

# MANAGING YOUR OWN LEARNING

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An Excerpt From

***Managing Your Own Learning***

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## INTRODUCTION

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### *The Age of Perpetual Learning*

FOR MANY OF US, living as we do in this fast-paced high-tech era, life is like trying to change a tire on a car while the car is still moving. It is a bizarre image, like something from a recurring dream—you can't possibly do what is expected, but you know your life depends on it. This is no dream. This is twenty-first-century reality. The only constant is change. Our only hope is perpetual learning.

Everyone today is either trying to get ahead, catch up, or keep from falling behind. Many people are trying to learn something just to survive—but learning is not fundamentally about survival, even though it often helps us to get through tough situations. Learning is the key to flourishing and prospering in this new era. Learning awakens our sensibilities, enables us to actualize our aspirations, and takes us places we never dreamed of going.

*This book is for people who would like to improve the way they manage their learning. The key to doing that is learning more about learning so that you can get the most out of any learning you undertake. The goal is to become proficient at the process of learning itself.*

*Managing Your Own Learning* is a book for a broad audience of learners:

- *Workforce learners* who have opportunities to participate in training and development programs in business, government, or not-for-profit organizations
- *Formal learners* enrolled in graduate or professional degree programs in colleges and universities or in continuing education programs
- *Part-time learners* in certificate or occupational programs in community colleges, proprietary trade schools, or the armed services
- *Independent learners* who are moving ahead on their own to learn what they want or need to know
- *Emerging learners* who may not even think of themselves as learners at this moment, but who have tremendous potential for learning
- *Awakening learners* who thought they had learned all they needed to know until they got that middle-of-the-night wake-up call
- *Recovering learners* who are trying to get beyond their previous bad experiences with learning so they can prosper in the new era

## A NEW ERA

### *Not Just a New Millennium*

The year 2000! We knew Y2K was coming. We read about it, heard about it, and got sick of hearing about it. Then it came. Is anything different? A lot of things are different, but they started being different long before the year 2000.

The cultural artifacts of a new era are now familiar and everywhere present: computers, lasers, robots, scanners, jet planes, bullet trains, color xerography, digital cameras, the Net, the Web. We

are surrounded by high-order-of-magnitude change. Technological innovation drives much of the change, but we also experience other kinds of change: new organizational structures and management techniques, new means of production and service delivery, and a new global economy and communications network.

Call it what you will—the Information Age, the learning society, the cybernated world—this new era puts us all in a new situation with regard to our learning. It is the new era that is significant, not the new century or the new millennium. Time is arbitrary; events are real. The year 2000 on the Muslim calendar was 1420 A.H. On the traditional Chinese calendar it was 4690. What is different? Not the date, but the times and what the times demand of us—continuous learning.

The world we grew up in no longer exists. Everything is changing. Rapid change is a fact of life for people all over the world, in developed as well as developing nations. The entire globe has plunged into a new era of accelerated change with enormous consequences for learning. Older people in the workforce certainly feel this, but so do recent graduates. Whatever level of education they have just completed, they soon see that they were not exposed to learning they really need and learned many things that are already obsolete. Today, learning has a short shelf life.

Most of us today are under great pressure to learn new things. That pressure comes partly from the organizations where we work, but the broader source is the society in which we live. Furthermore, the new era demands of us real learning—not just going through the motions, seat time in a workshop, a diploma in hand or a certificate that says we were there. Credentials are still important, but what really counts is the learning behind and beyond the credentials. The bottom line is performance, and high-quality performance depends on perpetual learning.

## PREDICTIONS THAT CAME TRUE

### *Looking Back on the Futurists*

When was this new era born? Scholars began thinking about the new era long before it arrived. They read the signs of the times and began to predict a radically new future. Some people laughed at these predictions and made fun of the predictors, who came to be called *futurists*. In general, the predictions of the futurists have come true; if they were wrong, perhaps it was in underestimating both the rate and the scope of the changes.

