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Advance

Finding time for learning in a time hungry world

By Julie Wedgwood

Many working people often comment that they are just too busy to invest any time in their own development. The list of regularly heard excuses include having too much work to do, pressing deadlines to meet, an inability to find a quiet place or escape constant interruptions and, particularly at the moment, the constant stress of making sure they are performing and seen to be performing as they try to retain their job. Other people feel that it's up to their employer to organise personal development activities or training. Add the current economic climate to the mix, and you'll find many workers reporting that management are disinterested in developing their staff because of the current squeeze on budgets.

But if workers really are too busy to: join a short webinar (or watch the recorded version); download a podcast; read a blog, book or magazine article or; watch a short clip on YouTube, just how are they managing to keep up with what's changing in their world of work? And why do many workers seem to wait for their employers to provide on-going skills and career development opportunities? That might have been the model in the 20th century. Now nearly everyone can access relevant content, for little or no charge, that will help to develop their knowledge and skills to support their current job role, prepare for a promotion or further their career.

This perceived lack of time for personal development often means that for many people, weeks and months can go by in the daily grind of life with no perceptible growth in the skills or knowledge that could contribute to their career. Frequently, this is because we see skills development as something that happens in a formal way, such as by attending a seminar or conference or sitting through an e-learning course or accredited development programme. So despite the fact that most workplace learning takes place serendipitously, we don't attach any merit to it because our mind-set for valuing what we learn is programmed to only consider formal training.

Over the course of this article, I'm going to show you that training doesn't have to be time or cost hungry and can still achieve the results desired by managers and employees alike.

“It's how we spend our time here and now, that really matters. If you are fed up with the way you have come to interact with time, change it.”

Marcia Wieder

Find 15

Find 15 is an informal development programme that I instigated many years ago when I was managing my first team. Back then, as now, there was little money available in the budget to pay for courses that would deliver better skills and team performance. So having met a brick wall when asking for additional finance for staff training, I decided to try something different.

I allocated each member of my team 15 minutes per day (seventy five minutes per working week) to focus on improving their skills. I looked at the skills improvement required by each individual and scheduled 15 minutes of time, daily into everyone's working week. During this time, they worked through a programme of resources and materials that I selected on the basis of how well they related to our business goals and the skills that they personally needed to develop.

My team kept a record of the learning that they did, including their observations on the extent to which it improved their own skills and impacted on their performance. If they failed to use their allotted 15 minutes each day, they lost it. They couldn't add it on to the next day.

“The bad news is time flies. The good news is you're the pilot.”

Michael Altshuler

The prospect of spending 15 minutes doing something to improve themselves within their working day was something that took the team a bit of getting used to, hence the structured programme at the start. But once they got going they started adding in their own topics and finding their own material so that they eventually took control of their own learning. For that original team, **Find 15** became a habit that continues today.

The original **Find 15** idea has been repeated many times within a variety of organisations to help them find time for personal and professional growth. My original rule of “use it or lose it” for each day's **Find 15** didn't last long and there have been many situations over the years for which it has been sensible to be flexible in order to make sure that the 75 minutes per week can be used to best effect. For instance, attending a one hour webinar and spending 15 minutes writing up what was covered might be the best way for a member of staff to use their allocation for one week.

With the advent of the internet and the mass of information now available, anyone can create their own **Find 15** programme and fit it into their working day simply by making a commitment to ring fence 15 minutes each day. Mobile technology has made this even easier, as has the acceptance of informal learning. However, within organisations big and small, setting up a **Find 15** programme requires both line managers and staff to buy into the idea.

How to get staff and manager buy-in

In large corporates, I've run **Find 15** marketing campaigns to raise awareness of **Find 15** and to encourage staff (and their line managers) to participate. However, one of the best ways of getting this adopted is simply to talk about it. After all, look at the numbers:

- 15 minutes per day = 75 minutes per week
- Assuming 200 working days per year:
 $15 \times 200 = 3,000$ minutes
- $3000 \text{ minutes} / 60 \text{ minutes} = 50$ hours
- $50 \text{ hours} / 7.5 \text{ hour working day} = 6.66$ days

What employee wouldn't want over six full working days-worth of personal development every year? Many managers would not really notice if 15 minutes were deducted from the working day: if you think about how long staff can spend making drinks for each other or having corridor conversations, time is often frittered away without anyone noticing.

However, training doesn't just only take time out of employees' working days. From experience, line managers require some guidance to help them find relevant learning material to which they can direct their staff. This direction is important during the early stages of the programme as it will help employees to use their time wisely but this requires real engagement by the line managers. Managers need to identify what skill deficiencies their staff currently have, as well as keep an eye out for what skills they might need to develop now, and for the near future.

