

Personal development plans

Personal development plans (PDPs) provide a powerful, flexible way to link employees' professional and personal development with the development of your business.

A PDP is a short, unambiguous written document that maps out how a person can develop skills and progress in their job. Using PDPs, you can engage your employee's abilities, commitment and knowledge to maximise their potential and that of your business.

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1. More than training

Using PDPs is not the same as simply putting groups of employees through traditional training programmes.

PDPs focus on the development of the individual employee

- The company will also benefit if the PDP is working well.
- To reap the benefits of a PDP, it is essential to secure the trust of your employees. Let them know you are fully committed to meeting the expectations that will be generated by PDPs.
- You will also need to enlist the commitment of the managers responsible for enacting PDPs, and provide any training they need.

PDPs are personal for each employee, and take account of his or her aspirations

- Make sure employees define their own PDP objectives to ensure commitment.

PDPs look at your employees' broad, long-term development

- The PDP is typically based on development objectives for the next 12 months rather than short-term training needs.
- Objectives do not always have to be directly related to specific work tasks. For example, a PDP goal might be to improve language skills.
- The benefit to your company will come from having a more accomplished employee whose motivation and self-esteem have grown through achieving PDP objectives.

PDPs should be structured and documented

- Agreed, long-term objectives are the foundation of each plan. These can then be broken down into short-term goals.
- Once you have agreed the objectives you can decide how best to achieve them.
- Regular reviews are essential to ensure that the PDP is on track. PDP reviews should be held at least twice-yearly and can be built into your formal appraisal system.

Consider what resources are needed to support employees' PDPs

- You may need to provide access to training, mentoring, finance or equipment.
- If you underestimate the resources required, you risk setting employees up to fail and damaging morale, productivity and the trust of employees.
- Review resource requirements regularly.

2. Who is involved?

Ideally, every employee should have a PDP

- Junior employees and [new recruits](#) benefit from PDPs that help them to develop their roles within the business.
- [Managers and employers](#) also benefit from PDPs, which keep them motivated and stop them resting on their laurels.

Typically, each employee's line manager should be responsible for the employee's PDP

- Managers may need appropriate training to ensure they can manage PDPs effectively. Courses to develop the relevant skills of counselling, coaching and mentoring are widely available.
- Developing these skills can be built into the manager's own PDP.
- The most senior employees - and those whose performance has the most impact on the performance of the business - may benefit from an external mentor.

Get the involvement of all your people by encouraging a learning culture

- For example, senior employees may be involved in mentoring others.
- Provide support and training to enable mentoring.

The new recruit's PDP

Using a PDP is an ideal way to manage the development of a new employee.

The broad objective is to enable the newcomer to become a useful member of the team

Within that, typical objectives might be:

- to find his or her way around, learn who the key people are and company policy;
- to build a productive relationship with his or her manager and co-workers;
- to be able to communicate with customers in a professional manner.

Each of these objectives should have a target deadline.

For each objective, the most appropriate method can be agreed

For example:

- a formal induction programme, with copies of appropriate company documents for self-study, to cover company knowledge;
- computer skills could be developed in training courses and on-the-job training;
- working relationships might simply be allowed to develop, but kept as part of the plan for review;
- the customer communication goal might be addressed later, by seconding the trainee to the sales team.

The PDP might initially be reviewed monthly

- You might aim to move to quarterly reviews after three months.

Reviews will aim to ensure the objectives are met

Over time, the new recruit should start to have more input into setting objectives

- The employee will report on how well the objectives are being achieved, and how effective the training has been.

3. Setting objectives

To help the employee determine PDP objectives use a standard PDP questionnaire. You can create different questionnaires for different roles in the business, but these questions are relevant to everyone regardless of position. This shows you are adopting a consistent approach and the questions can help uncover key issues.

List useful questions

These might include:

- What do you want to get out of work?
- What are your strengths and which parts of your work would you like to improve?
- Where would you like more responsibility?
- What is preventing you from developing as you would like?
- Which interests or abilities would you like to develop?
- Which new skills, or improved skills, would enhance your work performance?
- How do you like to learn?

- What skills or experience would allow you to feel more confident at work?
- Who would you like to oversee your personal development plan?

See where the employee's objectives can be matched to the requirements of your business

- Provide a copy of the company's objectives or business plan with the questionnaire. This makes it easier to agree what is and is not in line with your plans.
- When updating your business plan, identify what new demands will be placed on employees.
- It can take skilled negotiation to harmonise the employee's objectives with those of the company.