According to an article in *Fortune Magazine*,<sup>1</sup> the world passed from the Industrial Age to the Information Age in 1991, the year that corporate spending on information technology surpassed corporate investment in manufacturing technologies (Stewart and Furth, 1994).<sup>2</sup> One of the leading futurists, Alvin Toffler, gives the new era a much earlier date: 1955, the beginning of a decade “that saw white-collar service workers outnumber blue-collar workers for the first time” (1980, 20).<sup>3</sup> Toffler was able to see that this new era was going to be upsetting. In an earlier work he called it *future shock*, “a time phenomenon, a product of the greatly accelerated rate of change in society” (1970, 13).<sup>4</sup> He compared it to the culture shock one experiences in traveling to another country, but with one important difference: you can’t return home. It is not just change that causes future shock but the rate of change, what Toffler calls “the accelerative thrust” of change (1970, 20–34).<sup>5</sup>

The future described by the futurists (Toffler, 1972)<sup>6</sup> is not coming; it has arrived with full force. It doesn’t matter when it began or what we call it; what we know for certain is that the new era is here. However much we may want to turn the clock back to another era, or slow the rate of change, we can’t. Besides, there are many things most people like about the new era. We have no choice but to adapt. This is the Age of Perpetual Learning.



*The chief characteristic of the Age of Perpetual Learning is rapid change. The real meaning of the year 2000 is that no one can survive without learning. Learning is driven both by necessity and passion. The key is to learn how to manage your own learning so that you can not only survive but thrive.*

## LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING

### *Using This Book*

Although researchers know a great amount about learning processes after a fruitful century of investigation, most people remain relatively in the dark about how learning takes place. This is not the result of a conspiracy on the part of those who have provided our formal schooling; it is, rather, a matter of neglect. Few teachers or trainers believe their role includes sitting down with us to discuss the learning processes we are experiencing—even if they themselves had words to describe these processes, which they may not. Ironically, even after years of formal learning few people have a clear idea of what learning is or the many ways learning takes place.

*Learning about learning* is the organizing theme of this book. If you are able to learn the basics about learning, you should be able to maximize your learning in almost any setting. The structure of the book is simple and straightforward. In Part One you will learn how to assess your previous learning and build an action plan for further learning. You will also learn how to understand yourself as a learner and reframe your concept of learning. In Part Two you will find seven ways of learning presented, each in a separate chapter. At the end of each of those chapters you will find “Lessons Learned: Ten Things You Can Do to Maximize Your Learning.” In Part Three you will find suggestions for how to use the seven ways of learning most effectively, how to use information sources such as bookstores,

publishers, libraries, and the Internet, and how to find resources for continuing your learning.

Throughout this book there is an emphasis on taking responsibility for your learning, and maximizing your learning, in different settings. We call this overall process *managing your own learning*. Why did we pick the word *managing*? Definitions of management found in the classic textbooks include four inter-related functions: planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling. These four functions parallel what effective learners do.

- *Effective learners plan for learning.* They don't wait for learning opportunities to appear. They analyze carefully their needs for learning and aggressively seek out experiences that will meet those needs.
- *Effective learners organize their participation in learning.* They know how learning takes place and they think carefully about how they can best participate in order to maximize their own learning.
- *Effective learners motivate themselves to learn.* They understand themselves as learners and they know what they need to do to sustain their involvement long enough and strong enough to produce results.
- *Effective learners control their learning.* They seek feedback on how well they have learned. They know how to use information resources and how to find additional opportunities for learning.

In the factory model of mass education, the teacher was the manager. Although teachers and trainers still play important roles in *facilitating* learning, the ultimate responsibility for *managing* learning in this new era rests directly on the shoulders of the learner.

Most readers today skip around as they read. Recognizing this, we would like to provide some suggestions. If you already have a plan for learning and a good understanding of yourself as a

learner, you may wish to plunge directly into the seven ways of learning in Part Two. These chapters can be read in any order, but we hope you will read enough of them to become knowledgeable about several ways of learning and to recognize that there are indeed different ways to learn. If you need help in locating resources for further learning after reading Chapter 1, you may want to turn directly to Chapter 13; you can read about using information resources, Chapter 12, at any time, and so forth. Although the arrangement of the chapters is intended to be logical, you can random access each chapter or special topic as you would with software, by using those old-fashioned search mechanisms called the Index and Table of Contents.

Most works of fiction have a central character. In this book *you* are the main character. We have provided headings, bulleted lists, and sections in italic to help you find important points. We want you to be an active learner as you read, and we encourage you to interact with the subject matter, look for main ideas, underline key points, and jot down reactions. Note especially the sections marked *Time Out*.

