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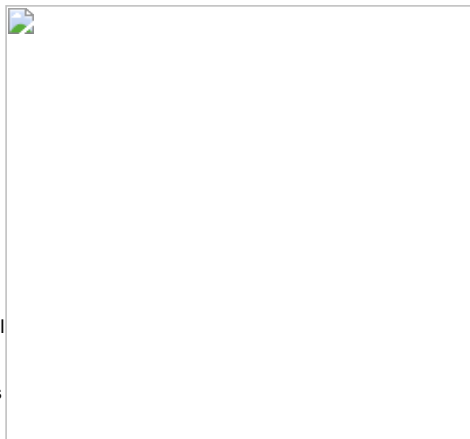
EI article

Teaching the teacher

With teaching standards under the spotlight, continuing professional development has never been more necessary. But there are serious barriers to uptake, finds Sunniva Davies-Rommetveit

In August one of the UK's largest recruitment firms, Giant Group, published the results of an illuminating survey. It found that 79% of supply teachers believe their pay will "increase or stay the same" in the coming year, a proportion 5% higher than last year.

The firm puts this down in part to staffing shortages, but also to the addition of new subjects to the national curriculum like programming and coding. With experience in such niche subjects in short supply, those with the right skillsets will be in demand, claims Giant, and that should translate to higher pay rates.



But how does a teacher go about obtaining such experience? For a start, one could take a 'continuing professional development' (CPD) programme. Such supplementary training can help teachers brush up on their knowledge, adapt to curriculum changes, and upskill in a host of other important work areas. It's also been provided by schools for years, usually via local education authorities, but also teaching schools and increasingly the private sector.

Major businesses clearly view CPD as worthy of their attention: blue chips like Discovery Education (which recently acquired Espresso Education), Capita and Babcock all have skin in the game. But this belies a more complex commercial picture. The UK's CPD space is still underdeveloped and subject to a host of unnecessary barriers. Where, then, do the opportunities for CPD providers lie, and how can they best capitalise on them?

A mishmash of courses

In reality, the term CPD covers a mishmash of programmes catering to a variety of needs. These could range from improving one's computer skills to understanding new curriculum changes. However, while diverse, CPD courses can broadly be categorised in three main groupings: 'horizon', 'skills' and 'problem-solving' CPD (see box below).

The different forms of CPD

Horizon CPD

Horizon CPD provides support and advice about new structural changes or incoming regulations that teachers should be aware of. Dominic Savage of BESA notes that there is a growing interest in this particular type of CPD following the recent changes to GCSE and A-level exams. "If a science teacher is not particularly confident in a new topic for instance, a CPD course, whether it's conducted in person or online, can help."

Horizon CPD courses can be quite difficult to get right, though. Companies must ensure that they keep abreast of upcoming alterations to curricula, and that they formulate courses that clearly and accurately depict those changes. The way to do this, says David Weston of Teacher Development Trust, is to build relations with subject teachers and experts. "Building these bonds is challenging but imperative. Teachers will likely be interested in attending courses like these as a result."

Skills CPD

Another major source of revenue for CPD providers are courses focused on improving teachers' skills, most commonly in IT. The constant updates in software operating systems – from Windows Vista to Windows 8 for instance – can leave teachers at a loss. Likewise, teachers can struggle when new technologies like interactive smartboards are first rolled out.

Christine Major of Discovery says her firm focuses heavily on courses which facilitate use of technology in the classroom. "Having worked with teachers before, I have seen some unable to harness technology's full power. Our courses therefore aim to show teachers how to use technology to enhance the learning experience for students." Interestingly, companies which sell learning software to schools often sell accompanying courses explaining how best to use it. One example is Data Harvest, a firm that sells data logging to schools, but also provides courses helping teachers to understand its products.

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Problem-solving CPD

Problem solving CPD gives teachers tips on dealing with the pressures students face at school. That could range from bullying to exam stress, issues at home, to picking a university. David Weston points that this type of CPD is "much less widespread" than other courses. "Problem-solving CPD has not always had an impact in the classroom and therefore does not have a great reputation right now."

