



CONNECTING PDP TO EMPLOYER NEEDS AND THE WORLD OF WORK

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BACKGROUND

This Guide summarises the results of a major research project sponsored by QAA in 2000. The project was designed to obtain input from employers and professional and statutory bodies to support the development of Progress Files in Higher Education. The Guide focuses on the Personal Development Planning (PDP) aspect of Progress Files - in particular, how PDP and the associated student support can be implemented in HEI's to be of maximum value to students in recruitment processes and later career management.

The work was made possible with the helpful assistance of four partner organisations - the Inter Professional CPD Forum, Association of Graduate Recruiters, Council for Industry and HE and Institute of Personnel and Development. These bodies were central to success of the project in terms of organising appropriate meetings, contacting their members, distributing questionnaires, setting up focus groups and directing the author to information available on public websites.

As a result of their efforts, the Guide draws on information from a sample of eighteen major graduate employers and seven professional and statutory bodies. A listing is given in Appendix 1. The project concentrated on large employers, predominantly in the commercial sector, with structured processes in place for recruiting large numbers of graduates on a regular basis. It did not, therefore, cover the voluntary sector, not-for-profit organisations or SME's.

Since the work is based on a sample of employers and professional/statutory bodies, it is to be emphasised that the guidance which emerges is of a generic nature. It should be supplemented with any specific information from employers not in the sample who may be of interest to a particular candidate.

An accompanying file contains overhead slides which can be used to summarise or present the main conclusions. A full report from the project is available (Edwards, G. 2000) on the QAA website (www.qaa.ac.uk).

PROBLEM DEFINITION

The overall problem can be captured in the question

In what ways can personal development planning be implemented in HEI's to be of maximum benefit in recruitment processes and later career management?

To investigate this, a number of more detailed research questions were defined to structure the information and data gathering :-

- a) How can information and insight from PDP activities be used in graduate application forms to help employers objectively evaluate a candidate's potential for a job?
- b) What happens in assessment centres, what are the generic things employers are looking for and how can PDP better prepare students for this process?
- c) What competency frameworks and selection criteria are used by large employers? Are there potential linkages with PDP in developing and portraying such competencies?
- d) What are the demonstrable benefits of PDP/CPD skills for career management in the modern world of work?
- e) What are the 'lessons learnt' from professional bodies and employers in the promotion of reflective learning and CPD which may be useful to HEI's in taking forward internal PDP developments?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Information and data gathering in relation to each research question were carried out using combinations of the following approaches :-

- Survey questionnaires
- Examination of submitted documentation
- Focus groups
- Telephone interviews
- Face to face interviews
- Examination of material on public websites

Using the information obtained, the following were carried out :-

- An analysis of a sample of graduate application forms
- A survey of what happens in assessment centres
- A review of competency frameworks and selection criteria used by employers
- A review of the benefits of PDP/CPD skills for career management in the modern world of work.
- A survey of 'lessons learnt' from professional bodies and employers in the promotion of reflective learning and CPD

WHAT DO EMPLOYERS WANT TO SEE FROM PDP?

Most employers put strongest emphasis on the process of PDP rather than the documented outcomes. In other words, the process is key because it adds value - by helping students reflect on their experiences and improve their ability to articulate and demonstrate resulting competencies during recruitment activities. If the process is continuous rather than fragmented or piecemeal it is felt to be of even higher value.

The documentation of PDP activities and outputs is seen as valuable for students in forming a framework for the above activities and as personal records of development. Appropriate IT based approaches could be useful as part of this and there may be some benefits in a degree of standardisation. But employers in this survey, do not welcome the prospect of having voluminous PDP records tabled or presented as part of recruitment activities – and students should have this made clear to them. Standard graduate application forms are still likely to form the basic documentation at the beginning of recruitment processes, see next section.

RELATING PDP TO GRADUATE APPLICATION FORMS

Although candidates' PDP records will be available in various forms, all employers indicated that standardised graduate application forms will still be used for the foreseeable future. These are regarded as the basic tool in the initial stages of recruitment. They are normally used as the basis for initial screening and sifting, to determine which candidates should progress to later stages in the recruitment process - such as interviews and assessment centres.

