Your Guide to Learning in the Workplace

This guide explains what workplace learning is, how it fits with more formal learning to enable you to make maximum use of your five learning and development days each year and how it can help with meeting your personal and business objectives. It is written primarily for individuals – at all grades and levels of experience right across the Civil Service – but there is also a section specifically aimed at managers who are looking for guidance on how they can develop their teams.

The guide includes:

- Information on identifying your learning needs and how you can meet those needs through workplace learning
- An overview of commonly used workplace learning methods and techniques
- Links (all red and circled text) to further information on topics covered in the guide both on the Civil Service Learning portal and elsewhere.
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1. Introduction

What is learning in the workplace and why should you do it?

What is workplace learning?

You might be surprised to hear that a significant proportion of your learning – perhaps even the majority – is very likely to be taking place through workplace learning already. Did you ask a colleague a question recently on how to do something, or reflect on how you might be able to carry out a piece of work more efficiently? It’s all workplace learning!

Workplace learning is:

- Any learning you do in your normal workplace – this includes any informal learning you do as part of your job and other activities you may have to set aside time for such as reading or job shadowing and is probably something you do already
- For all of us, whatever our level of experience and responsibility
- “Blended” – informal learning in the workplace can be mixed with other types of learning such as e-learning or job shadowing
- Self-directed – you access the learning you need, when you need it
- Manager supported – your manager should guide you and help you take stock of your progress.

Why should you do it?

Workplace learning can provide the ‘just in time’ learning that you need to deal with a particular situation or piece of work. It’s also a great solution if you only have short time slots available for learning as you can break it down into bite sized chunks. Equally importantly, it can be a really enjoyable way to learn as you are in the driving seat and can “pull” just what you need, when you need it.

Workplace learning is also well supported by research (ref. Institute of Employment Studies, Books and Articles) and is an approach adopted by many leading organisations (ref. Dixons Retail, Cafe Culture case studies).

In particular research* shows that good learning strategies use the 70:20:10 model:

Research shows that those who are more self-directed in their learning tend to perform better, are more interested in their work and their colleagues, are more motivated, are more successful and are happier.

How does it fit with more formal learning?

Of course there is still a place for formal learning. Civil Service Learning offers hundreds of face to face courses covering a range of topics. But, as set out above, maximising learning and development means using a rich blend of formal and informal learning opportunities. Many CSL courses already promote a blended approach by signposting learners to free learning resources and e-learning that support and consolidate the face to face learning. This guide provides information on getting the most out of all the informal learning opportunities that exist in the workplace in line with the 70:20:10 model set out earlier.

“We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that this thing must be attained.”

Marie Curie – physicist, chemist & Nobel Prize winner

“The least of the work of learning is done in the classroom.”

Thomas Merton – Trappist Monk
2. Ways into workplace learning: identifying what and how to learn

"The purpose of learning is growth, and our minds, unlike our bodies, can continue growing as we continue to live." Mortimer Adler - Philosopher

For individuals

There are four main ways to identify just what you need to learn. However, we all have biases and preferences which means that we tend to rely on one approach more than the others. When you use more than one approach you get a more balanced understanding of your needs.

Self-diagnostics

- Think about the tasks and challenges you will be facing in your role over the next 6-12 months and whether you feel that you have the knowledge and skills you will need
- Focus on any areas of weakness that might really impair your performance and make these your priority
- Remember to focus also on your strengths and how you can use learning to exploit your talents; great performers understand their strengths, and areas of special expertise, and make a point of building upon them
- Think broadly; consider your personal skills, the knowledge and skills you need in your current role and how they may change in the future, skills related to your profession, technological skills, your wider understanding of the Civil Service and beyond.

Advice from others

- Involve your line manager; it is part of their role to help you with your development and that includes helping you think through your needs and offering input
- Seek out trusted colleagues; they can be a great source of inspiration, ideas and feedback and might suggest something that you have not considered yourself
- Get a mentor or a coach; they will be able to use their experience and skills to help you consider your options and priorities. See the coaching and mentoring pages on the CSL portal; your department may also run their own coaching and/or mentoring schemes.

Tip: You can use advice from others, including coaching and mentoring, as tools both to identify what you need to learn and as a way of learning in the workplace.

“If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.” Thomas Merton – Trappist Monk
2. Ways into workplace learning: identifying what and how to learn

Personal development plan

- Try to think about your personal development plan as a useful tool for identifying and recording your needs rather than as hoops you need to jump through. Use our simple online development plan on the CSL portal to record and track your learning activities and to set development goals.

