

Meeting employer expectations: is a good communications system part of the solution?

Simply having a point of contact at the other end of the telephone or email was a common response. All employers expected trainers to have a **reliable communication system**. They wanted prompt responses to queries and to be able to discuss their training needs as well as be receiving feedback on trainees' progress. Some employers complained about a lack of communication – for example, that getting hold of the right person wasn't always easy, even when a designated contact had been provided. They commented how difficulties were sometimes caused by poor telephone systems, where too few staff were on reception to answer the phone, or they hadn't been given the extension number. Some employers complained that they hadn't been given regular feedback on trainees' progress or attendance. One said: 'We only receive invoices'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, **relevance** was at the top of the list for most. Employers expected the college service to be linked to workplace practices, to be up to date and reflect the changing needs of the sector and employees. Employers commented that some training providers were offering courses they thought *should* be provided rather than those which employers and their employees actually needed. For example, employers in the construction industry noted some resistance to providing training related to new processes, such as 'thin bed jointing'. In some cases, the training that was being offered was out of date, such as training in lead work, which is no longer commonly used.

Almost half of the employers stressed the need for **flexibility** – of delivery times, modes of provision, and assessment. Being flexible meant, for example, being prepared to cut training time to the minimum to achieve only the objectives the employer required. Some wanted 'bite-size' training that fitted into the employers' tight schedules and was tailored to the specific needs of their market. Others expected the ability to respond to a company's spasmodic requirements for training.

One third of the employers stressed the need for **high-quality training**. They saw this as depending on trainers having a good knowledge of their subjects, being up to date with current thinking, using clear, jargon-free language and giving relevant examples and illustrations. They also expected trainers to show a passion for their business and transmit their enthusiasm to the trainees. Employers felt that some courses, especially those offered for the first time, weren't sufficiently organised.

Employers saw good trainers as those who **gave support to their learners** – trainers who listened to their trainees and discussed their difficulties, offered advice and guidance and boosted their confidence. Those in the care and hair and beauty sectors, in particular, pointed out the importance of their trainees receiving such support, as many had not enjoyed success at school, lacked confidence and had low self-esteem.

It was important to employers that they were **kept up to date with national issues and developments**. Those in the care sector, in particular, noted how the skills and needs of their staff were changing and developing, especially with new areas of work, such as care for highly dependent clients. A few employers noticed the large variation in customer service, even between individual college departments. For example, whilst one department had helped the employer through the maze of government requirements, regulations and funding, another department had not.

Finally, employers across all sectors agreed that providers should engage in more detailed discussion and consultation with them before and during training. Many employers said they wanted to be more involved in training and in developing the trainers to help them keep up to date. They also wanted to be involved in developing the curriculum and training programmes that met their specific needs.

Take action

If you are a manager, trainer or teacher, could you:

- get together with other providers in your area and commission an independent survey of your employers to find out what they think of the service?
- be more proactive in contacting employers and make it easier for regular communication between you to happen, for example, through using mobile phones and email?
- do more to consult your employers about their trainees' needs so that you can match their requirements with a more bespoke service?
- work with employees to ensure you are up to date with the latest developments in the industry, for example, through gaining current industrial experience

Meeting trainee expectations

The researchers approached 118 employers whose employees received training from 18 FE colleges to explore their needs and expectations.

They also spoke to the employees. Their perspective was very similar, it seems.

Trainees wanted:

- good communication
- good quality teaching and relevant content
- flexible delivery, assessment and qualifications, with minimum disruption to their work patterns, and
- regular and frequent updates and feedback on training and development.

Trainees needed to have someone they could talk to and discuss their problems; someone who would answer their queries promptly, who understood their situation and the competing demands on their time.

Trainees also liked being able to gather evidence of their skills from their everyday work. They liked assignments that were directly relevant or specific to their company's work. It was important to them that training and assessment caused them the minimum of disruption: 'Teaching and assessment have to fit in with peaks in our workload'.

Trainees wanted to have regular and frequent updates and feedback on their training and development too – they wanted to know where they needed to improve and where they were doing well. At best, college staff kept them and their employers well informed of their progress but in other cases learners found they had to ask teachers for feedback.

Evidence source

Hughes, M. & Smeaton, B. (2007) Exploring employers' perceptions of employer engagement. Learning & Skills Development Agency (LSDA)