A representative sample of application forms was obtained, either direct from employers or from their public websites. All forms required information on the candidate, their qualifications and educational/work experience. However, the most striking similarity is that all forms included a significant number of 'open' questions. These are designed to allow candidates to outline experiences and achievements so that recruiters can come to a first perception of key underlying competencies.

The most common areas of open questioning in the sample are as follows. Percentages in brackets indicate the proportion of forms in the sample which included the question :-

- 1) Overcoming difficulties and sticking to a task (100%)
- 2) Description of the candidate's 'most significant achievement' (83%)
- 3) Teamworking and organisation of others (67%)
- 4) Reasons for applying and career interests/aspirations (67%)
- 5) Extra-curricula activities (50%)
- 6) Strategic/broad questions relating to employers' business (50%)
- 7) Positions of responsibility and details of responsibilities (33%)
- 8) Customer service and behaviours displayed (33%)

These results indicate many identical areas of questioning and a strong similarity in the generic competencies large employers are looking for. Another observation is that the questions are not simply focused on the academic subject the candidate has studied. They demand consideration of career aspirations and knowledge of the employer's business. They also allow (and demand) reflection and description of both academic and non-academic activities. Overall, the results give a clear pointer to where candidates

should generally focus their initial PDP and reflections as a basis for filling out application forms.

When preparing responses to open questions in application forms, it is also important for students to have an understanding of how their answers are analysed. Discussions with employers indicate that they frequently use highly structured approaches based on templates which specify typical behaviours, practices or 'indicators' which provide evidence of the underlying competencies being sought. A number of standard texts in the HRM field cover details of competencies and 'competency indicators' – for example [Whiddett, S. and Hollyford, S. (2000)]. Typical competence indicators are discussed more fully later in relation to competence frameworks.

Guidance

- ❑ **As general preparation for completing graduate application forms, PDP could be usefully focused, initially, on the areas of questioning in 1) - 8) above.**
- ❑ **PDP should cover both academic and non-academic activities. The most convincing answers to some open questions may well come from non-academic areas.**
- ❑ **Support might be given in PDP activities to focus on 'competency indicators' as a basis for candidates positively profiling themselves in answers to open questions.**

USING PDP TO PREPARE FOR AN ASSESSMENT CENTRE

The use of assessment centres and various other forms of direct assessment are now commonplace among large employers. Candidates who have passed initial screening are invited to such centres where employers are seeking demonstrable evidence of competencies. They also give candidates an opportunity to evaluate the company /organisation from their own perspective. A number of general texts on assessment centres are available, for example Woodruffe. C., (2000) and Ballantyne. I. & Povah. N., (1995)

The activities undertaken in assessment centres of a number of major employers were examined. Although there was considerable variation in the type of activity undertaken, a number of common elements emerged. The most common activities, with percentages to indicate the proportion of the sample using them, are as follows :-

- 1) interviews (66%)
- 2) group exercises (66%)
- 3) in-tray exercises (50%)
- 4) presentation (50%)
- 5) abstract reasoning exercises (50%)
- 6) verbal ability test (50%)
- 7) informal discussions (50%)
- 8) case study (33%)
- 9) numerical ability test (33%)
- 10) solving a complex problem (16%)
- 11) written report (16%)

- 12) questionnaire (16%)
- 13) observation test (16%)

From this list it can be seen that the broad emphasis in assessment centres is on how candidates think and behave in new situations or when encountering new tasks/challenges. Often, the tasks are time constrained or in groups. *They are not usually intended to test what a candidate knows in a subject sense.* Detailed review of the information from the sample of assessment centres leads to the following broad guidelines.

