

LSIS funded Improving training and related services for employers

PROVIDER END OF PROJECT REPORT

Project title: BusinessFirst

Section 1: Introduction

(Give a brief introduction to your organisation and the project.)

Please explain how and why the project emerged?

Incorporated in 1993, City College Norwich (CCN) is one of the largest Further Education/Higher Education (FE/HE) Colleges in the country and offers provision in 14 of the fifteen Skills Funding Agency's areas of learning, attracting approximately 14,000 students onto programmes ranging from pre-entry to post graduate level. In line with its **Strategy Plan 2009-2014 'Delivering Tomorrow's People, Tomorrow's Workforce'** CCN aims to *'act as a catalyst in supporting economic development and regeneration in the region through working with employers to provide high quality, relevant vocational and professional education and training to meet existing and future skills needs.'*

CCN's Ofsted Inspection Report (2009) confirms that a key strength of the College is its, *'excellent response to employers' needs'* which are confirmed using a proposal document to record the benefits and measurements and training impact of the planned delivery. The benefits are specific to, and agreed with, the individual employer and include both hard outcomes such as qualifications or completion of non-accredited programmes and soft outcomes such as increased confidence and reduction in absenteeism. This enables employers to both qualify and quantify the value of training to the business.

With a face to face visit (the employers' preferred way to conduct business), our Employer Partnerships team of Business Advisors work with an existing training needs analysis (TNA) to avoid duplication. Or they may suggest changes based on their experience and knowledge of the range of training solutions available. The employer's request may be straightforward, such as a need for mandatory training. This requirement can be agreed with the minimum of paperwork and is often delivered over a short time frame, such as Emergency First Aid in the Workplace which is a one day course. It may however take a number of discussions over a period of time for the Business Advisor to fully explore the employer's needs and plan an appropriate programme.

During our Training Quality Standard (TQS) revalidation visit, we became aware that this system is both outdated and flawed. As a further education (FE) provider, the College must collate and submit a substantial amount of data to its funding stakeholders, which is evidenced through a plethora of forms – joining, enrolment, registration etc. – and confirmed via the Individual Learning Record (ILR) at specific intervals. This enables the College, indeed all FE Colleges, to draw down funding but is cumbersome when applied to a commercial setting. Put simply, our systems are

geared for individual learners and often frustrate employers. However when a more customer-focused process is applied it can fail to collate relevant data.

What are you trying to achieve within the project?

The aim of the project, BusinessFirst, is to improve the quality of the College's business service to employers through the development of a web application responsive to employers' needs and funding data requirements. Building on the College's previous and current work to standardise systems (student eILP, staff eIDP and the virtual learning environment Grade Centre) BusinessFirst would create a web application, an 'online shop' which would:

- be sector specific;
- store each employer's data;
- enable a more innovative approach to organisational needs analysis (ONA)/TNA;
- create a secure payment system;
- store and continuously update the training offer, this can also include provision from other providers so the employer can select;
- provide updates on mandatory training;
- record specific company information such as key performance indicators; and
- log the company's staff development plan.

The College had already created an employer-focused site, The Training Hub which was designed as an 'online community', offering employers an opportunity to *'build relationships, network and share ideas for future growth'*. Requiring the employer to register, The Training Hub allowed businesses to track the progress of their employees' training, and exchange ideas and views within and across the sector. With the last postings dated February 2010, and contributed by the Head of New Media - the department which created the site - it is obvious that employers are not engaging with the Hub and it is providing no identifiable benefits.

Given the short time span of the project, BusinessFirst would focus on two sectors, Hospitality and Financial Services. Both areas within CCN have achieved the Training Quality Standard Part B, both areas are National Skills Academies, both have active employer forums and both offer bespoke training, full cost recovery, Apprenticeships and mandatory qualifications.

Section 2: Activities

Who has been involved? (Departments and/or job roles)

Although the College had already started to review The Training Hub and to identify what departments would need to be involved, it was the LSIS grant that enabled staff to be allocated to this project. The project team therefore included:

- ProjectFirst - Sarah Taylor (Manager) responsible for compliance;
- ProjectFirst - Don Smith (project broker);
- the role of ProjectFirst was to bring the various departments together and to report to LSIS;

- New Media – Peter Panes and Gary Haddon: web designers responsible for creating the new site;
- Employer Partnerships – Gary Howard (Director);
- Kirsty Barlow (Workforce Development Manager);
- Adam Barton (Systems Development Manager);
- Responsibilities included confirming data requirements, commercial provision and creating biographies for the Employer Partnership team; and
- Jayne Brown (Enrolment Manager), planning & funding and responsible for ensuring CCN systems and funding requirements are met.

