

RESILIENCE
***AND* PERSONAL**
EFFECTIVENESS
***FOR* SOCIAL WORKERS**

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VALUING OUR OWN HEALTH AND WELLBEING AND IMPROVING WORK/LIFE BALANCE

Key Concepts and Issues in this Chapter

- Determining priorities for our work and personal lives
 - Inner expansion as a technique for expression of the self
 - Cultivating inner stillness
 - Creating boundaries between work and personal life
 - Developing your inner sanctuary
 - Developing the right sort of passion about social work
 - Coping with vicarious trauma
 - Getting enough sleep
 - Getting enough exercise
 - Positive intelligence and gratitude
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What is it all for?

Many of you will be familiar with the TV drama *Breaking Bad*.

In the course of the drama Walter goes from being a mild-mannered school teacher with cancer to becoming a ruthless drug baron. At different times he tries to convince other people and himself that he is doing what he is doing for the best interests of his family. In the final episode, however, he admits that he was really working as a criminal because it made him feel good rather than for any more unselfish purpose. Even his final confession that he did it for selfish reasons could be seen as partly a delusion for he is acting to feed his ego rather than the totality of who he is and who he has been. As the series progresses, the warm considerate part of him disappears as he is consumed by demons which are driving him. Feelings of inferiority about his status, resentment of the success of his former business partners and anger about his illness are all part of what drives him forward. In this sea of anger and delusion he loses sight of the real love and respect which the important people in his life have for him. He is someone who has lost all focus and perspective on his life and its purpose.

Arguably, one of the reasons that mindfulness has come to prominence in recent times is that it helps us to understand what we are doing with our life and why we are doing it. Are we really being true to what we want to achieve for ourselves, our family and the people we work for or are we thrashing around in a sea of delusion? The character of Walter White had many good things in his life – his family and his work as a teacher, and the offer of financial help from a former associate. However, he could not see the value of any of these things.

Exercise

Understanding Your Priorities for Work and Your Personal Life

Find some quiet space for yourself.

- What are the three things in your work life just now which you value most?
- What are the three things in your life outside work which you value most?
- What are your three biggest goals for your work life over the next five years?
- What are the three biggest goals for your life outside work for the next five years?

In answering these questions try to be as broad in your answers as possible. For example, getting a job which is home based could be a goal whereas getting a specific job with a specific employer which was home based would be too narrow a goal.

Having written your three lists think about where goals might be in conflict or might support each other. For example, if you enjoy face-to-face work with service users then a

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goal to achieve promotion may result in a loss of that interaction which you enjoy. On the other hand, if you enjoy mentoring newer staff then that might support a goal for promotion to management. Alternatively, if you enjoy both these things then it might suggest that you should consider a job role which involved some management/mentoring while maintaining a small caseload. Think also about where there may be conflict between work and your personal life either in your present situation or in terms of your goals for the future. What can you do to get these conflicting priorities back into balance? What sort of compromises might be necessary to achieve work/life balance?

Only you can make the decisions about what is most important to you in life. Different readers will reach different conclusions about the relative priorities of work and professional life. However, what is important is that we are aware of where these priorities are and do not become like Walter White obsessively chasing delusional goals.

While Walter White is an extreme case of disconnection between goals and who we are, Leider and Buchholz (1995) described a more common phenomenon called rustout syndrome. They described this as a state in which people are no longer growing, because they made choices which had given them security and financial success but not a sense of achieving things which they find significant. Social work is a career which most of us enter into with a strong sense of purpose. We want to make a difference for others and tackle injustice and discrimination. Sometimes the mundane nature of casework, the lack of resources, and bureaucracy can be crushing. Gergen and Vanourek (2015) suggest an approach which they term 'pervasive service'. This involves finding creative ways in all areas of our lives to make contributions to our communities and the world. If our job is not always giving opportunities to do things which we find inspirational then we can make up for that in other areas, such as running a race for charity or getting involved in the work of a local voluntary sector agency in our spare time. They also suggest that we should try to find an organisation or a team to work with that shares our outlook and priorities. In large organisations, the culture can vary greatly between sections. I have worked in organisations where some teams have genuine camaraderie while other parts are blighted by bullying and unfairness. Getting a role in a team and an organisation which is consistent with our personal values is important for all employees and especially so in a job like social work.