Diagnostic instruments

- Consider using psychometric tests if your employer supports these; tests can be sourced locally through your department or have a look at the Psychometrics page on the CSL portal
- You could also use other tools such as diagnostic questionnaires or 360 degree feedback
- Try undertaking the Civil Service Competency Framework (CSCF) self-assessment tool.

Learning styles and preferences

Once you have considered what you need to learn, you will want to think about the best way to address your learning need(s). The Workplace learning styles quiz will help you to identify which methods are likely to work best for you but it’s worth experimenting and trying different ways as well. You can learn more about learning styles and preferences here. Check out Learning – It’s all in the mind as well for helpful tips on learning and how to learn effectively.

The next section of this guide sets out a range of learning methods and techniques for you to consider.

Tip: Your union learning rep (ULR) may also be able to advise on learning opportunities.

For teams

The Learning Team

CSL has worked with departments
to develop

The Learning Team is:

- A structured, tried and tested method of team learning, helping teams overcome business challenges and learning to work more effectively together, sharing expertise and using learning to achieve business benefits.
- An engaging approach to help teams identify some of the biggest barriers to delivering their work more effectively, to identify creative ways to learn how to overcome those challenges in collaboration with their colleagues and to plan and utilise workplace learning (as well as other forms of learning).
- It is not, however, the solution to every challenge a team faces or the only way to learn.

For more information have a look at The Learning Team pages on the CSL portal.
2. Ways into workplace learning: identifying what and how to learn

For organisations

Checklist

Just as teams benefit from individuals sharing their learning, organisations also benefit from learning being shared across different teams and business units. To survive in the current climate of change and reform, organisations must be able to continually adapt and respond to internal and external changes. For this to happen the workforce must constantly evolve so that it is equipped with emerging and changing requirements for skills, knowledge and attitudes. The checklist that follows offers some suggestions on how to identify what learning might be required at organisational level and how to deliver this.

• What ‘hidden gems’ and lessons learnt in one part of an organisation would be really valuable in another part?
• Who would benefit from knowing about these hidden gems and lessons learnt?
• What is the best way of sharing this information?
• Do leaders model knowledge sharing behaviour and encourage others simply to see it as ‘how we do things around here’?
• What processes or mechanisms exist to help share information?

You can find out more about organisational learning on the CSL portal. Have a look as well at themes and tips on how organisations learn.

“ One must learn by doing the thing. For though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try. ”

Sophocles - Philosopher
Self-managed learning

“Experience is not what happens to you, but what you make of what happens to you.”

Aldous Huxley – Author Brave New World

Learning by doing

Many of us have learnt more about doing our job well as we do it and training courses or manuals can not replace experience and practice. Maybe you’ve experienced yourself how learning from a mistake often inspires people to go on and learn more about a subject or area of work. There are always opportunities to develop ourselves as we go about our daily work.

One option is to become involved in specific projects that require your current skills but also allow you to develop new ones and to learn by working with different colleagues. Past projects are also a source of lessons learnt particularly where there has been an After Action Review.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is about being able to think back on experiences in a systematic way in order to learn from them. Essentially you ask yourself some key questions like “what worked for you?” and “what would make it better next time?” Later in this guide there are suggested questions you may like to ask yourself along with your manager.

Reflective practice can be an important tool in practice-based professional learning where individuals learn from their own professional experiences rather than formal teaching or knowledge transfer. It is an important source of personal development and improvement.

You may also be familiar with blogging, which some see as another form of reflection on experience. Writing about your experiences, and in this case your learning experiences, means you are more likely to reflect on what you have learnt and how it impacts on your work. Another example of how this can work is keeping a learning journal.
3. Workplace learning methods and techniques

Learning from change

Whilst change might bring uncertainty, it also brings opportunities for learning. These include:

- Learning about yourself, your reactions to change and your skills in working with change
- Learning about what is happening externally using techniques like benchmarking and modelling best practice
- Learning about managing major changes or fundamental transformational change.

When thinking about change we tend to focus on the future and the many transformations we can anticipate. Seldom do we take the time to look back at the many changes which we have already experienced. Should you ever be concerned with your ability to cope with future changes, pause to reflect on the many changes you’ve managed to deal with in your past. Having dealt successfully with so many previous issues, we often take them for granted and totally forget how they once loomed before us as impossible obstacles to overcome.