Guidance

- ❑ **PDP activity to help prepare for assessment centres should endeavour to develop and broaden a candidate's understanding of their 'transferable' competencies relating to thinking in new situations and addressing new tasks and challenges, particularly in time-constrained or group situations.**
- ❑ **Activities of importance are interviews and group exercises. Reflection, practice and familiarity with interview situations together with understanding of strategies interviewers employ is clearly beneficial. In the context of group exercises, skills emerging from both academic programmes and extra curricula activities are of importance e.g. leadership style, team member roles and effective working with others.**
- ❑ **Other activities of almost equal importance are rapid information processing/decision making (e.g. in-tray exercises), formal presentations, case studies and abstract reasoning. Typically candidates will have developed presentation skills during their academic programmes. However, additional reflection, development and action planning in the other areas may be necessary.**

REFLECTION AND ACTION PLANNING KEY COMPETENCIES FOR EMPLOYMENT

Graduate application forms and assessment centres are both tools to help employers identify the competencies they are looking for in recruits. But what are these competencies? Whiddett and Hollyforde (2000) discuss the general concept of 'competencies'.

Generic competency frameworks from a sample of eight graduate employers were obtained and analysed – either from public websites or direct from the companies themselves.

Although different terminology is used by different employers, the underlying competencies being sought are very similar in many instances. The 'top ten' competencies which were identified are given below. Percentages indicate the proportion of the sample in which the competencies were identified :-

- 1) Flexibility, adaptability and the capacity to cope with & manage change (88%)
- 2) Self motivation and drive (88%)
- 3) Analytical ability and decision making (75%)
- 4) Communication and interpersonal skills (75%)
- 5) Teamworking ability and skills (63%)

- 6) Organisation, planning and prioritisation abilities (50%)
- 7) Customer focus and service orientation (25%)
- 8) Ability to innovate (25%)
- 9) Mental and physical resilience (25%)
- 10) Leadership ability (25%)

To identify these competencies in candidates, recruiters have structured guidelines and checklists which specify 'indicators' (i.e. behaviours, practices and mindsets) which are considered to provide evidence of the underlying competencies. Whiddett and Hollyforde (2000) discuss such competence indicators. Indicators used by one employer to identify some of the key competencies above are given in Appendix 2.

Therefore, in relation to competence frameworks and competence indicators, it is of importance in PDP activities that candidates reflect upon and develop understanding of the following :-

- which competencies they have
- how they have obtained them
- which indicators they can quote to evidence the competencies
- how to highlight the impact of the competencies
- how they might be applied and evidenced in new situations
- how to develop or enhance competencies

Guidance

- PDP activities should be aimed at reflection and action planning in relation to competencies themselves but also assembling and giving evidence of these by means of 'competence indicators'.**
- Some key competencies on which to focus during PDP activities are 1) flexibility, adaptability and managing change 2) self motivation and drive 3) analytical ability and decision making 4) communication and interpersonal skills 5) teamworking**
- Typical competence indicators for some of the above competencies are given in Appendix 2. PDP activities should extend awareness of such indicators for all relevant competencies via engagement with standard HRM texts on the subject.**

CAREER MANAGEMENT AND LIFELONG EMPLOYABILITY

In the study, a large volume of material became available via interviews, informal contacts and from approved documentation and policy statements. This reflected the central importance of skills relating to PDP, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and self-career management in the modern world of work.

Overall, employers emphasised that PDP skills learnt by students in their undergraduate years are crucial (and indeed constitute the first concrete step) for lifelong learning, management of their own careers and to enable the widest possible contribution to performance improvement in organisations. This is a central driving force behind the government's University for Industry (UFI) - aimed at supporting reflective work-based learning. This is aimed at people fitting learning into their professional lives, learning

wherever they have access to the internet or in one of over 1000 centres. Over 80% of the courses are on-line. A number of larger organisations are also embarking on setting up their internal 'Corporate Universities' utilising new online learning technologies.

Professional bodies also unanimously welcome the concept of introducing PDP skills in the student years. An ability to continually reflect, 'self assess' and plan specific actions in relation to required learning and development is a crucial professional 'life-skill'. Increasingly, individuals are being given primary responsibility for their own CPD in their early careers. Also, it is becoming essential to fulfil the requirements for periodic 're-registration' of some professionals.

