Managing yourself

Introduction

Self-awareness is important for everyone. It enables you to make more choices, and exercise greater control over your life. Knowing and managing yourself also help you to manage and assist others in the workplace.

Managing yourself requires that you think about yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, personal and professional goals.

When you have completed this module, you should be able to

• identify your strengths and weaknesses
• set some personal and professional goals
• plan your own personal development
• enhance your career opportunities.

The main topics in this section are:

• Self-awareness
• Goal setting
• You and the organisation
• Professional participation

Self-awareness

Managing yourself is easy to say but (as we all know) harder to do!

This section looks at behaviours and attitudes, and how these can help in managing your day-to-day activities. Not only is this helpful in organising your own life, it also provides insight into what ‘makes other people tick’. This is useful if you have to supervise others.

Gaining a better understanding of yourself is a major step forward in building self-confidence. Lack of self-confidence is a problem for many people. Increasing self-confidence encourages you to take control of your life, helps decision-making, enables you to grasp opportunities and face challenges.

Being aware of your strengths and weaknesses, goals and ambitions, attitudes and values all helps in giving you control over your life.

The subtopics in this section are:

• Strengths
• Weaknesses
• Self-confidence
• Personal goals
• Professional goals
• Stages in life

**Strengths**

All of us have strengths or aptitudes which will help us in our life and work. Ideally, whatever we are doing, we can ‘maximise our strengths and minimise weaknesses’.

Being aware of what we like, what suits us and what we do well, helps in building confidence. Doing something we like and feel comfortable with contributes to a feeling of self-worth. With a positive self-image, we come across more confidently; we are more encouraging, and more successful.

With this increased confidence also comes greater ability to identify opportunities and go for them.

And remember, this applies to personal life and work.

Identifying strengths is a useful and positive exercise. Just listing your strengths, some of which might seem quite trivial, is an empowering exercise. You will be surprised how many you find if you think about it.

When was the last time you wrote down all the good things about you?

**Weaknesses**

Just as we have strengths, we also have areas of weakness. This may be due to individual motivations, desires, training, experience, and aptitude.

It is also important to recognise these areas and address them if they cause stress, or limit your career advancement, or impact on your home life.

Common problem areas that affect performance at work include:

• confidence in speaking at meetings or in making presentations
• dealing with clients in a confident manner
• writing reports or letters
• managing competing pressures of time and work
• not being able to say ‘no’ to requests for help.

Common problem areas that affect personal life include:

• not listening to others
• jumping to conclusions
• making assumptions
Self-confidence

Having confidence in yourself is extremely important, yet many of us find this difficult, particularly when we are young. Confidence means believing in yourself and your opinions; understanding that (like everyone else) you will sometimes be right and sometimes wrong, and that generally this does not matter.

Have the courtesy to respect other views, but don’t be afraid to see things differently. It is rare that situations are so ‘black and white’ that there can only be one opinion or one course of action.

Here is an excerpt from Rudyard Kipling’s poem (ignore the gender bias!). You can read the full poem on the Internet (www.bethel-college.edu/Faculty/johnsonr/if.htm). He shows clearly how self-confidence matters above virtually all else.

If you can keep your head when all about you Are losing theirs and blaming it on you; If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, But make allowance for their doubting too; If you can fill the unforgiving minute With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run, Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it, And - what is more - you’ll be a man, my son!

Personal goals

Clear short- and long-term goals are very helpful in building a sense of achievement, increasing confidence in your abilities, and giving you a sense of control over your life.

By spelling out goals in detail, you take a very big step towards achieving them.

It is important to have some easy, short-term goals you check off every couple of days, and longer, more demanding goals that provide a real sense of satisfaction when completed, but may take some time to do.

Professional goals

Just like personal goals, clear professional goals really help you make a positive contribution at work, and give you confidence in deciding priorities and meeting deadlines.

Often, professional goals have longer-term objectives which make them more difficult to achieve - things may change in the meantime. However, don’t let this prevent you from setting the goals. For reaching these bigger goals, break the activity into smaller chunks that are achievable in the short term. You can tick these off as you proceed towards your eventual goal.
And remember, simple things such as writing a daily 'to do' list can be very useful for small tasks. And ticking off the completed tasks is very satisfying!

