

Individualised Learning Trajectories for the Professional Growth of Managers in the Energy Sector



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1 Introduction

Having more professional managers and developing their professional skills constitute a key competitive edge for any business. The problem is particularly relevant in the energy sector that has to deal with a risk of disastrous emergencies caused by the declining reliability of technological systems.

There are three key industry-specific components of a manager's professionalism in the energy sector:

- The ability to do the job effectively and deliver high performance results in a stable manner in strict compliance with reliability, safety and environmental standards
- Commitment to one's production tasks and functions
- The ability to improve one's knowledge and competencies in order to prepare for the handling of new tasks [1]

Due to an extended investment cycle, the energy sector also requires a professional manager to be able to take forward-looking decisions.

The *professional development* of a manager is the process of acquiring necessary qualities and competencies and personal development skills. Professional development is a complex process that is governed by general patterns but has its own features that determine a specific development path for each manager. For the process to have a direction, scale (corporation, company, unit, worker) and steady dynamics, it needs to be managed. This chapter suggests management tools for professional development during the particularly challenging postcollege period.

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The authors are convinced that creating a friendly environment for self-learning in the company is the most effective method of managing the onsite professional development of managers. The environment should be tailored to the worker's personality, his or her professional development needs and interests.

The individualised learning trajectory is a promising methodological concept for corporate training systems. The instrument is well fitted to be used for customised training of the most sought-after professionals.

2 Research Methodology

The *individualised learning trajectory* is a self-directed learning plan that combines the needs of the company to address production tasks that require new competencies and the worker's own professional development needs.

A number of *indicators* are used to build individualised trajectories in line with the approach:

- Personal qualities of staff members, including their interests and values
- Aptitude for a career
- Professional degrees, including additional training
- Current professional competencies
- Professional plans and career goals of a manager
- Tasks and functions in the current position
- Needs of the organisation to effectively address new tasks

The indicators are used as a basis for creating methodological tools for building individualised learning trajectories. The latter include:

- Personal profile of a manager's professional growth potential
- A roadmap for realising his or her potential
- Assessment of the organisation's need to further the manager's professional development
- A request for the manager's professional development commissioned by the company

The logic behind and the application of the methodological tools of corporate training customisation occur in two opposite directions: by catering to the interests of the worker and the interest of the energy company (Figs. 1 and 2). The individualised learning trajectory reconciles the interests of both parties as it combines two projects that reflect the interests of the worker and those of the energy company. Professional competency is the key unit of analysis in the study of the manager's performance when designing his or her individualised learning trajectory [2].

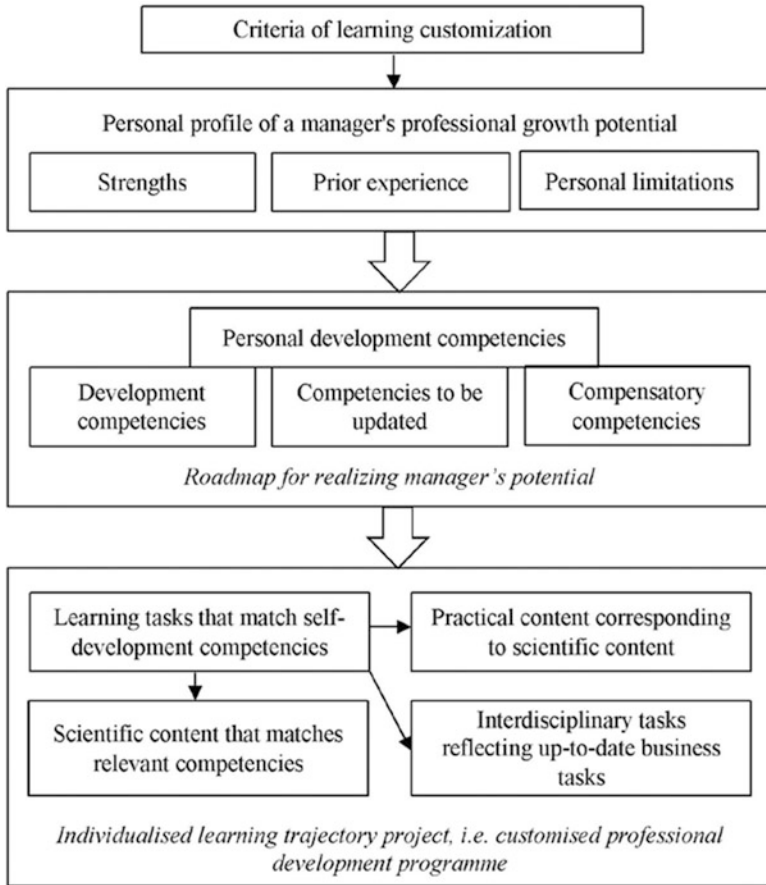


Fig. 1 Basic instruments for corporate training customisation responsive to the manager’s personality and interests