Online resources

The CSL portal offers access to 4,600 carefully selected resources including guides, pocketbooks, toolkits, videos and articles. Many are offered by CSL’s partners GoodPractice and Virtual Ashridge, who have mapped resources to the Civil Service Competency Framework (CSCF). These resources complement more formal learning activities and provide additional and associated reading and support. They are also extremely useful as stand alone products that can be referred to as needed or for bite size learning.

In addition, the CSL portal signposts to relevant external sites where you can find further resources, courses and opportunities to search for and download books.

Check out the guides and other free learning tabs to have a look at the resources that are available.

“ My biggest motivation? Just to keep challenging myself. I see life almost like one long University education that I never had . . . every day I’m learning something new. ”
Richard Branson - Entrepreneur

“ So when you are faced with change it’s not time to run – it’s time to learn! ”
Robin Sharma – Global Leadership Consultant
3. Workplace learning methods and techniques

E-learning
CSL offers just under 200 e-learning products across the topics of Working in the Civil Service, Core Skills and Leadership & Management. Have a look at the courses & e-learning page on the CSL portal to find out more about what is available.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs)
Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are open access online courses. They are open to large numbers of people and commonly provided by universities. The CSL portal provides further information and links to some of the most popular MOOC sites.

Mobile learning
Additionally, the emergence and rapidly expanding world of mobile learning (or M-Learning) due to the vast array of mobile devices – including handheld computers, MP3 players, notebooks and smart phones – brings learning directly to us without the restriction of location. Due to its accessibility it can take place anywhere and at any time. It not only allows the user to access what they need when they need it – for example with e-learning, pod casts, applications (apps) – it also allows other to create “on the spot” or “in the field” instruction and learning material that can be shared immediately.

Social media
Social media, or social collaboration and learning, can bring flexibility and ease of communication across teams. The potential for collaboration on projects is huge. It means workers who work flexible hours from a mix of office, home and from remote sites can do so without feeling out of the conversation. It can support networking across remote groups and enable those who might not otherwise have an opportunity to meet to have a conversation. Social media tools can help workers achieve more, get better work done, learn more in less time, and share information of mutual interest. For any organisation moving away from relying on formal learning, and exploring social media to facilitate informal learning is a massive shift and for many it is the way of the future.

The Government Digital Service (GDS) has developed guidance on the use of social media which can be accessed via the digital pages on the CSL portal.
Learning through others

Observation and shadowing

Learning from colleagues is an important source of obtaining and sharing knowledge in organisations. Research has shown that informal, social interactions with colleagues are strong ways of learning. Observing a colleague complete a task or interaction successfully and understanding the approach they chose to take, then mirroring it and achieving our own success is a good example of learning through others.

You could also consider spending time ‘shadowing’ a colleague to gain an understanding of their role and the way they work. This is usually for no more than a day and could help to enhance career development, deepen understanding of the workplace, and contribute to improved communications.

Gaining further insight into how others work and the impact they have on those around them can be an invaluable resource. Remember, the influence we have from just “doing” something in a certain way with a particular attitude can be far reaching. Being a great role model to colleagues who observe you every day most certainly goes on to influence how they behave and what they learn from your behaviour.

Feedback

Feedback is a way of giving and receiving helpful information about how you come across to others and how your actions impact others. It is also a way to measure how your actual performance matches with how well you think you are doing. The ability to give feedback to others, in a way that will help improve their performance and behaviour, is an important skill for anyone who works with others.

Actively seeking out feedback from others is an important aspect of managing your own learning. Start by picking people you know and trust but over time try selecting different types of people. Make sure you keep an open mind, ask questions for clarification and give balance in your reflections to both constructive criticisms and praise.

For further useful hints and tips on giving and receiving feedback, just type ‘feedback’ into the search engine on the Virtual Ashridge, GoodPractice and CIPD sites and you’ll find a wealth of helpful resources. You can also check out CSL’s feedback guide.
Coaching

Tip: This section covers coaching and the next section is about mentoring. For information on the differences between coaching and mentoring have a look at the links below:

Coaching can be as simple and inclusive as “the process of empowering others” (Whitmore, 1997), or more definitively it’s the act of guiding an individual and enabling learning to occur that ultimately improves performance.

The structure and methodologies of coaching are numerous but are predominantly facilitative in style. The coach asks questions and challenges the coachee, enabling them to explore their own resources and solutions for moving forward.