Stages in life
What we want from life, and what is important to us, vary as we move through our lives. At one stage a well-paying job with good career prospects and long hours will be fine. Later maybe shorter hours and more security are important. Sometimes responsibility may be sought, at other times simple, repetitive work with few challenges will suit better. When we are young, perhaps excitement and adventure are important. When older, we may prefer predictability and contentment.

These differences need to be accommodated and understood by managers at work, and by individuals. We should not be anxious that such changes are negative. Rather it is usually a logical response to changed circumstances that makes us acquire different values as we grow in maturity.

Goal setting
We have seen that clear, easily understood and measurable goals for your personal and work life are important in achieving your aims.

Setting goals also builds confidence, creates a positive reputation at work, and reduces stress and tension in your life. Thinking through what you want to achieve, and how to do it, is a powerful tool in giving you control over situations.

The previous section concentrated on personal and professional goals in a general way. Much of the following material is relevant to your personal life, but the discussion is aimed primarily at helping you to manage work situations.

The subtopics in this section are:

- Short-term goals
- Long-term goals
- Prioritising goals
- Level of difficulty
- Conflict and supports
- Obstacles
- Aids
- Tasks
- Achievement
Short-term goals

Not all goals have to be major, long-term projects. In fact, it is essential to have a mix of goals in order to assess your progress. A large, long-term goal is really only a series of small, short-term goals.

For goals to work, they must be clearly expressed, and include some way of measuring whether you have achieved them. Do not set a goal of ‘providing a detailed report of all overdue loans as soon as I can’. Instead, spell it out: ‘I will produce an overdue loan report, sorted by time overdue, with details of borrower and items, by Friday, in order to send out all overdue notices the following Monday’.

It is easy to see whether this goal has been achieved (unlike the first version).

Long-term goals

These are usually bigger and more complex than short-term goals. However, they can also be broken down into smaller, achievable pieces.

Ensure you understand correctly the timeframe involved in achieving long-term goals. Because they may be finalised some time in the remote future, it is easy to put off doing anything straightaway. That is why it is important to break down the goal into steps with shorter timeframes. Otherwise, things suddenly involve a big rush - not the best way to do a good job!

With longer-term projects, check regularly with your supervisor to report progress, and also to ensure there haven’t been changes that could affect your final aims. Liaising with the supervisor may be as simple as an occasional email, chat over coffee, or a more formal ‘catch up’ meeting to discuss progress. Always talk to your supervisor if things seem to be slipping, or the deadline starts to look tight!

Prioritising goals

Often we are faced with a number of tasks, but limited time to do them all. Prioritising is necessary to ensure that things get done on time, and that the right goals are achieved in the right order. Remember, some things are urgent and important - so have to be given priority; others seem to be urgent but may not be important; and others may be important but not urgent - try to recognise these aspects of any job.

In order to prioritise, you need to be clear about the following:

- What is the deadline - when does the job need to be completed?
• How important is it - are others waiting on the outcome before they can go ahead with their work?
• If the deadline is missed what difficulty will it cause?
• How does this task compare with others I also have to do?
Remember it may be impossible to achieve everything in the given timeframe. Always discuss prioritising and deadlines with your supervisor if you are unsure.

Level of difficulty

Some goals are easier to achieve than others and thus will need less careful planning in the initial stages. One of the problems is recognising this. Sometimes the project may seem easier than it turns out to be. So look out for the following when starting a project or preparing a timeframe for its completion.

• How tight is the deadline - is it flexible enough to cope with unexpected circumstances or is it absolutely fixed?
• Do you have to rely on outside help - e.g., suppliers, other staff, use of particular facilities? If so, confirm these at the beginning of the project.
• Will you have dedicated time for this task or will your normal work still have to be done? If fitting in with your day-to-day work, is this a busy period for you?
• Are you quite clear on what needs to be done and by when? Can it be broken into smaller tasks?