3 Research Results

Special psychological diagnostic testing and aptitude assessment methods are used when building *the profile of a manager’s professional growth potential*. The profile outlines personal strengths and limitations. Strengths are psychological qualities that fully match the specific nature of the worker’s professional functions. Personal limitations are the qualities that disagree with the nature of his or her professional functions, thus hampering their development. The growth potential profile also includes knowledge and competencies that the worker acquired from prior experience and that have not yet been used in the current position but can potentially become driving forces of his or her professional growth. Further diagnosis is needed to identify them.

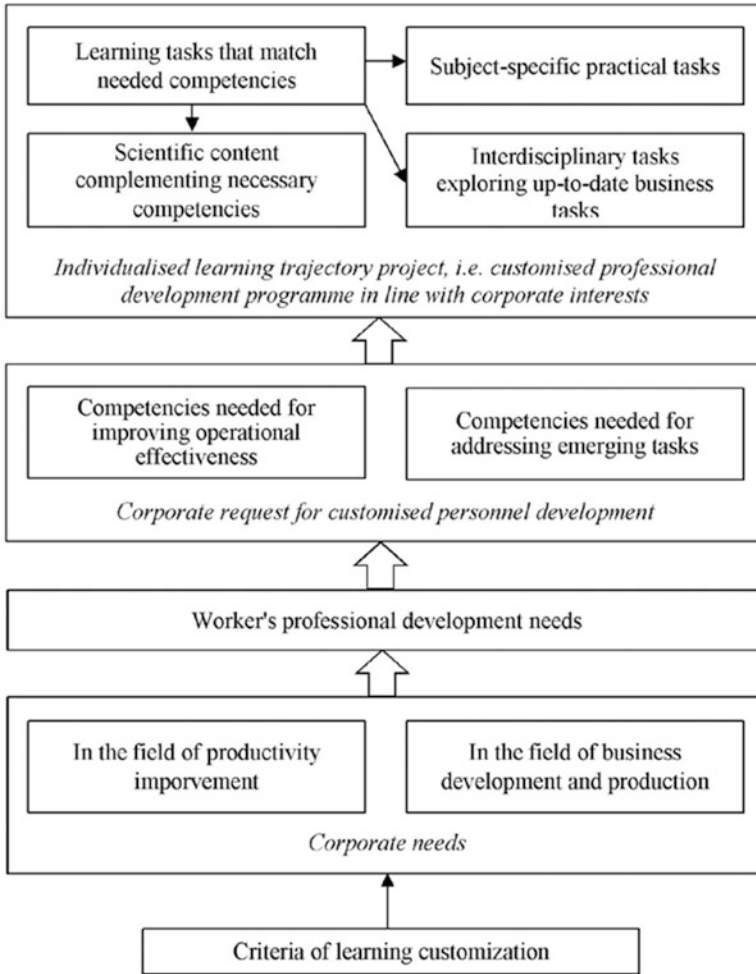


Fig. 2 Basic instruments for corporate training customisation responsive to the energy company's needs

The *roadmap for realising a manager's potential* is a tool for implementing his or her diagnostic profile. It represents the best way to grow professionally by taking into account personality features and adapting prior experience to the current professional activities. It needs to be emphasised that the roadmap for realising one's potential is developed using the competency-based methodology. For example, for each component of the professional growth, potential profile corresponding to *personal development competencies* is designed that incorporates competencies fit for developing, updating and compensatory ones (Fig. 1). The first ones are designed on the premises of making the maximum use of the learner's personal abilities in order to create new professional growth opportunities.

The second ones aim to adapt prior practical experience to solving tasks that match the worker's professional goals. The third ones are designed as modes of professional behaviour that could compensate for the manager's personal limitations (weaknesses).

Managers are able to quickly master self-development competencies because they agree with their personality traits, interests and career plans, provided there is a development programme that is aligned with the roadmap for realising one's potential. An *individualised learning trajectory* could serve as such a programme facilitating the accelerated and quality development of the competencies.

