

Continuing Professional Development: Returning to study with Work-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the processes, actions, thoughts and mindset of an Xtend/Master of Professional Practice candidate, via a first-hand account of his returning to tertiary education via a Work-Based Learning (WBL) programme. We look at the changes the candidate has made to his overall work practice, in terms of development as both professional and student within the ICT industry, what problems or difficulties have arisen and how these have been mitigated as part of the ongoing process. The WBL approach as described in this paper is still in its relative infancy, compared to traditional methods of learning such as the standard full-time degree or diploma, it is our hope that this account of how this process has worked and the benefits gained from it will encourage a discussion about the role of professional practice research and education in IT.

Keywords: Work-based learning, Master of Professional Practice, SIGNAL Xtend

1. INTRODUCTION

Ongoing professional development is critical to the functioning of a professional discipline. IT is a discipline where the pressures of constant change mean that ongoing professional development beyond keeping up with the churn of technology can be difficult to achieve. Busy IT professionals do not have time for taking out extensive periods for study. Also, such study is usually separated from the work context.

An alternative is a structure that encourages the development of reflective practice within the context of work (Mann *et al.* 2017). There has, however, been little, if anything written from the perspective of an IT professional undertaking such work-based learning. This paper provides a first-person reflection of the learner undertaking the initial stages of a Masters of Professional Practice. It is written in first person, from the perspective of the first author.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 New Role

In mid-2017, a few months after beginning a new role managing the IT needs of a well-regarded Dunedin legal firm, I also began the Xtend programme offered by SIGNAL ICT Grad School, the collaboration of the five largest South Island

tertiary institutions. As part of this programme, SIGNAL is facilitating my efforts through the Master of Professional Practice degree, a level 9 negotiated work-based-learning programme offered by Otago Polytechnic's Capable NZ. As of time of writing, I am now one month in to the third and final stage of the MPP degree.

My change in role has been an interesting and involved process in and of itself, as it represents an entirely different direction within the IT industry and opens avenues of opportunity and development that I had not even considered previously.

2.2 Masters of Professional Practice.

Before we continue my personal journey, it is useful to explore the structure and philosophy of the MPP.

Otago Polytechnic has adopted a heutagogical-based teaching and learning strategy that has a significant impact for education (Mann *et al.* 2017). Heutagogy refers to self-determined learning (Hase and Kenyon 2000). It applies a holistic approach to developing learner capabilities, centering learning as an active and proactive process (Blaschke, 2012), with learners acting as "the major agent in their own learning, which occurs as a result of personal experiences" (Hase and Kenyon, 2007, p112), assisted by mentors who facilitate the learning journey.

Exemplifying this methodology is the work-based learning approach of Capable NZ (the professional practice school within Otago Polytechnic). Capable NZ works with learners to recognise and extend learning in a professional work-based context at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels. At undergraduate levels, Capable NZ works with learners to align their professional framework of practice - their professional identity - with graduate profiles. These learners are expected to learn new areas, mostly to wrap their practice in theoretical context, but there are no formal classes. Instead the focus is on an individualised supportive environment for personal reflection.

Capable NZ has professional practice post-graduate qualifications for experienced practitioners: The Master of Professional Practice; and the Doctor of Professional Practice (MPP and DPP). For both, the goal is the advanced professional framework of practice. This is articulated in a "practitioner thesis" where the defensible argument is that professional framework of practice. The process starts with a review of learning that leads to stating the learner's aspirational framework of practice (e.g.: "to become a thought leader in values driven software development"). This is paired with an organisational practice goal (e.g.: to create a culture of values driven software development). The main work then becomes the professional development thread, interwoven through reflective practice to the work-based professional practice change (usually formally described as "auto ethnographic action research"). Learners are supported by academic and professional mentors. The graduate profiles for both the MPP

and DPP are written in terms of higher levels of thinking in a post-disciplinary sense, rather than for specific disciplines.

Hase and Kenyon (2000) place responsibility of heagotogy with the student where they are able not only to engage in a process of knowledge creation, but also have the opportunity to determine their learning experience from the influence of their professional practice. This then, means a loop is created between the doing and the learning, whereby the reflection provides a perspective on the work practice which both improves that work practice and aggregates for the learning to the high level of critical awareness and leadership aimed for in the aspirational professional framework of practice.

2.3 Approach

In keeping with the role of this reflective loop, in this paper we employ reflection as the vehicle for describing the processes, actions, thoughts and mindset of a Master of Professional Practice candidate, via a first-hand account of his returning to tertiary education via a WBL programme. We look at the changes the candidate has made to his overall work practice, in terms of development as both professional and student within the ICT industry, what problems or difficulties have arisen and how these have been mitigated as part of the ongoing process. The WBL approach as described in this paper is still in its relative infancy, compared to traditional methods of learning such as the taught masters or research masters not in a professional practice context, it is our hope that this account of how this process has worked and the benefits gained from it will encourage a discussion about the role of professional practice research and education in IT.

