



CONTINUAL PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IS VITAL FOR SUCCESS

by Leigh Wallinger

Most people quit their formal learning when they finish full-time education. They learn at school to pass GCSE exams; they learn at college to pass A-level exams; they learn at university for their degrees. After that, their books are put away and structured learning, more often than not, stops. They get a job and start their career.

Although there is much for the average university graduate to learn about the world of business, this learning is often unstructured and pretty informal on-the-job training rather than a formal, structured training programme. So their formal learning activities come to a halt as they graduate.

The brain is like a muscle

The brain is like any other muscle in your body. It doesn't work very efficiently after a period of little or no exercise. Like every other muscle in your body, your brain needs the right food and plenty of regular exercise to operate efficiently. After a long lay-off, you should exercise your brain gently at first and gradually increase the intensity.

Ideally, during their full-time education, students should be taught about how the brain works and the value of continuing with their learning – even after their full-time education stops. Indeed, it is suggested by some experts in this field that you should invest between 3% - 5% of your annual income on your own personal development each year.

If you study successful people, you will find that they spend a lot of their time on activities like creative thinking. Often captured in the saying 'working ON their business, not IN their business', successful people know the value of using their brains. Many exercise their brains through a process called mindstorming.

Mindstorming for creative solutions

Mindstorming can be performed anywhere, anytime and all that is required is some paper, a pen and your brain. The process of mindstorming generates a large number of possible solutions to a specific problem. If it's a new concept to you, this is how it works:

Firstly, at the top of the page, you write down the problem for which you want to identify solutions. It is important to write down the problem as clearly and as succinctly as possible. For example, "what steps can I take to reduce operating costs in my business by 20% before 31st December?".

Next, write down as many solutions as you can think of to this problem. Write down a minimum of 20 answers, more is better in this situation. Capture ideas as they come into your mind without any judgement as to their suitability. This is because new ideas spawn out of the ideas you write down. It doesn't follow that any new ideas which spawn from a "wacky idea" will themselves be "wacky".

Thirdly, when you have the answers listed on your sheet of paper, you can then begin to rate each of the ideas. The basis of your rating might be speed of implementation / cost of implementation or ease of implementation / impact and effectiveness of the solution. How you order them is up to you.

Finally, pick the highest ranking answer(s) and take action on the selected one(s).



In addition to using the brain muscles regularly, successful people also know where their careers and lives are heading. They set goals and use creative thinking to find ways to reach them. They are also avid readers – (auto)biographies, motivational books, industry texts and management books. For those people who travel extensively, audio books and motivational CDs are excellent “food for the brain”.

Just 1 hour a day

How much time should you devote to reading & personal development activities?
One good rule-of-thumb to use is the “4% rule”.

Take 4% of your income and reinvest it in yourself, in your own personal development. Buy traditional books, ebooks and CDs. Attend seminars and conferences to network with others in your industry and keep yourself up to date with the latest developments.

Spend 4% of your time, about 1 hour a day, on personal development activities. Over the next year, if you adopted this suggestion, you would undertake 365 hours of personal development activities. Based on a 7½ hour day, this equates to 48 extra days of learning.

Imagine how quickly you will progress in your industry if you invest in 365 hours of personal development over the next 12 months. In no time, you will be in the top 10% of people in your industry.

Given we all lead ever more hectic lifestyles in the 21st Century, where do we find an extra hour a day for personal development? This is a valid question and it doesn't have an easy answer. Firstly, you have to analyse how you spend your time in an average week. There will be some tasks that could be described as “low value”, such as watching television. If you are a commuter, then travel time is often low value.

With some thought, you will be able to identify an hour a day from your schedule which can be diverted from low value activities towards personal development. If it impossible to find 60 minutes, then look for 30 minutes. Take 20 minutes from your lunch hour and 10 minutes instead of a coffee break – 30 minutes is usually easy to find if you are determined to develop yourself.

To make this up to 1 hour, simply get up 15 minutes earlier than usual and go to bed 15 minutes later. Make this hour of time really work for you by undertaking personal development activities based on a pre-determined plan.

Build your own library

Begin to build up a library of books and CDs, to which you can constantly refer. After you finish each book, it is good idea to write down a summary of it in a notepad. This helps you to remember the main messages contained in the book. Also, identify 3 or 4 ideas from each book and introduce them into your life. Within a few months your outlook will be completely different.

Why do successful people invest time and money in themselves?

The main reason is because to be successful you have to. Continual learning puts them ahead of their peers. It extends their knowledge, which in turn helps them to grow. They will take a structured approach to becoming more and more knowledgeable about their role, their industry, their competitors and their potential customers.

In 21st Century life, nothing ever stands still. You are either progressing or you are falling behind. Develop a plan of action for your own personal development – it is far too important to leave to chance. Don't procrastinate simply because you can't see how to find 1 hour a day. Finding time is possible if you really want to find it. Make personal development one of your high priority activities. The real challenge is making full use of that time with effective personal development.



Persist

Everyone has 168 hours each week, of which a number are used for essential tasks such as sleeping, eating and working. The remaining time, which we could call discretionary time, is available for you to allocate as you wish. Make personal development a high enough priority so that you find the time. Work it into your schedule every day until it becomes a natural habit. It is thought that new habits take about 30 days to form as your brain tends to fight a change of behaviour. So, expect your subconscious to put obstacles in your way and be determined to see the process of forming this new habit through to the end.

Without regular exercise, the brain gets out of condition and is unable to function at full capacity when it is needed. Regular creative thinking and mindstorming will get your brain into better condition, which not only helps you to lead a more rewarding life, it also helps you to remain mentally healthy.

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