

Models of engagement with employers

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 'Models of engagement with employers - how to move from a transactional relationship to a strategic relationship'. It contains key ideas and learning points from the work on the project theme.

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 who play a role in employer responsiveness.

What will you gain from it?

The aim of this report is to share the experiences and learning of the nine participants involved in this project and the good practice that they have developed. Participants aimed to develop a more strategic approach to enable them to expand the scope of their work with employers and generate new business opportunities. You can use these findings to review and improve your own level of responsiveness in relation to the theme of this project.

Project background

Participants in this project identified and compared models, established and new, that could be used to move from a transactional approach to engaging employers to a more strategic employer partnership. A range of training providers participated in the project including further education colleges, independent training providers, a strategic health authority and two sector specific organisations.

Participants explored the nature of strategic relationships and defining different levels of engagement. In addition, they focused on evaluating the impact of training as a core element of building improved employer relationships.

Aims

The project aims were to:

- identify the characteristics of strategic relationships and define models of engagement;
- highlight the processes linked to moving from transactional to strategic relationships;
- develop and introduce procedures for managing effective strategic relationships;
- identify tools to evaluate the impact of training and development.

“ The Business Development Team at Loughborough College has taken a proactive approach to working with the National Apprenticeship Service. This has enabled sharing of market intelligence and opportunities for us both to add value to the potential employer in terms of Apprenticeships.”

Robert Belcher, Commercial Manager, Loughborough College

Participants

The nine providers who collaborated on this project were:

- **Bournville College of Further Education**
Rob Dunford
rob.dunford@bournville.ac.uk
- **City College Plymouth**
Sarah Hicks
shicks@cityplym.ac.uk
- **Hillcroft College**
Howard Bailey
hbailey@hillcroft.ac.uk
- **Loughborough College**
Chris Garner
chris.garner@loucoll.ac.uk
- **NHS North East Strategic Health Authority**
Ed Young
edward.young@northeast.nhs.uk
- **Rochdale Training**
Jill Nagy
info@rochdaletraining.co.uk
- **Skills For Health**
Hazel Robson
hazel.robson@skillsforhealth.org.uk
- **South West Regional Logistics Academy**
Vicky Oldfield
oldfieldv@bridgwater.ac.uk
- **West Suffolk College**
Elizabeth Bray
elizabeth.bray@wsc.ac.uk

You can contact participants for further information regarding their involvement.

Contact details correct at March 2010

Activity

Bournville College of Further Education had recently developed a strategic relationship with one of the college's main NHS employers, by using the principles of account management. On the project, they developed the concept of Key Account Managers (KAMs) by defining a minimum level of engagement for a strategic partnership. Having identified the need for the KAM role, they then followed the following steps:

- Outlined the scope, financial justification and sustainability of a KAM role;
- Created a job description and person specification, and requested approval from senior management;
- Advertised the role and recruited.

Rochdale Training focused on developing long-term relationships with employers to ensure maximum benefits for both employer and provider. They segmented the market and decided to concentrate on the larger employers that they had worked with for a number of years delivering Apprenticeships. They developed a questionnaire to find out how they could increase customer satisfaction and build their reputation with employers. This was used by senior managers in face-to-face meetings to maximise the opportunity to build relationships.

West Suffolk College piloted new methods for identifying the impact of training on individual and company performance, to help them build stronger relationships with employers. They focused on two areas with both large and small employers: leadership and management; and short courses in the health and care sectors. Different approaches included:

- capturing information from learners and line managers at the mid-point of the programme;
- agreeing objectives of the training and producing individual action plans; and
- gathering feedback from learners and line managers on how training was being implemented in the workplace.

The findings of this research were then used to consider how they can use impact measurement to build more strategic relationships with employers.

The aim for **Loughborough College** was to focus on developing models of engagement with employers within the engineering sector. A case study on their approach is included on the following page.

South West Regional Logistics Academy developed a short, focused programme to help employers link training to strategic priorities and encourage them to support training financially. The programme aimed to increase employer commitment to training to help the academy's providers develop stronger relationships. The programme introduced the use of key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the impact of training and provided advice on how to work with training providers to ensure that training resulted in business benefits.

