

Case Study

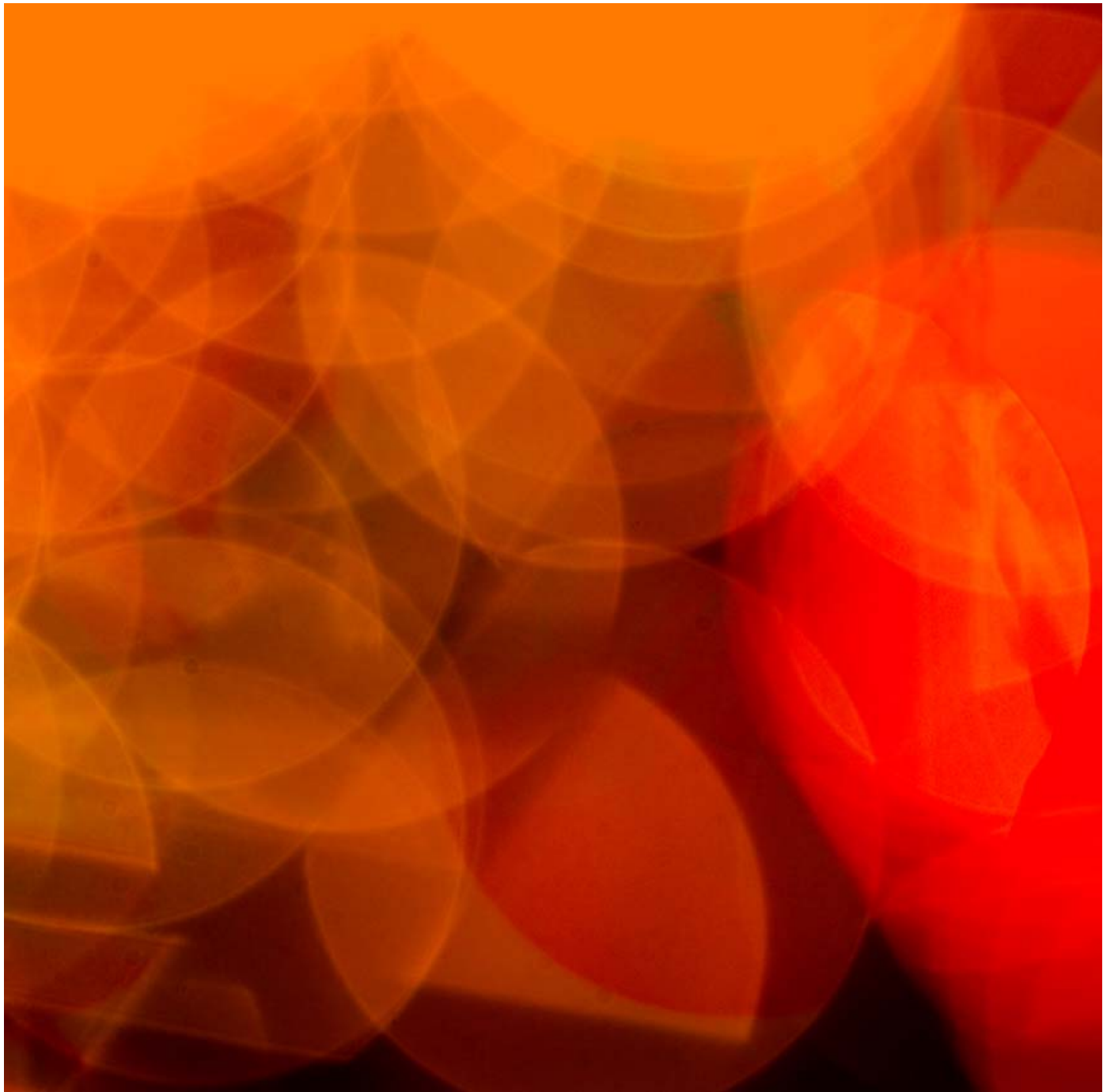
West Suffolk College

WCS

World Class
Skills Programme
Developing Responsive Provision



LSIS
LEARNING
AND SKILLS
IMPROVEMENT
SERVICE



1. Introduction

Business innovation and support (BIS) is support for company innovation and development, primarily intended to improve a company's products and performance. It typically involves consideration of a technical problem by means of applied research and development (R&D), which may draw on knowledge and expertise from a range of sources. In many cases it may be concerned with the application of existing knowledge, which is new to the organisation concerned, rather than with leading-edge technology or practice. BIS may be of benefit to both public- and private-sector organisations.

The following example shows how the provider dealt with a particular challenge relating to engaging with employers.

In this case the pressure point discussed is:

'How do we improve the skills brokerage such that it includes business innovation support?'

Or

'Serving the needs of our employer community'

2. Summary

West Suffolk College developed from a technical institute in the 1950s offering a wide range of qualifications to support vocational training and development of individuals at work. Prior to 2002 this consisted of a substantial apprenticeship programme and a wide range of part-time courses accessed by employers to achieve qualifications required for work. In the late 1990s the college became involved in significant European and national projects that supported the introduction of new curriculum for workforce development and the implementation of national initiatives to improve employee skills.