3. IT PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Jumping ahead to the conclusion, it is worth stating at that outset that MPP qualification process has had multiple significant benefits to my role as ICT Manager, especially so given that it is such a drastic departure from the IT roles I have held previously. Considering my background and progression thus far, the MPP programme is essentially the ideal solution, solving the roadblocks and obstacles I face in my ongoing development requirements, both as a professional and academic. The following first-hand account has been written solely for this paper: to describe my own personal journey through the MPP programme thus far, and while sometimes challenging, these challenges have enhanced the benefits seen not only by myself and my employer, but in all aspects of day-to-day life.

3.1 Career Development

Immediately prior to taking up the challenge of the MPP programme, my shift in employer meant an equally significant shift in how I operated professionally. For nine years I worked as an intermediate-level engineer, providing broad IT services and advice across a large and varied client base. Instead, I was now working as an in-house ICT resource, responsible for ensuring that 75 professionals could log in and work on any given day, my mindset while at work had no choice but to adjust accordingly.

In those previous nine years, I had worked for an IT consulting firm, initially in their consulting team, and later with the managed services and service desk teams. My workload consisted mainly of systems administration, break-fix and installation, the work was managed by the individual but the workflow was managed centrally. Despite this, my level of responsibility was somewhat low, matching my perception at the time that my progression path as a consulting engineer was

somewhat limited. For those who, like me, preferred not to develop into the niche levels of advanced systems, I came to feel that my work experience, without the motivating factors of responsibility and relevant industry development, was highly linear and unfulfilling. In hindsight, I do take responsibility for my part this; a lack of initiative and ambition did not help, my mind also firmly reiterating the narrow point of view around my work environment. I remember experiencing an overwhelming feeling of limitation, not just by the work but also by my own attitude towards it. The saving grace that made me happy to continue in that situation was the people; co-worker and client alike, I am pleased to say I left there on good terms, I still count my former colleagues and clients among my friends and acquaintances.

It was how I interacted with people that made my transition away from consulting possible, proving the point that it's not what you know, but who you know; that relationship-building is a vital aspect of the typical role in the IT industry. My real strength as an engineer lay in how well I related to the users I was supporting more so than the systems – very early in my consulting career it became clear that the people are the key component: learning what a system needed to run properly depends mostly on the people using it. Given this realisation, my focus became my working relationships with my clients; for many of whom I became the first point-of-contact, building up a strong level of mutual respect and trust that results from getting the job done with my client's best interests at heart.

In early 2017, the efforts of a Dunedin-based client to find a new ICT manager coincided with my own thoughts of potentially changing career. IT was all I knew since dropping out of a BA in Music in 2005, my concerns at possibly requiring a change in field were apparently unfounded. I jumped at the opportunity provided by a firm whose systems I was familiar with, a firm that knew who (and what) they were getting in offering me the position. Most importantly, I soon found how profoundly and horrifically *wrong* my whole outlook on an IT career had been.

There was a considerable culture shock involved in moving away from consulting. It started with a sudden lack of managed workload and timesheets, followed by a vast increase of responsibility and autonomy, not to mention greater freedom to get on with the work at hand (at least, without worrying who would be paying for it). Over and above this, I was, for the first time in nearly a decade, working as part of the team and supporting only one system, rather than as an external resource to the dozens of clients I had been supporting previously. In adjusting to a single system, I felt that, as a consultant, I had fallen into a trap of a building a static skillset or series of habits that only changed in response to a change in technology; for example, an updated operating system retiring a well-known tool or app and replacing it with something completely different. In many cases I found myself reluctant to use new tools in favour of the old ones, clinging to the familiar instead of accepting that adapting to changing technology was a significant part of my role. I had also found that consultants were, in general, only called upon when clients could not fix or otherwise attend to something themselves, as such I was highly apprehensive about what my daily workload as a dedicated resource would look like. My fears were again unfounded though, if anything these factors meant a stark contrast between my old role and new. With my new employer, I became part of a firm that takes a pro-active approach to technology and community, determined to be part of the widespread technological development within its own industry as well as those it services. I found myself in a position of broad overview of all firm systems: workstations, production servers, through to Information and communications infrastructure. On the inter-personal level, I found myself also handling the concerns

of colleagues and corresponding with vendors with a far higher degree of responsibility.

After leaving my role as a consultant and engineer behind, I was now representing both the technical capabilities of the firm as well as its ICT infrastructure and strategy. Contrary to my former outlook on the subject, the available options and progression paths in the IT industry are far from limited. Quite frankly, how could I have ever thought otherwise? The technological world was my oyster, and now I get to play a pivotal role in guiding the firm through the pros and cons of the constantly changing technological landscape.