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## Time Out

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Time Outs appear in each chapter to encourage you to think about what you are reading and connect it to your personal experience. Sometimes the Time Out provides a task for you to complete. We employ Time Outs to place you in an imagined situation, to underscore an important point, or to provide an example. Use them to give yourself time out to think about yourself and your learning.

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This book has been written as a companion to our earlier work, *Effective Training Strategies: A Comprehensive Guide to Maximizing Learning in Organizations* (Davis and Davis, 1998).<sup>7</sup>

That book was developed for trainers, teachers, consultants, and others who facilitate learning in organizational settings. If you are a learning facilitator, or if you want examples from organizations and more technical detail on each of the seven ways of learning presented in this book, you should read *Effective Training Strategies: A Comprehensive Guide to Maximizing Learning in Organizations*. It is available in bookstores or through Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

*Managing Your Own Learning* provides you with a language you can use to describe your own efforts at learning and to discuss your learning experiences with others: students, colleagues, significant others, and those who serve as your teachers and facilitators. We believe there is an urgent need for dialogue about learning in this new era so that learning can be more focused and efficient and less happenstance and superficial. We invite you to help initiate and sustain this dialogue by sharing with others what you have learned from this book. If you wish to communicate with other readers around the world you can do so through the Consortium for Business Literacy, a group of publishers with whom Berrett-Koehler cooperates to facilitate dialogue among readers. You can also get from Berrett-Koehler a guide to use for group discussions about this book. See [www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com) or call (415) 288-0260. You can reach the authors through the publisher or at the University of Denver.

## PART ONE

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### *Preparation for Learning*

# 1

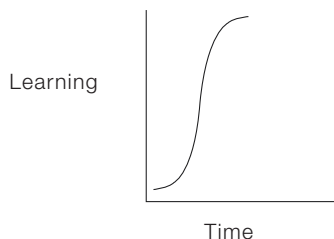
## TAKING CHARGE

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### *Developing a Plan for Learning*

**Y**OUTH IS WASTED ON THE YOUNG, so it is said, and maybe education is, too. For most of us, at the stage in our lives when we had the most time for learning we also had the least appreciation for its benefits. Going to high school or college cultivates the mindset of blocks of years and plenty of time for learning. As people enter the workforce, develop personal relationships, and accumulate responsibilities, the need and desire for learning multiplies but the time available diminishes. We begin to sense that without a plan, we will never be able to learn all we want to learn.

When people take on a new job or project, or begin advanced studies, they often say, “There is going to be a steep learning curve.” They are referring to a simple graph that plots the relationship of learning and time:



Many people today are in situations that require significant amounts of new learning in a short period of time. Learning becomes a struggle: too much to learn and not enough time to learn it!

*There are two good ways to meet the challenge of a steep learning curve. First, decide what to learn and make a plan for learning it. Second, when you get involved in some form of learning, make sure that you know how to learn so that you can get the most out of the learning experience. In this chapter you will learn how to develop a personal plan for learning. Managing your own learning begins with planning for learning.*

## Time Out

Reflect for a moment on your present situation. Can you identify learning you should undertake? Are you contemplating or are you already in the midst of new learning? Are you learning what you want to learn? How much time do you have for learning? Is there a pet project you continue to postpone? Would it help to have a plan?

## THE BASELINE

### *Understanding Your Previous Learning*

The place to begin in developing your plan for learning is with an honest analysis of your previous learning. Start with your formal education. Reflect on where you studied, the quality of the experience, the effort you put forth, and what you learned.

A useful way to analyze your formal education is to think about it in terms of proficiencies, conversancies, and specialties (Weingartner, 1992).<sup>1</sup> *Proficiencies* include such skills as reading,

writing, speaking, and listening; interpersonal, group, or cross-cultural communication skills; critical thinking skills; quantitative skills in math, statistics, or computer science; foreign language skills; mechanical skills, or performance skills. These are the basic building blocks of further learning—the competencies you have now. They are things you can do.

*Conversancies* are the fields where you have a familiarity with basic information and ways of thinking. Think of them as areas where you can carry on an informed conversation within a general field or subject area. Knowing the main historical developments, major figures, key terminology, and central ideas in a field enables you to talk with others about that field and learn more within it. These fields include the basic subject areas we encounter in schools and colleges—humanities, social sciences, and sciences—but also professional and occupational conversancies: business, legal, medical, social service, educational, international, mechanical, agricultural, military, and technical. These are areas with which you have varying degrees of acquaintance.

