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BRIEFING PAPER

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Elements of Successful Online CPD

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Introduction

Continuing professional development (**CPD**) has come to be accepted as a descriptor of all sorts of education and training done while actively employed. However, in order to understand the nature of CPD programmes and hence to develop a framework for course design and delivery, we need to look at where the term came from.

The pivotal concept here is that of **profession**. A profession is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as:

> any type of work which needs special training or a particular skill, often one which is respected because it involves a high level of education.

The professions are described as:

> jobs which need special training and skill, such as being a doctor or lawyer, but not work in business or industry.

A later and more inclusive definition was adopted by Cheetham and Chivers (2000):

> An occupation based upon specialised study, training or experience, the purpose of which is to apply skilled service or advice to others or to provide technical, managerial or administrative services to, or within, organisations in return for a fee or salary.

A common emphasis across descriptions that differ in many other respects, is that a profession has particular and distinctive competencies.

Competence

CPD must aspire to maintaining the competency standards of those who have joined the profession. It needs to meet the wider needs of the organisation, as well as develop individual staff in terms of their personal, current and future employment needs. It should embrace ongoing, structured and unstructured (or formal and informal) learning and educational opportunities.

If we assume that there are five stages of professional competence: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert, the question arises: at what point does a newly qualified professional enter the profession?

Let us assume that in order to practice efficiently, new entrants to a profession should be 'competent'. From this it follows that at the level of the individual, CPD is needed for two main reasons, to:

- keep the practicing professional competent by ensuring that their knowledge is up to date, and

- allow the competent professional to progress towards being proficient or even expert.

In the first case, most professions lay down a clear minimum requirement for CPD activity which requires compliance from members. Any CPD activity beyond this

is aimed at fulfilling the second aim, and in a slightly looser context, it is this second aim of progression toward expert practice that informs CPD which is not specifically related to the professions.

Compliance

CPD also needs to fulfil the wider needs of the organisation. In some cases, employers should formally be able to demonstrate that their employees are competent at complying with recent legislation. For example, mortgage brokers have to show that their staff have been trained in the latest legislation about selling mortgages. They may be required to prove this compliance when legally challenged in court by either the ombudsman or a disgruntled customer.

Hence, the CPD activities in which staff participate should have mechanisms to facilitate recording of achievements and provide evidence of compliance, and the company will need to gather and store these to provide an institution-wide picture.

Relevance

Clearly, experience and performance in a variety of complex, real-life situations are critical in progressing along the scale from competent to expert. In this context, we can readily see the value of unstructured, ongoing opportunities for learning, such as conference attendance, best practice fora, and so on.

One of the most commonly reported ways in which professionals develop their solutions to real-life situations is through discussion with respected colleagues; hence CPD programmes should provide mechanisms to facilitate and record the outcomes of these discussions.

Assessable

Where structured learning and education opportunities are undertaken, and assessment is used to ratify and recognise progression up the competence scale or to show compliance with a formal requirement for updated practice, it should measure performance, and not infer competence by simply measuring knowledge. In other words, assessment should be designed in a way that shows that learners can adapt their theoretical knowledge to perform competently within a variety of different situations (Hassall, Dunlop and Lewis (1996)).

Ethical

Professional practitioners should also be able to show how the values and ethics of their profession are employed to frame and guide routine practices. In this context, encouraging professionals to develop their skills of critical review and

reflection has become a cornerstone of good CPD practice. However, in order to achieve the full benefit of reflective approaches to professional development, the key appears to be a systematic and guided approach using tools such as reflective journals, audit frameworks and review exercises.

Complete

From the discussion above, we can see how Van Der Heijden (2001) arrives at the view that professional expertise goes beyond simply skill requirements to include:

- Declarative knowledge (knowing that);
- Procedural knowledge (knowing how);
- Conditional knowledge (knowing when and where or under what conditions);
- Meta-cognition (knowing about knowing).

All of these requirements are summed up by Chivers (2007), who states:

> 'From the viewpoint of embedding professional competences, only a deep learning approach will be effective. A professional practising in any field based on only a surface learning approach to their development, with little understanding of recalled, rote-learned facts and concepts would be incompetent indeed.'

Fostering deep learning in all the areas of 'knowing' mentioned above is a tall order when designing any CPD programme, but is particularly true for those which are to be delivered at a distance. Indeed, it may be for this reason that the literature reports a continuing tendency for companies and participants to prefer face-to-face programmes, despite the financial and logistical difficulties of delivering CPD in this way.

Elements of successful online CPD

In the context of learning delivered outside of a classroom environment, let's look at a list of the elements which could be used to build up a programme which addresses the needs outlined above:

Professional compliance

- A set of competencies (defined by the profession)

Expanding the knowledge base

- Access to resources and quality learning materials designed for the specific CPD purpose

Dealing with complex, real-life situations

- Links between resources and competencies via activities for learning to happen
- Tasks to set these activities in motion (case studies are a tried, tested and extremely useful way of achieving these two points)
- Communities of practice facilitated by tutors
- Peer group discussions over formally introduced, discipline-led theory and knowledge, actively facilitated by a tutor

Engaging with professional values, ethics and issues

- A web-based environment for group learning
- Interactions with the broader professional community
- Seminars, conferences and best practice exchanges
- Guided reflection activities and tools to allow translation of learning design and experience into meaningful learning

Assessment

- Learning agreements where students can negotiate specific content and practice evidence relevant to them
- Portfolios to include both reflection and workplace evidence to demonstrate achievement of competencies
- Evidence of ability to draw on past and current workplace practice and experience

All of this is facilitated by interaction between: teacher-learner, learner-learner, learner-technology, teacher-technology and learner-content.

Finally, the entire package needs to be delivered in a flexible, personalised environment which is affordable and easily accessible to employers and individuals.

Conclusion

There is no easy, 'one size fits all' approach here, and as Jane Knight (quoted in Little, 2006) says:

> 'There needs to be a more disciplined approach to designing learning solutions, by professionals who have wide experience in organisational behaviour, pedagogy and learning technologies, so that the outcome is effective, efficient and more importantly appropriate learning solutions that meet the [needs of the] organisational and technical environment.'

By combining the expertise of stakeholders and specialist companies such as CAPDM, and using online flexible learning environments combined with high

quality learning materials, we have an unsurpassed opportunity to meet all the requirements of effective and engaging CPD programmes.

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CAPDM provides a range of professional services that help professional associations and education providers to develop successful businesses in education.

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