

The application of innovative technologies and training to improve employer engagement within the work based learning sector

Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network



Project Synopsis

- To provide accredited instruction and guidance to WBL staff on how to engage with employers – in doing so we have now developed a Level 4 Higher Education accredited course on Measuring the Impact and Value of Learning and Development.
- To provide an accessible on line Return On Investment calculator for providers to use at an individual employer level. We call this ApplyROI. This is available for all work-based learning provider staff to use at www.applyroi.co.uk.

Project Aims

One of the principal aims of this project was to design a bespoke learning experience for employer facing work based learning provider staff to encourage them to engage more effectively with employers. We wanted to establish a new, innovative programme that gave employer engagement staff the confidence to speak about the 'value' of learning (including the financial value); as well as to encourage providers to be more business oriented in terms of their approach to employer engagement.

This was innovative because at the time there were structures in place for organizations to be more employer driven but there was no structured principles for providers to engage with employers (including talking the language of business). Through this project we believe that we have done this through the development of 2 programmes. Firstly, a Level 4 Higher Education accredited programme entitled 'Measuring the Impact of Learning and Development' and, secondly, an online Return On Investment calculator for the work based learning sector that we have named www.applyroi.co.uk – a description of what these are and how they work is provided further below.

Through the 2 innovative tools (the University programme and ApplyROI) we have given employer engagement staff and providers the means to convey the following barriers:

- Learning is seen as intrusive;
- Entrenched employer culture of resistance to change;
- Employers not seeing learning/staff development as being directly linked to their business aims and strategies;
- Employer perception of outdated modes of training,

We are also acutely aware that the first contact with an apprenticeship or work based learning provider is the most important and that an employers' resistance to a learning provider is

heightened as a result of poor quality first sales contact and a historically poor experience of work based learning. The 2 programmes that we have developed for this project help overcome this.

Moreover, there is a reduction in public sector funding for courses (for example the recent 2% drop in Apprenticeship funding in addition to inflation). This is leading providers to do one of two things:

- encourage employers to contribute/match fund public investment (this can be extremely difficult given the fact that there may well be another provider down the road able to deliver a course with just the public contribution);
- offer more full-cost programmes. It is generally the case that businesses with a diverse product portfolio tend to have greater stability. This course will give participants a clear path to follow on extracting what employers really need and steps that can be taken to create a bespoke offer to meet these requirements.

Either way, it stands to reason that should an employer need to contribute to learning/staff development then they will ask the question 'What do I get in return?' – and a provider should have the staff and the necessary tools to give as full an answer as possible.

This point about cost is, however, just one area of a wider aim of this project which was to encourage a wholesale shift in the work based learning sector in relation to employer engagement. The sector needs to make the move from "Making a Sale" to "Building a Relationship".

Both the HE Course and ApplyROI interventions embed Return On Investment as a part of building a long-lasting relationship with employers.

Another aim of this project was to develop an online facility to include a list of work based learning provision across Greater Manchester to be made available to employer facing provider staff. The usefulness of this was that if a single provider is not able to meet the needs of an employer, then a referral can be made to another provider within Greater Manchester who might be able to fulfil a particular employer need.

It must be said, however, that it was not possible to include this course information. The main reason for this is that gathering this data was supposed to be a wider Area Wide Prospectus project (designed to capture all provision across the Greater Manchester area) that we did not have any direct control over. The Area Wide Prospectus was not set up in time for us to integrate into our project (and indeed remains incomplete). It soon became clear to us that this was not the main part of the project and it was always debatable how popular a cross-provider referral system would work in practice.

Project Delivery

1) We learnt that employer engagement is a professional task and the journey of this project reflects this. We initially commissioned a company called abdi ltd from Cambridge to run their Foundation Level 4 programme in Return On Investment and we delivered a 3-day programme to 50 employer engagement staff from Work Based Learning Providers. We very much believed in the methodology that abdi ltd were promoting and the results from the courses were encouraging. However, we soon came to realise that the abdi ltd approach could be improved upon:

- a) An ROI methodology (and employer engagement in its wider sense) can only be respected and indeed credible if it is flexible enough to take account of the reality of a given situation - there is little point in having a stringent ROI calculation that does not

take into account the unforeseen aspects of life. For example, we considered the abdi ltd approach to be less accessible for the small to medium employer working on the ground – we needed a programme that was more accessible for these types of employers.

- b) Secondly, the project came to learn that ROI is not the be all and end all and that it is the employer engagement process as a whole that is of most value. Yes, we believe that ROI has a part to play in employer engagement, but it is a part of a wider process of a provider ensuring that an employer sees staff development aligned to the needs of a business and for a provider to then be flexible to meet the business need.