This is brilliant, one thinks quietly to oneself. How exactly do I go about doing that, though?

It was quite overwhelming in many respects, nothing I had done before had prepared me for the reality of this situation. The troubleshooting and systems administration aspect of the role are already second-nature, but the firm needed more than a sysadmin, they needed someone to take the ICT strategy of the firm to the next level. Considerable thought had already been put into the integration of technology, with many initiatives such as Clevertouch presentation screens and cloud hosting proposals already underway prior to my arrival. While these initiatives were within my skillset, the mid- to long-term vision for the firm would require considerable attention and development. It became apparent that if I was to enable greater technological capabilities within the firm higher, I would need to develop my own abilities as well. Standard IT support would need to incorporate aspects of management, governance and strategy, just to name a few. Any one of those aspects alone was something I had not attempted myself before, how do I go about integrating not just one, but multiple forms of managerial thought process into my daily work routine? The answer, it appeared, was quite literally just a few metres down the hall.

I had walked past SIGNAL many times before deciding to wander in, just on a whim, and see what it is exactly that a grad school does. Within a few weeks, I was enrolled as an Xtend candidate, working with the tools and processes I needed to assess my own aspirations within the spectrum of the IT industry, and what I could do to achieve those aspirations.

3.2 MPP Stage 1: The Review of Learning

The first course was the Review of Learning, a reflective essay based on nearly three decades of personal education and how it contributed to who I am today. The life lessons and teachable moments I experienced along the way form the narrative that shaped my persona and how I came to interpret the world around me. After a slow start, the words flowed, the fourteen-thousand-word document that resulted could easily have been twenty-thousand without restraint. While only a short document by academic standards, it was still more than I had written in any of my undergrad classes a decade ago, but most importantly, it was long enough to examine my thought processes, habits and ethics throughout my life. This provided a far greater perspective about my previous actions and attitudes that I had not considered before, a cathartic experience in how I could reflect on how both success and failure have personally affected my progression. As part of the Review of Learning exercise, I also considered ways to self-assess my abilities and demeanour, which became my first attempt at the auto-ethnographic review process. By the time the document had been completed, I had decided there were two primary aspects of my persona that drive how I behave as a professional: my IT skills and abilities, and my ability to work well with other people. The challenge lay in how to express these two very different skillsets in a clear and concise manner.

Two frameworks of assessment were decided upon for this purpose; the SFIA (Skills Framework for the Information Age: <https://www.sfia-online.org/>) framework to assess my technical ability and the FlipCurric Learning Capabilities framework (FlipCurric.edu.au) to assess my interpersonal skills and potential for leadership and responsibility, both of which I have detailed further in a separate paper: Learning Frameworks: Practical Application of Self-Assessment Tools (this volume).

SFIA works by separating the IT industry into a series of categories, such as IT Governance, Information management, and many others that cover any given ICT-based role. These categories are then divided further into up to 7 levels of complexity, the most basic at level 1 through to the most advanced at level 7. I reviewed the entire version 5 framework reference document, manually mapping out which of the listed IT categories applied to my current role. By highlighting the areas within each code that I was reasonably certain applied to me, I could then plot the appropriate levels of each category on a spreadsheet; as I have since discovered, this is very similar to the function of the current self-assessment tool available on the SFIA-partnered SkillsTx website (2018). I also performed the same self-assessment for each of my previous roles, from my previous work as an Engineer back to my first job in retail, plotting the results from each and overlaying this information as a separate colour. I then did the same for my expected progression path, projecting the potential development options based on my current responsibilities, and plotting this data in as well. The resulting spreadsheet highlighted for me where and when the personal and professional growth of my ICT-related skillsets occurred.

The Flipcurric framework originally developed by Professor Geoff Scott of Western Sydney University, consists of a list of personal qualities that are desirable in a successful student or learner. These qualities are separated into three groups:

- Personal, qualities of identity, further divided into self-awareness, decisiveness and commitment.
- Inter-personal, qualities on interaction, further divided into Influencing and Empathising.
- Cognitive, qualities of knowledge and perception, further divided into diagnosis, strategy and flexibility & responsiveness.

These categories were presented in the form of a table, I took each listed quality and put them into a flash-card format, colour coded to match each group. I then asked several of my colleagues to carefully read each card, then place it into one of four piles, each representing how strongly they felt it applied to me: Definitive (a core quality), Descriptive (often apparent), Applicable (sometimes apparent) and Negligible (seldom apparent, or an opportunity for development). I asked for honesty from my colleagues, thankfully there was a consensus regarding how I was perceived professionally and personally that was overwhelmingly positive, but above all this approach meant that the resulting constructive criticism was presented positively, and I found I was more willing to accept advice on those qualities I may need to work on.