During this period the College confirmed the appointment of Sue Dougal as Commercial Director. Ms Dougal joined the College in 2010 to establish the National Skills Academy for Retail Skillshop, Ego, followed by the recent opening of the Retail Training Suite (www.ccn.ac.uk/news/retail-training-suite-opened-theo-paphitis).

What's happened so far?

January 2012

- Project set up meeting to scope the project, agree tasks and confirm outcomes and objectives.
- Initial contact with CCN staff to request support for the project.
- Meeting with Sue Dougal to discuss the Training Hub and why this had not been a success.

Questions from this session included, *“What is the objective of BusinessFirst?” “What is it for?” “Does the College have a business image?” “What would make a business buy from CCN?”* The College is often product-led, not solution-led. *“What is the impact of this?”* The need to simplify functions and ensure online booking was discussed and Sue Dougal agreed to advise from a commercial perspective.

- Meeting with Jo Pretty, Head of Creative and Business Industries for introduction to two Employers' Fora, the Retail Board and the Financial Services Group.
- Project team meeting. Don Smith outlined the project and planned the project meetings, agreeing with both departments who should attend and their remit. Review of the Training Hub. Adam Barton agreed to compile a questionnaire for employers in the absence of Employers' Fora meetings.

February 2012

Feedback from the team on the Training Hub concluded that:

- many companies were not aware of it;
- companies may prefer face to face contact;
- site is too wordy;
- there are confusing links and headings; and
- Information is not up to date.

It was agreed that the new hub, BusinessFirst, should include the following.

- Information on training courses/Apprenticeships.
- Online booking.
- Online payment – ‘shopping basket’.
- Updated terminology – ‘business’ rather than ‘employer’.

A short period of research was carried out by the project manager who presented a selection of training sites to Gary Howard, Sarah Taylor and New Media colleagues. The objective was to critique and review nine websites that either focus on commercial training or have it as part of their overall offer. The nine websites were chosen from an initial group of 12 that Don Smith had visited as part of his initial research. Each site was then presented and discussed using seven criteria: navigation, design, payment method, training needs analysis, handy tips, testimonials, biographic content and business solutions. The team concluded that:

- videos showing interviews or discussions were not liked as they can be time consuming to watch. However a video showing an actual class could be a useful marketing tool;
- a simple clean design is what we should aim for;
- testimonials can be included but they must be genuine and high quality; and
- some of the college sites we looked at although offering commercial training were not business like in their approach.

The key objectives included enabling users to search for courses and read course information, confirm dates and times of courses, book online and to pay for courses online. This information is to be presented in three sections – short courses, Apprenticeships and stand-alone NVQs.

New Media was given the following five requirements to create a draft site.

1. Search facility.
2. Quality testimonials from businesses.
3. Online payment facility.
4. Link to the Apprenticeship CCN Site.
5. News (could be in the form of a blog).

Whilst New Media developed the site, the project team focused on selecting the commercial offer. The College maintains a ‘Course Planning File’ (CPF) which lists the training offer from each School. It was agreed that it was inappropriate to link BusinessFirst to the Course Planning File, not least as it was both lengthy and reliant on the appropriate Head of School to update the information. It was agreed with the Director of Employer Partnerships to list all full cost provision, but the point was also raised that the one day offers were rarely included in the Course Planning File.

Progress during February included the creation of a demo site which was to be shown to the Retail Board in March 2012. The team also sought further clarification on non accredited courses which are not on the Course Planning File but would be of interest to employers. This information is held by the Programme Manager for each

School. Employer Partnerships focused on producing biographies for their Business Advisors.

March 2012

The project team agreed the structure of the site to include:

- a rolling loop of photographs (at slow speed) showing business people at work;
- current testimonials from companies who have used our training services;
- news or blog section;
- following discussions with Gary Howard and Planning and Funding, a basic form, based around the Application form, was agreed on, for the purposes of capturing information for the new site. There would be three forms available; general enquiry form, course booking form, an Apprenticeship enquiry form to be created for this section;
- search facility;
- TNA form to be created by using questions set by Business Advisors and forwarded onto Gary Hadden. This will be a marketing tool without an automated response;
- a link to the CCN Business Club;
- Apprenticeships and work based learning will be in sectors with links to CCN;
- Apprenticeship site; and
- other commercial courses.

