



DIY development

You know how to manage your accounts, territory and pipeline. But how are you managing your own learning and development? Sales coach and *Infomatics* columnist Anna Britnor Guest gives some hands-on advice

As a sales coach, I am beginning to see a change in attitude towards staff development. Not an overnight revolution, but a gradual shift influenced by a number of diverse forces.

The pace of business life today, combined with flatter management structures and

greater employee empowerment, has resulted in a more frenetic and reactive working environment. At the same time, employers generally acknowledge that while salespeople rarely stay in one job for more than a few years, this hardly rules out two-way loyalty during that time.

In such a climate, most employers are willing to invest money in training as a means of ensuring they achieve maximum productivity from their people. As Mike Maynard, channel partner sales director for Ikon Technology Services, explains: "I'm firmly committed to looking after my people. If I can show them a career path, give them a structure and provide them with the opportunities to develop, then they themselves can progress towards the goal. There's a mutual commitment – if they are developing their skills and their career, they

will be more motivated and, in turn, will develop the business.”

Many managers share this sentiment but respond that the major hurdle to developing their team is not money, but time.

As a result, they are more likely to support staff who can identify their own training requirements, set personal objectives, and manage their own learning. Smart salespeople also recognise that taking control of their own development helps to significantly enhance their career progression opportunities.

This approach is not, however, an opportunity for companies to abdicate responsibility. As Pauline Willis of the Coaching & Mentoring Network explains: “To manage one’s own learning within an organisation requires a higher degree of independence and maturity than relying on a manager to deliver. It also requires a creative approach towards training options. The company has a responsibility to ensure that employees develop these competencies and are made aware of potential development opportunities.”

Willis argues that, in order for individuals to manage their own development successfully, there must be real buy-in at every level on the employer’s side. “Transitioning from traditional to self-managed learning takes commitment from the organisation in terms of skills, culture, time and support systems such as might be accessed through an intranet.”

Sean McGovern, VP of strategy at internet portal specialist Mediapps, agrees that the intranet offers a basis for supporting this self-managed learning culture. “HR managers increasingly want to delegate certain training needs to a self-service platform on the intranet. Enterprise-based learning portals are an excellent way of reaping the benefits and creating ‘homogenous’ groups of learners across the organisation.”

As Willis notes, developing such an infrastructure “allows development needs to be addressed in real time, through a much more dynamic network of supportive colleagues, tools and information services, leading to increased effectiveness, motivation and improved working environment”.

Clearly, these various factors present an opportunity for forward-thinking companies and salespeople to integrate ongoing professional and personal development into the heart of the working culture even within the busiest sales environment.

CREATING YOUR OWN DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Self-managed learning takes discipline. But with a few tools and techniques the process becomes easier.

Taking a ‘self-coaching’ approach means asking yourself open, sometimes tough, questions and being truly honest about your responses.

Start by creating your own documented personal development plan. This should take into account the following.

GOALS

If you have clear goals, write them down. If not, consider

- * Where do I want to be in three, six, 12 months?
- * Where do I want to be in five years?
- * What aspects of my life do I want to be the same?
- * What do I want to be different?

It is important to view your life holistically, rather than rigidly separating work and home life. Remind yourself that through the life of this plan, your goals may subtly shift or radically change.

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

We all have values, ethics and principles which underpin our actions and decisions.

- * What are yours?
- * How do they compare with those of your organisation?
- * How well does your role reflect and support your values?

The voice of experience

“In a young, fast-moving IT company, everyone is too busy and has to be a self-starter. You have to work on your own, using your initiative with few places to turn for help. This is not an ideal situation in which to develop staff.

We have introduced a coaching & mentoring program to help develop our sales and marketing staff and to give them somewhere to turn when the going gets tough. The mentor works with the individual staff members, providing an objective view of their activities, and works with them to develop both as individuals and company employees. They find it invaluable for working through ‘live’ situations to find the winning approach. Without it, a significant amount of extra time would be needed to manage and develop our employees, reducing the effectiveness of the company as a whole.

Ian Wells, MD, Mediapps



MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDE TO CHANGE

Wanting things to be different is only a small part of being open to change.

- * What evidence is there that you are committed to stepping outside your comfort zone in order to move forward?
- * How open are you to gaining greater personal insight?
- * What will make you persevere when the going gets tough?
- * Who can help by supporting you?

SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

For a sales or sales management role we might define the following as core competencies:

- Relationship building and communication
- Sales process skills
- Self-organisation
- Technical knowledge
- Business/market knowledge
- People management


For each of these areas consider

- How do I feel about this aspect of the role?
- What skills do I need?
- Which am I good at?
- Which do I need to develop?
- What difference will it make if I develop this skill?
- What will I do to make this change and who can help me?
- How will I measure my progress?
- When will I achieve this by?

Work through each area in detail, considering both your current role and next career step. Imagine or observe yourself in specific situations, for instance presenting to your top prospect's board of directors.

Examine every minute detail. Be ruthlessly honest about what your strengths and weaknesses are.

Having defined your development needs in this way, work out the best way of acquiring the relevant skills or knowledge. The self-coaching approach to managing your development allows you to integrate this development into your everyday life.

You may choose to learn informally by reading books, joining on-line discussion forums or sharing experiences with colleagues over a pint. No matter: you have committed to taking action in the real day-to-day working environment, and this is where you can expect to gain true and lasting change. 

Anna Britnor Guest is a co-founder and director of Lauriate Coaching Ltd which specialises in designing and delivering coaching and mentoring programmes within the IT sector. Anna works predominantly with salespeople, drawing on her own successful IT sales career. She is also a co-founder and director of The Coaching & Mentoring Network, the UK's leading web-based source of free and independent information on coaching and mentoring. <http://www.coachingnetwork.org.uk>

Anna writes regularly on sales, coaching and mentoring for the business press, is the Infomatics 'Sales Coach', and a Fellow of the Institute of Sales and Marketing Management (FIInstSMM).

Where to acquire new skills

- Training courses
- Finding a mentor
- Books, journals
- Internet / intranet
- E-learning solutions
- Colleagues, peers and managers
- 1-2-1 coaching from manager or an 'expert'
- Observing others
- Networking organisations
- Professional institutes/ associations
- On-line discussion forums