In addition, you probably developed some *special expertise* in one or more academic, occupational, or professional areas where you studied in depth. In those areas you have developed more than a conversancy; you have gained the ability to find and understand information in that field, perform specialized tasks, or apply concepts from that field to practical situations. This special expertise might have been developed through an occupational specialization, college major, or through further study in graduate or professional school. These are areas where you have in-depth knowledge or well-developed, specialized abilities.

Your formal education is only part of the picture. Some people actually obtained very little from their formal education. They might have learned more through their *informal* education, through those things they learned on their own. Some people like to read, others travel, still others spend hours at the com-



puter. Employees often have excellent opportunities for informal learning in organizational settings, as do volunteers. Many people have accumulated significant amounts of informal learning in areas unrelated to their jobs. Your previous learning consists of a blend of formal and informal learning.

## PRIDE AND REGRETS

### *Assessing Strengths and Weaknesses*

The important questions to ask as you try to establish your baseline are: What did you learn through formal schooling and on your own? What are your operational proficiencies, conversancies, and specialties? You can look at these as the strengths and weaknesses of your educational background, but a less threatening way to undertake this rigorous self-examination is to ask: What aspects of my formal and informal education do I take pride in, and what do I regret? In this way you have room to move ahead without blaming yourself or others. You can build on those aspects of your learning you take pride in, and remedy those areas about which you have regret. You are ready now to build a composite profile of your previous learning, a snapshot of yourself at this moment in time.

### *Time Out*

Using the Planning Guide on the following page, fill in the first column with notes about your previous learning. Leave the other two columns blank for now. Think about your formal and informal learning, your proficiencies, conversancies, and specialties. Note areas where you take pride or have regrets.

PLANNING GUIDE

Previous Learning	Gaps	Desired Learning
Proficiencies:		Performance:
Conversancies:		Capacity:
Specialties:		Interests:
		Related Learning:

Action Plan:

## PROJECTING LEARNING NEEDS

### *Knowing What You Need and Want to Know*

Knowing where you are now is a starting point, but you also need to know where you want to go. What learning will be necessary for you to survive now and maintain yourself in the future? What will the job demand? These are questions about *performance*. Many training programs in organizations focus on performance improvement, the skills needed to do a specific job more effectively and efficiently. Improving performance is important, but you also need to think about the development of your *capacity*. What do you want to be able to do in three, five, or ten years? What will your job be like then, or what new job would you like to hold? What learning will be necessary for you to get there? Developing capacity is important, but you also need to examine your *interests*. What do you like to learn? Is there something you have been wanting to learn for a long time now, but for one reason or another haven't done it? Is there something you have a passion about learning? Do you have some dreams deferred?

The answers to your questions about performance, capacity, and interests need to be very specific. What exactly do you need to learn or want to learn?

To discover what kind of learning you will need for improving performance in your present job, consider the following guidelines.

- *Analyze the job.* Step back from the job and analyze what is involved in performing the job well. Develop hunches about what learning will be needed for the future. Think about what you need to know in order to be more effective in this job.
- *Talk about the job.* Discuss with supervisors, or others who hold this job, what directions it is likely to take and what new learning will be required. Identify what you can do to add value to the organization through this job.
- *Change the job.* Think about how to transform the job into a different job and decide what you need to learn to do that.

To improve your *capacity* for undertaking a new job, consider these guidelines:

- *Read about the job.* Most fields have trade magazines, newsletters, reports, and journals. What are the trends and new developments? What forecasts are being made about supply and demand? What will you need as a credential and what will you need to know?
- *Build networks.* Interview people who do this job or who are prospective employers. Find out what others believe you would need to learn to qualify for this job and perform it well.
- *Project the job into the future.* Imagine yourself or someone else doing this job in five years. What will they be doing and how will they be doing it? Think beyond what the job calls for now.

To identify your *interests*, consider these guidelines:

- *Note career paths you almost took but rejected.* What drew you to this learning in the first place, and what eventually turned you away from it? Do you have lingering interests in these areas?
- *Examine leisure-time interests.* Do you have hobbies or activities you enjoy more than anything else? What do you like to read or watch? Are these areas where you would like to learn more?
- *Recall favorite learning experiences.* What was your favorite subject, course, or workshop? What learning have you engaged in that was so much fun it hardly seemed like learning?

