

Reinvigorating Curriculum Design

Case Study



Project title: Better training for work

A project that set out to encourage a stronger and more dynamic relationship between employers and training providers to ensure that training programmes are more integrated to working practices.

Worth reading if you are interested in:

- Working with employers to design tailored learning programmes
- Contextualising learning in the workplace
- Improving employer / provider communication strategies

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What the project set out to do and why

In common with many similar organisations, Charnwood Training provides generic training programmes to support apprenticeship and management programmes. Employers provide drivers for the inclusion of certain topics, but make little or no contribution to the curriculum design.

The project set out to change this relationship by involving the employer in the design of the curriculum from the outset. The two aims were to:

- determine effective ways of engaging with an employer; and
- test these ways of working with an employer in the joint redesign of a specific curriculum area.

By better understanding the employer's key business objectives and drivers, Charnwood Training would be able to identify a suitable programme and tailor the structure, delivery and assessment approach so that the programme meets the employer's needs as well as integrating employee training and working practice.

In addition, the project team proposed to convert the materials of the chosen curriculum from a paper-based, workbook-style approach to an online interactive approach supported by a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

What the project has achieved so far

The project began by opening discussions with a specific employer, chosen because of the number of and breadth of trainees involved. Subsequently, a second employer was brought in to test the validity of the approach being taken. Progress so far includes:

- agreement on working practices and communication channels between Charnwood Training and their employers;
- a Level 5 Management programme selected as the test curriculum area;
- employer requirements clearly identified and incorporated into the redesigned curriculum for this programme;
- a course structure created in the VLE and shared with the employer for comment;
- appointment of a Curriculum Manager to lead on the project (although the appointment was significantly delayed due to circumstances outside the control of the project).

Key curriculum design features emerged from the employer discussions:

- Adoption of a project-driven approach to the NVQ assessment – to maximise the extent to which the learning programme can be individualised to each learner and linked to their employment key performance Indicators. The assessment model has been adapted to support this through the mapping of outcomes occurring as a natural part of project development to assessment criteria, i.e. moving away from box-ticking.
- Building in interim project reports into the programme design as an assessment requirement – to help track progress and allow appropriate support to be provided in a programme which contains both taught and remote study. This was driven by the finding from the initial research that the employer would like to see the impact of the training on their business. It will provide evidence of interim impact throughout the programme, rather than just at its completion.
- Pooling learners' project outcomes in a common knowledge base, provided by the training provider for use by the employer – to generate practical solutions to business challenges through a KPI driven, project approach to the curriculum design. The aim is to capture these so they can be made available across the employer's business, enabling staff and teams to benefit from good ideas which have been shown to be effective in practice.
- Inclusion of a reflective journal – to encourage the personal qualities that the employer regards as being important, i.e. independent thinking, personal responsibility and an enhanced understanding of the whole organisation. These also fit with the objectives of study and assessment at this level

There is an expectation that the project approach with individualised assessment will increase learner engagement and motivation as learners will clearly see the direct relevance of their course to their roles.

What the project still needs to

The project is now focusing on redesigning the existing paper-based workbook materials, taking into account the outcomes from the discussions with the employers. These materials are also being adapted to take account of the proposed emphasis on a more independent style of study than previously envisaged. Therefore, there will be more emphasis on learner activities, research and reflection rather than on providing a substantial amount of content. It is envisaged that the Curriculum Manager and his team will complete this during April 2012.

Evaluation of the project outcomes, including the development of working practices and the redesign of the trial curriculum area will take place during May 2012 with the intention of making the evaluation and final report public at the end of May.

It is intended that a trial of the Management Level 5 programme will become live for learners by 1st May 2012.

Key learning points

- The language used when communicating curriculum ideas and developments to employers is important. Words like "curriculum", "qualifications", "levels", "verification" etc. can confuse and don't help an employer understand the relevance to their business. They need to hear phrases like "a training solution to meet your needs x, y and z".
- Re-branding of any training materials must be easy to do as companies may regularly change their branding or style guides.
- Employers need to be shown what is available and possible (in terms of how training can be designed and delivered) so they can make judgements as to what will suit their needs best. Showcasing clearly understandable examples of course programmes, resources and management can help achieve this. It is also important to provide examples of successful outcomes that are relevant to their business.
- Employers need the training provider to make what's on offer very clear to their staff, in terms that they can relate to. This includes relevance to their role, career progression, time commitments and assessment methods. The employers look to the training provider to provide a complete package which includes not only the training itself but also effective promotion to encourage their managers and staff to buy in.
- Employers are interested in outcomes throughout the programme of study, not just the achievement of a qualification at the end.