

Low- & No-Cost Professional Development Ideas



In an effort to balance budgets and eliminate non-essential expenses, organizations and employees alike often limit funds available for professional development. But lack of money is not an insurmountable obstacle, as there are many affordable and free ways to develop professional skills.

With a little creativity and an open mind, you will find that opportunities to increase your professional knowledge, build skills, and hone talents are all around you. So keep your wallet intact with the following professional development ideas:

WRITTEN MATERIAL

This is the “information age,” with written material available to you in many forms.

- One of the easiest ways to access information is on the Internet. Type a specific development interest in your favorite search engine and see what Web resources are generated.
- If the amount of information provided by a Web search is overwhelming, you may prefer using a library. Libraries remain wonderful resources for free access to books, magazines, journals, and newspapers. Whether visiting your public library or the local university library, browse the *Career Development* section for literature on a variety of professional topics, or seek personal assistance from library staff.
- Speaking of libraries ... find out if your employer has an internal library. Some companies maintain an inventory of industry-specific and general career development books that employees may borrow. Books are often sent via interoffice mail, at no cost. Another idea is to tap into your manager’s professional library. Ask to borrow a book or ask him/her for reading recommendations. (Not only will the material help you, but your manager will be impressed by your interest and initiative!)
- Finally, consider starting a professional book club. Join with other employees who wish to read and discuss books on various professional development topics. Discussion can address the principle that is presented and ways to apply the principle to daily work practices. Additionally, a book club can offer leadership opportunities by having employees take turns organizing meetings and facilitating discussions. (Consider modifying the format to an “article club” if employees do not have time to read books on a regular basis; have difficulty finding multiple copies of books at the local library; or do not want the expense of purchasing books.)



TIP: Partner with a colleague to split the subscription cost of an industry publication. That way, you both can stay apprised of industry information and trends – but at half the cost!

COURSES

Financing an advanced degree may not be a realistic option for you right now, and a formal academic track may not even be the best way to meet current development needs. Fortunately, learning opportunities come in many shapes and sizes.

- Again, you can start with the Internet. There are many free courses available online. They can be accessed at a time that is most convenient to you and may be completed at your own pace. A simple Web search can help you identify your options. (Did you know that Microsoft has free training resources for most of its applications? Learn new tricks with software you are currently using or develop proficiency with new programs. See: <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/training/>)
- Next, head back to the library. Many libraries offer training videos, CDs, and DVDs on a variety of topics.
- Does your organization have its own Professional Development/Learning & Development department? If so, research their classroom and online course offerings.
- Does your organization offer a tuition reimbursement program? Are external grants available? If so, explore the details to see if you can take advantage of these opportunities.
- Research educational opportunities available in your community, such as adult learning classes offered by municipalities, community colleges, and universities. Explore free or low-cost classes and workshops offered by community agencies, chambers of commerce, etc.
- Contact your alma mater to see if classes offered by their Career Development Office are open to alumni and/or if the institution offers the ability for alumni to audit classes. (Auditing a class allows an individual to gain classroom instruction without receiving academic credit.)



TIPS: Negotiate attendance at a professional conference with your employer. (They may be willing to pay the seminar registration fees if you pay the transportation and lodging fees.) If you were unable to attend a class or conference but know someone who did, ask to review his/her materials or meet to discuss the information offered.

PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATIONS

A professional certification helps build skills and knowledge that are currently used for a vocation. They often have a high level of industry recognition that may help you stand out among your peers.

- A professional certification is a designation earned by a person that represents qualification to perform a particular job, role, or task. It indicates knowledge of professional standards and best practices.
- Most certifications are offered by a professional society or educational institution. Since they are more targeted than traditional educational degrees, they are often able to be acquired in a shorter amount of time and at less expense.
- Once an individual is certified, he/she may need to complete continuing education. (That is just an added benefit for your ongoing development!)

TIP: Ask a relative or friend to cover part of the certification cost as a birthday or holiday gift to you.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Membership with a professional association is a great way to increase your awareness of industry news, market trends, and resources.

- Membership costs and benefits vary. Many offer members free professional development seminars and free or reduced subscriptions to industry publications.
- Professional associations offer invaluable networking with others in the field, as well as leadership opportunities with the association itself.
- Research if memberships are transferable and, if so, consider splitting the cost with a colleague. (Just be aware of restrictions that may apply, such as attendance by one person per event and provision of only one subscription.)

TIP: Let your manager know the value that membership will provide to your role and ask for paid release time to attend meetings and/or events. (In exchange, be prepared to share information and/or provide regular updates to your manager and teammates.)

MENTORS

Having a mentor is a powerful and personalized way to develop yourself. (And it is free!)

- A professional mentor is a person who you can leverage as a resource for your own career path. A mentor will help facilitate your professional growth by sharing his/her knowledge and experiences, identifying opportunities and obstacles related to the career area, and providing encouragement as you chart your own course.
- You and your mentor can structure the relationship in a way that best meets expectations and availability.

TIP: View the *How to Find a Professional Mentor* article located in the featured article archive on www.optimaep.com.

JOB SHADOWING

Observing an individual performing a specific job offers a unique opportunity to gain practical knowledge of the job's responsibilities and demands, as well as a comfortable environment to ask questions and build skills.

- Job shadowing involves spending time with a seasoned expert, to observe what and how he/she performs a particular professional role.
- Job shadowing is often structured as a formal part of an employee's professional development plan, and is used by managers for succession planning or as part of a restructuring initiative. In this case, specific development and skill objectives are identified, dedicated time is scheduled for training, and progress is measured.
- However, you can also pursue a job shadowing experience on your own. To do this, start by identifying a particular skill or knowledge area that you would like to acquire. Next, identify an "expert" of that skill or knowledge and ask if he/she would be willing to help you with this area of development. Offer to work around his/her schedule and be sure not to let the partnership negatively impact your own work schedule.

TIP: Bring back the bartering system! Consider if there is any skill/knowledge that you possess that may be of interest to the other person and commit to mutual support.

VOLUNTEERING

Volunteer work can be a highly effective and rewarding way to build new skills and stretch existing talents.

- Communities are full of non-profit organizations, offering a variety of volunteer opportunities.
- Volunteer roles range from clerical work to customer service, technical support, project management, marketing/communications, event planning, manual labor, and more.
- Formal training is offered in many cases, and leadership roles are often available. Networking is a natural benefit as you interact with people from diverse backgrounds.
- Volunteering is a great opportunity to develop yourself while helping others.

TIP: “Volunteer” in the workplace. Step up for special projects and take initiative to solicit tasks from your manager that provide opportunities to develop new skills and exposure to different types of work. Volunteer for organization-wide initiatives, such as wellness committees and community service councils.

YOU!

Remember that any professional development effort begins with you!

- Set professional goals. Take time to reflect upon and define what you want from your professional life. Assume responsibility for your career and create an action plan to follow. Recognize that the more skills you build, the more opportunities you create for yourself!
- Move forward at your own pace, but keep moving forward. Instead of attempting to tackle a large development project when you are already overworked, create more realistic and attainable steps. For example, give yourself one task per quarter – 1Q: attend a networking event; 2Q: read a book on skill/knowledge area you wish to develop; 3Q: do a volunteer project; 4Q: conduct an informational interview with a person who is in a role similar to one you wish to assume one day.



Money does not need to be a barrier to your continued growth as a professional. Your world is rich in professional development opportunities ... and you do not have to be rich to take advantage of them!

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