*Generate information that will help you decide what you need to learn to be able to improve performance, develop capacity, or build on your interests. The goal is knowing what you need and want to know.*

Your plan for learning also should include another important element: *related learning*, or learning beyond your field. It is important in an organizational context to identify the learning beyond your field that could have impact on your performance or capacity within your field. There are several reasons for branching out:

- *You need to communicate laterally, vertically, and outside the organization with other people.* Knowing enough to be conversant with the people with whom you work is important for good communication.
- *You need to be an effective team member.* You need to understand enough about the fields of other team members to work with them in a way that capitalizes on everyone's knowledge and skill.
- *You can gain new perspectives.* By acquiring knowledge and skills from outside your field, you can view your own field in a new way and gain insights about how to be more effective.
- *You can become more creative.* Today, most breakthroughs and new insights are interdisciplinary; that is, they come about by synthesizing information from two or more fields, or by using methods from one field to study phenomena in another field.
- *You can develop as a person.* Some learning is needed just for renewal, so that you can be a happier, more enthusiastic, and more interesting person.

*Include in your plan for learning the related learning you will need outside your field so that you can communicate better, broaden your perspective, and be more creative and effective.*

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## Time Out

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Using the Planning Guide, provided on page 15, fill in the third column with notes about desired learning. Think about the learning you need for improved performance and expanded capacity, the learning that builds on your interests, and related learning that will broaden your outlook.

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## GAP ANALYSIS

### *Comparing Current Learning and Desired Learning*

The next step in the personal planning process is to compare your findings about your current learning with your desired learning. No doubt there will be some gap, big or small, that needs to be closed by learning. Some of the previous learning you identified as matters of pride may put you in a good position for learning what you need to learn next. Some matters of regret may not be important at all in terms of what you need to know, but some regrets may be exactly the point of focus for closing the gap.

Be specific about the kind of learning that needs to take place to fill the gap. The learning may include knowledge or subject-matter information, but consider also such things as skills, including interpersonal skills, or the reworking of feelings and attitudes. As we will describe in Chapter 3, learning goes well beyond accumulating information. As you think about the gap, contemplate the many different kinds of learning that might fill it.

It will be tempting, as you think about the gap, to want to plug it with a program such as an MBA (Master's in Business Administration), a law degree, or a specific training program. You may eventually select more formal study as one means of filling the gap, but unless you have done a thorough gap analysis you won't know which program best meets your needs. Similarly, if you are already enrolled in further formal study, you should consider which aspects of the gap will be filled best by your current study and which will require other means of learning. A thorough gap analysis will help you analyze what specific learning is desired and what blend of formal and informal learning is most appropriate.

## Time Out

Return to the Planning Guide on page 15 and make notes in the middle column to describe the gaps in your learning. Focus on specific learning outcomes described as new or enhanced proficiencies, conversancies, or specialties. Describe the learning needed, not the way of getting it.

## GETTING WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

### *Developing an Action Plan*

Now that you have a better idea about *what* you want to learn, begin to think about *how* you want to learn it. Be specific. What formal and informal learning opportunities will you seek? Where will you inquire about options? Who will you ask about opportunities? (See Chapter 13 for suggestions about finding opportunities for further learning.) If you are already enrolled in a formal training, certificate, or degree program, what choices can you make within that program—courses, projects, assignments—that will help you most to fill in the gaps in your learning? What steps must you take to carry out your plan?

## Time Out

Return to the Planning Guide on page 15. At the bottom of the page, jot down notes about specific actions you will need to take to fill the gaps in your learning. Develop and prioritize the steps. What is the first step? What commitments of time and resources will you need to make?

*Your personal plan for learning will grow out of your understanding of your formal and informal education, your areas of pride and regret about previous learning, your analysis of your learning needs in an actual or potential employment situation, your assessment of your interests and passions, and your needs for learning outside your field. The key to your plan is an honest and realistic gap analysis—a sincere reflection on the discrepancies between your current learning and what you need or want to learn. A personal plan for learning provides the mechanism for focusing on specific goals. By pursuing your plan diligently you can prepare yourself for greater success in this new era. Managing your own learning begins with careful planning.*



this material has been excerpted from

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