Progression: helping learners to make good progress

What?
- level and pace of work
- influences in the workplace
- personal circumstances
- motivation.

Why?
A key aim of employers and providers of work-based learning is to help learners progress so that they complete their programmes and achieve their learning goals swiftly and efficiently. Whether learners progress well or not is linked to many things that employers and providers control or influence, such as:
- the design of the programme – are the different parts linked coherently?
- the extent and availability of support to learners
- how well the progress of individual learners is monitored.

These and the many other issues that affect progress are covered in other factsheets. This one is concerned with a specific issue in the design and delivery of learning – making the level and pace of work suit each individual – and with some of the key external and internal influences on learners’ progress.

How?

Level and pace of work

It’s important to get both of these broadly right. One of the reasons why learners get demotivated and may leave early is that the work is too hard or too easy for them and they get behind or bored as a result. It’s particularly demoralising if the programme is too demanding at each stage, or has an ultimate goal that is beyond the learner’s ability to achieve at the moment.

To get the level broadly right for each individual, it is necessary to:
- establish what level the learner is working at before they start, and set a destination level above this – but not too far above
- monitor the learner’s level of work regularly through formative assessment and review, backtracking or ‘fast-tracking’ the learner if necessary
- as learners progress to a higher level of learning, make it clear what the increase in standard will be, e.g. by introducing elements from the next level into the learning plan.

A learner’s ability to progress to more demanding levels can be checked by introducing work from basic and key skill units, sections from technical certificates and elements from NVQs at the level above the one they are tackling at the moment. It gives a snap-shot of the learner at the time, which helps to identify any areas where learners may struggle with an increase in level.
Learners all progress at different rates, as their mental ability, maturity and motivation develop over time. Each of these will help dictate the pace at which people learn. There are few restrictions on the time allowed for learning to happen, so there shouldn’t be too much or too little pressure on learners.

Short, end-of-phase tests can be helpful in demonstrating a learner’s progress. If they do well, learners may be given a more responsible role at work as a result. If the tests show areas that still need developing, learners can be given further support.

In order to get the pace broadly right for each individual, it helps to:

- periodically assess learners’ work, to make judgements as to how long they are taking to reach the appropriate standard
- set realistic but challenging targets for completing each learning goal in the individual learning plan within a manageable time scale
- make sure that everyone involved with the learner is aware of these timescales and gives learners the support they need to achieve their targets.

The pace of work can be built around the review process, where targets are set and agreed by the learner and monitored during the time up to the next review. Many learners progress well with the structure provided by regular targets and reviews. Others may need individual support and coaching to maintain and improve their pace of work.

**Influences in the workplace**

Work provides a great arena for learning, but it can also be counter-productive. Many people flourish at work but there’s a risk that some learners may never gain the confidence to succeed. Others may be swamped by the demands made on them by their supervisor, or by pressure from their peers.

Some ideas are given below to help prevent workplace pressure getting in the way of learning.

### Successful learning at work

- Give clear guidelines at the start about the support learners can expect to receive from their supervisor during their training.
- Encourage supervisors and others at work to play a full a part in the learning process, avoiding the separation of ‘learning’ and ‘work’.
- Find a suitable mentor or ‘buddy’ who can help the learner, especially during the initial stages as they make the transition into their new role – the factsheet entitled ‘Support for learning’ has more on this.
- Involve supervisors actively in the review process, so that they help to identify learners’ successes, areas for development and next steps.
- React quickly to any change in workplace circumstance that has a direct effect on the learner. For example, a learner may have established a bond with a particular mentor or supervisor, and a change to this relationship may have a greater effect on the learner than can be easily seen.
- Make sure everyone at work knows that there are unacceptable levels of practice that will lead to learners no longer being ‘placed’ in that workplace.

Many workplace pressures can be relieved by ensuring that clear, realistic goals and expectations are set and that a robust, inclusive review process is in place. Frequent informal contacts, either by telephone or drop-in, can often solve issues before they become unmanageable. They also help to strengthen the relationship with learners.
Peer pressure can happen in two distinct ways. A more successful peer can unknowingly put pressure on a learner currently achieving at a slower pace. A less successful peer, experiencing problems of their own, may become disruptive in the learning environment or encourage other learners to join them by not taking part.

