



## These are today's **professionals.**

Their professional **development** will be **continuing** to the day they retire

### **Tracking CPD** in the workplace

The MD of a local business recently went back to the Further Education College where he had studied Business and Economics twenty years ago. Looking at an exam paper that had been sat a few days earlier, he was amazed to find that exactly the same questions had been on the paper he had taken back in the 1980s. As the college principal observed when challenged, the questions are the same every year: it's the answers that change.

And therein lies one of the most compelling reasons for Continuous Professional Development, or CPD as the process is universally known. Gone are the days when a teacher – or a practising solicitor, medic or accountant, for that matter – could rest content with the knowledge they had acquired as a student or trainee in their profession, and simply recycle it until the day they retired.

Keeping abreast of developments might be something as simple as reading an article in the FT or the Lancet: it could equally well involve a programme of online training in new techniques or approaches to their subject.

To be effective, it has to be the right content, delivered in the right way and achieving the right objective.

That ongoing professional development is essential is not in doubt. How it is managed

and monitored and recorded is where the complications can set in. From an employer's perspective, all elements of CPD and training need to be tracked both for personnel records and to ensure that the most effective HR decisions can be made for and with each member of their staff. Courses may have to be booked and online training selected, for example.

Then there are the professional bodies and similar institutions who need to take an overview of the staff for whom they have a responsibility. What information can they call upon to monitor CPD records? Could it be that the records held by the employer are incompatible in some way with those needed by the regulatory body, so there is the prospect that information might have to be keyed in twice? It was certainly worth exploring some of the technology which is in place to handle CPD.

### **Demands for quality CPD recording**

Aware that that the CPD 'industry' is growing apace, we have taken a look at both sides of the subject. What do employers need from such a system? How far can developers come up with a solution to assist? As this edition of The Informed Executive is focussing on education, we

**Continuing Professional Development is a requirement in most professions today. We consider the progress made towards developing a comprehensive CPD management system by AccessAcademy.**

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checked out the requirements with a leading Further Education college that is keen to take on board a fully integrated CPD management system. And for the other side of the coin, we turned to one of the training development specialists which has been harnessing its skills in management education to the thorny issues of CPD.

### Further Education sector

To determine how far the Further Education sector is typical of the CPD marketplace as a whole, we met AccessAcademy of Hitchin, in Hertfordshire. Its name might suggest a college or training establishment, but the company is a commercial developer of learning and development solutions.

Account Manager Leslie Strachan believes that there is the same, underlying requirement for systems from many different professions. “All of the recognised professions have a requirement to promote and monitor Continuing Professional Development amongst their

members. The companies who employ those professionals need both to support their staff in pursuing those objectives and be able to assure their professional body that the development programmes are rigorous and achieving the results required.”

### Corporate solution

What AccessAcademy has developed in response to that broad-based demand is a corporate solution rather than one for individuals. A typical scenario would be an accountancy or legal practice which is seeking to rationalise the whole of its CPD activities, integrating them with a new or existing HR management tool.

Employers of ‘qualifying’ professionals range from Further Education Colleges that operate on a small number of sites (with administration and HR often based at one of them) through to the high profile accountancy practices with staff distributed throughout of-fices across the UK.

Unless there is a procedure for centralising CPD information in widely dispersed organisations, there is a real prospect that employee training records could become fragmented and hence less than meaningful.

### Avoiding potential pitfalls

Access Academy appears to have approached the task in a way which overcomes that kind of pitfall, and others along the way. The company’s MD Christian Greenshaw outlined what is involved. “We are an application service provider – ASP – which means that we host the application that is accessed online by the user. A consistent CPD record is therefore maintained irrespective of their location or number of sites being served. The facility can be accessed from any web browser.

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## Shrewsbury College of Arts & Technology is clear what it needs from an effective CPD system

With 250 full-time and 300 part-time staff on its two campuses, Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology is one of the largest employers in Shropshire. Courses range from apprenticeships through to traditional degree-level courses: all of those involved as teachers or instructors have to be fully up to speed in the material they deliver.

The responsibility of working with more than 1600 full-time and 10,000 part-time students at the College highlights the need for the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) which is now a regulatory requirement in the FE sector.

As Richard Banks, the HR Director at the College explained, the extent and content of the CPD which each member of staff undergoes is determined by the nature of the courses in which they are involved. There are multiple dimensions to each piece of training they undertake: "While part of the development programme might involve reading a book to update subject knowledge, the person involved has to reflect upon what they have read, and determine how they will apply the information gained from that process."

### Institute for Learning

To that extent, of course, CPD in the FE sector follows a similar structure to professional development in other disciplines: the difference is that the controlling authority for Further Education is The Institute for Learning (IFL). Its remit covers all of those employed in FE and independent training providers.

Teachers and instructors are required to join the IFL-hosted scheme, but others engaged in the management and administration of Further Education establishments are encouraged to do so.



While the IFL does not prescribe the structure or content of the professional development undertaken by those it covers, the Institute does determine the manner in which CPD is recorded. There is a sound technical reason for that: as part of its monitoring responsibilities, it can call for individual CPD logs, which are then uploaded to the Institute's system for evaluation.

