

Career focus

Cross organisational learning

General practitioner Shera Chok, refreshed from her own experience at a football club, explains what cross organisational learning involves, how you might benefit from it, and how to organise it

Cross organisational learning is an exciting new concept that involves stepping outside your own organisation, such as the NHS, to learn from another organisation about a predetermined subject. The private sector leads the way in this by sending employees on secondments to improve their performance by learning from other organisations.

Public sector organisations have developed schemes to learn from private sector industries. For example, the heads, teachers, and industry (HTI) scheme has been running since 1986 to encourage senior teachers to spend up to a year with a local company working on various projects that add value to the company and the individual. Benefits cited are stronger links between schools and companies, new approaches to problem solving for both organisations, and insights into what employers want from future employees.

What is in it for you?

There are potential benefits for both individual and organisation. The individual learns new skills and explores his or her own resourcefulness in extracting useful information from an alien environment in a short time. It is also an opportunity to develop a new interest and contacts that may lead to a career change or further research in the future.

Every doctor needs a break from medicine once in a while. This scheme allows you to learn about something that interests you at your own pace. It is refreshing to see how others cope with the same problems you face, but in totally different ways. Be prepared to have your working practices and beliefs challenged. You are also ideally placed to get some frank feedback about the NHS.

Your organisation gains from the imported skills and knowledge, as well as a rejuvenated team imbued with a broader outlook and fresh viewpoint on key issues. The host company may

My week at Sunderland football club

I spent a week in the summer of 2000 with the Sunderland Football Club looking at teamwork and motivational techniques. I chose a football club because, like the NHS, its team members are its most vital resource. Both organisations work in highly pressurised areas under constant media and public scrutiny. Team members come from a variety of backgrounds, and it is up to their leaders to unite these individuals and produce good results.

It took about eight months to finalise the placement. For someone with no previous interest in football it was a baptism by fire. The contrast between my east London practice and the Sunderland football stadium could not have been greater. It was a glimpse into a different way of life, not just of the team itself but of the local fans and supporters. Having my daily, rather insular general practice routine totally shaken up was in itself rewarding.

I shadowed the team (filling training, toured the stadium, and interviewed various team members including players, coaches, the manager, personal assistants, physiotherapists, and grounds staff; all of whom contribute to the success of the team).

I learnt that respect, support, and loyalty are absolutely critical for successful teamwork and that mental strength is as important as physical ability. Other key factors for good team performance are having a clear vision and objectives for the long and short term future, mutual trust and respect among team members and the manager or leader, support for team members especially during difficult periods, and the manager and coaches knowing which approach to take and when.

What also struck me was the close relationship between the coaches, manager, and players. This contrasted with my experience of hospital medicine, where the managers (and often the consultants) are barely aware of junior doctors' existence. I am considering starting a course on sports medicine and will be keenly watching Sunderland's progress in the league.

also gain from your expertise and knowledge.

How much time away do you need?

A placement with an organisation outside the NHS could be seen as a "mini-sabbatical." Sabbaticals are becoming increasingly common in general practice and give doctors an opportunity to rest,

reflect, learn, and refresh themselves by taking an extended break from work. However, most sabbaticals are spent, working or studying in a medical setting, often because of funding restrictions. Thus, although there is the potential to step outside your environment temporarily, a complete break from medicine is extremely rare.

Benefits of cross organisational learning

- Acquire new skills and approaches to organisational problems
- Build links with and awareness of the external environment
- Challenge long held practices and beliefs
- Explore your ability to adapt and cope in a new environment
- Easier and cheaper to organise than prolonged study leave
- Refresh and energise yourself
- Reduce your stress levels
- Develop new interests, links, and contacts
- Opportunity to explore different career pathways

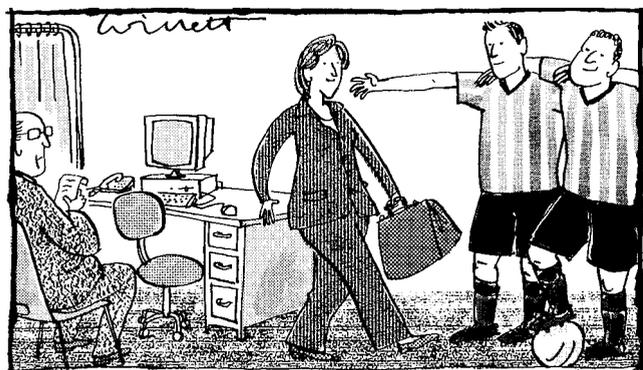
However, most general practitioners are allowed a sabbatical only once every five years or more, and these are often financially draining because it is standard practice for the doctor on sabbatical to have to cover the cost of a locum. The costs can exceed £1000 a week for a general practitioner, and prolonged study leave allowances tend to be much less than this. Practice life is also disrupted for 6-12 months. Sabbaticals are rarely taken by hospital staff:

In my experience shorter placements can be just as rewarding and easier to organise than a traditional sabbatical. A whole year or six months is rarely necessary, as a placement of up to a month can provide as much useful information as a longer spell. Even a week in a well planned placement can give valuable insights into the host organisation. This also avoids disruption to the practice and your family.