I plan to repeat both exercises at the end of my MPP programme during completion of the thesis, including peer review from my MPP mentors and appropriate community members. SFIA provides options for validated assessment through an accredited assessor, I am investigating local options for this service. From my experience, I believe the Flipcurric framework can be adapted further for the corporate IT environment; the interpretation of the questions by my assessors varied considerably, appearing to result in participants over-thinking, focusing more on the questions than on the person they were assessing.

In summary of the Review of Learning and MPP stage 1, the long-held saying goes that one cannot know where one is going until one knows where they have been. This is certainly how I interpreted the philosophical underpinning of this process; the reflective thought experiment of the Review of Learning put wider perspective and some form of logical framework around the long chain of decisions and actions throughout my life that have led me to this point. Most importantly, it prepared me for the thought processes propagated by stage 2; learning to ask questions about how I further develop the skills I already have, how these will benefit my employer, myself and others, and my own aspirations going forward.

3.3 MPP Stage 2: The Learning Agreement

The second stage of the MPP involves a learning agreement that acts as both contract and roadmap for the learning process. The “trick”, as my mentor keeps telling me, is the relationship between my aspirational framework of practice and the in-work project that will serve as a vehicle for developing that “new me”.

My personal aspiration is to further my professional development as an ICT specialist, with a focus on services delivery and quality assurance to a corporate environment. In doing so, I expect to make progress in both my management and governance skills, as well as interpersonal and relationship building skills. This is roughly summarised into a goal to “explore what it means to be an ICT Manager supporting a modern and future-oriented Law firm and the nature of IT Governance and Risk Management inherent in in this context”.

Looking back, this goal now seems obvious, but it was perhaps the most significant component of my MPP journey to date (this is discussed further in Section 3.5).

This goal was developed around identifying an area within my responsibilities that will act as a suitable in-work project; an aspect of my role that can demonstrate my professional growth as part of my normal duties. The in-work project itself is designed to provide a structure that maintains the following:

- Benefit to the candidate, action or research that allows for personal development and reflection of such
- Benefit for the employer, business development and genuine improvement to business practices
- Proof that the candidate has shown thought and learning consistent with that of a level 9 qualification.

This project forms the basis of my autoethnographic research, the primary source of data for reflection and analysis of my actions and development as a professional. Once the project was decided upon and all relevant areas were considered, the Learning Agreement was signed by myself, my employer, and the educational institution to ensure the MPP efforts will proceed as planned.

In careful consideration of these requirements and discussion with my employer, the subject that made the most sense was cybersecurity. This area within my role seemed to fit all the criteria: it would benefit the firm from having an in-depth analysis of practices where required, it would test my abilities and give ample opportunity to expand my existing skill sets and learn new ones to complement them. Ideally, it will also create more raw data for an area of high interest to a wide range of industries and communities. The approach decided upon begins with research of cybersecurity, determining the current expectation of ICT best practices in SME businesses and how they apply to a partnership operation model. This forms the

basis for a case study of current practice within the firm, aiming to identify what we do right and what we need to work on. In turn, this will justify my recommendations as ICT Manager on how the firm should act on these findings. With the full co-operation of the management team, these recommendations are considered and tested from every necessary angle, before being incorporated into a full project proposal enacting the chosen recommendation.

The project is the central ‘pillar’ of my MPP efforts, building around this are considerations regarding several factors:

- interaction with my audience
- reflection on the project
- ongoing literary review
- reflection on my own professional practice

These considerations are combined with the results of the project in the final thesis, and has been documented as an expected timeline from the start of stage 3 up to completion of the thesis in October 2018 (Figure 1).

The question regarding which aspects of cybersecurity involved in the case study became part of the Learning Agreement process, as a guide for the form and scope of the work expected. Several major considerations became apparent from this questioning, mostly relating to potential effects on productivity, working environment and benefits for the firm and its assets, but perhaps more importantly, what drawbacks might also arise? These considerations (and how they relate to each other) became smaller questions within the greater process of fleshing out the learning agreement, providing further opportunity for the candidate to explore a wider perspective of their profession.

Each Learning Agreement document surely ends up as unique as the candidate that wrote it, tailored to the experiences and temperament of its author. The flow charts, diagrams and templates that guide its creation were provided early in stage 1, though at the time I did not fully appreciate the ramifications of what the documents would be asking of me. The in-work project itself, while significant, is still only one part of stage 3 and a vehicle for the primary goal of the entire MPP learning method: autoethnographic action research. Documenting the project plan maps out the expected actions of the candidate as the project progresses (with the approval of employer and tertiary institute), but the rest of the Learning Agreement ensures the supporting aspects of the project are considered thoroughly and integrated into the entirety of the work.