3. Situation & Context

Traditionally, most of this training was delivered in the college focusing on the provision of funded qualifications rather than attempting to work with employers to offer business solutions. Like other colleges, West Suffolk College was affected by the low profile of further education and the perception of employers that FE colleges could not deliver business training to the same high standards as specialists in the private sector. Therefore, repeat business tended to relate to funded qualifications that were required in certain industries and where the employers could not access the funding through the private sector. Despite good quality training it was difficult to grow the reputation and the perception was that colleges were only interested in selling qualifications. Meetings between college staff and employers focused on the qualifications themselves rather than demonstrating the real benefits that training could bring to the overall business performance.

Meanwhile, West Suffolk College senior management made the decision to adopt an internal structure that ensured integration of college based and employer led provision within the specialist curriculum areas rather than set up a separate arm of the college. In order to support curriculum managers central service units were established to focus on support for apprenticeships and for adult workplace learning.

4. Task or Challenge

The early 2000s were significant for the College in deciding whether to grow its employer engagement or focus on the already expanding provision of full-time courses for school leavers or indeed to do both. Its range of provision of full-time courses was growing fast with new vocational areas being introduced to meet the needs of young people to progress in FE within their home area.

West Suffolk College was also keen to play a significant role in employer training in line with its mission to serve the whole community. The College wanted to deliver a better service to employers and saw this as a route to further increasing learner numbers which in turn would result in increased income to support the overall development of the College. It also recognised that employers needed more support

in selecting appropriate training to meet business needs as well as provide for individual career development.

A 'stay as you are' approach was, therefore, not an option and senior management looked to internal development to set a path to growth and development in employer engagement. It was decided to build on the successful structure that had been established.

At this time there was a shift in outlook from funding bodies with the realisation that the UK economy in general was suffering from skills levels in the workforce being below that of its competitors. Government initiatives resulted in attention being focused on the development of employer engagement and in particular the need to raise the skills levels of the workforce. West Suffolk College adopted an enthusiastic attitude to this national objective and developed its employer engagement with the same approach to quality as all its other provision.

On the introduction of Train to Gain in 2006 West Suffolk College was contracted as a consortium lead provider for Train to Gain delivery. The College was keen to work closely with the skills brokerage organisations in the East of England. Effective working relationships were established at an early stage. However, it was soon recognised that with a large target of learners to achieve, the proportion that would be recruited via broker referrals would be small. The College had to decide the steps to be taken to achieve its own targets. It was expected by the Learning and Skills Council that, as well as receiving referrals from brokers, providers would recruit directly from employers and in so doing would ensure that the training identified would meet business needs. Thus a format for conducting business training needs analysis would need to be implemented.

In delivering quality provision West Suffolk College had always ensured that the training needs of individuals were assessed before learning took place but decided to extend this service to offer a needs analysis at organisational level, similar to that offered by skills brokers. It was decided to develop the internal group of project co-ordinators to take on the wider role of business development co-ordinator. The internal liaison between those members of staff and the specialists in curriculum areas was also further developed. Senior college management recognised that resources needed to be provided to enable this change to happen.

5. Actions or Approach

To ensure quality of delivery and responsiveness to employers West Suffolk College regularly reviews its structure including posts related to employer engagement. During the last two years the staffing structure within the college faculties has been revised to enable the establishment of specific posts for employer responsiveness at Head of School level, working alongside their counterparts in faculties who focus on the college-based provision. Diagrams indicating the current structure and operation of employer engagement are included at Appendix 1.

Training has been provided for the Business Development co-ordinator team and Heads of Employer Responsiveness as well as work-based learning co-ordinators who direct assessors and verifiers.

The four Business Development Co-ordinators have enhanced their employer engagement skills and sector knowledge and have developed a structure for working with employers. This includes conducting an organisational needs analysis in a flexible way in order to identify the skills needed to meet business goals. They work closely with the Heads of Employer Responsiveness to ensure that business needs are addressed in the training solution proposed and that the training is offered flexibly to suit work patterns.

In order to enhance the service to employers support is provided where requested to review business processes and to assist with recruitment, particularly in relation to apprentices. Full training needs analysis of all employees across a company is also undertaken where requested by an employer. A large majority of Suffolk companies are small or medium sized employers who often do not have separate training manager responsibility within their structure so find this service helpful.

6. Results

This development has taken place alongside the growth of the college, recognition by Ofsted as an Outstanding college and the development of quality standards for work with employers. The enhanced service to employers together with quality of delivery and responsiveness has helped to build the College's reputation as a provider of quality services to employers. This service is underpinned by an Employer Charter.

One reason for this success is the ethos of the college which focuses on continuous improvement in an open and self-critical culture. Staff members at all levels are encouraged to make suggestions for improvement to line managers or direct to senior management. Where weaknesses are identified or procedures can be enhanced changes are made through staff teams and through the business development structure across the college.

