

Engaging SMEs through e-learning and blended learning approaches

Between September 2009 and March 2010 the LSIS World Class Skills programme funded 97 providers to work together on Thematic Development Projects. There were 10 projects, each addressing different aspects of making provision more responsive to employers' needs.

Introduction

This particular project is on 'Engaging small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through e-learning and blended learning approaches'. This report contains key ideas and learning points from the project.

Who is it for?

The report is aimed at a range of individuals and teams within training provider organisations. It should be of particular interest to staff that play a role in employer responsiveness and who are planning to develop e-learning and blended learning provision. This type of provision offers the flexibility that SMEs often require when shift patterns or workloads in a small workforce make conventional training unfeasible.

What will they gain from it?

The aim of this report is to share the experiences and learning of the eleven participants in the project. SMEs seek to maximise their return on investment (ROI) in training and development. You can use the findings of this project to review and improve your organisation's responsiveness to their needs.

“ We were able to build new partnerships as part of the project and the expertise from within the group proved invaluable in enabling us to drive the project forwards. Often the new ideas produced outputs that had not previously been considered ”

Terry Mullins, Cool Cats Computing

Project background

SMEs operate in a variety of markets and contexts and as a result they have unique circumstances and training needs. By using e-learning and blended learning it is possible to provide flexible solutions to meet these needs. The project participants had recognised the opportunities for future work with SMEs through the development of e-learning and blended learning approaches. They were geographically dispersed across England, operated in both urban and rural areas, and varied in size from national organisations and large general FE colleges to small independent training providers. The participants represented the full spectrum of e-maturity from those who were researching the feasibility of e-learning and blended learning for their organisation to those who had developed e-learning approaches in the past. They also had different levels of experience in engaging with SMEs.

Aims

The project aims were to:

- understand the training needs of SMEs and how these could be met using e-learning and blended learning;
- identify how to work with SME clients to ensure that e-learning and blended learning provision met business objectives;
- establish the strategies and infrastructure for developing flexible and sustainable e-learning and blended learning approaches;
- develop and pilot blended and e-learning provision to meet identified needs and establish how these approaches could be beneficial to SMEs.

Participants

Eleven providers collaborated on this project. Key contacts are named in brackets.

- **Avanta Enterprise Ltd (Paul Wolstencroft)**
paul@tngconsulting.co.uk
- **Cool Cats Computing (Terry Mullin)**
terrymullin@coolcatscomputing.com
- **DLC Training (Karen Hope)**
karen@dlctraining.co.uk
- **North East Worcestershire College (James Reynolds)**
JReynolds@ne-worcs.ac.uk
- **City College Norwich (Gillian Scofield)**
G2SCOFIELD@ccn.ac.uk
- **Obatec Ltd (Margaret Ajibode)**
margaret@obatec.com
- **Richmond upon Thames College (Barbara Plimsaul)**
barbara.plimsaul@rutc.ac.uk
- **South Essex College (Paul Cousins)**
paul.cousins@southend.ac.uk
- **South Nottingham College (Neil Fowkes)**
neil.d.fowkes@snc.ac.uk
- **Training in Childcare (Viv Muirhead)**
vivmuirhead@traininginchildcare.co.uk
- **Westminster Kingsway College (Ray Shilling)**
ray.shilling@westking.ac.uk

You can contact participants for further information regarding their involvement.

(Contact details correct at March 2010)

Activity

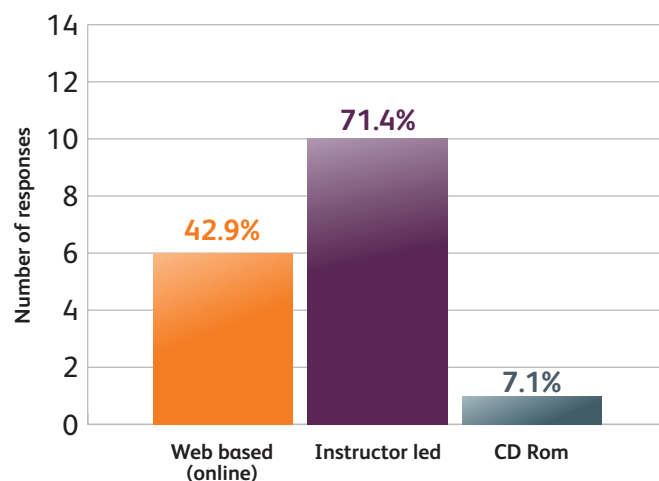
Participants worked on four distinct topics to address the aims outlined in the project background.

Research

- Participants planned and undertook web-based research around low cost and no cost web solutions to engage with SMEs, aiming to increase client retention and gain repeat business.
- Participants undertook primary research to understand SME needs using a mixture of web-based questionnaires and interviews.
- South Essex College explored the use of iTunesU as a portal for hosting and sharing e-learning materials.

The following diagram shows some of the research outcomes as part of this topic regarding preferred delivery methods for SMEs.

Figure 1: Preferred learning approaches of SMEs



Source: Obatec Ltd

The research conducted by Obatec Ltd in London found that almost half of SMEs interviewed in a small sample wanted e-learning solutions. Three quarters wanted instructor led courses so a large proportion selected both options, indicating the importance of planning blended learning approaches for SMEs.

Analysis of trends following the research by City College Norwich in a rural area reinforced the finding that the need for flexibility was a key requirement from participants. Many SMEs needed to fit in training at times and locations when workloads permit.

Meeting SME needs

- Participants such as Richmond upon Thames College identified the IT skills and training needs their employees would require to develop impact assessment measures. They used a refined Training Needs Analysis for this.
- Westminster Kingsway College organised and attended business network events to provide opportunities to explore local SME business needs.