3.3.3 Sustainability, Maori and Ethics

Other than the expected methodology and justification of the project, there are sections focused on the wider implications of the research on other individuals and communities such as Māori, Sustainability and Ethical concerns, all of which prompted a considerable amount of contemplation. The conclusions reached in these regards were:

- my work does not directly impact Maori interests beyond my ability to ensure the firm can provide legal services (as it would for any client of any nationality or ethnic descent)
- the firm is already conscious of sustainability practices, evidenced in its effort to reducing office waste and commitment to the ‘paperless’ movement
- my work is unlikely to cause ethical dilemma, t I do not directly manage employees and the project is highly unlikely to encounter power imbalances or vulnerable participants.

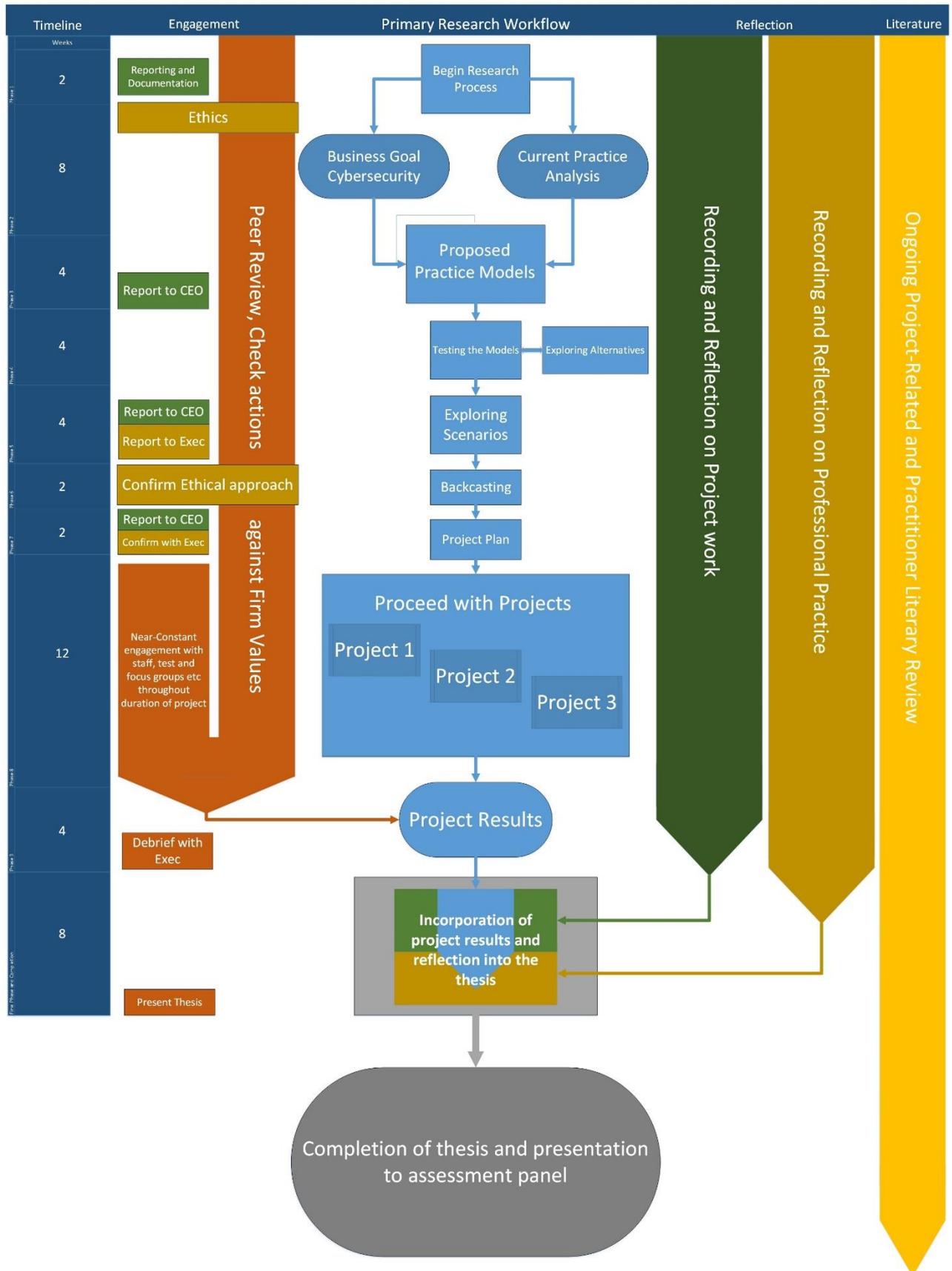


Figure 1: Stage 3 Workflow plan; the central portion in blue indicates WBL in-work project

Nonetheless, I made the decision to include an opt-in approach rather than opt-out; any comment or input contributed as part of my research would identify or impact a group or individual, then specific permission to include it would be sought from that party before publishing.