Some themes emerging in the study, which characterise the 'modern world of work' and illustrate the central importance of PDP related skills are :-

- ❑ Businesses and technologies are changing and there is a need for people to continually learn and be able to move within companies
- ❑ Continued learning helps motivate able staff and improves employability, both within and outside a particular organisation
- ❑ Nowadays, the individual usually has the prime responsibility for development of their own competence portfolio to ensure currency and applicability. There is a changed psychological contract between a professional and the employing organisation such that there is now a 'joint responsibility' for career management rather than a 'job for life'
- ❑ Re-accreditation and periodic re-certification in a number of professions (e.g. dentistry, law) is either in place or coming soon. Verifiable CPD and its recording will be a requirement of continued practice. PDP skills are needed to establish individual needs and patterns of CPD as there will be a considerable element of choice in most cases
- ❑ There is a public demand for change towards *verifiable proficiency* as a basis of 'trust' in many professions (e.g. medicine, financial services) in the wake of recent high profile scandals. Protection of the public is seen as paramount. Ongoing PDP, CPD and their recording is part of the response to this demand to ensure verifiable 'fitness to practice'

Guidance

- ❑ **In implementing and supporting students in PDP activities, HEI's should highlight and include activities to emphasise the longer term benefits in relation to 'life-skills' for self-career management and maintenance of employability in the modern commercial world.**
- ❑ **From a professional standpoint, it is of equal importance to highlight. The need for long term PDP skills in relation individuals assuming prime responsibility for their own competence portfolio to ensure currency, applicability and verifiable 'fitness to practice'**

PROMOTING PDP AMONG STUDENTS AND STAFF

Strategies for motivating and convincing students and staff in HEI's of the value of PDP and the associated skills are likely to be of importance. The study involved the identification of some 'lessons learnt' from professional bodies and employers in the promotion of CPD in professional and commercial life. It was felt that, suitably translated, these may be useful to HEI's for taking forward internal developments and setting up appropriate support arrangements for students. The recommendations were analysed thematically and are given below under a number of headings. They are translated into terminology which is meaningful in HEI's:-

Strategies for Promoting Progress Files in HEI's

a) In the same way that CPD is becoming a 'ticket to practice' in the professions, some level of 'coercion' is probably necessary to encourage students to undertake PDP. One possibility is for PDP to be assessed in some way – as currently happens on some postgraduate programmes, However, somehow it should be made 'fun' and be part of the course, not a stand-alone activity.

b) Students must be made to realise that PDP skills are a crucial 'life-skill' for later flexibility and career management. However, they are realists and the impact on initial recruitment potential is likely to be the main selling point. These benefits should be promoted most strongly.

c) An undergraduate degree should be portrayed to students as the first step on a road to 'lifelong learning' (i.e. 'learning how to learn'). Inclusion of PDP activities as part of the course is an indicator of this. Promoting this vision in strongly vocationally oriented courses (e.g. medicine, engineering, law) should be handled with care and focus on continued professional updating.

d) Introduction of PDP should be clearly recognised as an additional student support requirement - requiring extra time/resources from staff and students. Sharing of support between academic subject and central careers staff would appear important. Academic staff must be committed to supporting students to develop PDP skills and will need appropriate training.

e) PDP skills must not be promoted as or seen as a 'crutch' for weaker students. There is apparently an emerging feeling among some employers that the best students don't need it and it could therefore be an uphill battle in these cases.

f) PDP is also important at postgraduate level. It is important for research students emerging from 5* RAE rated research departments to have reflected upon/developed key skills to ensure successful transition to the world of work

g) Academic staff could probably benefit more themselves from PDP and it's recording. Sharing this with students as part of supporting them would enable staff to act as powerful role models.

