

# Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme

## Winning friends and influencing employers



Employer engagement – the art of working collaboratively with businesses to deliver learning – is one of the toughest challenges that any learning provider faces. Get it right, and you're in business – but get it wrong, and you could well be out of business altogether.

Even if the training you're offering is free to the employer, there's always a danger that a rival training provider might be offering its training in a way that simply suits the employer better, perhaps by offering to deliver it in the workplace in the early hours of the morning.

So how do you give your organisation the best chance of success in such a crowded and competitive marketplace? Obvious as it may sound, the most effective way is to learn from others' experience – and especially from their mistakes.

That's what Ian White does. As the owner of Business Development Midlands – better known as BDM – he has more experience than most and admits to having learned from his fair share of mistakes, too.

"I now know how vital it is to build your local database," he says. "Every bit of information, every business card, is potentially valuable. But I'd been to thousands of networking meetings over the years and hadn't garnered enough information. It took me years to realise that it was a mistake.

"The big challenge is getting in front of employers, particularly in this economic climate, but you can waste an awful lot of time chasing the wrong people. So you can save a lot of money and effort by stepping back and deciding where your market is."

That means reading the business sections of newspapers, keeping an eye on the trade Press, going to networking events, and keeping meticulous records.

It sounds simple, but Ian regularly comes across people at networking meetings who either believe they have the gift of the gab yet don't listen, or are shy and don't like talking to people. "You either have to learn to talk to people or forget about employer engagement," he says.

Once you've established where your market is, the next challenge is to engage with it.

That used to mean cold-calling, e-mailing and direct-mailing them, but Ian says the advent of social media like Facebook and Twitter has changed everything, forever.

"The traditional methods are still important, but some training providers have a lack of social media presence and awareness," he says. "If they don't grasp the importance of the media in which people are doing business, they will no longer be in business themselves.

"Social media is like having thousands of marketeers working for you. They're otherwise known as students, and they will talk about your product or service. The tools you need are free and they can help you contact your target market, sometimes described these days as your tribe.

"But where does your tribe live... on Facebook or Twitter or LinkedIn? You need to know what they're talking about and you need to have a social media strategy to make your business work.

“Facebook and Twitter are basic tools. But how does Google link into them? And how does your traditional marketing blend in with it? You need to be familiar with Twitter and Facebook and integrate your blog with it. That should push your online presence up, and your market will come to you.”

That said, Ian still makes efficient use of more traditional methods.

“We have a reasonable set of cleansed data and we market to that. We use an e-mailing system called Constant Contact which means that if I want to send out something to the database I can do it all in one go. It shows me who’s opened the e-mail and who’s clicked on particular links. And it shows me where they’re going in their mind, which saves us time and money.

“It sounds really obvious, but it makes sense to look after the clients you’ve already got. It’s a travesty when you meet people who don’t know who they are doing business with. So nurture your clients!”

Ian does that himself by using a very cost-effective CRM (customer relationship management) system that only costs him about £9 a month. When he calls someone, he knows a lot of information about them; and he keeps notes from his conversations so that next time he can ask them if they enjoyed their holiday in Corfu or managed to find their dog.

“The training world is very, very competitive and it’s not always a level playing field with funding,” he says. “We need to offer flexibility and fit into employers’ time-frames. It’s important to try to tease out what the employers’ real problems are. Let the clients talk while you listen!

“And if money is tight, they might only want a small chunk of training now – but you might be able to go back to them later when things are better for them and sell them some more.”

He says it’s not a good idea to offer numeracy and literacy to companies straight out, because they may run a mile. But integrate those skills seamlessly into the other training you offer, and they’ll be glad of it. “You have to show employers the business benefits,” he says.

Ian’s organisation is part of the Black Country Consortium, and he says he values being involved with the Skills and Employer Responsiveness programme.

“It’s been very good for inspiration with some useful workshops, particularly in Key Skills,” he says.

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The Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) Programme is funded by LSIS. It is a sector led programme tasked with increasing the capacity of all providers in the learning and skills sector to work with employers and help address the current and future skills needs of their business and workforce.

The SER programme is managed in the **East of England, East Midlands and West Midlands** by ALP, the 157 Group, NIACE and AoC. It offers support in three key strands:

- Employer responsiveness
- Apprenticeship provision
- Pre-employment provision and transition into work.

The Programme offers a variety of support including workshops, webinars, coaching and tailored support.

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