

# ALTEF

WORKPLACED INTEGRATED LEARNING

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Output 4 of the ALTEF-Project

## Competence development in the workplace

### The „Agile Learning“ - Approach

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### A Guideline for Employers

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## Authors

### **Jörg Longmuss**

Sustainum – Institute for Sustainable Economy Berlin

[j.longmuss@sustainum.de](mailto:j.longmuss@sustainum.de)

### **Benjamin Höhne**

Beuth University of Applied Sciences Berlin

[bhoehne@beuth-hochschule.de](mailto:bhoehne@beuth-hochschule.de)

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## Management Summary

For a targeted development of competencies, it makes sense for employees to learn directly from their own field of work, dealing with real problems. The method of "Agile Learning" was developed for this purpose. Its aim is to enable learning within the work process and based on real tasks and thus to make competence development and knowledge transfer a continuous component of the company organisation.

In this method, a **learning task** is provided by an **internal sponsor** and **completed in stages** by the **learning group**, supported by **coaches**. Intermediate results are presented to the sponsor and must be accepted by him or her. Various aspects need to be clarified for these learning projects. This guideline aims to ensure that

- the introduction of learning projects takes place on a sustainable basis,
- the implementation is supported by the relevant stakeholders and
- the method can be carried out by the company itself in the long term.

Central points are:

## Objectives

- What is strategically important for this first project, what is "nice to have"?
- How is the success of learning projects measured?

## The Parties Involved

- Who has the role of the **sponsor** and checks the learning and work results?
- Who are the **participants**? Previous experience with the topic?
- Which **stakeholders** in the company may need to be involved?
- Who are the **coaches** to accompany the project? Are they internally available or shall they come from outside?

## The Project

- Which **task** is to be processed?
- Are the necessary **learning contents** already available or do they have to be prepared by the coaches?
- What **time budgets** are available: Length of the work and learning phase (per day / per week and in total)?
- **IT infrastructure**: Is there a suitable learning and communication platform?
- Which internal experts can the teams turn to for **questions and support**?

## Specifications for the Start

- **Clarification of roles**: Who does what, who has what responsibility?
- **Project flow**: work assignments, intermediate stops, results
- **Schedule**: When does the project start? By when should which level be reached?
- **Conclusion**: Final presentation and reflection of process and learning outcomes

## Introduction of the "Agile Learning" Method in the Company

For a targeted development of competences that are needed in the company, it makes sense for the employees to learn from their own field of work rather than from imaginary tasks or case studies from another environment. In order to implement such competence development in companies, the "Agile Learning" approach was developed. Its aim is to enable learning in the work process and on the basis of real tasks and thus to make competence development and knowledge transfer a continuous component of the company organisation.

In this approach, a **learning task** is provided by an **internal sponsor**, which is worked on and presented in stages by **the learning group**, supported by **coaches**. A brief description of the method can be found in the appendix. For a detailed description see the ALTEF paper "Competence Development at the Workplace - The Agile Learning Approach".

A successful and long-term implementation of this method in a company has various prerequisites. This guide aims to ensure that

- the introduction is made on a sustainable basis,
- the implementation is supported by the relevant stakeholders and
- the method can also be supported by the company itself on the long run.

In every company and for every type of learning project, additional specific questions will arise and further clarifications will be necessary. Here an overview is provided of what needs to be clarified before agile learning projects begin and what needs to be decided in the course of and at the end of the projects.

### The Objectives

- What is the **reason for competence development**?
- What is the **topic of competence development**?
- **What results** should be available?
- How is the **success of the learning projects** and the method measured?
- To what extent can and should the method be used **in the long run**?

### The Framework

- **Naming a person with decision-making power:**  
A clear decision by the management of the company or business unit to make the method (after probation in a pilot project) a standard procedure, and the appointment of the person responsible for driving this introduction forward;
- **Sponsor ("Product Owner"):**  
Naming the person(s) responsible for day-to-day operational implementation, defining learning projects and deciding whether the results of the learning groups meet the requirements;
- **Stakeholders:**  
Who else is involved in the company (Human Resources, Organisational Development, other departments, ...)? What are their interests? How can they be integrated?

- **Coaches:**  
Which competences are needed by them? Is internal staff able to take over their or shall external ones be hired?
- **Evaluation and documentation:**  
Deciding in which form the learning projects and the method as a whole should be evaluated and how the results should be documented;
- **Certification:**  
How should the services provided and the competences acquired be classified and certified? E.g. on the basis of company competence profiles, analogous to other further training measures on behalf of the company, the award of internal certificates or - in cooperation with a university - credit points according to ECTS (European Credit Transfer System).