IFL has created an online product called Reflect that allows those registered with the Institute to record their CPD logs directly on to the system. But, as Mr Banks observed, the solution is less than ideal as the employers of IFL members do not have access to the data being recorded in Reflect.

### More inclusive system needed

But, as Mr Banks observed, employers of IFL members do not have access to the data being recorded in Reflect. "The employer has to assemble exactly the same information in its own database if it is to have any value in progressing a staff member's professional

- Integrate fully with the college's own HR system;
- Provide a seamless interface to its online CPD booking system and course material;
- Provide data in a format which can be piped online direct to the Institute for Learning.

development. An FE College will certainly need to know the kind of development that its staff have undertaken."

Shrewsbury College regards that knowledge as vital if it is to deliver high quality education and training to its students. While the core of its revenue is the grant from the Skills & Learning Council, the college contracts with employers to provide fee-earning training services.

FE Colleges are in competition for this part of their income and must make available the most appropriately qualified members of staff to meet those employers' requirements. "If a college cannot back up and consolidate the information being passed over to the IFL, it either has to key the data into its own system, or find a better way of doing it. That suggests a single system which can meet both parties' requirements."

### Flexibility of data recording

The kind of material that has to be recorded in an individual's file will depend on a number of factors: members of staff will determine with their college employers a relevant programme of activities. "The log has to be able to record what has been agreed, and the time in hours that will be committed.

"No less important, it will establish - and note - how the employee will apply that learning; how it will engage in a professional dialogue with others who can comment on the development being undertaken."

The case for a single CPD system is strengthened when it is recognised that staff members at the College will be examining online prospectuses and then booking courses that provide key components of their agreed professional development. §

“By delivering the service from our host, we are able to simplify the management of the product for our customers by handling all of the backups, hosting and bandwidth problems. From a security perspective, our servers are not shared, and we operate to the same encryption standards as banks and the MoD – which explains why we meet the requirements of those organisations for handling their data.”

“This is the same route we have taken with our training solutions, and has accounted for our being taken up by multi-site customers such as solicitors, accountants, architects, management consultants and many other types of professional practice. But it also means that we can serve equally well an organisation operating out of a single office.”

Pricing in this ASP configuration is based on the number of staff members being tracked: many public sector institutions such as FE colleges prefer a site licence.

In either situation, customers have their applications upgraded without charge as features are refined (this is another benefit of application service provision as systems do not have to be upgraded by the user).

There is no upper limit to the number of staff whose CPD records can be maintained, but below 100 staff, the solution would probably not be viable.

### Concerns about hosted solutions

The benefits of running training solutions on an ASP footing are obvious, but would the prospect of holding sensitive private data such as CPD records be so appealing to employers or their staff? Greenshaw was aware of valid concerns that might be raised, but was able to describe the environment in which the service operates.

As the MD noted, “By delivering the service from our host, we are able to simplify the management of the product for our customers by handling all of the backups, hosting and bandwidth problems: the customer just pays an annual fee.

“From a security perspective, our servers are not shared, and we operate to the

same encryption standards as banks and the MoD – which explains why we meet the requirements of those organisations for handling their data.”

AccessAcademy may be well established and can claim an impressive customer base, but it is clearly not the size of an IBM or an EDS. Can customers be confident that the information they place with the company will continue to be accessible, for whatever reason?

“Provision has been made in our service level agreements for such contingencies and this has satisfied 98% of our customer base. There remains a very small proportion of our users who, for institutional reasons, prefer to host everything themselves and we can accommodate that arrangement, even though there are real benefits in ASP.”

### Integrated solutions

What the Hitchin-based developer has achieved is the ability to integrate its evolving CPD system with its online training systems, and training booking applications, to provide a seamless point of access to professional development for its customers. But that implies an environment in which staff progressing their CPD will remain with the organisation to retirement.

It may be the case in some professions, but the Further Education sector

– one of the markets which the company is addressing - has an acceptable degree of fluidity. How far can the Access Academy technology absorb end user data which has been generated on other systems (or indeed, on the back of an ‘Excel envelope’)? And what provision is made for exporting the data into other proprietary systems and those of professional bodies who require sight of CPD records in an electronic format?

### Meeting FE sector requirements

Leslie Strachan is in close contact with the customer base on both fronts. “We are able to export the CPD report for an individual member of staff into any convenient format such as a ,csv file as this is a common denominator between otherwise incompatible systems.

“But our specialism has been in the close integration of our component technologies and this is the basis of integrating the employer’s CPD system with that of the relevant professional body. In FE, for example, we have been conscious of the need for delivering records into the Institute for Learning’s system from the internal CPD facility of the colleges.

AccessAcademy’s understanding of the FE sector was put to the test when we discussed the requirements of a major FE College on page 93. §

“We are able to export the CPD report for an individual member of staff into any convenient format for transfer between otherwise incompatible systems.”

AccessAcademy Ltd can be found at [www.accessacademy.co.uk](http://www.accessacademy.co.uk)