Managers are likely to resist engaging with **Find 15** if they feel that such a programme will create more work for them – but finding materials for a **Find 15** programme doesn't need to occupy too much time. Often all it takes is for managers to sit down and talk to their employees about what areas they might like to improve and then to suggest or signpost resources that already exist within the organisation or that can be accessed externally. It is amazing how many line managers just don't realise the wealth of learning material that already exists within their organisations. Sure, its existence will have been

communicated to them at one point (probably by email), but the likelihood is that the email got overlooked or flagged for a later review that never rose to the top of their ever expanding 'To Do' list.

Fellow line managers can often be a great source of relevant content. For example, what communities of practice are they personally engaged in? What sources do they get their information from? What are the books, magazines, blogs, associations etc that they trust? Line managers probably receive more information and invites to external events and conferences by email, post and through personal networks than they can possibly read through and examine on their own. If they directed their staff to these valued sources, this constant flow of information could be shared amongst the team, relieving pressure on the line manager and giving him/her the time to research further sources of information that will help their team.

Aside from the fact that workplace training need not take up a great deal of people's time, it is also worth pointing out to managers, that the personal development gained by programmes like **Find 15** will benefit them, their team and their business performance. A crucial part of the **Find 15** programme is that employees must record what they do with their 15 minutes and most importantly, whether any of the time invested has had an impact on their performance. For instance, if a member of staff spends one or two of their weekly 15 minutes reviewing a video that teaches them how to use Excel Pivot Tables, what impact would that have? In many offices, there is usually a resident "expert" who knows how to use some of the more complex Excel features. This "expert" often gets repeatedly interrupted by requests for help. Providing less confident staff members with a video that guides them through the process (and which they can refer back to repeatedly if necessary) would not only improve the staff member's performance (because they can now use Pivot tables without help) but would also deliver a secondary benefit of reducing the number of interruptions received by the resident office "expert."

Small changes like this can really add up to a significant difference over time. By focussing on the outcomes

of small chunks of targeted learning, the individual, their manager and ultimately the organisation can review the impact of the **Find 15** programme in real terms and not in terms of a happy sheet that measures little more than the attendee's satisfaction with the trainer or facilitator!

A **Find 15** programme can be used within large corporates to help staff take immediate and positive steps to address issues identified in their appraisal interviews. All too often, the agreed development plan from an appraisal can take months to materialise when formal training is seen as the only "answer." By the time the appropriate training courses are found, funded and arranged, the employees' post-appraisal meeting enthusiasm is likely to have died away. Employees are more likely to be motivated to engage with any training discussed in their appraisal meeting if time is set aside a short time after their meeting, when the appraisal and the reasons for development are still fresh in their mind. In this case, a series of short informal learning pieces that the employee can work on over time would be ideal.

Find 15 can also help managers to ensure that development promised during an appraisal is actually delivered. Good appraisal systems can be derailed by a lack of follow through by line managers who schedule the time to do the appraisals and then forget to actually deliver on the actions agreed. This is true in working environments where a heavier emphasis is placed on conducting appraisals than is placed upon carrying out any of the arising actions points. Sadly, this "tick in the box" staff appraisal mentality still persists in some organisations. **Find 15** can help managers to understand that executing the actions agreed in appraisals is not only their responsibility but that they will reap the benefits. Complaining that they have to wait months for HR to review all the data and organise a course is no longer a valid excuse. Of course, managers aren't the only ones we need to convince...

What will employees think?

A **Find 15** programme may be seen by some as a cheap alternative to "proper" training and some employees still view being sent on a training course as a perk. Taking away a perceived perk may not be popular, but these days few

organisations can afford the training course junkets of the late 20th century, hence the rise of e-learning and synchronous learning. It is misguided to think that a set course can cover every member of staff's requirements. Everyone's development is at different stages, and people will have different outcomes in mind. Losing the "sheep dip" mentality is easy if everyone has their own on-going programme that is personal to their job role and team, and is controlled by the individual and their line manager. Implemented in the right way, **Find 15** can provide targeted skills development for workers and motivate them to take control of their own learning rather than stagnating whilst they wait for their employer to deliver a ready made "one size fits all" solution. I am not suggesting that formal training doesn't have its place, but rather that the modern "knowledge worker" needs informal learning and performance support as well. This is supported by [Charles Jennings](#) in his use of the 70:20:10 model and the research of [Tom Gram](#).

Find 15 also works for individuals who either work for themselves or find themselves in an environment where management support for the development they want is not forthcoming. In this situation, self-motivation is the key to a successful **Find 15** programme.

