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Creating a unifying platform for advertising and finding external CPD

When you wake at 5.00am thinking about continuing professional development (CPD), something is obviously wrong. But why was it so easy to find hotels, trains, and friends online, while education could be so elusive? Why, in 2017, were CPD adverts scattered across so many websites, or buried in my junk email folder? Why was I attending the same events every year, travelling hundreds of miles yet largely unaware of what was on my doorstep?

I eventually decided that these questions were occupying my mind for two reasons. Firstly, I was reading lots about climate change, oceanic health, and the negative impact of fossil-fuel-powered travel. I had become self-critical when realising my past actions had not been benign. Secondly, I had recently decided to undertake a specific study day, but had found the process of finding an available course time-consuming and frustrating.

It soon became apparent that I was not alone, with colleagues reporting difficulties in finding relevant, accessible, and affordable education, resulting in attendance at inappropriate events just to gain points for revalidation. It was impossible for these healthcare professionals to keep track of all available opportunities when hundreds of CPD providers

were marketing through their own individual websites. I therefore decided to build a software platform to accommodate all UK course, conference, and webinar adverts on a single website. Utilising the well established 'sign-posting' and 'matching' model from holiday and travel sites, I aimed to reduce the risk of healthcare staff missing educational opportunities, ensure they were aware of what was happening locally/online, and decrease miles travelled.

I decided the site had to provide a level playing field for advertising regardless of organisational budget, be free to use for NHS-associated course providers and all healthcare staff, and ensure that relevant education could be easily found through CPD categorisation and user-applied filters. I pledged to never

lose sight of the fact that I was aiming to reduce the environmental impact of attending external CPD.

Autonomy of development was required to ensure this ethos was preserved, so I registered a company, a range of domain names and approached my Regional Tech Centre (RTC North) for advice. The RTC was a natural next step as I was aware of their existence through the Bright Ideas in Health Awards and although completely independent of the NHS, were well connected and employed professionals who could help local businesses innovate, compete, and grow. Thereafter, 2018 disappeared in a blur of due diligence; grant applications; and meetings with education providers, Health Science Networks, Health Education England Northeast, software developers and lawyers.

I was fortunate to find a software design agency who completely understood the concept and who were so enthusiastic that I started to believe my vision could become reality. Three commercial grant applications were successful, and innovation sponsorship was secured. All grants were 35–40 per cent match-funding, so I had to self-invest to fund development and then claim reimbursement, thus demonstrating my own financial commitment to the product.

It needs skill to communicate effectively with software developers, and my initial attempts to provide concise guidance resulted in the four-months 'phase one' stretching to a year. In retrospect this was a blessing as during 2019 there was an exponential rise in the awareness of climate change and of the fact that the NHS was both part of the problem and part of the solution. We therefore prioritised geographic matching and support for online education which, through CPDmatch, could reach a global audience.

With only a small budget and team, development was glacially slow, and intellectual property protection was essential. All conversations were either conducted under non-disclosure agreements or with trusted professional bodies such as the College. There was little we could legally protect, so our focus was to be 'first to market' with support from regional and national organisations.

In February 2020, we quietly launched <https://cpdmatch.co.uk> for online testing, sent emails to anaesthetic course providers, and started seeing courses listed. It took six weeks to ensure that the site was functioning correctly, and, just as we were beginning to start the huge task of marketing, COVID-19 forced a UK lockdown and cancellation of most on-site educational events.

While this was a blow, we realised there was no better time to reaffirm goals as many adaptations to COVID-19 were relevant to the sustainability agenda. Physical events were rescripted for

online delivery and the term 'webinar' was being used daily. Large-scale mass 'conference' gatherings were unlikely to reappear anytime soon, and local events were likely to predominate if online delivery was not an option. Site development continued to ensure we were well positioned to provide a service for 2020 and beyond.

CPD is only of benefit if it can be found, and in a rapidly changing world there is logic in creating a 'go to' place for all 1.4 million NHS staff to find education, especially when so many courses, conferences and webinars are relevant to multiple specialties. This will require a small change in practice for course providers and healthcare professionals, but the result would be a world first, benefiting staff, employers, professional organisations, the NHS, and patients.



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