Taking the concept of 'pervasive service' a stage further, the Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler (2003) explored the idea of 'inner expansion' whereby we track the things that are important in our job role back to what they mean for us at a fundamental level in our being. Thus, for some social workers their job might be an expression of their wish to fight oppression. For others it might mean helping to give people back a sense of control of their life. For me personally, social work

is about enabling people to make choices and giving them the psychological help or material resources to live their lives according to what is important to them. While all social workers follow a common code of ethics and values, they will differ in which elements of the job are important to their identity at a fundamental level. Following the Dalai Lama's principles we can base our identity on the essence of what our work means to us in the totality of our life rather than on the external form which it takes in our current job role. By gaining this understanding we can then make sense of where our existing job role fits with our own identity and where it might come into conflict. For most people, there will be a degree of compromise between the essence of who they are and the degree to which they can express it in their job.

Exercise

Inner Expansion

Take some time to think about what fundamental values you have as a person. How do these values relate to how you see the world and the behaviour of other people? How do they relate to your views on politics, if politics are important to you? How do your values relate to your spiritual life (if you believe that you have one)? How do these values, ethics and political views form part of your overall identity as a person?

Now think about your current job. To what degree and in what ways is it a vehicle for expressing and practising the things that are of fundamental importance to your identity? To what degree is there conflict between your job role and your personal identity?

Now think about the totality of your life and your other roles: for example, as a spouse, parent, son or daughter, carer, volunteer, member of a community, member of a team or club, political activist, church member, union member, blogger, etc. What opportunities do you have for expressing your identity in areas of your life outside work?

Now thinking about your life as a whole, do you feel that you are able to express who you are fundamentally within your life to an acceptable degree? If not, what changes might you have to make either in your work life or other areas?

Being able to see the connections and disconnections between our life as a whole and our identity is in my opinion very important to professionals in human services. I feel it is especially important to social workers at a time when there is a perception that the values of our profession are at odds with current political trends. Tummers et al. (2013) described a phenomenon called policy alienation in which professionals are in a state of 'psychological disconnection' from the policies which they are being asked to implement within their job. As public policy diverges more and more from the values and traditions of a profession, feelings of despair and alienation for those in the profession can increase. Being able to identify the ways in which we can or cannot express our core values and identity in our life as a whole can help us

identify more clearly our sources of satisfaction and our sources of dissatisfaction and disconnection. This in turn can help us to make informed choices about the direction of our life.

Cultivating inner stillness

Being in touch with our values and thinking about how we can apply them in our lives requires a degree of awareness and a capacity for reflection. I introduced the concept of inner stillness in the previous chapter. Here I explain how it fits into the wider aspects of self-awareness.

Lawrence Boldt (1993) described three keys from the Japanese Samurai code of Bushido which are important to channelling energy effectively: being present, being concentrated and being strong. Being present means having an inner stillness which allows us to be conscious and alert. Boldt states that most people 'muddle through life half asleep, scarcely aware of the dangers and opportunities that lie all around them' (p.63). Being still and alert allows us to respond to the world as it really is rather than being influenced by our own misconceptions, anxieties or fears. Concentration is the art of perfecting an ability to do one thing perfectly and carrying this ability to focus into other parts of our life. We can develop an eye for detail or a discipline in one area of our life, be it a sport or an art or a craft and then apply the lessons from that into doing our work more skilfully and mindfully. Strength refers to strength of the body. This means having a body which does what we require it to rather than a body which limits us. Most social workers spend their time with more cerebral activity and are very far removed from physical caring. This is unfortunate because physical caring can be a very intimate and spiritual experience. The lack of physical labour combined with the strong demands of the emotional labour in social work makes for a poor balance of energies. Getting the necessary physical activity to maintain a balance in our life is a difficult but important task.

We have a choice between having a life which is healthy and purposeful or mistreating our bodies and muddling through life aimlessly. To have real purpose we need to develop that stillness and awareness which Boldt referred to. This is difficult when we work in a culture where activities such as smoking, excessive eating and drinking are seen as aids to relaxation. Whatever you gave as your goals for work and the rest of life in the previous exercise I am fairly sure that they will involve you having to maintain good health, unless all you want to do is lie in bed and watch TV. Maintaining health should therefore be a priority for all of us.

