

Keeping Your Skills Current at Work

Overview

Ways to make sure your skills stay up-to-date.

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Keeping your skills current is one of the most important ways you can do your job well and stay on top of changing demands of the workplace. It can also help you prepare for new opportunities that may arise at work and help you keep your job in a difficult economy. But don't make the mistake of thinking that training is entirely your employer's responsibility: It is up to you to stay current. Typically, this is a two-step process that involves making an honest evaluation of your skills, then taking any needed steps to strengthen them.

The benefits of keeping your skills current

You might think that keeping your skills current doesn't matter in your job, or that it's more important in other fields. In fact, you can benefit from staying up-to-date no matter what kind of work you do. Learning new skills can be stimulating and motivating, and it can help keep your mind young. New methods of communication, changes in technology, and increasing global competition impact many types of jobs. In addition, strengthening your skills can help you do the following:

- *Build confidence.* Keeping your skills up-to-date can give you the confidence to handle any tasks that your employer expects you to perform.
- *Stay flexible and enthusiastic about your work.* You may become reluctant to take on new projects if your skills are rusty or you lack some abilities that are needed to take on a new project.
- *Make even better use of your time.* Sharpening your skills can help you become more efficient and productive.
- *Become more valuable to your employer.* Strengthening the skills you need to do your job (as well as your cross-functional skills) increases your chances of getting raises and promotions, and of holding onto your job. It also keeps you marketable.
- *Make a bigger contribution to your team.* Your new skills can be good for co-workers, too. They will benefit from the work you do as a team.

Does it pay to keep your skills up-to-date?

If you would like to learn new skills, you may wonder: Will it be worth the cost and the time it would take away from other things that matter to me? Many studies have shown that for most people the answer is an overwhelming "yes."

David Autor of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other economists have found that your income increases with every year of education you get. College graduates earn nearly twice as much per hour as high school graduates. Workers who have completed four years of college earn more than those who have finished just two.

This earnings gap has been increasing for decades. And if it keeps rising, you may benefit from extra training even if you are in your 20s or 30s and have relatively current skills, because your added education will keep going up in value.

Why does extra learning make such a difference? One answer is that “the proportion of adults working full-time year-round increases with education level,” according to the nonprofit organization, the College Board. Even if you prefer to work part time, more education increases your options.

In addition, keeping your skills up-to-date is essential to staying employed in some jobs or careers. This is especially true in continually changing fields, such as technology. For example, job opportunities for computer programmers are expected to decline slightly in the next decade as more work is done offshore, so “programmers will need to update their skills in order to stay competitive,” the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports. One way they can gain a competitive edge, the BLS says, is to get certified in an additional tool or computer language.

Questions that can help you evaluate your skills

Most employees’ skills decline gradually over a period of months or years. If you don’t stop to evaluate your skills periodically, you may fall behind even if you’re very conscientious about other aspects of your work. The following questions can help you decide if you need to update your skills:

- Has your manager suggested, in a performance evaluation or elsewhere, that you might benefit from gaining new skills or training related to your position?
- Have you failed to get (or decided not to apply for) promotions that would require skills that you don’t have?
- Do you have skills that, if your job were eliminated, would enable you to qualify for other positions in your company?
- Have you passed up any opportunities that your company offers to employees who want to learn new skills (such as training or tuition-reimbursement programs)?
- Have you missed opportunities to take courses or attend workshops in your community (such as classes at local colleges or adult education centers)?
- Have you found yourself struggling with projects because you’re lacking information or skills?

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- Do most of your co-workers have some skills that you don't? Do you sometimes have to ask them to take time away from their jobs to show you how to do certain things?
- Have you decided not to get certified (or recertified) if you have a job that involves optional certification?
- Do you have the feeling that you're stagnating or "not going anywhere" at work?
- Do you think that you might be able to provide better service to customers or clients if you had more skills?
- Do you avoid volunteer activities that might help you gain useful skills, such as helping at community organizations?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you may want to look into ways to update your skills. Even if you don't foresee any need to add to your skill set now, you may need to gain new skills to do well in the future.

Getting the coaching you need to keep your skills current

The best way to begin keeping your skills current is to decide which skills you'd like to develop. You may want to get some feedback on this from others.