Agree the development objectives

- You may need to compromise with the employee. For example, agreeing one objective which suits the company and one which suits the employee.
- Unless the employee genuinely accepts the objectives, and believes they are worth striving for, the PDP will not lead to change.
- With short-term objectives in particular, make each objective SMART (specific, measurable, agreed, realistic, time-limited).
- Resources are limited, so prioritise the objectives with the employee.
- Limit the number of main objectives to three or four. You can add subsequent objectives as progress is made.
- Agree the action points necessary to achieve each objective.
- Be positive and upbeat. For example, if absenteeism is a problem, talk in terms of 'improving attendance' rather than 'stopping absenteeism'. Provide challenges for the next period rather than criticising the previous one.

4. Developing

Many PDP objectives can be achieved through learning in the workplace

- Assign a suitably skilled manager or colleague to provide guidance to the employee, as requested.
- Delegate additional tasks (and authority) to the employee, expressly to develop new skills. Or second the employee to a different department.

More formal training can help to develop specific knowledge and skills

- Objectives that are common to many employees, or that demand special expertise, are often suited to formal training.

Self-directed development can be the most powerful way of ensuring employee 'buy-in'

- An employee with an 'attitude problem' may resolve it independently if you bring it to his or her attention. The issue can then be monitored as part of the PDP reviews.
- More senior or expert employees may be highly motivated by achieving development objectives independently.
- Managers can encourage self-directed development by making it clear they will support and reward employees' efforts.
- Any form of development will be more effective if the employee takes responsibility for reviewing its effectiveness.

5. PDP reviews

Like any strategy for growth, PDPs must be managed and monitored to yield results.

Schedule your next PDP meeting

- The timing will depend on the employee's particular objectives and development plans.
- Meetings can be as often as necessary - even monthly, in times of rapid change. Twelve months between PDP reviews may be too long.

Give each employee a self-assessment form, based on the questionnaire used to set objectives

The form should cover:

- what the employee feels has gone well;
- what the employee feels can be improved;
- what training, if any, would help the person achieve future goals.

Use the PDP session to give feedback

- This should be done in a positive spirit.
- Recognise achievements.
- Focus on ways to improve areas where development has been slow, rather than writing them off as failures.

6. PDPs in action

The power of PDPs is that they focus on the development of the individual. But certain employees may still have similar needs.

High fliers need to be challenged

- If they are not constantly developing at the speed they feel is necessary, they may leave.
- Such employees may wish to consider objectives such as winning promotion, running an exciting new project or getting involved in setting business strategy.

Under-performers need clear-cut, short-term objectives

- For example, a driver who has a problem with lateness needs to focus on correcting the cause of this bad habit.
- An under-performer must start by recognising his or her own needs, rather than blaming other people. Otherwise there is no motive to improve.

A PDP for the boss

As people become more senior, there is a strong tendency for them to be forgiving of their own weaknesses. This is particularly true of hard-working owner-managers, who may readily criticise employees without ever beginning to address their own shortcomings.

Employees are often reluctant (or scared) to give feedback to their bosses

- The first step to improve is to involve a neutral, professionally-skilled person to come in and ask employees and colleagues what they think (this is known as 360 feedback).
- This person can then help the boss evolve a suitable PDP.

Use the PDP to address problems

Typical problems that are revealed and can be addressed using a PDP are:

- reluctance to 'let go' by failing to delegate or trust staff to complete tasks;
- poor listening and lack of interest in - or understanding of - what makes employees tick;
- autocratic rule by the boss, where better results would come from introducing efficient management structures and systems;
- lack of communication, so that employees are left unclear about where the business is going and what their own priorities are supposed to be;
- unrealistic ideas of what can be done, so that too much work is taken on.

Developing a PDP for senior staff can be a very positive experience

- There is little point involving a neutral person in this process if the manager is not prepared to take heed and act on the findings.

7. Measuring success

Use performance measures to track the business benefits brought by PDPs

- If the PDPs are seen as an investment in your company's future rather than a drain on its resources, you will be able to assess the benefits against their costs.
- Link your business performance indicators with employee performance and identify areas where employee development would be beneficial.
- Results may not come instantly. Be prepared to take the long-term view.

Identify factors that have prevented the achievement of objectives

- These may reveal underlying problems. For example, sales staff may be unable to improve their paperwork because standard forms are out of date.

Look for hidden benefits

- For example, the customer loyalty brought about by improved handling of complaints is a major asset to your business.

Signpost

- Find a personal development planning [checklist and template](#) from the Chartered Management Institute.
- Find coaching, mentoring and other [training courses](#) from the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development).

Expert quotes

"Buy-in from the employee is essential, as it is the employee who makes the improvements during the course of the year." - Frank Thaxton, Thames Valley Partners business advisers

"Unless the employee seriously intends to change, the whole PDP process can be a waste of time. The key skill for the manager is the ability to bring about that desire to improve." - Simon Macaulay, Anglo Felt Industries

"There are no hard and fast rules about PDPs and what goes in them. That is the point. They are personal and unique." - Liz Trumper, management consultant

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