Making a clear division of space between work and the rest of life

An important stage in being able to relax is making space for it. A few years ago I saw what I thought was very poor advice in a publication I normally have a great deal of

respect for. A reader had asked the *Financial Times* agony aunt whether they had to check their emails on holiday (Kellaway, 2013). The agony aunt declared that the reader ought to check his emails on holiday simply because ‘everyone else does’ since the advent of the work Blackberry. I was pleased that reader response was more balanced. Some readers suggested that it might be warranted simply because the reader worked for a small business and there may not be suitable cover for their expertise. However, many readers believed that holidays should be sacrosanct. This is very much my view. Many people already have personal worries when they go on holiday, e.g. about the health and wellbeing of relatives left at home. I feel that a holiday should at least be a complete break from work, even if it is not a complete break from all our worries. I would also suggest that before a two-week holiday you clear your diary for the two days immediately preceding your holiday to deal with unexpected contingencies. It is also useful to clear your diary for a couple of days after the holiday to deal with the email backlog and any report requests which have come in while you were away.

Making appropriate space for relaxation outside of vacation times can be more difficult. The availability of electronic devices has made work more flexible for many people. However, it can also lead to work pressures becoming tyrannical and omnipresent. Gergen and Vanourek (2015) suggest that it is important to have a daily routine which timetables in time for exercise, relaxation and reflection. Obviously there will be times in a job such as social work in which emergencies and other contingencies will interfere with our ability to find time for relaxation. However, if we make a regular place for relaxation and exercise in our schedule then there is a better chance that we will achieve it some of the time. Gergen and Vanourek term rest and relaxation ‘daily renewal’. Another part of daily renewal is making time to eat properly. This means eating away from your desk and taking time to eat slowly and chew properly.

Having some time away from your office or work routine is also valuable. Making time in the day for a walk in the sunshine or a visit to a small exhibition in a local gallery are examples of renewal. If you work on an industrial estate then bring a book to absorb yourself in for 20 minutes or go for a short walk if there is some green space nearby. Many people do not realise that they only have to walk a short distance from their office to find a country lane. Even if you work in a city then there will be interesting things to see just a short distance from where you work. When I worked in Sunderland I found many interesting sites around me. There was a building called the Eagle Building that had a slightly comical statue of an eagle on its roof. There was also a building with carved elephants on the outside at first floor level. This had been an establishment called The Elephant Tea House in the early part of the nineteenth century. Seeing it evokes images of another era and sights like this lift my spirits when I feel bogged down by the bureaucratic parts of my job. Cities like Manchester are full of gems like these – all it takes is a willingness to look up or look around and take in your surroundings. If you can find enjoyment in what you see then this will be part of your renewal.

Gergen and Vanourek also mention the concept of ‘sanctuary’ which is about having some sort of activity in which you can really lose yourself. You may not have time for this sanctuary every day. It might be something you can do in small bites over the week or might be something you do in longer chunks at weekends. The important thing is to get absorbed into it and take your mind away from whatever problems

may be troubling you at work. For some this might be walking, running or cycling. For others it might be prayer or meditation. For yet others it may be a hobby such as painting, photography or bird watching. The important thing is to get that space and refuge from work. If you can enjoy the feeling of being completely absorbed in an activity which you enjoy then you will be giving your mind and body time to heal from the emotional stresses and strains of working as a social worker.

Exercise

Developing Your Inner Sanctuary

The next time you are doing something that you really enjoy and find fulfilling, take a few moments to take in all the aspects of how you feel within your mind and body. What is your breathing like? Is it calm and regular? Are your muscles relaxed or tense? What can you hear? What can you see? Are you looking at something which fills you with joy or wonder like a beautiful sunset or painting? What is it about this experience which special?

Then, a day or two later try to recapture that feeling when you are somewhere else such as at your desk at work. Try to remember what made the positive moment special. Try to relax your breathing so that it is just as it was when you were doing what you enjoyed. Try to recapture a feeling of wonder if you were looking at something beautiful or inspirational.

Practise reaching back to that relaxed feeling whenever you feel stressed, overworked or undervalued.