Infrastructure and process development

- Participants developed the supporting infrastructure and processes to deliver e-learning and blended learning. North East Worcestershire College documented the steps they went through in planning online SME advice.
- Staff development activities at South Nottingham College identified training needs and benefits that could be realised through e-learning and blended learning approaches.

E-learning materials and pilot activity

- Online materials were developed for business improvement techniques by DLC Training. New blended learning provision for management and leadership qualifications were also piloted.
- An online business centre was trialed using integrated free software by Cool Cats Computing. Assessment methodologies were also developed with e-portfolio developments at Training in Childcare.

Challenges

Some of the challenges identified are typical of working with SMEs. Others arose from infrastructure issues within participants' own institutions. These challenges are outlined within each topic.

Research

- Getting responses from busy SME owner/managers required innovative marketing techniques.
- Defining who should be targeted and making effective contact with the right person in that SME.

Meeting SME needs

- Building relationships through local networks to get opportunities to discuss the benefits of e-learning and blended learning approaches took time.
- Due to their visual nature it was difficult to demonstrate fully the impact of e-learning and blended learning tools if opportunities to meet SMEs face to face were not identified.

Infrastructure and process development

- Getting sufficient commitment and budget from senior management was essential as new technology often required 'up front' investment in resources and time.
- Existing IT infrastructures could block innovation because they were often not developed with e-learning capacity as an element of the technical specification.

E-learning materials and pilot activity

- Staff expertise was not always in place to make the most of the technological opportunities. Staff could be negative toward using e-learning and blended learning rather than embracing opportunities if benefits were not immediately apparent.

Impact

It is too soon to identify impact measures such as new business contacts, increased learner numbers or increased satisfaction ratings from SMEs. However, it has been possible to identify impact points around each topic based on the work conducted to date.

Research

- The findings that the SME demands were very similar in urban and rural locations meant that good practice examples could be shared between many of the participants and similar solutions could be developed and be successful.

Meeting SME needs

- Conducting surveys and developing networks and contacts with SMEs raised organisational profiles and showed they were a responsive provider. It also provided increased numbers of contacts for future programme development and marketing activity.

Infrastructure and process development

- Benchmarking successful delivery means that further development can be on the basis of a secure return on investment.
- More flexibility in forms of delivery provided more options to meet SME employer needs. This could be evidenced by client satisfaction and repeat business.
- Introducing the use of e-portfolios decreased completion times making NVQs potentially more profitable.

E-learning materials and pilot activity

- Training staff in the use of rapid development tools provided a significant bank of online resources with consistent quality of output.
- A pilot of an accredited blended learning programme showed increased take up, motivation and retention of employees from both SMEs and larger employers.

New e-learning tools – a case study

Avanta operates from multiple locations, trading as TNG and InBiz. Over 200 trainers are involved in creating materials. The challenge was to introduce tools to enable staff at all locations to create high quality consistent output.

A three-tier system allowed trainers to work in PowerPoint at the basic level; add materials into a predesigned e-learning template as a next level; and work in full e-learning software at the highest level. The system also allowed for the creation of short learning modules, targeted at SMEs.

The strategy devised ensured good ROI by maximising the use of staff time and creating a library of re-useable materials. All were created using a blend of PowerPoint and e-learning framework programming to create seamless output.

SMEs also used their learner management systems. Dr Husna Ahmed, CEO of Faith Regeneration Foundation said "At Faith Regen we have used the TNG e-learning system with great success. The key is the wide range of subject areas and levels, allowing us to help people at both ends of our market."

Top tips

- SMEs need bespoke training that is cost effective, highlight these key business benefits in your approach.
- Research the market in terms of SME business needs, delivery modes and appropriate technologies.
- Do not assume that what works in one sector will necessarily work in another. Whilst there is a consistent demand for e-learning and blended learning it is often in response to unique circumstances.
- Be prepared to try innovative marketing approaches to generate interest among your target SMEs.
- Ensure you have a flexible blend of provision. Your e-learning/blended learning solution should not be off the shelf but customised to the needs of each SME.
- Allow time for materials development. This will include research, development and evaluation which will take longer than expected.
- Commitment needs to be sought from senior management and all staff involved. Good internal communication is essential for innovative technologies to be sustainable.
- Look for free or open source solutions where appropriate. It should be noted that these solutions can require significant staff resources to make them suitable for the intended use.
- Keep up to date with developments because as new technologies emerge, those which seem unaffordable now will decrease in price substantially.
- Pilot small elements of the project rather than go for a big launch. This enables workloads to be managed and impact measures gathered to support further development.
- Learners and employees with dyslexia or poor literacy can benefit from the visual nature of e-learning materials such as the example in Figure 2.

“Trialling voice recognition software has been an interesting and rewarding process. Staff now have more confidence when faced with exploring future technological advances ”

James Reynolds, North East Worcestershire College

Figure 2: An example screenshot of e-learning materials developed by Avanta Enterprise Ltd



Source: Avanta Enterprise Ltd

What's next for you?

This checklist will help you develop e-learning and blended learning approaches with SMEs.

Checklist

- Have you identified SMEs to contact for your market research and the methods to gain the greatest response?
- Do you know the training requirements of local SMEs and how e-learning and blended learning approaches can meet these?
- Have you identified suitable technologies to meet SME training needs through which you can pilot your e-learning and blended learning approach?
- Do you have buy-in to the strategy for SME engagement through e-learning and blended learning from the senior management and the staff involved?
- Have you considered all the direct and indirect costs of e-learning in your business plan?
- Is the necessary staff training in place to enable effective development and use of e-learning and blended learning approaches?

Get in touch

For more information please go to www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs