

How do I devise an RPL strategy?

By Dr Karen Deller

What is Recognition of Prior Learning?

Basically, RPL is a process whereby adults can have all their previous learning recognized. This can either be done for formal credit against unit standards, or simply for recognition by an employer, professional institute or education provider. RPL can be used by the candidate to gain access to a higher course of study that they would normally have gained access to or it can be used for promotion or job searching. All prior learning is recognized, regardless of the context within which it occurred – it could be formal (e.g. a short training course), informal (in the work place) or non formal (in every day life).

Despite this simple explanation, RPL is a value-laden concept, especially in South Africa where it is seen by some as the catalyst for social transformation because it provides the tools whereby employees can gain access to jobs and places of higher education previously unavailable to them because of their lack of formal education.

In the SAQA policy documentation, RPL is considered a fundamental part of the strategy to transform education, training and the workplace in South Africa. RPL is seen as a catalyst that can be used to:

- Facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths; and
- Accelerate redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities. (SAQA, 2002)

Many organisations are realising that RPL holds the key to a number of burning issues within their organisations. The challenge of Employment Equity can be remedied by RPL, as can talent management, succession planning, performance management and the provision of more focused and cost-effective training. However, organisations are not sure how to implement RPL and how to manage the process to ensure that the results are fair and reliable.

Getting started

Step 1: Consultation

As with most activities resulting from government policy, the key with RPL implementation is consultation. The first step would be to consult with the Work Place Skills Forum and Employment Equity Forum (which should ideally be one body). If the organisation is unionised, the union should also be brought into the discussions and if any professional bodies are involved on a large scale these should also be consulted. Management must know why it wants to implement RPL and it is essential that these reasons are communicated clearly and unambiguously.

Reasons for RPL could be:

1. Simply as part of HRD strategy – to act as a basis for performance management without being credit bearing. This can result in internal job promotion but may limit the candidates' progression outside the company.
2. To award credits to allow people access to further study, and better job prospects both internally and externally.
3. To radically challenge all aspects of the organisation – to challenge job entry requirements (which are usually qualification based), to challenge course content from internal and external providers and to challenge the SETAs in what they will pay for and what they will not.

Step 2: Resourcing of the process

RPL can be an expensive endeavour, but these costs can be absorbed over time.

Key expenses include:

- Provision of RPL information and advise company-wide
- Provision of training to all staff – so that even if they do not want to access t they respect those who have and see the value in their credits
- Provision of RPL adviser services (could be a dedicated resource if the company is large)
- Training of assessors and moderators and assessment tool designers
- Development of assessment tools
- Becoming an ETQA-accredited provider (if you want to award credits)
- Development of RPL policies and processes
- Development of a system to track RPL, its successes, failures and numbers (for claiming from the SETA if permitted)

Step 3: Designing the policy

This is the difficult bit. You need to consider:

- What is the objective of RPL in this company – what will be possible and what will not be possible?
- Who will have access to it?
- How will we recognise the outcomes?
- Who will pay for it? If we pay do we restrain the candidate for a period?
- Does it happen in work time or off time?
- Do we assess only in English or all languages?
- How much assistance do we give each candidate?
- Must candidates be literate and numerate
- How many times can someone RPL at company cost? And at their own cost?
- Do we only RPL against unit standards?
- Do we use the results to challenge our job descriptions and training provision?
- Who are the assessors?
- Do we need witnesses? Translators? Subject matter experts?
- Who moderates?
- What do we measure?

Step 4: Designing the processes

- Talk to your SETA and ascertain how they want you to present credit information so that they will endorse it for credit
- Work out the paper trail to track a candidate through:
 - Application
 - RPL adviser
 - Portfolio development
 - Workplace assessment
 - One-on-one interview and feedback
 - Individual Development Plan
 - Credit awards
 - Training provision
- Make someone responsible and accountable for the process
- Track your metrics – whatever is important to you. This could be numbers of candidates, numbers completing formal training, numbers of promotions, higher productivity, EE ratios, etc.
- Keep your sense of humour – it is not always going to be easy.

In conclusion

RPL is a brave path and at the moment it is a largely untrodden path in South Africa. The potential for high rewards exist for those companies prepared to take the road. Rewards may be largely intangible during the early days but RPL presents companies with an opportunity to truly become part of the social transformation of South Africa and the workplace. As individual managers RPL presents us with the opportunity to actually do something constructive for our workforce so that they can also grow and develop to their full potential. That is an awesome, scary and rewarding challenge.