NHS North East Strategic Health Authority aimed to build sustainable partnership working within the NHS to strengthen workforce development. They implemented a measurement tool to measure partner progress and identify issues within a common framework. They selected a publicly available tool and developed this into an electronic format to share with partners. The outputs were then used to build joint action plans and develop a 'community of practice' site. This will be the basis for future collaborative working.

Challenges

Some of the challenges identified were typical of working with employers when introducing new business models of engagement. Specific challenges included:

- In certain sectors (e.g. logistics) the current training focus is predominantly on legislative compliance rather than on developing their business.
- Some smaller employers were not able to provide performance management data to support impact measurement.
- Some employers did not have a specific training budget, which made it difficult to engage them in strategic training discussions.
- In less developed businesses, managers were often focused on meeting daily operational requirements. These time constraints meant that results could not always be achieved quickly, so it was important to be prepared to invest in building up a relationship over time.
- In some cases, it was difficult to objectively evaluate the link between the development of new skills by staff with enhanced operational performance.
- Line managers were often not involved in the design of training and its intended outcomes. This limited their ability to identify a link between new skills and organisational performance.
- Some employers wanted different levels of partnership, so defining a standard approach was not always appropriate.

Impact

Whilst it is too early to identify the long-term impact of the projects, there have been positive developments for all participants:

- The Key Account Manager role - a new way of working - has helped build longer term, sustainable relationships with employers.
- Delivery staff are now in touch with more senior employer contacts, which makes strategic discussions easier.
- Better links with employers have led to shared activity and resources, with the potential for costs savings.
- Employer managers and supervisors have started to put individual staff action plans together, linking new skills to training objectives.
- One participant has developed a revised employer engagement action plan focusing on areas for improvement. This includes a flow chart for managing regular communication with larger employers at a senior level.
- There has already been an increase in the number of apprentices placed with employers as a result of the closer relationship with the National Apprenticeship Service.

Case study

Loughborough College

The college focused on strengthening their Apprenticeship provision in the engineering sector, through building relationships with both employers and the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS).

The specific aims were:

- to improve processes for helping employers take on apprentices;
- to investigate alternative delivery models that are appropriate in this sector; and

- to develop the internal infrastructure to support these changes.

Closer links were built with NAS which included conducting joint employer visits, joint strategic planning meetings and a meeting with all of the colleges in Leicestershire to explore the potential for collaborative working in this area.

Positive outcomes to date have included ten new apprentices starting programmes, the creation of an additional assessor/training officer and a new marketing plan to target specific new employers.

These processes will now be cascaded throughout the college to realise the benefits in other sectors.



Top tips

Participants have suggested the following advice to help you transform your existing transactional relationships into strategic employer partnerships:

- Work with employers to demonstrate that a strategic approach to training and a clear link to business objectives will bring the greatest return on investment.
- Emphasise the importance of line manager involvement during the design, delivery and review of training.
- Ensure that sales teams are clear about what is achievable.
- Ensure that partners, such as the National Apprenticeship Service, are clear about what you can offer and your models of working.
- Be clear that developing electronic tools or surveys does not remove the need for face-to-face contact with partners or employers.
- All staff must be committed to working strategically with employers, including senior management and delivery and administrative teams.
- Offer staff comprehensive training in conducting an organisational needs analysis (ONA) to ensure that they can develop a true understanding of a business's needs.
- Consider developing a tracking system that monitors the level of revenue generated by employer responsive activity. This will provide evidence to support any request for new resources (e.g. the recruitment of a KAM).
- New models of engagement will be most beneficial when accompanied by a culture change from traditional compliance thinking to longer-term businesses development planning.

What's next for you?

If you are aiming to introduce new models of engagement and develop more strategic relationships with employers, ask yourself the following questions:

Checklist

- Can you clearly identify which employers you would like to develop a strategic partnership with?
- Do you have a clear vision and approach for how you will develop your partnerships?
- Have you got support from the sales and marketing department?
- Are you prepared for long-term sustainable relationships without short-term wins?
- Do your employers demonstrate a high level of commitment to training?
- Are you flexible and responsive in your approach to ensure that you can meet employer needs?
- Have you considered the possible investment of time needed to develop long-term partnerships?

Get in touch

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

“ This project has given us the opportunity to develop a structured and pro-active approach to driving business from our key accounts, which will be essential as the college moves into 2010/11.”

Sarah Hicks, Commercial Manager, City College Plymouth