



10 principles of self-managed learning

Your Quick Reference Guide to the 'Holy Grail' of L&D!

What's this about?

As budgets are squeezed and individuals are demanding that learning be accessible in the time, place, pace and format that they want and need it, more organisations are realising the power and potential of self-managed learning (SML). But what does it mean and how do you make it available in your own organisation. This document provides 10 key principles for self-managed learning to help you move your organisation towards this 'holy grail' of L&D.

Why it's important to you

Technology is moving at pace, organisations are moving at pace and individual expectations are moving at pace. It therefore follows that to continue to add value, L&D professionals also need to move at pace. This document is a 'must read' for all L&D professionals who want to be at the forefront of business strategy.

Summary of the information you'll find in this document

- 1** A description of what is meant by Self-Managed Learning
- 2** 10 Principles of Self-Managed Learning
- 3** Ideas for action to explore your own organisations approach to SML
- 4** Examples of other organisations approach to SML

Ideas for Action

- 1** What messages does your organisation give about ownership of learning and how is this reflected in the processes and infrastructure that support learning?
- 2** How much are your L&D professionals a conduit to SML, what could you change to improve this?
- 3** How much learning in your organisation is just in time? What would need to change to improve this percentage?
- 4** At the end of today write down a list of everything you have learned - I bet it shocks you!
- 5** Think of something you need to learn then see how many learning solutions you can find for that topic (think YouTube, Apps, e-books and so on).
- 6** What could form a Learning on the Loo topic in your Organisation - are you brave enough to try it?
- 7** Go onto the internet to research something. When you find something of interest, ask some people to come and see what you have found, take a note of the pleasure you get in sharing such 'treasure finds' and the ensuing discussion!
- 8** How are face to face solutions used in your organisation are they icing on the cake or just a mish mash of ingredients for the cake?
- 9** Look at the reward and recognition processes in your organisation, does learning feature and if so does it feature enough to swing the balance in favour of SML?
- 10** Ask yourself - who are the learning role models in your organisation and where do they sit in the hierarchy?
- 11** Look at your own company website - what does that tell you about your organisations approach to learning!

Introduction

Self-Managed Learners...

seek, select, consume and covet learning at every opportunity

You have probably heard the term Self-Managed Learning or SML, but what does it mean?

In a nutshell SML is about individuals taking responsibility for their own learning and development and managing the achievement of learning themselves.

This approach requires individuals to be dedicated and committed to their own development and to be the active driver of all activity to ensure learning needs are met. Anyone who has been delivering face to face training on a regular basis will have their own story about the 'prisoner', the person who turns up for a training course because their boss told them to, or it was mandatory or remedial! This type of approach is rarely going to achieve a satisfactory outcome for trainer or learner and can lead to very inefficient and expensive use of resources. There are no prisoners in self-managed learning; the proposer and learner are one in the same person.

This document contains 10 principles which underpin and enable the SML culture in organisations.

1. Learners Own Their Own Development

It is simple to say but what does it mean. Traditionally in organisations individuals are directed to learning by others. Their manager may use their job description to outline the skills they need in their role, their performance is assessed and further areas of development are highlighted.

The organisation may also have a list of mandatory learning their people should complete and a skills or competency framework outlining the skills and behaviours for a grade or for promotion. Then members of a profession may also have development suggested by heads of profession or professional bodies. I am sure this is familiar to many of you reading this article. Whilst individuals are included in decisions about what learning they undertake, the ownership and responsibility is often perceived as either a responsibility of L&D professionals, their manager or a joint responsibility between these two and the individual. In self-managed learning, individuals own their own development, others may signpost, advise, agree and authorise but ultimate ownership sits squarely with the learner.

This means that individuals willingly take responsibility for all aspects of their learning journey which includes:

- 1** Deciding what they need to learn
- 2** Deciding how they will learn it (where, when and in what format)
- 3** Understanding why they are undergoing a particular piece of learning
- 4** Ensuring that the learning they are seeking is achieved and applied effectively
- 5** Committing to an on-going learning journey in which they constantly seek to enhance and refresh their knowledge
- 6** With respect to learning in relation to their work they also ensure that the learning they undertake is done so in the context of the organisation, their industry and potentially the profession in which they operate.