Developing the right type of passion about your work

Social work is seen by most social workers as a calling or a vocation. It is something which we feel very passionately about. Kaufman (2015) suggests that passion for work can be a negative trait if it leads to people becoming obsessive and unable to switch off. He calls this obsessive passion and points to research which suggests that it is implicated in burnout. Kaufman suggests that rather than arising from feelings of joy about one's work, obsessive passion arises from people's work forming a large part of their self-concept. Thus, if their ability to focus on work is threatened then this is experienced as an attack on their identity. Kaufman contrasts this with the concept of harmonious passion. This involves an ability to bring one's work life into harmony with the rest of one's life and switch off when it is time to enjoy free time or time with one's family. This can be difficult when we work in a job which involves complex and distressing human problems. However, it is an important skill to develop.

Social workers who see their job role as a central part of their self-identity are in my opinion especially at risk from feeling dispirited by attacks on the profession in the press and in society more widely. I consider that one way to deal with this issue is to embrace Gergen and Vanourek's (2015) concept of pervasive service and take the view that our passion for helping is part of a much wider theme in our life than simply our present job or even the job title of social worker. Thus our values are not dependent on our ability to do our job as it exists now. The increasing fragility of job roles and organisations will be discussed in a future chapter.

Trauma and social work

Van Heugten (2011) discussed the impact on social workers of 'vicarious trauma'. She described this as the 'emotional impact of working with, listening to and observing trauma experienced by others, and absorbing this trauma into one's own psyche via a pathway created by empathy' (p.113). At an extreme level Van Heugten suggests that this can resemble PTSD but that it can be experienced in much less severe ways and that different workers are affected to different degrees. She explains that less experienced workers, less supported workers and those with high caseloads are most likely to be affected severely. She further reports that work by Hesse (2002) and Tham and Meagher (2009) has found that child care social workers are most particularly at risk. This is associated with activities such as removing children from their parents, especially when this is soon after birth, and dealing with sexual abuse. A more recent source of distress for child care social workers is the naming of them on anti-social-work social media sites. Child care social workers also live with the threat of being openly criticised in the media over perceived failings in their practice when harm comes to children in their care.

Van Heugten also reports that for all types of social worker working with terminally ill service users and coping with the suicide of a service user can be particularly traumatic. I have personally experienced the latter and therefore recognise how shocking and upsetting this can be. Despite the fact that social work is a profession concerned with helping people the level of support offered to social workers who experience vicarious trauma can often be completely inadequate. Even with good support it may be necessary to supplement support at work with help from a counsellor. Good employers provide access to an independent counselling service for their employees via the Human Resources department. If this is not available then a private counsellor or therapist can be contracted by the social worker, though this can be expensive.

Van Heugten says it is important for social workers to develop the ability to modulate their responses to trauma so that they can provide empathy while being able to emotionally differentiate themselves from their service users. She suggests that it is important to embed an understanding of vicarious trauma in social work education as well as an ability to identify signs of psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression. She states that workers should have the opportunity for time out following the witnessing or vicarious witnessing of a traumatic event, but at the

same time not being isolated from colleagues who could provide emotional support. Opportunities should be available for discussing or reflecting upon the events without being forced into having a detailed debriefing.

In the next two sections we will look at general self care which is important both in recovery from trauma and in maintaining our fitness for the regular demands of social work.

Getting enough sleep

Former British Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher famously managed with only four hours sleep a night. As this is a social work book I probably don't need to say anymore to convince you of the benefits of a good night's sleep. A scientific study (Knapton, 2014) suggests Mrs Thatcher's limited need for sleep could have been the result of having a gene which allows the body to survive on less sleep. For the rest of the population there is divided opinion about how many hours of sleep are needed. Some experts say that everyone needs at least eight hours per day, while others claim that what is more important is the quality of the sleep and that it is undisturbed. Sleep is a time to rest and repair the body and also to process information and experience from the day. Since social work is a job which involves exposure to stressful and emotionally demanding situations the role of sleep in processing the day's events is especially important. Lack of sleep has also been linked to increased likelihood of obesity. There are also studies suggesting that exposure at night to light sources such as computer and phone screens suppresses the production of melatonin which controls sleep and waking cycles (Wallop, 2014). Some people deal with these issues by having a certain amount of time free of electronic screens before going to bed.