In either case it is important to:

- recognise that these are real cause for concern
- give learners the opportunity to discuss their concerns in a confidential way
- establish the underlying cause rather than just the effect of the pressure – most instances of peer pressure occur because of a more fundamental problem
- deal with the problem by supporting the learner and removing the cause of the pressure – strong and fair disciplinary processes are just as important in this situation as strong and fair support processes.

**Personal circumstances**

With so much going on just to get learners through the requirements of their learning programmes, it's easy to miss the many other influences on progress. Whilst work and learning may be the most important factors for employers and providers, it will rarely be the most important part of a learner’s life.

Some personal circumstances can be motivating and useful to learning. But at times, the things happening outside work or training may have a disruptive effect. The best relationships between learners, employers and providers allow them to deal with the many outside influences that affect learners’ progress by showing learners that there are ways to overcome these issues. Where this happens, learners are more inclined to look for help.

Information, advice and guidance procedures should allow learners access to appropriate help as required. When dealing with personal problems, it's essential to make it clear to learners that support is available informally and confidentially, from specialist agencies where appropriate.

**Motivation**

Highly motivated learners are far more likely to progress quickly and achieve their goals than those whose levels of motivation are low, for whatever reasons. By finding out what energises individual learners, employers and providers can link the learning to positive factors in learners’ lives. Sometimes it's all that's needed to show learners that they can achieve their goals even in areas where they are unconfident.

It's helpful to:

- find out where learners have been successful in the past and build on this
- reward achievement in an open way
- use formative assessment to see what learners have already achieved to a good standard and use this as a basis for motivation
- encourage learners to experiment when practising skills
- encourage well-motivated learners to influence others.

Giving learners opportunities to develop skills in a way that allows them to find and experience the benefits of that learning will lead to greater motivation. Allowing those motivated learners to demonstrate their skills to other, less confident learners will pass these benefits along.
Case studies and examples

Supporting learners’ progress

A sector-based group of employers, supported by a provider, has developed a range of strategies to respond to the needs of individual learners and support them through the various stages of their learning. They include:

- Evening workshops – arranged with the individual’s trainer, so learners work with someone they know and trust. One learner says: ‘They’ve helped a lot, more people should do them. It gives you quiet time where you can get on with things and there’s always someone here to help.’
- Out-of-hours learning and support – trainers arrange to see learners during lunchtimes, evenings or on days off, usually for additional work on theory or portfolio building.
- Specific assessment opportunities – where learners don’t have an opportunity within their job role for specific assessments, arrangements are made either to make the opportunity available in their normal workplace or transfer the learner briefly to another workplace for the necessary observation.
- Frequent targets – some learners are set more frequent, simpler targets, with lots of ‘quick wins’. In these cases, trainers visit every fortnight for half an hour rather than less frequently for longer, as is normally the case.

Taking ownership

One employer has appointed a member of staff with teaching and training qualifications to design and deliver an in-house MA framework. Her role replaces a previous, unsatisfactory arrangement with a local provider. Apprentices now attend the in-house training centre approximately one-and-a-half days each week for off-the-job training. The training schedule is designed to help learners focus on job-specific skills and covers all aspects of their activities at work.

There is a culture of high expectation. Staff, including the training manager, are highly qualified themselves and insist on high standards. Retention rates are very high (around 90 percent) and all learners are offered full time employment on completion. They are keen to continue learning and progressing. As one learner said:

“I have a proper job with opportunities for promotion. This job has given me real independence.”

Learners enjoy working and being trained by the employer, rather than going to college. They speak of a real continuity between their training and work, and greatly appreciate the ability to address any training or assessment issues on a day to day basis.

Checklist

- How do you find out about the progress individual learners are making?
- How much are you able to ‘flex’ learners’ programmes so that they get the chance to work at the level and pace that is best for them?
- How do you make sure that workplace pressures don’t get in the way of learning too much?
- What influence have you seen on learners from their peers, and how do you manage things so that learners benefit from working and learning alongside others?
- How do you find out about personal circumstances that might adversely affect a learner’s progress?
- Where can learners get help?
- How do you identify and build on the things that motivate individual learners to continue with their work and learning?
- What can be done to raise learners’ levels of motivation?

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