

For many years construction has been described as an industry of brawn and determination. A reputation that stems from building custom products, with rudimentary equipment and limited technical support by an industry that resisted change, was slow to embrace technology and staked its reputation on a can-do attitude. New technology is upon us--driven more by the skilled labor shortage than a willingness to change. Innovative systems and processes have uncomplicated the production and organization of the work.

Construction is or will be a commodity and the production of commodities demand efficiency. Builders will either be numerous, well-educated and well trained small and mid-size construction companies as we have today, or fewer large regional and national organizations. The choice is for individual contractors and construction professionals to make.

Self-Directed Professional Development (Back to [Table of Contents](#))

For those who do not have access to company-sponsored education programs but wish to advance in the construction industry there is an option: Self-Administered Professional Development. Professional development includes personal development because your people skills are as important as your business, management and technical skills. The approach recommended is a multi-year activity which you can develop on your own or preferably with the assistance of a mentor, successful friend or associate that can help you evaluate your current status. The next step is to identify subjects or areas that need improvement or should be learned. Then create a multi-year, preferably three year, Professional Development Plan and of course, diligently carry out the plan on your own. It is particularly effective to work with another or others who have the same ambition to advance. Studying and working with another or with a groups provides the opportunity to exchange ideas, learn from each other and encourage each other. A sample of such a plan is shown below.

Sample Self-Directed Professional Development Plan

Dates: Multi-year - from-to (lasting as long as five year)

Reading

Life-long learning is a commitment to continuous advancement in one's professional and personal life and is directly proportional to ambition. The world body of knowledge is captured in books and the ultimate recommendation is to create an attitude and/or change habits so that reading becomes a habit. Many people avoid reading non-fiction text material because they consider it boring or hard to get through. However, when something learned from a book avoids or solves a problem reading becomes easier. When the reading effort pays off it seems a lot less difficult. Serious managers and entrepreneurs read as many as 12 non-fiction books a year with six as an average. I recommend a minimum of three non-fiction books a year on appropriate topics (matched to your needs) in addition to miscellaneous reading required as part of the self-study section below. The first three books in order are: (these are suggested subject headings that may be altered to individual needs)

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: Book on body language or basis communication recommended.
LEADERSHIP: There is almost too much available.

MANAGEMENT: The One Minute Manager by Ken Blanchard or similar recommended.

Begin a personal reference library. Get into the habit of reading with a highlighter in hand and highlight phrases or sentences that interest you or facts you may want to remember or refer to later. Purchase the books if at all possible so you can make notes directly on the pages. Use a dictionary and lookup words you are unfamiliar with--a tremendous vocabulary-building method. We often think we will remember what is informative or interesting to us as we read, but it escapes us over time. Highlighted and marked up books that you have read are a tremendous resource in problem solving that you can refer to throughout your life to recapture information you can't quite remember, but know you have seen somewhere.

Another valuable source of information are trade magazines and journals. You do not have to read every one of them in their entirety, but can scan for articles and subjects that you find of interest. Even then the articles need not be carefully read if interest or time does not permit. Tear

them out and file under general headings like Marketing, Leadership, Customer Service, Management, Technical, etc. Use a system of file headings that make sense to you because it is your personal reference material. Take the materials out when working on a subject or problem and review them for information and insight into the topic at hand.

These are good habits to get into even if you can't see the value up front. They are proven techniques that work, but only after your reading habits change and you have collected some information in your files and on your book shelves. Start now and order the first three books and then others as you are ready for them. When you start the last of the three books decide on the next three so they will be there when you need them.

Self-Study

Communication skills can be advanced in self-study. After you read a body language or basic communication book put into practice what you learn. Become more conscious of studying people more thoroughly through their actions as well as their words when you interact. This is an excellent skill-set to perfect; valuable in marketing, negotiating and presentations. After you try this for six months, if the communication subject is more than a passing interest to you, include another book on it in the next selections and then move on to the study of group dynamics. A writing skills text might also be included in the next selection if that is an area where improvement is needed. Most business and technical subjects can be learned in disciplined self-study.

Seminars and Conferences

These are subject to your budget and should be selected as they become available on subjects that match your needs. It is recommended that you attend two a year if possible. Most are announced months in advance so it is an ongoing selection process.

Short Courses

These may or may not have a place in your plan and may depend on what is available in your area. There are costs involved but these can be effective and in multi-year plan.

Progress Reports

Measuring your own progress is an important element in sustaining motivation. It would be wise to find someone, like a mentor, your study partner(s) a friend or spouse who is willing to discuss your progress, options and to assist you in your professional development efforts.

A Continuing Process

A multi-year Professional Development Plan should be flexible because the pace of professional and personal development is set by the participant and the learning opportunities and bodies of knowledge change over time. The significance of multi-year reflects the length of commitment and investment you or your company is making. The plan should be updated annually preferably in consultation with a mentor who hopefully will be available throughout the year for assistance and consultation. Most of that interaction should be prompted by you as you see the need.

Continuing Education versus On-The-Job-Training:

It's a dog eat dog world out there for forty hours a week. But when you get to fifty, there aren't as many dogs. And when you get out to sixty or more it is down-right lonely! Long hours are common in our industry and generate a lot of work experience. However I have met some construction people who will tell you they have 25 years of experience when they actually have five years of experience and 20 years of repetition. Experience is not enough. You need to add some "new" information to on-the-job learning, to advance your professional development. You would not go to a doctor 25 years out of medical school if you knew he did not read medical journals and text books to keep up on the latest developments in his field. The same is true of construction professionals. Working long hours may help you keep up with the competition but to get ahead of the competition you need to add new information to your work experience. The process is called "professional development". The consequence of not using the latest information available is failure to accomplish what is expected of you.

As mentioned already, the cornerstone of professional development is reading, therefore knowing what to read is important to the busy executive. The initial subjects should include Management, Leadership, Business Development, Corporate Development, Economic Forecasting, Personal Development and Business Classics. Those interested in advancement should be reading a minimum of three non-fiction books a year as part of their professional and personal development and that more is better.