In response we then looked to develop a course that did what we wanted it to do. We approached the University of Bolton who confirmed that they had a member of staff, Tracey Ellis, who had the necessary experience to help us (Tracey used to own her own Training Company and was working at the University as a lecturer and researcher in the field of Professional Development). During early 2011 through to the Summer of 2011 the University of Bolton developed a brand new course entitled 'Measuring the Impact of Learning and Development' that draws down 20 HE Level 4 credits.

For a breakdown of the course (ie materials etc please navigate to:

<http://www.resultsbasedlearning.com/> (password: monkey) - *Here is a wealth of materials that were developed for this project that are well worth viewing although the website should not be for wider distribution as we feel that these are best used for people who have enrolled on the course.*

This course has addressed the 2 key concerns above. We now have a course that has been designed specifically for Work Based Learning Provider staff operating on the ground and that now allows participants to draw down recognised HE accreditation.

- 2) We have refined the project with each cohort of learners. To date we have run 4 cohorts and each time we have run a cohort we have improved the course offer. Our systems have become more sophisticated and our offering has broadened to include the requirements of the participants.
 - a) Our ApplyROI online ROI Calculator only really began development in early 2011 and was not completed until the end of January 2012. The development of this online calculator (www.applyroi.co.uk) was informed by attendees on our training course and has been designed and tested by them and with their needs in mind. As with any new product and service this is just the beginning. The final 2 cohorts were to refine the offering and now we can start to go out and get learning providers using the system.

Project Outcomes

It is my strong believe that this project over-achieved on 2 counts. Our initial aim was that we would be able to develop a course designed to furnish employer engagement staff with the confidence and necessary skills to conduct quality Organisational/Sector Needs Analysis (ONA) and Training Needs Analysis (TNA) with employers. We have gone much further than this:

Over a two year period we developed a HE accredited Level 4 course – this goes far beyond the original project brief that stated that we would deliver training to Work Based Learning Providers. It was unforeseen that we would need to abandon the services of abdi ltd, but this was the right decision to ensure that the project ended up with an excellent product

In terms of impact of the course for Work Based Learning Providers:

- 60 Work Based Learning Provider staff have completed the ROI programme and another cohort has been planned to start early May 2012.
- It has helped set in place an approach for Work Based Learners to sell a learning solution rather than off the shelf packages and a realization that Work Based Learning is about focusing on the business need rather than focusing on what the provider can offer.
- Individuals who have been on the course and who have accessed the ApplyROI online calculator have been given the knowledge and practical tools to help change their own individual practises that we hope can be implemented within organizational practises.
- Both the course and the online ROI Calculator shows that a Learning Organisation is one which responds to and anticipates changes in its operating environment. As part of its strategy for success it should support and encourage learning for all its employees and other stakeholders e.g. suppliers and customers.
- Measuring the Return on Learning and Development enables an organisation to assess, not only if spend is being channeled in the right direction, but also whether the competencies we associate with roles are a true reflection of the role requirements. In turn, this can lead to alignment of learning and development with organisational strategy and is also closely related to activities fundamental to promotion of a learning organisation, due to the involvement and commitment required by all stakeholders.
- The course and online ROI Calculator for measurement of return, whether monetary or added value, the adoption of a structured process and the commitment of identified stakeholders is essential. There needs to be buy-in in the form of a partnership from business stakeholders, training providers and learners.

For a breakdown of the course (ie materials etc please navigate to:

<http://www.resultsbasedlearning.com/> (password: monkey). *I would strongly urge LSIS to access these resources to see the sheer volume of materials that have been developed as part of this project.*

I would furthermore welcome LSIS to access our ROI Online Calculator www.applyroi.co.uk and to undertake a 'test' ROI Calculation. For guidance on how to complete an ROI calculation contact Richard Nash on 0161 654 1508 / 07787 291982.

Sharing of Project Findings

Promotion and dissemination:

- Given that the project is now complete we want to disseminate the findings so that more and more providers can complete the course and use the online calculator. It is our mission to ensure that more and more providers use these resources.
- We have had preliminary meetings with the National Apprenticeship Service and we are looking to host an employer engagement convention during the first half of 2012.
- We have already enrolled the majority of GMLPN members (www.gmlpn.co.uk/members) on to this course, but we want to ensure that more and more staff within our membership undertake this process.
- We will also promote this regionally and nationally through AELP.

Course development:

- We have developed a product that has the capability to be built upon and transformed into a Higher Apprenticeship in Work Based Learning Sales Techniques. It is quite possible for the 'Measuring Impact of Learning and Development' course to be the knowledge component of this Higher Apprenticeship.

- In addition to the current three-day course, the University of Bolton sees value in developing a subsequent one-day course for senior managers. This recommendation came directly from an attendee who has completed the three-day course.