What messages does your organisation give about ownership of learning and how is this reflected in the processes and infrastructure that support learning?

2. L&D Professionals Signpost Learners

In the past L&D professionals have been looked to as the experts in the subject matter in which they train, they had the experience, the qualifications and the theory. They were totally immersed in their area of expertise and shared this through formal learning solutions. The world has moved on with social media and websites which mean that the information is available at the 'swipe of a finger (or voice command)'.

In their day to day life people have an expectation of instant knowledge, instant gratification of need and a myriad of choice about where, when and how they access these solutions. What is clear is that individuals don't have the time, patience or inclination to wait for the professional to be available to consult. Hence they go looking for solutions themselves. The problem is that with so much information out there, are people looking in the right place, are they absorbing the right (correct or appropriate) information? Are people able to discern fact from opinion and reliable source from creative fiction?

The role of the L&D professional in SML is now to signpost and guide people to enable them access their learning from reliable sources. Sometimes these are internal resources and often they are external to the organisation. The L&D professional enables SML by acting as the conduit, linking people to knowledge sources, networking contacts, search tools and then helping them translate the information into pragmatic solutions they can apply in the workplace. This approach is already permeating into schools and universities where 'homework' has been turned on its head. Previously students learned the theory in class then practiced it at home (on their own). Now modern thinking means that they research and study the theory at home and come into class to practice and apply it in exercises and role play. This enables the consolidation of learning to take place in an engaging and challenging environment where the people with experience are on hand to answer questions and aid the translation of theory into practice.

**How much are your L&D professionals a conduit to SML?
What could you change to improve this?**

3. Just in time learning

Organisations and individuals alike rarely have the time to wait on the availability of training courses which may be run only quarterly, often learning is needed to coincide with the commencement of a key project or piece of work, or to meet an immediate learning need following a change of job role. Outside work people have an expectation that they can go on line and find and answer to any question they can ask (try typing some weird questions into a search engine such as Google or Youtube and see what comes up). Teenagers these days are more likely to ask Wikipedia than ask their parents for information, the on-line solution is king and real people are just backup!

For learning to be credible this approach needs to translate into the workplace but how?

To emphasise how this approach can work in an organisation it is worth looking at how Google themselves approach learning. Here are some key elements of their approach as described by Ben Connell leadership and organisational development specialist based at Google's London Office. Google believe that people are diverse and highly motivated with an inherent interest in innovation, creativity and learning. They believe that 'Googlers' (their endearing name for people who work at Google) want to solve most of their learning needs themselves and the role of Google's EDU (the learning group) is to enable this. Ben describes an iceberg with only the tip above the surface of the water, he said the bit under the water is the learning Googler's take care of themselves, the bit above the water is the learning they need help with and EDU support. In essence he says that Googlers 'own their own development'. When Googlers learn their first port of call is web search, news, blog, books, YouTube, Google Maps. Their second port of call is feedback from peers, mentoring, authors@Google, GLearn Courses and GUTS (this final bit being when they ask for help).

**How much learning in your organisation is just in time?
What would need to change to improve this percentage?**

4. Learning is through a wide variety of different methods

You can probably recall people who are focussed and effective at managing their own career development, you may yourself be one of these people. If so, you will be aware that their learning does not consist of just one form of learning but rather a kaleidoscope of different learning opportunities which have suited their particular context and need at any point in time.

This is the principle at the heart of self-managed learning.

Individuals seek out and utilise a myriad of sources and opportunities to learn, rarely waiting for the learning to come to them but rather searching and capitalising on the resources available to them.

In addition to traditional sources such as classroom training, coaching, mentoring, e-learning and reading manuals, people will also seek learning from the internet, social media, peers, job shadowing, challenging projects, professional networks (and events), reverse mentoring, secondments, job moves, loans to other projects, volunteering and so in.

In short, SML's seek and find learning at every opportunity, not a day goes by without learning taking place (and being recognised as learning). In addition they reflect on their learning, can articulate what they have learnt and know what type of learning is most effective for them.

