

General hints, tips and suggestions for developing problem solving and analytical skills

VERBAL REASONING



When reviewing complicated written /verbal information, seek to be as objective and logical as possible. Ask yourself, can a particular conclusion be drawn from this information, or is further information required?



Practice reading more complex articles, business journals, science reports or 'opinion-pieces' in the higher-quality newspapers including those where a particular case, viewpoint or personal perspective is being argued. Have a go at:

- Summarising the key messages
- Thinking how strongly the argument is developed
- Thinking how well the argument is based on facts presented in the article, or is based upon opinion
- Drawing up your own counter-arguments to the article based upon facts or logic.

NUMERICAL REASONING



When looking at numerical data, develop a habit of evaluating it with a critical eye:

- Does the information look right?
- How reliable is the source of the information?
- What conclusions can we draw from this information?
- Do we need more information before doing this?



We all get rusty on basic mathematical principles, partly due to the abundance of technology to do things for us. However, the rule of 'rubbish-in-rubbish-out' particularly applies to tools such as spread sheets and if using electronic calculators. Because of this, effective leaders, managers and professionals find it very useful to maintain their basic numerical skills, if only to be able to see when information might not look quite right (as per the above suggestion), or to be able to estimate a numerical answer to a problem. To assist in this, have a go at brushing-up on the following mental arithmetic techniques:

- Percentages
- Fractions

- Ratios
- Using graphs and tables.



Practise reading financial articles in newspapers, etc., particularly those which combine objective narrative and analysis with graphs, charts and tables.



Practice numerical puzzles which can often be found in newspapers.



There are excellent books and resources for brushing-up on number skills.



Consider taking courses in numerical skills appropriate to your current role and your career goals and ambitions. If you work in a line role, for example, consider a course in finance for non-financial managers. Check out the courses at your local college.

LOGICAL AND FLEXIBLE REASONING



When facing difficult or complex problems, seek to:

- Un-pick the problem into its component parts
- Consider the causes of the problem
- Sift out the more relevant from the less relevant factors
- Keep an open mind about different causes and factors
- Identify if there are any connections, parallels or links between different factors, or with other, different or even apparently unrelated problems or solutions which you may have come across before
- Explore different 'what-if' options before deciding on a particular solution – if we were to do this, what would be the consequences?
- Don't rule out or dismiss different, less obvious, unusual or creative options to resolve problems at too early stage, until the suitability of these has been explored or evaluated.



Practice any type of logical puzzles such as 'brain-teasers' and Sudoku which can often be found in newspapers and magazines.



Identify people who seem to be good at problem solving at work or in your personal life. Consider what makes them seem to be good at this, and identify the behaviours which they are demonstrating when doing this. Think about what techniques you could use as well.