Fundamental Concepts and Terminology

a) The word 'CPD' presents a problem in professional life because it is often seen as a product rather than a process. It has come to imply something that is 'done' to you' and professional bodies talk about minimum amounts of CPD per year, usually in terms of hours for which points are awarded. PDP for students in HEI's should be promoted as something you 'do yourself' based on individual planning and ownership.

b) The process of 'reflection-in-action' should be promoted as the fundamental concept underlying PDP. PDP and its recording is of most value if it is based on continual reflection and updating. The continuous process going on all the time is the crucial element.

Possible Learning Futures and Scenarios

a) With the rapid pace of change in the world of work, PDP/CPD and associated skills are needed just to keep in touch with changes in working lives, let alone staying ahead of them and developing future plans. So it should be emphasised in HEI's that PDP is learning about a 'survival' skill.

b) The future will be one of frequent job changes for many professionals, with new skills and knowledge being utilised at increasingly frequent intervals during their lives. Continued learning and the skills for 'reflection in action' will be essential.

c) Some futurists and radical thinkers, consider that the concepts of 'qualifications' and 'professions' may become obsolete. Instead, people will continually build their own personal portfolios of learning and development and access other learning in an open and way on the internet. Each person will have a learning plan and 'qualifications' will become incidental markers along the way for those who need them.

Guidance

- **The points above cannot be summarised in a simple way. It is suggested that staff in HEI's review them and utilise the concepts as appropriate in promoting and implementing PDP in their institutions.**

REFERENCES

- 1) **Edwards, G.** *Employer Input to Support the Further Development of Progress Files* Project Report to QAA (August 2000) [also at www.qaa.ac.uk]
- 2) **Whiddett, S. and Hollyforde, S.** *The Competency Handbook* Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2000) ISBN 0 85292 7355
- 3) **Woodruffe, C.** *Development and Assessment Centres* Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2000) ISBN 0852928521
- 4) **Ballantyne, I. And Povah, N.** *Assessment and Development Centres* Gower Publishing Ltd. (1995) ISBN 0566074842
- 5) **University for Industry (UFI)** www.ufild.co.uk (Accessed 11/6/00)

APPENDIX 1 – GRADUATE EMPLOYERS AND PROFESSIONAL/STATUTORY BODIES

GRADUATE EMPLOYERS	PROFESSIONAL/STATUTORY BODIES
Thames Water Standard Life Shell International Railtrack BP Amoco Reuters BT Marks and Spencer Lloyds TSB Civil Service Faststream ICL Sainsburys BBC Met. Office DFEE P/W Cooper KPMG PA Consulting	IP CPD Forum (Representing many PSB's) Institution of Mechanical Engineers The Law Society The Bar Council Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development General Dental Council Council for Professions Supplementary to Medicine

APPENDIX 2 – INDICATORS OF SOME KEY COMPETENCIES

Competence	Unemployable (No evidence of meeting competencies) 1	Employable (Competencies met at some level) 3	Highly Employable (All competencies met at highest level) 5
Flexibility/Adaptability	Closed to alternatives. Likes to do one job at a time.		Open minded. Change oriented. Able to change roles quickly and successfully
Self Motivation/Drive	Acts reactively. Doesn't fight own corner. Evidence of giving up in face of adversity.		Self motivated. Evidence of seeking responsibility and succeeding. Makes and defends own case.
Communication	Unclear, unstructured sentences. Doesn't make points convincingly. Difficult to hear. No eye contact. Defensive manner.		Clear, succinct sentences given in a persuasive and confident manner. Good use of eye contact. Open body language and enthusiastic manner.
Analytical Ability	Takes face value. Doesn't pick up on logical steps or question premises.		Critically evaluates information given. Identifies and evaluates alternatives. Makes sensible assumptions, where appropriate.
Decision Making	Rushes into decisions without evaluating options. Alternatively, avoids making decisions, passing responsibility to others.		Evaluates before making a decision. Consults and listens to others. Takes responsibility. Prioritises actions.
Teamworking	Prefers working alone. Doesn't support those around them. Makes only negative comments. Poor at making/influencing group decision.		Evidence of taking different roles in a team, including leader. Supports others. Makes positive contributions throughout.