

Lifelong learning – what's in it for me?

By E. Leigh Olson

Leigh Olson was born in Canada but has called Australia home for many years and is the Director of Leigh Olson and Associates Pty Ltd, a human resources consultancy. Leigh is a teacher and qualified facilitator holding a Bachelor of Adult and Vocation Education and Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment. She practices what she preaches by continuing to undertake research and her own professional and personal development. She is a member of Australian Human Resources Institute, the Australian Institute of Management and holds Directorships on several Boards. She also spends much of her time coaching and mentoring others, as well as volunteering in both a personal and professional capacity.

The New Year has begun and many of us are still wondering what happened to 2003. As life continues to rush by at what appears to be an ever-increasing speed, many of you will be questioning whether you can afford the time to continue your education. My question to you is whether you can afford not to make time?

It would be easy for me to extol the link between continuing education and learning capacity but lifelong learning is so much more. Learning is an attitude that links closely with professionalism as an attitude and not just a set of competencies (Maister, 1997). It is the key to opening doors and giving yourself more choice.

Perhaps you are like me? I do not have a great ambition to be president of the world but I do want to be able to control my own destiny as much as possible and to give something back to the community I live in. In my area of expertise I would hope that my clients and peers view me as a professional whose undertakings and thoughts can be respected. I believe that continuing education has provided me with this level of professionalism.

As a single parent of two young boys and the owner operator of a small business, I really did not think I would find the time to continue my education. Nevertheless, a few years ago I began travelling down a road that has changed everything for me. I enrolled in a Certificate IV course and when that was completed, I undertook a degree part time which I have completed with first class Honours. I also began attending many networking functions and short courses for both personal and professional development. Currently, it feels as if I have come full circle as I am once again going through a self-questioning process as I decide whether to embark on my doctorate. What has this learning done for me?

This learning has increased my skills and understanding, it has improved my performance and given me the ability to respond to changing circumstances, it has changed my attitude towards myself and others by making me more open, responsive and flexible, and it has given me the structure upon which I can reflect on my experience as I continue to try to achieve self-mastery. Additionally, continuing education has given me the opportunity to problem-solve with like-minded peers and to meet many new and wonderful friends, both inside and outside my profession. In short, it has changed my life and I could not now imagine going back to a time when learning was not part of each and every day.

I will close this short article with a quote from Delors (1996). Lifelong learning is about 'encouraging the fullest development of the creative potential of each individual, in all its richness and complexity', which can only benefit society as a whole. Join me in my commitment to professionalism. Sign up for a course, meet new people, and make a difference!

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http://www.aamt.com.au/journals/Feb2004/4_lifelong_learning.doc