Yet, he thinks that this type of CPD is becoming essential in an increasingly pressurised school system. "Schools need to focus on one or two key areas that they want their teachers to improve on, and work with it throughout the academic year. This kind of CPD will not be effective if teachers just go on a quick, one-off course."

Horizon courses help teachers stay up to date with structural changes or incoming regulations that are vital to their jobs. Such programmes have become particularly important since the coalition took power and implemented a raft of exam reform and curriculum change. Skills programmes, meanwhile, involve more prosaic sorts of training, in IT for example, while problem solving educates teachers about student behavioural issues like bullying.

CPD courses can be instructor-led training (ILT) or delivered online, the latter an increasingly attractive option because of its lower cost. Anything from CD courses to cloud-based services, webinars to mobile apps are seeing take-up, says Dominic Savage, chief executive of the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA). "The reality is that the Department for Education does not provide the funding that it used to, and so cheap and effective online models are becoming go-to options for teachers."

The trackability that comes with online learning makes it even more popular. For one thing, it allows teachers to learn where their strengths and weaknesses lie. CPD providers are also able to share a lot more data analytics with potential customers to prove a course's value. "Schools increasingly want tracking tools and statistics from providers, to view evidence that the training is actually worth it," says David Weston, chief executive at the Teacher Development Trust. "Local authorities are also increasingly asking for this information."

The rise of online courses does not necessarily mean the demise of ILT, however. In fact many CPD courses nowadays are offered as blended packages. Christine Major, professional development director at Discovery Education, explains that when the firm first began, the majority of its training was delivered face-to-face. Now, though, Discovery does webinars, blogs and online courses too. "As technology has evolved, it has facilitated the delivery of ILT. It has also enabled us to have the Discovery Educator Network which connects teachers worldwide," she says.

Barriers to uptake

But there are a series of barriers to take up of CPD in England currently, a major one being time. Teachers are allowed five days off a year for training, but Savage says this is not enough given the extent of recent curriculum changes. It may also be further driving demand for online solutions which offer the flexibility of practising on mobiles, tablets and laptops.

Weston adds that schools often do not have time to focus on all three areas of CPD, either. Instead they are "only reactive to the area of most stress", which in terms of teacher development is worrying. Promoting a more holistic approach to CPD is therefore key.

Funding poses another challenge, although not one unique to CPD by any stretch. School budgets have remained flat while the cost of hiring staff stubbornly rises, and as such, many schools "wince" at the cost of CPD, says Savage. Stephen Cox, managing director of Osiris Educational, another CPD provider, agrees. "As a proportion of the school budget, CPD has not grown. Supply costs and travel increases have also had an impact."

Like most providers of services-into-schools, CPD businesses have also faced the well-documented challenges of 'academisation'. Schools decentralised from local authority (LA) control now hold their own purse strings, but marketing to them has got tougher. "The greater autonomy over budgets has seen schools now able to make different priorities. So [procuring CPD] is all down to individual decision making," says Cox.

Navigating the market

Despite these difficulties, there are still opportunities for CPD providers as long as they're savvy enough. Understanding that primary and secondary schools are very different target audiences, for example, goes a long way. "Primary schools are small institutions and tend to be more reliant on local authorities. Knowing that primaries do not have as much direction when it comes to CPD is vital for providers," says Weston.

The biggest problem facing CPD providers, though, is one quite out of their control: teachers themselves are not being encouraged enough by government to procure such training. In the US, for example, there is a professional development credit system, which incentivises take-up. "More points can boost the position of a K-12 teacher within a school, and can certainly improve opportunities to advance their career," Savage notes.

Unfortunately, no such system exists here for teachers on a similar scale. That is despite the fact that one has already been introduced for doctors by the Royal College of General Practitioners. If we were to see a credit framework in schools, take up of CPD would surely become more embedded in the system.

For now, CPD will continue to be a somewhat volatile area for operators. Ironically, teachers face a barrage of curriculum change and good CPD provision has never been more necessary. But market fragmentation and tight budgets have made it an afterthought for many schools.



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