The recognised benefit of coaching to the individual and the business is the facilitation of self-directed learning and the ability of the individual to recognise what they need to do next to achieve their goals.

See the coaching and mentoring pages on the CSL portal; your department may also run coaching schemes.

For further information on coaching in the workplace:

Coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them learn rather than teaching them.

Robin Sharma – Global Leadership Consultant

Coaching: Grow your People

CIPD Coaching Fact Sheet

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**Coaches do not develop people; they equip people to develop themselves.**

Gebelein, et al, Successful Manager’s Handbook

Coaching is usually a one-to-one (coach to coachee) mix of support and questioning providing a safe environment for you to think about what you do, how you do it and why you do it the way you do.

Coaching can:

- help you develop a greater understanding of yourself
- help when tackling major choices or seemingly insurmountable dilemmas
- help you build practical skills
- help you reflect on past events and think about the future.
3. Workplace learning methods and techniques

Mentoring

The essence of mentoring recognises the value of learning from each other.

The mentoring process involves an individual outside the line management structure with greater experience in one or more areas exchanging knowledge with another person through a relationship of mutual influence and learning.

We all use other people to help and support us in our day-to-day lives, usually people whose opinions we value because of their experience.

See the coaching and mentoring pages on the CSL portal; your department may also run mentoring schemes locally.

For further information on mentoring:

Action Learning

Action Learning Sets (ALS) are based on the underlying principle of learning by doing and operate on the basis of a proven cycle of learning.

A set consists of a small group of no more than six to eight participants who meet regularly and frequently to discuss and share current challenges and difficult issues. It is an opportunity for each member to bring their own problem for action learning, often one that links back to their current job or personal development plan.

The set can discuss, offer support, share experience, and suggest action to address the issues once back at work.

Often, it is possible for everyone to choose an issue relating to a common theme, such as managing change, addressing poor performance or encouraging innovation. Members meet to discuss progress on action taken and to offer insight and suggestions on related issues, maximising the opportunities to learn from each other and increase knowledge.

For further information on Action Learning Sets:
Team learning

Team learning is how we can learn collectively with colleagues to achieve common objectives as a group. In a successful team, members tend to share knowledge and often complement each other’s skills. In less productive teams there is often low commitment from team members to work together effectively meaning any effort to learn together is unlikely to be successful.

Virtually all important decisions at work are made by groups of people sharing their experiences and knowledge with each other. Discussing with others what we have learnt by “doing” or through research forms the basis for the decisions we then make. It’s not often we make big decisions without consulting and gaining insight from others!

Networking

Some think about networking as feeling pressured into having an awkward conversation with a stranger while wondering who to go and speak to next. But try to think about it differently – as a tool to make sure you know who to ask if you’ve got a question a little out of the ordinary. Keeping in touch with old colleagues and making a point of keeping up with your professional contacts, for instance, are two good ways to make sure that you’ve got someone to call on when you need a tricky bit of information fast. It’s essentially about establishing friendly and useful relationships in advance, and about remembering to do your bit. What you get is greater collaboration and the potential for sharing of skills and experience.
Volunteering

Volunteering is a great way to share the wide range of skills of civil servants with many worthy charitable causes. But for us too, it is an opportunity to learn new skills and to benefit from stronger links with the civil society sector.

Volunteering is simple. It’s about giving your time to do something useful, to help others, to share your knowledge and skills, and gain some new ones too! Volunteering can be extremely rewarding, opening up opportunities to learn and develop, building your confidence, making you feel good and improving your job prospects. It can give you the satisfaction of time and effort well spent, along with meeting new people and gaining useful experience. The range of opportunities is huge. Whatever skills and experience you have, there is something you can do.

Greater support on the role of civil servants in volunteering is now shown by:

- providing civil servants with opportunities to use their skills to support civil society organisations
- using volunteering as a means of learning and professional development, both in terms of gaining new skills and new experiences and acknowledging the benefits back in the workplace.

Many departments already offer their employees the opportunity to use at least one day of special leave to volunteer and have programmes in place supporting opportunities. Check with your department for information on how you can get involved, or have a look at the volunteering page on the CSL portal for more information.