All three aspects of Maori, Sustainability and Ethics are expected to remain actively monitored as the project progresses, this expectation written in to the Learning Agreement itself. My facilitator, Professor Mann, is a recognised thought-leader in sustainability; any concerns that arise with Maori or Ethics will result in consultation with Kaitohutohu and the Otago Polytechnic Ethics committee respectively. Despite my initial expectation that considerations of these matters would be somewhat procedural in nature, the exercise of including them within this document has clarified and expanded upon concerns that are more complex than they appear at face value. This has been particularly insightful for my role of ICT Manager; as part of the management team, I share responsibility of ensuring these considerations are given the appropriate level of attention at a corporate level.

3.3.4 Practical Applications

The case study of Cybersecurity, conceived and fine-tuned to guide and bolster my personal development, will focus specifically on how I learn to approach the tasks and duties at hand. Regarding practical application of the Learning Agreement, there are several habits and techniques from the planning process that I can and will apply to my work as an ICT Manager, continuing after the completion of the MPP. For example, the project itself involves a basic to intermediate level of project management skills; through the learning agreement process I have developed these further as a derivative of my existing skillset. This also differs in that I now act as an internal project sponsor, or potentially managing projects myself; compared to my former role as a consultant, in which I would act as a resource to be managed. Both Project Management and Sponsorship will always be integral parts of my IT Management role by default, however the MPP research project and Learning Agreement have provided significant guidance around the transition from Engineer to Manager. The experience and perspective gained from the planning stages of the in-work project combined with the contemplative exercises on the nature of my role have given shape and direction to the path ahead.

Regardless of whether I act as Manager or Sponsor, a requirement of my role is to provide accurate and competent ICT advice on the best path forward for any project. As such, industry research, both at a broad level as well as in-depth for individual projects, will be a regular part of my ongoing work as both ICT Manager and MPP Candidate. Despite over a decade-long break in study, I expect research skills from my time as an undergraduate to assist with the ongoing work, although in practice my in-work research feels very different to the undergraduate studies performed in my time at the University of Otago. In contrast to the course-assigned research of a BA in Music and History, the entirety of my MPP research scope has been defined by me, albeit with guidance from my MPP Facilitator to ensure it is in line with the subject. While the concept of self-assigned study at this level was overwhelming at first, the structure of the Learning agreement meant my own aspirations, my employers requirements and academic standards consistent with a level 9 qualification were accounted for right from the outset. Furthermore, inclusion of ongoing literary review is designed to establish a habit of

continued reading for development purposes, a habit I intend to continue long after completion of my MPP studies.

3.4 Audience

Maintaining the theme of broadening of perspective, authoring the Learning Agreement document resulted in discussion and consideration of potential interested parties in the outcome of my work. At the outset, my assumption was that the in-work project was of benefit mainly to myself and my employer. While not necessarily incorrect, my assumption was lacking educated context, showing only a small part of the larger picture regarding the potential outcomes of the case study, as well as the intentions of the MPP programme itself.

From the outset, the project establishes the firm as the main participant, intending to analyse and overhaul the security practices within the firm, promoting internal and external risk management on all firm systems. While this position has not changed as the project has evolved, the first addition to the list of potential participants came about from discussion regarding engagement with external organisations; for example, let's assume the case study and subsequent improvements are completed successfully and the firm can reasonably claim that it follows best practices for Cybersecurity and Risk Management. Do we advertise this as a differentiating factor in our advertising to an increasingly risk-conscious market, or do we share our new-found expertise, perhaps in a consulting function, with other SME businesses with concerns for their digital wellbeing? This raises other questions, do we advertise this expertise at all, lest we paint targets on our backs for those with nefarious intent? As such, the first addition to my list of potential audience members was that of Industry: Legal, IT and possibly many others that might benefit from the results of the case study and project. This also expands further upon the role of my employer as an audience member, the expectation is that while we will benefit from this work, careful consideration of my recommendations will need to include appropriate risk management and governance actions to ensure there are no negative side-effects to our operations, including contemplation of individual legal responsibilities of any actions taken.

