

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Learning Opportunities to Advance Your Career

Times have changed. It's not long ago that many people stayed in the same job, or at least the same career, from the time they entered the workforce until they retired. Today, lifelong careers are a thing of the past. In fact, the average North American can expect to make eight job changes and have as many as five different careers during his or her working life.

Three Steps to Begin the Launch

Whatever the reason for a job or career change, you will have to learn new skills and expand your field of knowledge. No longer will the education you had when you entered the workforce sustain you until you retire. In other words, you have to become a lifelong learner to keep up with the changing times. And for many, this will mean taking three steps:

Take responsibility for your own learning. In today's times of economic uncertainty, you can't depend on your employers to upgrade your skills or teach you new talents to get ahead. It's up to you to take the initiative to further your own career.

Develop a more positive attitude toward learning. One of the less obvious benefits of learning is that it boosts your self-confidence. When it comes to your working life, one of the most important benefits of lifelong learning is that it provides you with more choices. In other words, the more skills you have, the more marketable you become, and the more able you are to take advantage of the positive aspects of change.

Learn how to learn. Grasping new concepts may be difficult for those who have been out of school for many years. Try asking yourself these questions: Do I learn best in a small or large class? Can I learn on my own? What did I like and dislike about courses I have taken? Try to brush up on basic skills such as taking notes, reading a textbook and studying. You should also find out how to manage your time so that you can juggle the triple responsibilities that many have—a home, a job and student life.

Tapping Into Learning Opportunities

Now that you've prepared yourself to re-enter the world of learning, you'll need to consider what kinds of learning opportunities are available to you. Here are some ideas:

Get a diploma, degree or certificate. Take a look at your career goals and decide what prerequisites you need before you enroll in a course. Ask yourself the following questions: What are my career goals? Do I need a diploma or degree to reach these goals? How does this course or program relate to my goals?

Join a professional association. You can expand your skills by participating in educational programs, seminars and workshops offered by an association. You'll also have the opportunity to stay abreast of new trends in your particular field.

Learn from others. Consider conducting informational interviews with staff from other companies who hold similar positions to your own. This can give you a broader idea about how your duties are carried out by other industry professionals.

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Share your learning. To reduce expenses, many companies now send only one employee to seminars and workshops instead of the usual three or four. If you attend a seminar or course, put together a short presentation when you return. This way you can share some of the information from the workshop with others in your organization. Also, offer to share your notes and handouts with those who are interested.

Form a learning group. If your company doesn't have a training department, perhaps management would allow employees to present lunchtime seminars. There are excellent training videos and audio recordings available on a wide range of topics, and many of them include a leader's guide.

Make seminars work for you. Find out as much as you can about a seminar before you register. Who is the seminar leader? What are his or her qualifications? What is the size of the class? In some cases, such as with computer training, it's important to know whether it's a lecture or hands-on training session. Once you're at the seminar, be interested. Take notes, ask questions and enter into discussions. When you get back to work, be sure to put some of the information into action.

Lifelong learning will allow you to keep up with the world around you. No longer can you expect to remain in a single job or career for your entire working life. The more you are willing to learn new skills, the more you will be able to accept and establish new goals.

If you feel your skills are lagging behind those of co-workers, or if you wish to change the direction of your career, talk things over with a professional. They can help you decide what you need to learn if you are looking to move up from your present position.