## The Perspective

In the course of the first pilot projects, it is still necessary to clarify

- How can a **constantly growing involvement of the product owner** take place?
- How can the **internal coaches be qualified**, as integration into the pilot projects and in separate measures?
- In case there is **external staff** (coaches and / or consultants): which role shall they have in the long term: supervision, evaluation, consulting?
- **Selection/development of suitable structures:**
  - Main responsibility for agile learning in which department?
  - Communication within the company, especially to potential target groups
  - Forms of involvement of the labor council and other participation structures
- A gradual **transfer of responsibility** to these structures

## The Preparation of Learning Projects

In the run-up to a learning project a number of points has to be determined:

### Clarify the Mission

- Who is the **target group**: qualification, current position, age, future tasks, previous experience?
- How is competence development **organizationally embedded**? Responsibilities, instructions, procedures to be followed, overall company policy?
- **Who else is involved** or to be included: Human resources department, works council, adjacent departments, IT?
- What **resources** are available: Financial resources, length of learning phase, time budgets of learners (per day / per week and in total)?
- What **infrastructure** is available: Work equipment, rooms, etc.?
- **IT infrastructure** for the learning environment:
  - Setting up a new communication platform or opening an existing one,
  - Storage and editing options for teamwork,
  - Virtual conference rooms if required;Minimum requirements are: reliable notifications, file exchange and online task distribution are possible.

## Determine Competence Needs

- Which competencies does the target group already have?
- Which should it acquire?
- For what tasks should they be used?

As a rule, three perspectives should be considered for this:

- The superiors: Where do they see the current strengths and needs of the members of the target group, where should they develop to, what future tasks should they meet, what requirements will the company have in the future?
- The target group: Where do they see their strengths, where their development needs, what would they like to learn, where do they see their personal perspective?
- An expert view (e.g. the human resources department or consultants): What could be unrecognized implications of company planning, what is common / important in this area in other companies, where is there already good practice that could help?

By combining these different perspectives, the competences to be imparted in the learning project must be brought into a manageable concept, which is backed by the superiors and the learning group. An example of such an approach is given in the box below.

### Example from practice: **Learning on real tasks**

A department had been given a new area of responsibility that required additional knowledge and skills. The following steps have been taken to develop these:

1. Interviews were held with the human resources department, supervisors and employees of the department and a brief job analysis was conducted. Initially, very general learning areas such as "materials engineering" and "spreadsheets" were mentioned as desired, but finally two specific learning topics could be identified for which there was a current need: on the one hand, possible correspondences between current and outdated material names, and on the other hand, working with "if/then"-rules and between different worksheets when calculating with tables.
2. Material lists and worksheets from daily work were used as learning tasks in which these requirements were included and which were suitable for exemplary processing.
3. These learning tasks were worked on in small groups, alternating between technical input, exemplary self-work, processing instructions, intermediate stops with comparison of the learning results and a final reflection of the process.

## Define the Learning Projects

Now the specific learning project can be determined. This includes

- **The employees** who are to participate in this learning project. Clarify and consider differences within the target group as far in advance as possible.
- To choose a **suitable practical problem** in coordination with the sponsor and the team as a learning task. The learning task can be based on the participants or the participants of a learning group can be determined according to who works best on a specific task.
- Clarifying the **resources in detail**
  - **Time:** How much time is available to team members to complete the learning task, per day, per week and in total?
  - **Rooms:** Can a workroom be set up in which the team and, if necessary, individual members can work undisturbed and in which presentation walls, flip charts and a Kanban board can remain if necessary? If not: How else is it ensured that the team can work unhindered?
  - **IT:** Which programs and platforms should be used, e.g. Sharepoint, Jira, OneNote with Kanban extension etc.? Is it tested and stable? Does everybody master it? Is there a contact person for problems who is available and can react quickly?
  - **Learning materials:** Are additional learning materials needed, e.g. moderation equipment, company documents, special computers / servers etc.?  
and firmly agree these resources with the parties involved
- The **roles of the participants:** Who is the sponsor, who is the representing the task, to what extent must operational experts be involved, are direct superiors involved?  
Once the roles have been clarified, it must also be ensured that there is sufficient commitment from all parties involved.
- **Define the schedule.** Which dates for which tasks? How is communication organized within the team, with the coaches and with the client? By when should which level be reached?