Another component of the Learning Agreement includes presentation of my proposal to an assessment panel, in my case made up of my facilitator, the CEO of my employer, my industry and academic mentors and representatives of the Otago Polytechnic. During this presentation and resulting Q&A session, the esteemed panel members had some very positive feedback regarding my proposal, but also pointed out some glaring areas regarding my audience that I had apparently overlooked. Following further discussion with the panel, the next addition was that of the wider IT community, both professional and academic, who might be interested in the conclusions reached by the end of the project. My membership of IITPNZ and work as a student within SIGNAL both require commitment to my participation within the IT community in general, it had not occurred to me that others within this sphere might find my work interesting as well. The potential for authoring white-papers based on the work was also mentioned, another intimidating idea that I have never considered before and, quite frankly, made me wonder what on Earth I had gotten myself into (though it must be mentioned this paled in comparison to the question of co-authoring a paper for a certain Wellington-based conference).

This feedback served to drive home the importance of community participation, but ultimately lead to an important revelation of the Stage 2 process, and the final addition to my intended audience: Me. This is not to say I had not considered

my place within the ongoing project, it will be me that performs most of the work and reaps the rewards, my constant recording and reflection of the process and my understanding of what the MPP thesis requires of me. The aspects that I needed to reconsider were those of my personal and professional aspirations, emphasised not only by the assessment panel, but also by my mentors and facilitator as well. Attempting to define these aspirations became something of a struggle; I felt I did not have an adequately accurate or realistic perception of my situation given how many new concepts I have had to consider since changing role. In taking the view that I am also an audience member of the work at hand, the bigger picture became easier to comprehend, as did my place within it.

3.5 Aspirations

Moving past the mental roadblock around identifying where my own aspirations lay was perhaps the most significant part of the process so far, at least for my personal development. From the initial questions regarding this in Stage 1 and beginning the Learning Agreement in Stage 2, attempting to give a genuine answer as to what transformational direction I would like my MPP efforts to take often wound up in the too-hard basket; I couldn't figure that one out so I promised myself to think about it later.

When I moved from my former role to my current one, the difference between the two was a significant shift in mind-set in and of itself. The change from my long-term desk job as an engineer to the autonomous, highly responsible role managing the systems of a larger firm was more than enough of a shock to the system as it was; I had found it very difficult to give my own aspirations much serious contemplation, let alone a thought-out or even comprehensible response. I had already taken what I perceived as a considerable step upwards in the world, and was also now studying for a master's degree to boot. How could I possibly think about what comes next? Nonetheless, that is exactly what the MPP programme was requiring me to do.

I have thrown the word 'perspective' around several times throughout this paper, relating to the industry I work in and the actions I have taken previously, as noted in my Review of Learning. Through this same process, I was now attempting to apply the level of contextualisation achieved from my reflective work to the actions I intend to make going forward. In applying this level of thought and the occasional push in the right direction from those guiding me through this process, my prior lack of ambition to progress within the IT sector was disappearing rapidly, replaced with new-found appreciation for the near infinite number of directions I could potentially develop my career. In any case, I was finally able to put express a long-term aspirational statement that accurately reflects what I am trying to achieve: to progress as a technical management and governance specialist within services delivery and quality assurance to a corporate and professional audience. Even this is a mouthful, and is highly likely going to evolve further as the project does. For the purposes of the MPP programme, my overall reflective work incorporating the in-work project and professional development will focus on defining exactly what my role of ICT Manager means, not just to myself and my colleagues at Gallaway Cook Allan, but also to those I will work with in the wider IT community.

3.6 Academic Development

My previous attempt at tertiary study was a major contributing factor to my initial decision to pursue the MPP Programme. I attended the University of Otago for nearly 3 years following High School, with the expectation I would graduate with a BA

in Music and History, followed up with a degree in Secondary Education. While I enjoyed my time there, by the end of first semester in my third year, I concluded that I really wasn't cut out for a career in professional music, and I should probably find a different vocation. I intended to cross-credit into Comp Sci, most of my friends in music classes were doing it, how hard could it be? My over-confident ego did not survive attempts to write code in Java, in frustration I opted to drop out rather than persevere, taking on more hours at work; at the time a combination of computer retail and very basic tech support at a big-box retailer. I never went back to complete my degree despite the fact I am only two 300-level classes from graduating with my original BA.

This apparent complete waste of time and student loan balance has been a source of nagging regret since; while on most days this is something I could ignore, it was something I was not proud of at all. As I moved into IT consulting a few years later, I was very self-conscious of the fact I did not have any qualifications to my name, regardless of whether they were relevant to my work or not. In my consulting role, I did attempt other forms of certification, mainly that offered by Microsoft, but found aspects of this frustrating. From the lack of a local testing centre, the speed at which the certification becomes obsolete and the tiny percentage of the certification that was genuinely relevant to the work I performed, once again I let my frustration get the better of me and allowed industry certification options to fall by the wayside. On several occasions in my 9 years as a consultant and Engineer, I would enquire with the University about completing my degree, perusing the various websites regarding options that will allow me to work and study at the same time. On one occasion I even called and spoke to the Music Department HOD to discuss the best way forward, potentially looking at part-time study options. However, these plans never eventuated. I now had a household to support, all the responsibilities that went with it, not to mention enough excuses to bury any motivation that might accidentally occur. Either way, the sacrifices required to leave work for study appeared to simply not be an option. Something would always pop up to perpetuate this pattern as well, be it the birth of my eldest son, my wife trying her hand at a retail business, buying a house, getting married, the birth of my youngest son, amongst many others. I'm sure it is a common story, life just seems to get in the way.