**At the end of today write down a list of everything you have learned -
I bet it shocks you!**

5. Delivery platform mirrors the learners own experiences

When individuals are at home they access a variety of platforms such as a PC, Laptop, Tablet, Iphone and so on. Information is gained through web pages, social media, apps, networks, gaming networks and e-books to name but a few sources.

Many large organisations understand that organisational IT should encompass technology used by individuals at home and these should be able to be 'plugged' into organisational networks rather than the clamp down/firewall risk averse approach currently taken by many organisations. **Does yours?**

As the world moves towards greater numbers of faster, varied and mobile platforms, learning solutions need to keep pace. The expectation of SML's is that learning will be available and accessible via a variety of platforms and at a time and place to suit them (which usually means they can access information evenings, weekends, night shifts, at home, abroad and just about anywhere).

Think of something you need to learn then see how many learning solutions you can find for that topic (think YouTube, Apps, e-books and so on).

6. Peer to peer learning is key

The majority of learning about your work is done on the job, therefore the power of enabling peer to peer learning is evident but often not fully utilised. To promote a culture of SML, organisations need to make it ok to ask and to learn from each other AND passing on knowledge needs to be as natural to the CEO as it is to middle managers.

It is worth considering Google again for some ideas of how this can be really powerfully integrated into an organisations culture. There is a library of books by Googlers called authors@Google, they also have G2G training - which is 'Googler' to 'Googler' training and G2GTV (which is exactly as the name implies). There are opportunities for people to try new things such as new positions, short 'bungee' assignments, 20% projects (where you spend 20% of your time progressing a Google project which you think you can learn from), volunteering assignments and apprentice programmes. They also have Learning on the Loo, where posters are put up in the Loo's to enable people to learn whilst they 'erm...perform! In addition people can ask questions and talk to anyone, new employees sit down and have discussions with directors and crucially there is a lot of trust between employer and employee, there is no restriction on web access!

**What could form a Learning on the Loo topic in your Organisation -
are you brave enough to try it?**

7. Learning is an expectation of the day job

With SML, learning is not an add-on to the day job, it is not something to be fitted in around the workload, rather learning is part of, and integral to, working. You can't work without learning and you learn whilst you are working. With every assignment the SML looks for opportunities to learn, to practice and to enhance their understanding.

When people take time out to research something on the internet, undertake a piece of e-learning or follow a Twitter feed it is not seen as 'sloping off' but as crucial, critical and integral to their work. People are encouraged and proud to share sources of learning with others and to open their learning to positive challenge and discussion.

Go onto the internet to research something. When you find something of interest, ask some people to come and see what you have found, take a note of the pleasure you get in sharing such 'treasure finds' and the ensuing discussion!

8. Face to face solutions are interactive, live experiences to engage and explore with practitioners

With SML some organisations view the face to face solution as the solution of last resort yet conversely, the face to face option can provide a stimulating live experience that moves and engages people. It can be a catalyst for change or it may be used to consolidate learning to ensure individuals are able to pragmatically apply (and transfer their learning) into different situations and scenarios.

In the context of SML, face to face solutions are the 'icing on the cake', the 'added value, the 'glue that binds the knowledge into skill'. By combining SML and a live experience the time people attend face to face solutions they are ready and willing to apply their learning to date and leverage maximum value from it!

How are face to face solutions used in your organisation are they icing on the cake or just a mish mash of ingredients for the cake?

9. Learning is part of your engagement strategy

You know an organisation is embracing SML when it recognises and rewards SML achievements. This is where organisations really need to put their money and their culture where their mouth is. If learning is important then how is this reflected in how the organisation recognises people?

Are qualifications celebrated, is application of learning applauded, is time taken to learn as accepted as time taken for meetings, do meetings have an agenda item on learning, do CEO's talk about their learning, do job interviews explore recent and on-going learning? If learning is not seen to lead to recognition and success then why should people bother?

Look at your engagement strategy, does learning feature and if so does it feature enough to swing the balance in favour of SML

And Finally....

Whenever I go to a new organisation, I trawl around organisation's website to see how they approach learning. I ask myself, is learning in all its forms applauded, or is the focus on formal programmes or worse still is it not mentioned at all?

**Look at your own company website -
what does that tell you about your organisations approach to learning!**