Whatever your views about exactly how much sleep is needed it can certainly be agreed that social work is a job which requires alertness and concentration from the point of view of one's personal safety and also to avoid making serious errors in our practice. Of course, social workers cannot always make decisions which lead to positive outcomes. However, if we are rested and capable of concentrating properly then we are less likely to overlook important information, policies and protocols in reaching our decisions.

Getting enough exercise

This is a subject of a great deal of wasted money (gym fees) and broken resolutions. Many people make very bold and unattainable resolutions about improving fitness which inevitably lead to disappointment and disillusionment when they are not attained. A few years ago the UK pharmacy chain Boots introduced a health improvement campaign to the public as part of its health education called 'Change One Thing'. The concept was that it would be easier for people to improve health-related behaviours if people focused on just one thing at a time. Changing entrenched

behaviours is very difficult as we have had many occasions on which to practise the unhealthy behaviours. For a new behaviour to become part of our habitual routines takes a great deal of practice. If we are used to slipping out of the office for a cigarette or a cake after a stressful conversation or phone call then we will probably find ourselves repeating this behaviour without even having to think about it. We may therefore have to put quite a lot of concentration into defeating a single bad habit. Cognitive behavioural therapists recognise that the best source of motivation is to have small successes and build upon them. Thus, rather than motivation leading to achievement, a change in behaviour (albeit small) must precede motivation. If we are going to have any success in improving our health and our wellbeing then it is important to give ourselves praise for what changes we make no matter how small and ensure that these changes are permanent.

Friedman (2015) stated that while it is difficult to find time against a background of pressing deadlines and work demands we should consider what we mean when we say we don't have time to exercise. He suggested that what we really mean is that it is not a priority. He considered that we should instead view exercise as an essential part of our job. He outlined the many ways in which exercise can improve job performance:

- Better concentration
- Sharper memory
- Faster learning
- Prolonged mental stamina
- Enhanced creativity
- Lower stress
- Elevated mood

While Friedman was not writing specifically for social workers I think we can agree that these exercise-related enhancements are all ones which are beneficial to the practice of social work. Friedman suggested that an important factor in ensuring that we take up exercise is that we focus on activities that we will find enjoyable. For example, I enjoy circuit training and running but I find exercise machines such as cross trainers and treadmills incredibly boring. I am more likely to persevere with the types of exercise which I enjoy than those that I don't. Being able to get a form of exercise that you can stick to or build upon depends on you finding the exercise enjoyable and having a feeling when you are finished that you have accomplished something worthwhile.

There are a number of phone apps which can help you build up workouts and monitor your progress. S Health for Samsung Galaxy phones, for example, allows you to monitor your steps if you have a walk and it can also help you to monitor your calorie intake. Social media can help you to get support from friends. Some apps can post your progress directly onto Facebook or other social media and hopefully some up-votes from friends will give you some encouragement. Training for a charity event like a charity run can also be a motivation for improving fitness even if improving your condition for the sake of your health isn't.

Positive intelligence and gratitude

We normally think that if we achieve our goals then this will make us feel happy. Achor (2012) argued paradoxically that it is satisfaction with our life that leads to success. This idea is similar to that we discussed in relation to exercise; that we have to change our perspective before we can achieve more. But how can we feel better about ourselves if we are fundamentally dissatisfied with elements of our lives and have a habitual tendency towards negative thinking patterns? Achor suggests that humans have a very high degree of neuroplasticity and that we can train our brains to think differently if we apply ourselves. He suggested that we should engage in a positive behaviour at least once a day. If we repeat this process regularly over a period then it will cause a change in our psychological outlook. He reported that he asked a group of taxation managers with a leading accounting firm to do one of five activities daily for three weeks. The activities they could choose from are as follows:

1. Write down three things you are grateful for.
2. Write a positive message to someone in your social network.
3. Meditate at your desk for 2 minutes.
4. Exercise for 10 minutes.
5. Take 2 minutes to describe in a journal the most meaningful experience of the past 24 hours.

Achor compared the activities group with a control group in scores for optimism and life satisfaction immediately after the programme finished and then again at four months after the programme finished. At both times the experimental group scored significantly better in these important measures of happiness. Achor stated that life satisfaction is a strong predictor of both happiness at work and productivity. The fact that the increase in positivity continued well after the programme had finished suggested that the people in the experimental group had experienced a permanent change in how they thought about the world. Just as negative thinking patterns can become entrenched, so with practice we can develop habits of positive thinking. These positive thinking habits can help us to enjoy and appreciate our lives and achieve more in our work.