Conflicts and supports

When thinking through your goals and how to complete them, try to recognise the factors that will conflict with reaching the goal, and those that will help you. Making the most of the supporting factors, and trying to minimise or eliminate the conflicting one, are major parts of planning for complex projects.

The sorts of things to consider are:
• conflicting work demands - too many things happening at once
• your personal life which can impact on how well you perform at work
• conflicting advice or information
• locating other resources that may be able to assist.

Obstacles

As we have seen, there are often difficulties in working through to a goal. Often the hard part is identifying the
them, avoid them, or take them into account in planning, even if nothing else can be done about them.

The important thing is not to let obstacles appear insurmountable, causing stress and loss of confidence. Look at obstacles in the following way:

- There is always a solution. Doing nothing is a solution if it has been properly considered amongst other options.
- Obstacles are rarely so overwhelming. Remember not to be unrealistic and expect to solve everything.
- Spell out the difficulty in writing - it helps to clarify the issue.
- Look for ways others can help you if you are stuck.
- Have a break. Go away and look at the problem later with fresh eyes.

Aids

As with obstacles, there are usually people or other resources that can help in meeting objectives on time. When looking at your goals and working out the best approach, make sure the following are taken into account. They won’t always be available or appropriate, but it is worth considering them, particularly for larger projects or those with a short deadline.

Does anyone else in your organisation have the information you need, more readily available? If so, can you approach them? Talk to colleagues or your supervisor if you are in doubt.

Would additional resources help - e.g., someone to help you, an extension of the completion deadline, or funds for a piece of equipment? If so, think through the implications carefully and discuss the problem with your supervisor.

Is it likely that someone elsewhere has already done this work, or a similar project, and you may be able to use their results? Check with your professional organisation, consult relevant literature, or contact similar institutions for advice.

Tasks

We have already noted the need to break down big goals into smaller achievable tasks. These should be simple enough to be more or less self-explanatory and have little need for further explanation. That way it is easy to delegate tasks, get people to help and understand what they are doing without having to ask you too often.

Tasks should:

- be simple, self-contained jobs that do not rely on input from others.
• relate directly to the overall goal in a very clear way. If this is not the case, ensure that the person doing the task understands its importance.

• not have a major quality aspect that you will have to check. What may be good quality for one person is not for another.

Make sure that the work is returned to you before the deadline - giving you time to review it and fit it into the completed project.

Achievement

One of the most important aspects of goal-setting is the ease with which the results can be assessed. Achieving goals, within the timeframe and to the standard expected, is a highly empowering process. Achievement builds confidence, and creates a feeling of competence that provides a firm foundation for undertaking new challenges.

Even if a goal is not achieved, it should be possible to see why not if it was laid out clearly. The reasons can then be examined, to determine whether anything could have been done about it, or if it was unavoidable (e.g., the weather was bad and the building work couldn’t start on time). Either way, you are more in control, and being able to see why something was not achieved is also very positive.

Personal development

Most of us have a picture of ourselves moving along in our careers. This may entail promotion and a steady rise in seniority. For others it will include changes in work patterns to fit into other aspects of your life. Again, increasing responsibility is attractive to some, while others prefer routine work that can be readily managed in an otherwise busy life. Whatever you want from your working life - and this will change over time - like your career to proceed.

Your personal development is primarily your responsibility. Others can help - e.g., your supervisor - but you have to select from the options available to you. There are also fundamental skills that make work easier and more effective, whatever approach you take. These skills, together with those covered in the previous topics, will assist you in reaching your work goals and enjoying the process - which is very important!

The subtopics in this section are:

• Personal development program
• Time management
• Stress management
• Motivation
• Networking
• Selling yourself
• Building a career
• Professional participation

**Personal development program**

Think about your goals - short-, medium- and long-term. Do you have the skills and knowledge to achieve these goals? Are there areas you need to improve? Are there things about yourself that hold you back? These are the questions you need to ask yourself in order to sketch out a program for yourself.

If you are not sure of the answers to these questions, ask friends, family, teachers, or work colleagues. In particular, if you work in an organisation, consult closely with your supervisor.

