

Up with Skool!

The case for continuing to study – but on your terms

“If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.”

One of the basic tenets of being “in my prime” is that nothing (well almost nothing) is beyond us. We’re at a stage in our lives when we still have drive and ambition and are physically and mentally more than capable of achieving the goals we set ourselves. Not only that, but to maintain this state of affairs for as long as possible requires us to continue to invest in our health and our fitness and to ensure that we’re making maximum use of “ze little grey cells”.

Elsewhere on the **in my prime** site you’ll find guidance on the things to do to help ensure that you’re physically, temperamentally and emotionally equipped to continue to meet life’s challenges. Here we take a look at what education, training and personal development, whether formal or informal, can do for us and how we can access the kind that might best suit our needs. This can only serve as an introduction but should at least provide a few pointers.

There are many ways that we can stay mentally active. All of them have their places. Reading for pleasure, crosswords, su doku puzzles, bridge, chess etc are all valid ways to stimulate the brain and keep it active. However, in addition to these pastimes we may wish to take up some form of organised study either to learn new leisure pursuits or skills or to develop ways to assist us in our business venture or our employment, either current or future.

Working for yourself

Perhaps the most obvious immediate need, in our context, is for those who are starting or wanting to start their own businesses. If we’ve got an idea or technical skill we wish to exploit then we must consider whether or not our expertise is sufficiently advanced for us to make a living from it. Even if it is, does the nature of our work demand technical or professional qualifications or certification?

Then, in addition to having a good idea and being technically competent in its delivery, there exist a whole raft of business and managerial skills which probably need to be grasped in a very short space of time. We need to understand about marketing, about finance, about legal issues, about strategy, about managing people, about health and safety. The list goes on. So how do we embrace this?

Hopefully, we already have knowledge of some of these before we start but probably not all of them. For some of the more technical aspects we may be prepared to pay professionals to do the work for us. However, this isn’t totally satisfactory, certainly not in the longer term. We’re always likely feel insecure and uneasy. We’re likely to require many of the skills on an everyday basis and it would not be appropriate or affordable to keep running to our advisers at every opportunity. After all, we’re the ones whose business it is and we should have a handle on most things.

So how do we go about picking up the necessary expertise? We could go on specific, individual training courses, as and when, to pick up the skills as we feel we need them and as we feel able to devote the time. Alternatively, we could decide to study for a formal qualification. Doing this would not only give us the knowledge and skills but would also lead us to obtain a degree, or a DMS or MBA or membership of an appropriate professional body. This obviously involves us in a much greater commitment in terms of time and of money. However, the discipline of studying formally like this might keep us focused and we might also obtain the satisfaction, self-esteem and self-fulfilment that come with achieving success and gaining recognised qualifications.

Either way we need to be able to find the time and energy to devote to such activities. Furthermore, if we go to our local college or university we will have to travel and will have to be prepared to commit ourselves on a regular basis. This may not always be easy, particularly if we’re trying to juggle the demands of a business and a home-life at the same time. Are there other ways? One way might be to study at home by distance or flexible learning, possibly using the internet to obtain

materials and communicate with our tutors. This is a growing area and it means that we may be able to study at our pace and at times when it is convenient for us rather than the college.

The next stage in a career

Let's now look at another possible scenario. Suppose that you're in your prime and in employment working in an organisation. You may have reached a stage when you need to be planning the next phase of your life, hopefully with the encouragement and assistance of your employer. There could be various possibilities.

You may see yourself as having many years of work still to go before you're prepared to contemplate retirement and many more challenges to undertake. If so, it may be that refreshing or adding to your skills will help get you there.

On the other hand, perhaps you're approaching retirement and need to be preparing yourself for that. What are you going to do with that time? Should you ease down gradually? How will you organise your finances? What hobbies and interests do you want to take up or hone?

Or it may be that your firm is reorganising or relocating. Your employer and you together should be thinking about any study or personal development that you might benefit from to help you obtain new employment. However, if they do not feel able to help you then you will still have to think it through yourself anyway.

The world is changing fast and the knowledge and skills which brought us to where we're today aren't necessarily those which are going to take us forward into the future. As a minimum we're going to be expected to be computer literate. If we have not been regularly exposed to word processing, spreadsheets, e-mails and the internet then we must do a bit of catching up. It is not difficult if we've got the motivation, and the spin-off will be apparent not only in our working lives but also in our personal and domestic environments.

Study as a pleasure

Even if we don't need to study for work or business reasons there are plenty of good reasons to engage in organised learning of some kind. There is the mental stimulation; there is the acquisition of new or better skills; there is the opportunity to socialise, to meet new people and to travel and see new places.

The commitment of study

Nevertheless, before embarking on any formal studying we should do some thinking, some self-examination and some research, and ask ourselves a few questions.

Firstly, why are we doing it? Is it vocational study that we want, with well-defined outputs in terms of employment possibilities and expertise? Is it academic study, exploring a subject for its own sake and the pleasure derived from the pursuit of knowledge? Is it recreational? Are we doing it for social reasons or to develop or start new hobbies, for example cookery, art, photography etc?

Next we should ask ourselves whether our study leads to a formal qualification of some kind and how important is that in the overall scheme of things? Obviously if our study leads to recognised qualifications we must be prepared to take that study seriously. How much are we prepared to pay? What can we afford? Are there possibilities for financial assistance in the form of grants, scholarships or loans?

How much time are we prepared to commit to study? This could vary from the odd day or weekend, here and there, through regular part-time study up to full-time study, where it becomes the main activity in our lives, which may be possible for some people but may be not for many.

Is there any way that we can study in bite-size chunks? Some study requires us to commit to the whole course from day one. However, there are other, more flexible ways of studying whereby we could take a module, say in marketing, with or without formal assessment, and maybe clock up credits for it. Only later, when we've got the time or the inclination, do we need to decide if we want to take other modules and, gradually over time, we can build up to a full qualification at our pace. Furthermore, we may be able to obtain credits for prior learning done elsewhere or for experience that we have gained at work.

Do we want to live at home and study or would we like to travel as part of our education?

What kind of study suits us best? Do we like working on our own or with others? Are we good at taking exams or would we prefer coursework or the completion of a portfolio of our learning activities?

These then are some of the things to think about. And it's worth spending a bit of time over such matters. If you want the effort and the experience to be as rewarding and enjoyable as possible it is worth doing some prior investigation.

Here, at **in my prime** we're highlighting some other sites which might be useful in helping you with your deliberations. However, if you would like to contact us at enquiries@inmyprime.co.uk we will do our best to answer any questions you might have and point you in the right direction.

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