## Provide Learning Content

Required learning content

- What content should be taught in the context of competence development / in the completion of the learning task?
- Which of these contents are available / elaborated / documented in the company, in what form are they available (suitable as learning material)?
- To what content are there internal experts that can convey it? To what extent are these experts available?
- What content must be provided by external parties (because there are no internal ones or because these are not available)?
- In what form must / should the contents be prepared? It is important that their format is
  - suitable for self-learning (scope, preparation),
  - solution-oriented,
  - the work should produce verifiable and immediately helpful results for the learning project.
- How are the contents made available to the team?

## The Implementation of Learning Projects

The work in an agile learning project is characterized by a stage-by-stage approach. A stage is the period of time necessary for the preparation of interim results, which represent such progress compared to the previous stage that they should be presented to the sponsor or a specialist coach. If the learners can only deal with the learning project parallel to their usual work, about four weeks are a realistic period. In principle, however, it should be noted that stage intervals of more than six weeks should be avoided if possible, as otherwise a "fragmentation" of group and work dynamics can be expected.

### During the Stage

- The team works on reaching **the stage goal** of the learning project using the agreed tools, e.g. a Kanban board and a SharePoint;
- The **coaches** support this work by removing obstacles, e.g. problems with IT, or by procuring various resources such as technical experts, rooms or work material;
- If necessary, **intermediate stops** take place in which the team introduces each other to the work status, clarifies interfaces, synchronizes the procedure and arranges the next steps;
- The work is continuously **documented in public**, i.e. everyone has access to all documents in the current version at all times;
- Progress that is individually, collectively or organisationally relevant beyond the specific learning project can be recorded in a **learning diary**.

### The End of a Stage

There are

- The **presentation of the results** to the sponsor of the learning project, who then either accepts the results or returns them to the team for revision.
- **Review**: Which goals were achieved, missed or rejected, what would have been better or easier, how would this problem be dealt with next time?
- The necessary **appointments for the next stage**: Which goals are to be achieved, which procedure is chosen, what is still required and how is it organised?
- The **process reflection** between coaches and team (possibly with the participation of the sponsor): How did the learning process go, what do we want to keep in the future, what do we want to do differently in the future - individually, collectively or organizationally - and how can the coaches support this?
- If the participants find it difficult to reflect in a team, it can also be useful to **keep a learning diary** in which they record their own development steps in key points. The form of the learning diary should represent the lowest possible hurdle for the creation of new entries.

### Completion of the Learning Project

This includes

- The **final presentation**, if possible in front of a wider audience, to disseminate the results and show respect to the team;
- The **final reflection** of the learning process, including the remaining personal learning needs of each team member for the future, and
- A worthy conclusion with handing over the **certificates**.

## Appendix: The "Agile Learning" Concept at a Glance

With this concept, required competencies are acquired within the company - in the handling of real problems from the employees' own field of work. This means

1. first to determine the new competences that are relevant to the employee or will become relevant in the foreseeable future ("**learning topics**"),
2. identify current questions from operational practice in which these competences are needed ("**learning causes**") and then
- 3 **learning projects** from this area are exemplarily worked on with technical and didactic support ("**coaches**").

This learning directly at and in real practice has several advantages:

- The employees learn exactly what they need for their work.
- What they learn can be applied directly in everyday life, it is not learned "on stock".
- The learning topic becomes more accessible for the employees.
- The processing of operational tasks is resource-saving and the employees remain in the work process.

Learning from real operational tasks requires three types of participants:

- A person who commissions the development of competencies and sets his or her goals, decides on a specific learning project and checks the technical results: "**sponsor**";
- The employees who work on the learning project as a **team**, acquire the necessary knowledge, share learning progress and present the results;
- Guides who supervise the learning process organizationally and didactically and guide the reflections of the learning process: the "**coaches**"

Steps in the learning process:

- Working on the tasks in the learning project, alternating between individual and group work
- Input for the teams through prepared "learning cards" / units for self-learning
- The teams meet in intermediate stops as necessary and coordinate their work
- At greater intervals - the end of the learning stages - the sponsor is presented with the learning progress
- Then reflection on the learning process and agreements for the next stage.

For a detailed description see the ALTEF paper "Competence Development at the Workplace - The Agile Learning Approach", available at [info@sustainum.de](mailto:info@sustainum.de).