Finding your own Find 15

There are three core ingredients to a successful **Find 15** programme:

1) Good communication between the line manager and their staff

This is especially true at the start of the programme. The line manager must be very engaged; make sure that their employees are using the time allocated; that the required resources are available, relevant, practical to use and; that there are no technical barriers. As the programme becomes established, an open communication channel will allow staff to suggest content that they want to study as well as take direction from their manager. In time, managers should find that running a **Find 15** programme requires a lot less input from them, as staff begin to take control of their own learning.

2) A commitment to scheduling Find 15 time in advance and making sure it is respected

If the time has to be rescheduled try and make sure it is rescheduled into the current week. I have never let people carry time over to the next week. Once you start doing that for one person everyone else starts doing it and then the programme slides back into a cycle of everyone never being able to find the time again.

3) Proper recording of the Find 15 activities and outcomes

In the early days we kept paper records, but these days (particularly when developing team skills) I've used wikis that all team members can contribute to. This helps everyone to see how everyone else is developing and so fosters an atmosphere of support and sharing (particularly if links to resources are included). When employees see what resources their team members are using, they can discuss the merits of them using these resources with their line manager. By giving staff the opportunity to begin identifying useful content for themselves, you will encourage them to start taking control of their own learning (this links back to point 1, above). A private blog that can be shared with a line manager is a good alternative where **Find 15** is being used by individuals as a tool for personal development. For individuals who are managing their own **Find 15** programme, I thoroughly recommend that you record the content and outcome of each set of 15 minutes in a diary or blog. By entering the activities undertaken each day and then reflecting on them at some later date, you can record any outcomes and further plans. It's amazing how much you can demonstrate that you have gained in a year, especially if you are already keeping a professional development record for any associations or bodies that you belong to!

What content should my Find 15 programme consist of?

I always recommend joining communities of practice, following the leaders in your industry on Twitter and following relevant LinkedIn discussions. Reading blogs, journals and magazines is also a great way to start getting motivated to improve your knowledge in a particular area.

If you're running your own **Find 15** programme, you might find that your daily 15 minutes is taken up finding valuable material. Train journeys, airport lounges, buses, coaches and cars are my regular study zones. Travel time can be a rich time for catching up on web-based stuff (if internet access is available) but podcasts, white papers and a good book (whether digital or in print) are just as portable these days. Thank goodness for mobile technology!

Finally, should I Find 15?

Find 15 is simple to do, time and cost efficient and can be as informal as you want it to be. Most importantly, it's personal to each individual, whether they are doing it within a work organised programme or on their own. And when you bear in mind that the learning outcomes and benefits to the business or individual are tracked and valued, it's hard to refuse to give it a try. Yes, not everyone will make the most of the opportunity by using their time wisely. But for those who get into the habit (which usually means, those who have line managers who support, encourage and cajole them in the early days) the rewards for the individual, their team and their organisation are tangible. It can also provide a great mental break during the working day and often stimulates a lot of cross-organisation discussion on skills development. In a couple of my clients, **Find 15** has become so much part of their culture that formal training courses even include scheduled time for staff to do their **Find 15**. One thing that I've learnt from doing this over the years is, once workers get into the **Find 15** habit, they take control of their own learning and I believe that is something really worth fostering.

“Ordinary people think merely of spending time. Great people think of using it.”

(Author unknown)



Julie Wedgwood specialises in turning the theories and strategies developed by L&D Leaders into practical real world solutions that harness learning technology to help organisations to work and learn smarter. Julie views technology as a workplace learning enabler and believes that organisations can improve employee effectiveness, accelerate skills transfer efficiency and improve productivity within the workforce by using a rich mix of formal, informal and collaborative approaches.

Julie has over 25 years experience of teaching and training across a wide range of industry sectors in the UK, Europe and the USA. She has gained recognition as one of the leading learning architects for blended learning. Her current work involves customers in both the public and private sector and she is in constant demand to help trainers and teachers upgrade their skills to blend technology into their teaching practice. Recently labelled “the trainer’s trainer”, Julie is known to practise what she preaches and has a down to earth attitude that makes her case studies and experiences valuable examples of good practice.

Julie is a fellow of the Learning and Performance Institute, is a member of their Advisory Board and is a regular conference speaker, awards judge and contributor to Twitter (@juliewedgwood).

Julie Wedgwood can be contacted on +44 07989 745771

Gray's Inn House
127 Clerkenwell Road
London
EC1R 5DB
t: 020 7092 8900
f: 020 7242 2757
e: info@saffroninteractive.com

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