- *Talk with your manager.* Describe your goals and ask which skills would help you achieve them. Be frank about any time or financial constraints that you have. You might say, "I'd like to become a manager someday and want to take some night classes that could help me reach that goal. But I'm not sure whether it would be best to study marketing, accounting, or communications. What would you suggest?"
- *Talk with co-workers who have strong skills that you lack.* Share questions and ideas with them about how they got where they are. Staying in touch with colleagues from any previous jobs can also help you determine what skills you should strengthen.
- *Seek advice from a mentor.* Ask about the skills that a person uses regularly and how she acquired those skills. If you don't have a mentor, talk to someone who currently holds the type of position you would like to have in the future.

Career development and training opportunities

Once you know which skills you'd like to strengthen, you may want to take classes or pursue other learning opportunities. Here are some options to consider:

- *Community-based adult education programs.* These programs usually allow you to take night or weekend courses at a high school or elsewhere for a modest fee (for example, less than \$100 per semester). And many courses are on work-related subjects such as business writing or using spreadsheets. They are less expensive

and less time-consuming than classes at most colleges, so they can be ideal for busy adults on a limited budget.

- *Online courses.* Online courses range from brief workshops and tutorials to programs that let you obtain degrees from accredited colleges and universities. Many teach computer skills such as database management or how to use popular software programs. You can take many online classes simply by paying a fee and logging onto a website when you have time. If you're interested, take courses only on reputable sites, such as those run by respected universities, companies, or professional associations. You might start by learning about the online classes offered by your state college system. Call or visit the website for the system, or check out the list of distance-learning opportunities by state at the website for the Oregon Network for Education (<http://oregonone.org/virtualU.htm>).
- *Other types of distance-learning programs.* Distance-education programs include but aren't limited to online courses. In some programs, students and teachers communicate by email and teleconferencing. Others involve podcasts, telecourses (in which you watch broadcasts or videos in "real time"), or interactive classrooms (in which you are electronically linked to other sites). Distance learning also includes more traditional correspondence courses (in which you receive and return course materials by mail).

Another good resource is Petersons.com. On their website, you'll find a link to Distance Learning. The site provides lots of helpful information on checking a school's accreditation, searching for schools, and researching your options.

- *Private teachers or tutoring.* Hiring a private teacher or tutor can be the most efficient way to reach a goal such as improving your math, learning to use Microsoft Windows, or brushing up on a foreign language that may help on the job. For much less than the cost of a college course (for example, \$10 to \$50 an hour), you may be able to hire a college student or teacher to teach you at your home for an hour or two a week, or even meet with you on your lunch hour. Your tutor can tailor lessons to your needs so that you are learning exactly what you want to learn. To find a tutor, check community bulletin boards, search online sites like www.craigslist.org, or inquire at a local high school or college. Many colleges have online job boards listing undergraduate or graduate students who provide tutoring services for a reasonable fee. Of course, you should always check references before letting someone into your home.
- *Reverse mentoring.* One of the most rewarding ways of keeping your skills up-to-date is reverse mentoring -- developing a strong relationship with a younger person who provides mutual coaching and support. Each of you teaches the other something that you know well. You may offer a younger employee tips on team-building or client relations while he helps you boost your computer skills or understand the latest trends in your field. As with traditional mentoring, this kind

of relationship tends to develop informally and may arise naturally if you make a habit of extending a warm welcome to younger employees at your company.

- *Seminars and workshops.* Professional organizations, local colleges, and companies often provide one- or two-day workshops geared toward teaching new skills or honing existing ones.
- *Publications.* Some skills can be learned through self-help books available online or at bookstores and libraries. You may also be able to stay up-to-date on some standards and new findings in your field by reading magazines, newspapers, and newsletters from professional or trade associations.
- *National or professional associations.* Almost every industry has at least one national organization with a website that has information on developments in the field. These sites often provide many additional resources, including announcements of seminars or training programs offered by experts.
- *Career services offices.* Many colleges and universities have expanded their services to assist alumni with career information. By visiting the website of the college you attended, you may find helpful links and resources to assist you in your own career development.
- *Keep a career journal.* As you go through the process of updating your skills, keep a journal that lists your responsibilities at work, special projects you have worked on, the results you've achieved, training you've done, and relevant volunteer activities. Also keep copies of emails/letters you've received praising your work, as well as performance reviews. Doing this over time will save you from having to pull it all together at once if an opportunity for advancement presents itself or if you find yourself looking for a new job.

Finally, remember that strengthening your skills may bring benefits even if it doesn't lead to a quick raise, promotion, or Employee of the Month award. Few things are more rewarding than pursuing -- and achieving -- an important goal. Over time, the confidence you gain from keeping your skills sharp may extend into other areas and give you a new optimism not just about your work, but about your ability to meet any other challenges that life may bring.

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