Once you have some idea of what you need in order to progress as you would like, think about how you can get these skills, attributes, or knowledge.

Is it as simple as a training course, or would it require more complex studies? Are you after broad generic skills to help in all sorts of situations - e.g., customer service skills? Or more specific training aimed at a particular job, e.g., using Kinetica?

Remember, specific skills are usually easier to acquire, but they limit your options. More general skills often take longer to acquire, but are more applicable to a wide range of work.

**Time management**

You can’t make more time, so you must make better use of the time you have. Remember, the problem is not that there isn’t enough time - it’s that you have given other things priority.

Try to prioritise tasks. Jot down the ones that have to be done - e.g., pick up kids from school; have parcels ready for the courier by 4pm. Then note the others that you want to do that day, in order of priority.

If you have a big job to do, break it into smaller tasks (remember goal setting?). Each day list one or more tasks that you will complete that day.

Manage others - you can’t stop someone chatting to you, but you can limit how long they do it.

Do not react to everything - some things can wait. Just because you enjoy doing something shouldn’t mean it always goes to the top of your ‘to do’ list.
Stress management

We all feel stress at times, from pressures at home or at work. While stress is virtually inevitable for most people, it is important to minimise it in order to reduce its effect on our day-to-day lives.

To control stress, try some of the following:

- Have realistic expectations - don’t set too high a target for yourself.
- Focus on successes, not failures.
- Remember: when things go wrong, will anybody remember or care in a year’s time?
- Accept that life can be difficult - it’s the same for everyone.
- Often you can’t control what goes on around you and how others deal with you. But you can control how you react to it all. Do not let others dictate your well-being.
- Physical exercise is a great way to relieve stress.
- At work, be reasonable - in your expectations of others and of yourself.

Motivation

Generally ‘motivation’ refers to the working environment - what motivates staff to perform well? But it can also apply personally - how do you stay motivated when you feel you can’t be bothered? The difficulty is that what motivates one person may not work with another - we are all different. However, the following actions are useful for most people, both at work and in your personal life:

**Praise:** Simple comments like ‘You did a great job with that’, ‘It’s looking terrific’, ‘You look really good today’ are often powerful motivators. Easy to do, but we often overlook this simple approach.

**Active listening:** That is, listening carefully to people. Concentrate on what they are saying, not your response. Respond carefully to what they are saying - make it clear that you care.

**Enthusiasm:** Try to approach tasks enthusiastically - look for the good points in them (there are always some!).

If the present situation is discouraging, keep going by planning your future. Think about a holiday or career change - write down some of the smaller tasks you can do now that may help. See the current situation as a temporary phase before the big change you are planning.
You and your boss

Getting along with your boss is important. You need to be regarded positively, and stay on good terms. It is difficult to be happy and do good work if you and your boss do not respect each other.

In order to build this relationship:

• Help your boss to be successful. This reflects on the staff as well.
• Appreciate your bosses’ world - the stresses and difficulties.
• Learn their strengths and weaknesses and work with or around these.
• Make sure you understand their expectations, timelines, priorities, etc.
• Talk to your boss. Know when to ask for help and when to use your own initiative.
• Be loyal and supportive - you expect it of them.
• Don’t just complain - offer constructive alternatives.
• Do good work and get on with your colleagues.

Networking

Networking is all about meeting others and establishing contacts who may be able to help in your career. They might offer advice, information, or direct support.

Meet people through:

• making an effort at work to mix outside your own section
• volunteering to help on different projects
• becoming involved in your work’s social club, if it has one
• attending work social events and mingling with staff you wouldn’t normally meet
• joining professional associations and being active - e.g., attending meetings
• visiting other institutions
• making contacts with your counterparts in other organisations
• always mixing outside your own group at training sessions, conferences etc.

Keeping in touch with new acquaintances - e.g., an occasional email on a topic of common interest - can help build a long and valuable relationship.
Selling yourself

We have already discussed strengths and weaknesses. The next step is to promote your strengths to others. There is no need to go into the weaknesses!