The individualised learning trajectory of a manager takes shape in the course of preparing customised learning tasks and methods of their execution that foster self-development competencies. The tasks are designed based on the subject content and interdisciplinary aspects of the appropriate fields of management and the experience of their application, including the home company. The resulting individualised learning trajectory reflects the manager's personality traits, professional and career goals. Figure 1 shows a step-by-step use of the described toolkit.

As shown above, building an individualised learning trajectory implies the creation of the core elements of self-learning that play a significant role in the manager's development: competencies as the necessary outcome of the learning process aimed at professional development, corresponding learning tasks, web-based scientific content and subject-specific and interdisciplinary learning tasks.

Reciprocally, another training customisation project is crafted that takes into account the interests and needs of the organisation. As a rule, serious businesses are well aware of their issues and development needs and address corresponding challenges. If they are not, personnel training customisation is not only impossible, it is pointless.

A manager's *need to grow professionally* is assessed through the analysis of current efficiency issues and emerging professional tasks. Juxtaposing the needs with the present level of qualification of a manager shows whether he or she delivers on her present production commitments and is capable of dealing with new tasks.

An energy company puts together a request for tailored coaching for a manager by identifying competencies that are required for increasing its productivity and addressing emerging tasks. A training request for one manager will specify one list of competencies, while another request for a different manager will contain another list of competencies, when, for example, the person in question is a candidate for a new key position in the company.

Designing a corporate version of the individualised learning trajectory of a manager is done in a similar way but with the use of a different set of tools as demonstrated in Fig. 2.

The final phase of designing the individualised learning trajectory of a manager is the integration of the two projects. The integrated version of the individualised learning trajectory is created with the direct engagement of the manager. It is a combination of the same elements as listed above: necessary competencies, learning tasks, web-based scientific content and subject-specific and interdisciplinary learning tasks that provide for the manager's professional growth.

The integration of the projects can produce two essentially different results. The first one is when the project built upon the interest of the company and another one built upon the interests of the worker coincide or are close in content. It is the perfect situation because it indicates the employee's motivation and determination to develop his professional skills that are needed by the energy company. Such employees are ready for self-learning, and, more importantly, they are ready to use the results of their self-learning efforts to improve their professional skills and productivity. It is advisable to provide all-round support and encouragement to such workers because investment in them pays off quickly and in spades. Integrating the content of the two projects does not pose much difficulty and produces an optimum learning trajectory. Preparing web-based content and providing methodological support for it are the most labour-intensive parts of creating a personalised continuing education programme based on the integration of the personal and corporate projects for the individualised learning trajectory.

The second possibility is when two projects are radically different content-wise. In this case, it becomes problematic to reconcile production needs and the employee's professional development needs. There are two ways of integrating the learning trajectories that are so different: one is to simply put them together, and the other one is to find a compromise integration solution. The first option essentially means that integration is impossible and results in a decision to implement both learning trajectories successively. The second option implies that the projects could integrate when some parts of each of the two projects are dropped. The resulting trajectory is a loose combination of two projects that, to a certain extent, means a longer learning path and does not fully meet the expectations of both sides involved. The compromise-based integration is not only more challenging to achieve, but it is also fraught with the risk that the manager may not be ready to independently master the suggested trajectory or may not be motivated enough to apply the results of self-learning efforts for increasing his productivity.

4 Conclusion

For managers whose own learning trajectory coincides with or is close to that generated by their company, this instrument becomes an almost perfect means of their professional development and can also be a robust career development strategy [3]. When individualised learning trajectories drawing upon employees' personal professional plans (career goals) disagree considerably with the corporate request, it might be reasonable to first find another position for them and then make an attempt at integrating the two trajectories and creating conditions for self-learning. Of course, the choice of jobs that would match the employee's own learning trajectory is limited, but if the energy company manages to find an appropriate position, it will get an extra chance to improve the quality of its human resources. If no such job is available, then, obviously, it makes no sense for the company to invest in the professional development of the manager.

Individualised learning trajectories are a tool that enables effective planning of corporate training as well as a more effective use of staff resources and the personnel development budget of an energy company. Both functions of the tool make it possible to improve management effectiveness by means of enhancing the professional competence of managers and other staff members and, therefore, increasing the quality of human resources in the company.

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