April 2012

Activities included a presentation of the site at LSIS Coventry, Commercial Director to meet all CCN Heads of Schools to discuss their commercial offer, hand-over of BusinessFirst project to Commercial Director for continuation of development and launch and the pre-launch testing with employers

What has been achieved?

The following outcomes have been agreed/achieved.

- The structure of the site will be sector specific.
- Storage of employers' data will be from information stored on the TNA.
- An online training needs analysis will be created by the Business Advisors.
- A secure payment system or shopping basket will be available.
- All training offers can be updated from course lists.

In addition we have:

- completed an initial web development workshop, 24 Feb;
- disseminated the theme for the pilot to Business Advisors and project staff;
- undertaken analysis of the failures and features of The Training Hub;
- agreed an overall design (Verso and Boxer designs) for the pilot site;
- completed biographies for the Business Advisors;
- identified all data required for funding; and
- analysed our existing systems and processes for collecting data.

Section 3: Success factors and challenges

What have been the key challenges? (up to three)

1. Access to the Hospitality and Financial Services Employers' Forum groups.
These were either cancelled or our request to attend was turned down due to a full agenda and perception that the activity was not appropriate to the business in hand. We requested time on the Retail Board agenda but the meeting was cancelled.
2. Making sure we are realistic about what can be achieved within the timeframe.
3. Our initial concept.

And how did you overcome the challenges?

Access to employer forum groups

We overcame this by contacting individual businesses who were known to us and would be willing to spend some time on a one to one basis or via phone or email. Also a questionnaire is being developed by the Commercial Director to use at future retail board meetings to ascertain general information about employer needs.

Making sure we are realistic about what can be achieved within the timeframe

This was solved by a process of distillation and drilling down. At each stage, more questions were asked and clarification given. We were able to ascertain what was really achievable rather than what was idealistic.

Our initial concept

We originally planned to link the College Course Planning File to our commercial site but realised that this contains too many courses which are irrelevant to the employer. This means a significant amount of work but it will clarify the College's commercial offer against its mainstream learner response, and employer responsive offers.

Section 4: How has something changed?

What difference has the project made?

The immediate difference is that the project focused the existing efforts of separate departments across the College, and enabled us to work together with a set of clear objectives and within a timeframe. The long term benefits will be a replacement site for The Training Hub that clearly identifies our commercial offer to employers, and enables businesses to choose and purchase training more efficiently.

How are you measuring the impact?

The impact will be measured by the number of 'hits' and purchases against a record of 8,000 hits in 2011 for The Training Hub. This will be tracked by the New Media department and reported to the Commercial Director.

Section 5: Reflections on learning

What changes did you make as you went along and why?

As discussed, feedback from the organisers of both the retail and financial boards

was that attending these formal meetings with business leaders would not be using their time in the most effective manner. There was a concern that they had other pressing matters to attend to, and would not be able to spend the time needed to give us quality answers. We therefore decided, using the Blackburn College model, to contact individual companies who were more than happy to spend the time on a one to one basis. This proved to be more effective.

The original idea to log the company staff development plan was not implemented as there was evidence that this facility would not be used by companies.

As discussed, we realised we could not simply import the Course Planning File onto BusinessFirst. The positive outcome of this was in then identifying our commercial offer we became aware of other commercial opportunities such as hiring out space.

Section 6: What learning and outcomes from the project could be shared with the wider sector?

What else could be useful to capture what's coming out of the project?

The Commercial Director will be leading on BusinessFirst from May 2012 but will continue to share its progress with Employer Partnerships and ProjectFirst up until the site goes live. After that, New Media will track the number of hits to the new site.

Section 7: Future planning

What is the legacy?

The legacy of this project is the BusinessFirst site that will be managed by the Commercial Director and monitored by New Media. The process of delivering the project has identified that the College tends to apply learner solutions rather than employer solutions, and has enabled us to see our commercial offer from an employer's view point. BusinessFirst will be launched as the College's employer focused website.

Section 8: Further information

Please supply contact details to help people who want to know more about the project.

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