First impressions are important. Speak with confidence, even if you don’t feel it. Always offer to shake hands—no-one will ignore your offer, and it again suggests confidence. Concentrate when being introduced. Remembering names and positions is very important - people notice when you refer to them. Listen carefully to what others say - show real interest by nodding and commenting occasionally. Again, this creates a positive impression.

Never describe yourself as ‘just a ... student, clerk, temp etc.’. Phrase it positively: ‘I am currently studying to complete my ...’, ‘I am working here on a temporary contract and gaining valuable experience’, and so on. Think of a work-related anecdote that is amusing but also shows you in a positive light—e.g., you fixed something, dealt with a difficult client. This is not bragging, just making a good impression in a subtle way.

Building a career

Your career is your responsibility. Create a plan - short- and longer-term. Like any plan you should have clear goals and consider what can help, what may hinder you. Make sure your bosses know about your plans. Try to enlist their support in working towards them.

Other general strategies include:

- Be serious about the quality of your work.
- Be visible - make sure your bosses are aware of you.
- Present the right ‘image’ - dress, approach, style.
- Help your boss succeed or try to work for a ‘successful’ boss.
- Develop good personal relations throughout the organisation.
- Be as mobile as you can.
- Occasionally, take risks and branch out.

Professional participation

One important way to build a positive profile for yourself and expand your networking opportunities immensely is to participate in professional activities. Become involved with work-related associations and groups. Join a relevant organisation, go to its meetings, and volunteer to help. Small organisations always have difficulty getting secretaries, treasurers, etc - don’t be shy, volunteer. Others will
appreciate the effort you are making and value your contribution.

Through such activities you meet others with similar interests, and often more senior members of the profession who may be able to help you in your career.

Union membership is also valuable. Joining the relevant union is useful for a number of reasons, including the training and development opportunities that they offer.

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You and the organisation

Most of us work in organisations, even if they only employ a few people. Generally, we don't know the 'owner' of the business, or have a personal stake in the organisation. This means that we rarely have a strong emotional commitment to the job. Likewise, our employers rarely have a personal commitment to us. The relationship between you and the organisation is strictly business.

Remember - keep a balance between your work and private life. Work will not always meet your expectations, and sometimes you will feel let down. Again, keep this in perspective - there are also likely to be times when you will not give 100% value. Hopefully, it will balance out, and you will have a healthy relationship with work which will be fulfilling for you and make a positive contribution to the organisation. But it is only one part of your life.

The subtopics in this section are:

- Rights and responsibilities
- Organisational climate
- Ethical behaviour

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Rights and responsibilities

You have the following responsibilities to the organisation you work for:

- to perform work of an appropriate quality and quantity
- to work according to accepted standards
- to be loyal to the organisation and its aims
- to be honest, open and team-oriented
- to show respect and courtesy to co-workers and clients.

In return, the organisation has similar responsibilities:

- to be loyal to its employees
- to be open and honest in communications
- to provide a safe and considerate work environment
- to accept and appreciate individual differences
• to provide meaningful feedback and, when necessary, counselling
• to empower employees by involving them in decision-making.

Organisational climate

All organisations are different. Working in one will not fully prepare you to work in another. Each has evolved to meet its own environment and challenges. Thus working for the army or the police is quite different from working for the National Library or the local hairdresser. The reasons are obvious: they have different work to do, under quite different circumstances.

This can result in quite different policies, practices, and traditions, which may mean that while one workplace feels very comfortable for you, another is quite stressful - even though the work might be similar. Bear this in mind when applying for a job.

Ethical behaviour

Ethical behaviour can be difficult to pin down. What appears ethical to one person may not to another. However, regardless of the ‘grey’ nature of this subject, it is important to respect certain principles when dealing with others - individuals and organisations. One basic principle is to put yourself into the shoes of others. If you were on the receiving end of your behaviour, would you think it reasonable and appropriate?

In addition, many organisations have codes of ethics that new staff must read, and standards of conduct are laid down. Take these seriously: they are building blocks in creating the ‘shape’ of an organisation.