Why you should spend several weeks outside the NHS

Firstly, patients are now more educated, demanding, and aware of their rights. The quality of health services needs to improve, from the administration of appointments to the patient-carer interface. Poor standards of service are no longer tolerated. The NHS is first and foremost, a service industry. We are judged by the quality of our services, from the moment a patient telephones for an appointment to the final discharge from hospital. Other service-led organisations are rich learning resources that should not be ignored.

The NHS needs to modernise by learning from other organisations and importing new practices and skills that will improve services and patient satisfaction. Interprofessional or multidisciplinary learning is a key part of the NHS Plan. By extending this learning process outside the NHS, we stand to benefit by learning what works for other organisations and then modifying



and incorporating these practices into the health service.

Secondly, stress and burnout are common in the health profession. Short placements outside the NHS can be an effective break from your job and normal routine. It is a chance to test or cultivate your skills in communication, research, and self reliance.

Where do I begin?

Decide what you want from a placement. What problems do you face at work and what changes are likely to affect your team in the near future? What roles and responsibilities do you hold in your practice: Is there an organisation or company renowned for its success in this area?

How much time can you take off work? Placements may be in short bursts of a week or two or even a day a week for several months. Flexibility in planning and negotiation is the key. Study leave arrangements should be agreed from the start.

Discuss your proposed attachment with your practice or consultant and get approval for it. Stress the positive aspects of the placement—new knowledge and skills, lack of disruption to routine work, a refreshed colleague, links with a potentially useful ally, and potential solutions to a long-standing problem.

What can we learn from other organisations?

- Teamwork and leadership—From sports teams such as football or rugby teams or (corn expedition centres
- Staff management - From companies that have effective human resources, such as airlines
- Customer focus—From service industries such as restaurants and hotels
- Stress management - From sports tennis or other "high stress" environments such as banks and law firms
- Innovation and information technology From internet companies

Contact potential placement organisations. This can be time consuming and demoralising if rejection letters are all that return. Develop patience and a thick skin. Get advice on your writing skills and curriculum vitae. Make contacts and obtain advice from your local postgraduate dean. You can also apply for a Post Graduate Education Allowance (PLEA) if you can produce a clear plan listing the educational advantages. The BMA or royal colleges may also have valuable information, contact addresses, or even travel scholarships.

Plan the placement carefully: list your aims and objectives and produce a timetable of activities, including who you want to see and how you intend to extract the information you require—such as interviews, questionnaires, observation of meetings, etc. Read up about the organisation beforehand. Establish a named contact who will be responsible for ensuring that the placement goes smoothly. Conduct a literature search on the subject to find relevant or similar studies.

Keep a record or journal of your impressions or record your interviews as you go along. Do not trust your memory. If the placement goes well there is likely to be a vast amount of raw information to analyse. Initial impressions are important.

Observe how the organisation deals with the issues you are researching—for example, how it tackles poor performance in employees. Do not be afraid to ask searching questions. Your host organisation may also value your opinion or solutions to problems that it is facing.

Obstacles

The organisational and financial aspects of planning a short placement may seem daunting. Persuading your colleagues that this is a good idea is the first challenge. A far steeper learning curve and greater challenges will face you in your new placement as you come to grips with different or even conflicting work ethics, practices, and situations. It can be extremely difficult to get another organisation to take your proposal seriously without formal support and connections. Make use of any contacts you already have. The key is to have a clear proposal and a set of learning objectives listing the mutual benefits of your placement. It is important to explain why you have chosen a particular organisation to learn from (flattery helps) and to stress that you will respect areas of confidentiality.

Conclusions

Cross organisational learning is an exciting concept that could be developed in the NHS to facilitate the change and modernisation it desperately needs. There is growing recognition that we need time off work and opportunities to learn in innovative ways that will lead to real improvements in the health service. Instead of isolating ourselves from the outside world, we should be learning from the best organisations and expanding our horizons at the same time.

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I thank the Sir Edgar Williams Fellowship for support in my placement.

Further Reading

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Briefing

Career focus is committed to helping overseas doctors and so was delighted to help out when approached by German colleague **Christian Herzmann**.

"Considering that there are more than 20(10 German doctors in the UK it is surprising that the Anglo-German Medical Society (AGMS) is not better known among the British and German medical professions. Founded in 1959, it aimed to revitalise the bilateral relationship after the war. Ever since, annual scientific meetings have been held either in Britain or in Germany. This year's will be in Canterbury (September 6-9 2001).

"Although most British doctors meet several German colleagues during their training, very few doctors come in contact with the German medical system. The AGMS encourages and supports medical students who wish to take part in exchange programmes in Germany, as is currently offered at Manchester University. Other services include translations and personal advice for students and doctors. The most recent aim is to build up and strengthen a network of German doctors in the UK. For many German students and doctors the UK offers attractive working and training conditions. Good teaching, decent working hours, higher salary as a house officer, and a friendly working environment attract some hundred doctors each year.

To ease their start in the UK, the society runs a very useful induction course in cooperation with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (July 27-29, 2001). In workshops the new doctors will gain confidence in clerking and presenting patients in English and learn how to handle common on-call situations. Financial issues and career planning in both countries will be discussed. Further information at www.agms.de, info@agms.de, or Dr G Herzinann, Darlington Memorial Hospital, Darlington DL3 6FIN."

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