8 Ways to Prioritize Your Professional Development
Making Time for Learning

Get into the habit of learning a little every day.

We all know the benefits of learning. But, we also know that learning takes time – often, time that we simply don't have.

It's hard to find space for learning around a daily commute, our everyday work, household chores, and, of course, precious time with friends and family.

But, when we ignore our professional development, we risk getting left behind. For example, we might miss out on opportunities for greater responsibility, or even get passed over for promotion.

In this article, we explain why dedicating time to learning is so important, and explore eight strategies for doing so, no matter how busy you are.

What Is Professional Development?

Professional development means taking positive steps toward improving your skills and knowledge. Taking **ownership** of your own development can help you to feel more empowered and confident in your abilities.

When you dedicate time to **building up expertise** , you'll be seen by your boss, colleagues and clients as someone who is able to make valuable, intelligent and insightful contributions. This will soon earn you a reputation as the "go to" person on the team who can "turn their hand" to anything. In addition, your newfound **expert power** will make it easier for you to win support for your projects, to negotiate contracts, and to respond to change.

You'll also find that your professional value goes up! If you have a long list of skills to your name, you'll be more marketable and you'll be in a better position to take on a challenging new project, or even a promotion.

Create a Professional Development Plan

One of the hardest things about learning a new skill is finding the time to do it. In fact, **research** has shown that many of us spend 72 hours a week working, leaving precious little spare time each day!

So, here are eight practical strategies that you can use to prioritize your professional development, even when you have a busy work schedule:

1. Focus on Objectives

If you can't see the benefit of something, you'll likely give up on it. After all, why bother, if it's not going to get you anywhere?

So, you'll need a strong sense of purpose when it comes to drawing up your learning objectives.

Start by listing the skills and knowledge that you most want to learn. Then, express these as **SMART goals** . When you've done this, break them down into long- and short-term goals that you can add to your daily **To-Do List** or **Action Program** .

Drawing up a clear plan of action will help you to organize your learning time more effectively, strengthen your **self-discipline** , and boost your motivation. It will also give you a way to measure your progress. And when you do this, you'll more clearly see the value of continuing with your professional development.

2. Manage Obstacles and Distractions

Next, identify possible obstacles that might make it difficult for you to stick to your learning schedule. Then, go through each obstacle and **brainstorm** strategies that will help you to overcome it.

For example, you might plan to commit some time to learning during your daily commute. But, as soon as you open your computer, you get distracted by a slew of **emails** – and, before you know it, you've forgotten all about learning.

So, commit yourself to reserving your commute time for learning only. And avoid opening your emails or looking at your daily To-Do List until you arrive at work. You could even write down this promise as a "contract" with yourself.

3. Make Learning a Habit

When you make learning a **habit** , you'll more likely make a positive, long-lasting change, and achieve the goals that you set yourself.

Do this by building learning into your daily routine. Schedule time – however little – each day for learning, and **stick to it**!

For example, you could get to work early on Mondays and Wednesdays to practice a new skill, or find a quiet area each lunchtime to study.

Whatever you decide to do, make sure that you do it **routinely**. Be clear on what you're going to do, where you're going to do it, and how long you're going to devote to it.

4. Set Boundaries

One of the biggest distractions is often other people. You might have set aside some time in your lunch break to read up on a new industry development or complete an online test, but other people may not realize this, so the work requests keep on coming.

It can be hard to **say "no"** when this happens. But doing so in an **assertive** way will help you to protect your valuable learning time. This doesn't mean you should be rude or inflexible. Instead, be friendly but firm. Explain to your colleague what you are trying to achieve, and ask that he or she respects your "time out."

Tip:

Of course, use your best judgment here. It would be unwise to ignore a genuinely urgent task that needs your attention. Be sure to prioritize what's most critical and return to your learning plan as soon as you can.

5. Make Every Minute Count

Many of us assume that learning something new requires large chunks of time. But short blocks can be just as effective... as long as you **focus** !
The key is to maximize the impact of **every moment** that you have available. Start by taking a look at your To-Do List. What could you realistically achieve in the time available?
Even if you have just 10 minutes to spare, grasp the opportunity! Use this time to fit in a bit of extra learning. Make sure that you focus your energy effectively. For instance, **minimize distractions** by going somewhere quiet, turn off your phone, and log out of your email.

Strategies such as **speed reading** , **mind mapping** , and making use of **Bite-Sized Training resources** can also help you to maximize every moment when you have limited time available.

6. Learn at Your Best

Many people opt to work on their professional development after they've completed everything else. But, however tempting this may be, think about how you feel when you've ticked off everything on your To-Do List – you're usually exhausted, right?

Instead, try to schedule your learning for times of the day when your energy levels are high and you're more likely to be "**in the zone** ." For example, you may feel a little slow straight after lunch, but you might be buzzing with energy in the morning.

Tip:

See our article, **Is This a Morning Task?** for more information on how to identify your "peak times."

7. Find Your Own Learning Style

We all have our own way of learning. Some people prefer to read and take notes. Others are more active – they learn by doing.

When you identify your own **personal learning style** , you'll be able to learn more efficiently and in the way that works best for you. Time spent slogging through a textbook, for example, would be time wasted if you find videos more engaging.

8. Collaborate With Others

Learning alongside others can often make the experience more fun and engaging. They can help you to stay motivated, and provide advice and

support. If you have someone checking on your progress, it can also keep you focused on your main objectives.

Ask your colleagues whether they'd be interested in making more time for learning. If they are, why not form a study group, run a **lunch and learn** event, or simply spend some time reading and learning with them? You could even join a class or do an online course together. Social media sites like **LinkedIn** and **Twitter** can also help you to find other professionals in your industry who are interested in learning, or who can offer training and advice.
You may also want to explore more specialized training activities. Some workplaces offer **mentoring** or shadowing programs, which enable you to structure your learning around a relationship with a knowledgeable partner. Alternatively, your employer may offer to fund training on a professional course, if it will benefit your role and the business.

Key Points

At a time when so many of us are time-poor, finding time for professional development can be a real struggle. But doing so has a number of benefits. It can help to enhance your professional value and build up your expertise, and it makes you more capable when you're faced with new challenges or given new responsibilities.

These eight strategies can help you to prioritize your professional development, even when you're busy:

1. Focus on objectives.

2. Manage obstacles and distractions.

3. Set boundaries.

4. Make learning a habit.

5. Make every minute count.

6. Learn at your best.

7. Find your own learning style.

8. Collaborate with others.

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