I'm just amazed I did it'

Caroline Holland speaks to a dental nurse who has been transformed into a dental leader through an eye-opening course and the support of her colleagues and tutors.

For five years, when Julie Chilvers was asked what her job was, she found it difficult to say the words 'practice manager'. Although it's what she does, she could never quite persuade herself that she could lay claim to the title. Today the words are no longer a challenge. Her perception of herself has been transformed and she is contemplating a degree course, something she would never have thought possible previously.

This transformation is the direct result of an 18-month leadership course with UMD Professional, a leading supplier of qualifications to the dental profession. Julie's bosses paid for her to go on the course, a supportive gesture for which she is very grateful. The UMD courses are accredited by the Institute of Leadership and Management and are a robust qualification.

The ILM Level 5 course undertaken by Julie was a combination of ten monthly one-day workshops and written assignments based on management in the practice. Julie was sure she wouldn't pass. Roger Lilley, one of her tutors, was available whenever she had a challenging assignment or needed to thrash through her thoughts. Happily, Julie passed all her assignments and Roger was there to see her collect her certificate at the UMD Awards Ceremony. In this article, Julie and Roger share their feedback on the last few years with *Vital* readers.

Julie Chilvers works as the Practice Manager at Peppermint Dental Centre in Wymondham, Norfolk. She trained as a dental nurse before taking time out to have children then went back to work as a Senior Nurse in the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital's Oral Surgery department. Then, Kate Starling and Michelle McConkey, oral surgeon colleagues, decided to set up in practice and asked Julie to join them as their senior nurse. She worked part-time on reception before being appointed practice manager just over five years ago.

Julie

My problem with Roger was that I thought he was wrong! He didn't see things as I did, so he had to be wrong. At least that was my take at the outset. Then, when I realised that he wanted us to see the bigger picture, that he was teaching us principles of management first and foremost, I could see he might have a point. I had to stop focusing on how I solved problems, thinking I was using common sense and experience, and concentrate on what is best practice in the world of management.

The hardest thing for me was the assignments. I always wrote too much and had to cut out words. One of the most challenging for me was the second assignment I did, on stress management. I work in a small women-only practice and stress at work was not something which I felt was relevant to me. Once again, it was a question of thinking round the subject and seeing that stress permeates everything. The late patient, the anxious patient, the staff member who wants a holiday at a busy time, the need to stay late to support your clinician, the list goes on. As the practice manager you often find yourself managing everyone's stress, but you are just not aware of it. The assignment I liked best was on communication.

All the tutors brought case studies from their own working lives to the workshops and these were really helpful. I don't think distance learning would have worked for me. As a group, we hit it off really well from day one. From a social side it was very rewarding to get together with like-minded people. I'm just amazed I did it.

The bizarre aspect of the situation is that I did not have any confidence at all. I really did not think I would get through the course. Having been out of education a long while, I did not think I had the discipline. I started it in the first place partly for me and partly to demonstrate to others that I had the right training. I always felt like a dental nurse doing a manager's job.

Since the course finished, I have started a practice managers group for colleagues in the Norwich area. We knew each other already as we had a meeting before the introduction of HTM 01-05. Now we get together regularly and share information. This is a direct result of doing the course. As a practice manager you are isolated. You are not in the surgery like the rest of the clinical team and your job is sometimes to be the big bad wolf. It helps to discuss some of the difficult daily issues with other practice managers.

In the past, I thought common sense dictated what I did. But I now realise that what might appear to be common sense could put a practice in breach of employment law, for instance, so I'm much more aware of everything that needs to be taken into account. I now find I'm looking at things from the perspective of a practice manager. I have to admit that Roger wasn't so wrong after all.

Roger

A lot of practice managers working in small businesses have gone through the ranks. They start work as a dental nurse, often straight from school, or become a receptionist. They have never had any formal management training but management is what they end up doing.

The experience they have is really useful but when I first start working with a group, what I often encounter is that because they do something in a particular way in their practice, they think it's right. The assignments they are given are work-based but they have to think differently. I have to help the students to see that what's customary for them might not necessarily be the best way to do things.

This was definitely an issue for Julie although I only found out afterwards that she was convinced I didn't know what I was talking about! The interesting thing about Julie was that she was very lacking in self-confidence. Once she started believing in herself, everything changed. She understood what the issues were. It took her a while to convince herself she knew what this was all about. It made her realise her opinions were worthwhile and that she understood things which others didn't.

Doing this course isn't like school exams which might be a student's last educational experience; it's the equivalent of a series of business reports in which issues must be

Roger Lilley is a business advisor and a tutor for UMD Professional. He had a successful industry career, first in sales, then in business development and marketing. The experience he acquired is relevant to management in all spheres of work and he has worked with dental practice managers and dentists for the last five years.

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carefully evaluated. The word ‘evaluate’ is often a challenging one to grasp and we have to work at it with the students.

Management is not just a science, it's an art. That's according to Charles Elvin, Chief Executive of the Institute of Leadership and Management. He handed out the certificates to all the successful students at the UMD Professional Awards Ceremony. In his speech he said that what managers often need to learn is a more reasoned approach to problem solving and planning and I think that sums up the Level 5 Diploma very well.

Students can get very disheartened when they fail an assignment for the first time but this is an important learning opportunity. Julie kept persisting and that has resulted in her success.

A lot of practice managers underrate themselves and Julie was no exception. The course is a challenge because it holds up a mirror to people and how they perform and this is challenging. It means that for those who pass, this is a qualification which has real meaning. I hope that when Julie looks back it is with a great sense of achievement.