The daily positive activities listed above do not cost any money and only take a short amount of time. Why not try one or more of them out daily for a three-week period?

Replacing complaining with gratitude

One of Achor's positive exercises listed in the previous section is that of writing down things we are grateful for. Workplaces can be full of negativity. Our negative self-talk affects our own wellbeing. When people's resentments and frustrations are

voiced regularly to colleagues without being challenged then they can form a psychological pollution in the workplace. This can lead to an environment in which negative talk becomes the norm. While there can be a certain amount of solidarity and camaraderie around shared misery, the overall effects of this sort of communication are detrimental. We can change our own internal dialogue by replacing negative self-talk with thoughts and feelings of thanks for things that make us happy or make our lives special. We don't need to actually thank someone in person. It might be that one of the things that makes our life enjoyable is the work of a musician or writer or artist who is no longer alive. We can't thank them in person for their work. However, we can give thanks in our mind for the pleasure which their work has given us. Alternatively, we could phone a friend who we haven't spoken to for some time and tell them why they are important to us or remind them of a time you spent together which has a special memory for you. When we get in touch with happier or gentler times, we can melt away the tension, anger and frustration which has built up in us. Business writers James and Claudia Altucher (2014) recommend carrying out what they call a 'no complaints diet'. They suggest trying to live a whole week without making a complaint about anything. They recommend suppressing any negative thoughts which arise and avoiding conversations in which we might feel social pressure to be negative. They also suggest replacing negative thoughts which arise with feelings of gratitude or compassion for others. If you break the diet and make a complaint then you have to start again at day 1. At the end of the week the Altuchers suggest that you should take stock of how it felt to go a whole week without making any complaints. If it was helpful to your emotional wellbeing, then try to cultivate a non-complaining approach as a longer-term strategy.

The importance of gratitude and positive feelings towards others is an important part of many religions. Buddhism, for example, has a specific meditation, the *metta bhavana*, which is concerned with developing unconditional loving kindness towards others. The Dalai Lama (Gyatso, 1999: 132) said of compassion '...when we reach beyond the confines of narrow self-interest our hearts become filled with strength. Peace and joy become our constant companions. It breaks down barriers of every kind and in the end destroys the notion of my interest as separate from others' interest'.

Compassion and gratitude may sound like soft emotions but they have an important role in the development of resilience.

Chapter recap

The chapter started with a challenge to you to think at a fundamental level about what your life is actually about and what is really important to you personally and professionally. The opportunity to think about our goals in life is theoretically always with us but the pace of life is such that we can find ourselves carried away with events and out of touch with what is important to us. We discussed ways of maintaining our connection with personal and professional values in the context of a policy climate which is antagonistic towards it. We then went on to look at how to maintain physical and psychological health while doing a job which brings

us into the contact with the distress and trauma of others. The chapter ended with a reflection on the benefits of feeling gratitude for good things which we have in our life.

Further reading

The book *Social Work Under Pressure: How to overcome stress, fatigue and burn-out in the workplace* (van Heugten, 2011) looks at the different sources of stress which social workers face and some practical ways of tackling it.

I would recommend tuning into James Altucher's daily podcast Ask Altucher available from The Stansberry Radio website. This podcast has helpful advice to workers in any field about how to get their life in balance while being effective and imaginative in how they approach their work.

The Art of Happiness at Work by the Dalai Lama and H. Cutler looks at the spiritual dimension of work and is going to be of interest to anyone who is concerned with being in touch with the ethics and values of their job while trying to find contentment and fulfilment in what they do.

Next up!

In the next section we are going to look at lots of practical suggestions for how you can become more efficient, more effective and have the time and energy for large and important pieces of work. It's all about planning and having the right scheduling tools to make it all possible. We will also look at how to leverage short periods of 'found time' which would otherwise be unproductive. We will also look at why people procrastinate and how we can tackle difficult and complex tasks proactively. The concept of Lean management will be introduced and you will be challenged to look in detail at how some of the procedures could be used in your day-to-day work and how they could be made more efficient.