www.vault.com/vault-guides">www.vault.com/vault-guides</a>	What it is like to work for named companies, including on placement and in internships
<a href="http://www.companieshouse.gov.uk">www.companieshouse.gov.uk</a>	Lists details of all UK public companies
<a href="http://www.bloomberg.com">www.bloomberg.com</a>	International and entrepreneur site
<a href="http://www.b.co.uk/the-lists/">www.b.co.uk/the-lists/</a>	<i>Sunday Times</i> lists of best employers to work for based on employee feedback
<a href="http://www.highfliers.co.uk/">www.highfliers.co.uk/</a>	Information and annual report on leading UK graduate employers

## Employment: job hunting and recruitment agencies

<a href="http://www.giveagradago.com">www.giveagradago.com</a>	Graduate jobs and recruitment
<a href="http://www.graduate-jobs.com">www.graduate-jobs.com</a>	Graduate jobs, schemes, internships
<a href="http://www.milkround.com/">www.milkround.com/</a>	Graduate recruitment site
<a href="http://www.graduate-jobs.com/gco/Booklet/graduate-job-hunting.jsp">www.graduate-jobs.com/gco/Booklet/graduate-job-hunting.jsp</a>	On where to find graduate jobs
<a href="http://www.linkedin.com/company/graduate-recruitment-bureau/">www.linkedin.com/company/graduate-recruitment-bureau/</a>	Graduate recruitment site

## Employment rights

<a href="http://www.equalityhumanrights.com">www.equalityhumanrights.com</a>	Equality and Human Rights Commission
<a href="http://www.adviceguide.org.uk">www.adviceguide.org.uk</a>	Citizens Advice Bureau, UK
<a href="http://www.acas.org.uk">www.acas.org.uk</a>	ACAS – advice on employment law
<a href="http://www.hse.gov.uk">www.hse.gov.uk</a>	Health and Safety Executive

## Starting your own business/Working for a start-up

<a href="http://www.nacue.com">www.nacue.com</a>	Support for student enterprise
<a href="http://www.workinstartups.com">www.workinstartups.com</a>	Job and information with start-up companies
<a href="http://www.startupdonut.co.uk">www.startupdonut.co.uk</a>	Advice on setting up your own business
<a href="http://www.gov.uk/business-finance-support">www.gov.uk/business-finance-support</a>	Government financial support for UK businesses
<a href="http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/intellectual-property-office">www.gov.uk/government/organisations/intellectual-property-office</a>	Information about intellectual property rights and patents
<a href="http://www.fastcompany.com/90339051/how-to-survive-and-succeed-in-the-gig-economy">www.fastcompany.com/90339051/how-to-survive-and-succeed-in-the-gig-economy</a>	Article on surviving and succeeding in the gig economy

## Resources



### Planning tool

#### Evaluate whether your PDP goals are SMART-F

In the column headed 'Interim goals', list the interim goals (main outcomes) to undertake to achieve your overall goal or vision. These might be qualifications, experience, skills to acquire, etc. Consider whether each of these is specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound (with clear start and end dates). Can it be flexed or adapted? Write 'yes' or 'no' in the boxes as appropriate. An expandable version is available on the companion site.

	Interim goal/ target <i>(write below)</i>	Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Realistic	Time-bound	Flexible
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							

# Personal Action Plan for PDP



<b>Vision/longer term goal(s):</b>		<b>To be achieved by (year and/ or month):</b>	
<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>	
<b>Interim goal (1)</b> <i>(write opposite)</i>		<b>Start by:</b>	<b>End by:</b>
<b>Actions to take (to achieve interim goal (1))</b>	<b>Evidence that this is completed</b>		<b>Done</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
1	<b>Evidence that this is completed</b>	<b>Start by:</b>	<b>End by:</b>
2			
3			
4			
<b>Interim goal (2)</b> <i>(write opposite)</i>		<b>Start by:</b>	<b>End by:</b>
<b>Actions to take (to achieve interim goal (2))</b>	<b>Evidence that this is completed</b>		<b>Done</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
1	<b>Evidence that this is completed</b>	<b>Start by:</b>	<b>End by:</b>
2			
3			
4			

Interim goal (3) <i>(write opposite)</i>	Start by:	End by:	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>(3)</b>	Actions to take (to achieve interim goal (3))	Start by:	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
	1			
	2			
	3			
	4			
<b>(4)</b>	Interim goal (4) <i>(write opposite)</i>	Start by:	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
	Actions to take (to achieve interim goal (4))	Start by:	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
	1			
	2			
	3			
4				



An expandable version is available on the companion site.

## Evaluate your targets as SMART-F

In the column headed 'Targets', list the interim targets (outcomes) to undertake in order to achieve your overall goal or vision. These might be qualifications, experience, skills to acquire, qualities to develop, or the outcome of other relevant actions. Consider whether each target is specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound (with clear start and end dates). Can it be flexed or adapted? Write 'yes' or 'no' in the boxes as appropriate.



### Evaluate your targets

Evaluate whether your targets are well-formed, SMART-F targets. Use one row per target. Consider whether each is specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, clearly time-bound, and flexible. Write 'yes' or 'no' in the boxes as appropriate.

Target <i>(write below)</i>	Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Realistic	Time-bound	Flexible
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						

# Action Plan: Version 1

An expandable version is available on the companion site.



Aim/overall goal		Completion date:			
Interim targets	Actions to take	Start by:	End by:	Evidence that milestone is completed	Done <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1)	1				
	2				
	3				
	4				
2)	1				
	2				
	3				
	4				
3)	1				
	2				
	3				
	4				
4)	1				
	2				
	3				
	4				

# Action Plan: Version 2



<b>Vision/longer term goal(s):</b>		<b>To be achieved by (year and/or month):</b>	
<input style="width: 100%; height: 40px;" type="text"/>		<input style="width: 100%; height: 40px;" type="text"/>	
Interim goal (1) <i>(write opposite)</i>	Start by:	End by:	Evidence that this is completed
Actions (to achieve interim goal (1))			
(1)	1		Done <input type="checkbox"/>
	2		
	3		
	4		
Interim goal (2) <i>(write opposite)</i>	Start by:	End by:	Evidence that this is completed
Actions (to achieve interim goal (2))			
(2)	1		Done <input type="checkbox"/>
	2		
	3		
	4		

Interim goal (3) <i>(write opposite)</i>	Start by:	End by:	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>(3)</b>	Actions (to achieve interim goal (3))	Start by:	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
	1			
	2			
	3			
	4			
<b>(4)</b>	Interim goal (4) <i>(write opposite)</i>	Start by:	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
	Actions (to achieve interim goal (4))	Start by:	Evidence that this is completed	Done <input type="checkbox"/>
	1			
	2			
	3			
4				



An expandable version is available on the companion site.

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