3. Workplace learning methods and techniques
Part of learning is thinking about what worked for you and what you might want to do differently next time. Having explored some of the different methods of accessing workplace learning, the key now is discovering what makes the learning really come alive for you so you get as much out of it as you possibly can. You can use the list of questions below as a starting point to think about what worked well and how learning can be even better next time. Whether you do this on your own, or with your manager, it will be almost impossible for you to not come up with ideas for how to make sure learning activities work for you – so give it a go!

**Questions to ask yourself and discuss with your manager**

- How did it go? What did you learn?
- Did you achieve what you wanted? Did you get what you needed?
- How relevant was the learning to your current role? Or your future needs?
- How have you used your learning? How will you use it?
- Are you now more effective in your role? Has the learning increased your competence, skills or knowledge? Has your performance improved?
- Have you shared your new-found expertise with colleagues? How have others benefited from your learning?
- Considering the resources (in time or money) that you and your work place invested in your learning, was it good value?
- Have you thought about other learning you would like to do, or ways to build on what you have already learnt?
4. Maximising your learning

Sometimes, checking the benefits of your learning will be as simple as an informal discussion with your line manager. Or you may be asked to demonstrate the impact of your learning in terms of behaviour change and improved performance. Reading the Campaign for Learning guide *Becoming a better learner* may help you further with practical suggestions on applying and evaluating your learning. It also contains guidance on how to continually improve your learning capabilities.

An example of a more structured way to consider the benefits of your learning experience is with an *After Action Review* (AAR). This is a technique used to explore more deeply what went well and what could have been done differently. It is an extremely useful performance improvement tool that encourages all stakeholders to share and learn in order to have continuous improvement. It is particularly effective following a major learning event or project based experience.

Put your learning to work. You have to make the changes in order to evaluate the impact. Going on to engage with others to share your learning helps you understand what worked really well and is a great way for you to make sure you realise what exactly you learnt. It also enables other people to benefit from your strengths, to learn from you and to go on to improve for themselves.

Remember - it’s all about applying, consolidating and cascading your learning!

“We must learn from everything we do; we must exploit every experience as a learning experience. Every institution and every person we have access to becomes a resource. It is a lifelong process.”

Robin Sharma – Global Leadership Consultant
5. Guidance for managers and leaders

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”
Doug Larsen – American journalist

This section provides guidance specifically for managers and leaders on developing your teams. A key part of your role is helping others learn and improve. This means that you:

• help them to diagnose their strengths and development needs
• offer guidance and feedback
• provide support and challenge
• if required, carry out coaching, often to help them to be more self-sufficient
• help them give some balance to the needs of the job, the team and the business, as well as their personal skills and longer term career aspirations
• make them aware of all the ways there are to learn on the job and the benefits for themselves, colleagues and the business.

In addition, you will have your own personal and development agenda. It is helpful to lead by example, and do that openly so you are seen as a role model. People always respect someone who “walks the walk”. When your team see you setting learning goals and devoting time and energy to becoming better at something you will inspire them to do the same, driving up performance across your team.

You also have a responsibility for making sure others in your wider team and in your organisation support and encourage learning, promote the benefits and understand the different ways to learn on the job.

As a next step have a look at the Management Essentials pages on the CSL portal.
6. Materials and resources

Learning journeys

We have developed some illustrative learning journeys to demonstrate learning at work in action. Please click on the links below for further information.

Resources

Each section of this guide signposts you to further information on specific topics. In addition, here is a reminder of key sources of helpful information:

- Guides & workplace learning pages on the CSL portal covering guides, The Learning Team methodology, MOOCs and other free learning and links to Virtual Ashridge and GoodPractice

- Virtual Ashridge give access to the research and expertise of Ashridge Business School using text-based resources, videos and audio in the form of learning guides, pocketbooks, book reviews, knowledge maps on topics including leadership and performance management. In particular have a look at The handbook of work based learning and self-managed development learning guide and pocketbook.

- GoodPractice offers a rich mix of resources you can download to read or use with others on topics such as change management, interpersonal skills and people management in the form of top tips, case studies, self-assessment tools and articles.

Do not think of today’s failures, but of the success that may come tomorrow. You have set yourself a difficult task, but you will succeed if you persevere; and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles.

Helen Keller – author, political activist, lecturer, and the very first deafblind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.
6. Materials and resources

The following resources provide further very useful background information on learning and how to learn in the workplace:

- The Four Stages of Learning
- Adult Learning
- Learning from Experience at Work
- NAICE research
- Improving Your Memory
Website:
www.civilservice.gov.uk/learning