Do not misconstrue, I make no attempt to shift the blame for this. The responsibility for not completing either of these qualifications was my own, I chose to focus my attention elsewhere rather than on engaged personal development, so the consequences of doing so were my also of my own making. In saying that, given the arguably momentous examples of a life well-lived listed above, I would still make the same decisions every single time without question, but I argue it shows how easy it was for my academic goals to get lost in the background of everyday life.

By the time I left my consulting role, my experience and reputation in the IT sphere spoke for itself, the lack of a formal qualification was far less of a concern than it once was. For my new employer, it was not a concern at all, yet nonetheless it was something that weighed heavily on my mind in those first weeks of exploring my new role. Imagine then, walking into a tertiary institute for no reason other than that it matches your field of work and happens to be down the hall. While there, you are told that the long-held plan returning to tertiary studies, while still working no less, was not only possible but actually very likely; amazingly, the previous thirty thousand dollars-worth of University study and years of professional practice count as evidence of prior learning and meeting eligibility criteria for the advanced courses the grad school offers.

All the required boxes were ticked; I could study while working, I would earn a level 9 qualification relevant to my field and I can expect to make a meaningful contribution to my workplace and community through the in-work project. I am fortunate enough to have the full support of my employer in pursuing the MPP programme, given these factors alone I would have been negligent to decline.

4. LOOKING FORWARD

Under normal circumstances, a paper would now conclude and summarise its findings, but in this case my MPP progress is still ongoing, and I can only report on the results of the programme thus far. As of January 2018, I have begun the third and final stage of the MPP programme, the research into Cybersecurity and Risk Management practices is underway, leading preparation for the upcoming case study into the performance of a future-oriented law firm. I have described here the experiences and benefits I have gained from the programme so far, and I am not yet half-way through the programme. Many more steps in my development as a professional lie ahead of me, all of which I expect to include in my final thesis and any reflective exercises I choose to partake in once the MPP programme has been completed.

Canning & Callan, 2010 described, heutagogy fundamentally changes the role of the educator in higher education from one of “‘expert’ in a body of absolute knowledge” to one where learning “is achieved through shared meaning making in a relational, facilitative approach to reflection” (p75). I have experienced this firsthand. In 1998, my third form year at Otago Boys High School, I had a maths teacher named Mr Bell, on the first day of class he told us a sentiment I will often paraphrase, but never forget: ‘Teacher’ is not an accurate word for what he does, as it implies that he must provide the information and learning for the class he teaches. In truth, his role is that of a Facilitator; he is there to guide and assist the student while they learn for themselves. In short, he is there to show us the way, and guide us while we walk that path for ourselves. To me, this sentiment sums up my experience of the MPP programme so far, through my studies in the last 9 months I have learnt of the tools and methods that will allow me to guide my own process of learning and natural development within my role.

Without any doubt whatsoever, I am a very different person now when compared to the person I was fifteen months ago. As an engineer in the call centre, with no long-term plan or goal in mind, I was the architect of my own situation and very unlikely to make notable progress beyond it. Thankfully, I jumped at the opportunity that presented itself, and made the transition into IT Management, only to jump at the next opportunity offered by SIGNAL, to take that role and learn how to truly make it my own. These steps I have taken, both on my own and with the guidance of the MPP programme, have already been profoundly transformative in my attitude and outlook, leading to a level of confidence and motivation unlike anything I have ever experienced before. As I continue my efforts in Stage 3, I

very much look forward to finding what else this version of me will achieve, and what potential I have yet to live up to.

While the argument could be made that I would need to adjust my own professional practices regardless to succeed and develop in my current role, the efforts made through my WBL have provided a far higher level of introspection and perspective on how I, as both professional and individual, think and act compared to what I would likely achieve on my own.

Beyond the process of reflection, the guidance offered through the WBL platform, how it has been customised to my skill and experience, has also meant I have composed my own framework of processes and potential goals to support my ongoing learning, giving some direction regarding the areas and skillsets that would best benefit my professional practice, my employer and (hopefully) the IT and legal communities.

A year ago, I might have asked you to wish me luck in this process. Given my experience since then, however, I am sure I already have everything I need to succeed.

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