West Suffolk College has established an Employers' Forum which meets regularly and encourages employers to work with the college to improve its services to employers. The College also holds regular employer breakfast meetings which include presentations of relevance to local employers as well as providing an update on funding opportunities available for employee training. The College, therefore, adopts a position of supporting the business community as well as delivering training. Additionally, it contributes to the community through its involvement in and support for community activities such as the local strategic partnership, chambers of commerce and other business focused organisations. Good working relationships exist with Business Link and effective partnerships are conducted with public and third sectors.

The Train to Gain consortium established in 2006 with a group of mainly generalist providers in Suffolk from both the public and private sectors has now evolved and developed to consist of a group of specialist training providers which together offers a wider range of training opportunities which is able to meet the needs of all employers in the area. Very effective and growing relationships have developed with some of the larger companies who are in a position to conduct their own training and in some cases to contribute to training of external employees and who can provide specialist resources that are not otherwise available. This has resulted in a hub and spoke approach with West Suffolk College as the hub, facilitating skills development and support for business development together with a number of smaller specialist providers.

The result of the internal structural development over the last 5 years is that we now have a fully integrated team of solution developers which works effectively to meet employer needs and to offer a service that ensures that training delivered meets the business needs directly, producing real business benefits for the employer.

Feedback from employers indicates that their satisfaction rate is high. An annual survey of all employers is conducted with a higher than average response rate. In each of the last three surveys 93% of respondents have indicated that they would use the college again. West Suffolk College took part in a nationally organised survey of employers last year and in this survey 61% of West Suffolk College employers strongly agreed that they would use the college again compared with a national figure of 55%.

As indicated by the award of Beacon status in 2007, success rates of all of the College's learners is high. Train to Gain achievement is significantly above average for the region. The most recent figure reported by the LSC is 87%.

The College provision of training in the workplace has grown substantially in the last five years. The College continues to lead a Train to Gain Consortium which to date has over 3,200 learners. In addition to funded training West Suffolk College has a significant income from full cost provision.

However most of this engagement with employers has come from the College's own marketing and the service it provides to employers with only a small proportion resulting from broker referrals.

In the past when funding was available the College also worked with employers on specific product or process development projects over a longer period of time. In this way the specialist knowledge of college staff was able to contribute to business developments. These projects were very successful in delivering knowledge transfer and innovation and assisted local companies to implement business

improvements alongside training. However, most small employers in the west Suffolk area are unable to fund this type of support themselves.

One way in which the College has been able to support employers is by linking knowledge transfer to the delivery of funded qualifications. This has the advantage that support for business improvement is combined with upskilling the workforce to implement the change. The Business Improvement Techniques NVQ has been successfully used to enable small companies to introduce process improvements and waste reduction with consequent cost reduction and increased productivity. It can also improve team working and the motivation of the workforce.

7. Learning and Next Steps

Having achieved the Training Quality Standard with Part B in seven vocational areas (the first provider in the country to achieve this) West Suffolk College has demonstrated that high levels of quality and responsiveness to employers is a consistent feature of its provision. The College is once again in a position of deciding what course to follow for the future. One option would be to continue as we are, delivering high quality training and support for employers whilst working closely with skills brokers to expand the number of companies that we work with.

As a forward looking college, however, that would not be a satisfactory approach. We constantly seek to improve and develop what we offer to ensure that the needs of our local and regional employers are being met. We select other providers with whom to work so that the offer is updated and extended and remains appropriate to employers. Opportunities for the future will to some extent depend on the relationship with skills brokers.

West Suffolk College is competent to provide the same brokerage service offered by the contracted skills brokers. The *Simplification of Skills in England* paper published by UKCES in October 2008 recommends a tied brokerage approach for providers accredited with the Training Quality Standard and with appropriate funding this option would be adopted enthusiastically by the College. Additional training for the business development co-ordinators would be put in place to provide them with appropriate qualifications to undertake the role of broker as currently offered by the skills brokers. They would have the additional advantage of understanding more clearly the vocational offer relevant to upskill the workforce and of making appropriate referrals for training or other training support services. We currently do refer to other training providers where we are unable to deliver what is required, or to business support services and would continue to do this where appropriate.

An additional element to enhance the present service would be for funding to be made available to extend the offer of knowledge transfer and innovation services more widely to the small and medium sized businesses in the area. As described above, this service when funded, worked very successfully providing gains for the businesses involved as well as additional professional experience for college staff acting as consultants. We are currently exploring potential opportunities in this area.

Ultimately the College wishes to develop its service further and to use effectively all its knowledge and experience for the benefit of the business community. In doing this the College would further develop its links with training employers and appropriate provider organisations to build the local network.

A recent initiative is to focus training and support within local industrial estates working with localised networks or clusters of employers, providing short training interventions as well as full qualifications and supporting the groups to gain additional benefits from co-operation in other business activities. The College is working with the West Suffolk Local Strategic Partnership on this project.

It is recognised that provided we can demonstrate the real, financial benefits to the SME of the solution proposed many will be prepared to pay for the service. However, the College itself needs to resource staff developments to establish a credible service. This is difficult to do without external funding given the already challenging targets for skills training and the increasingly competitive further education market place.

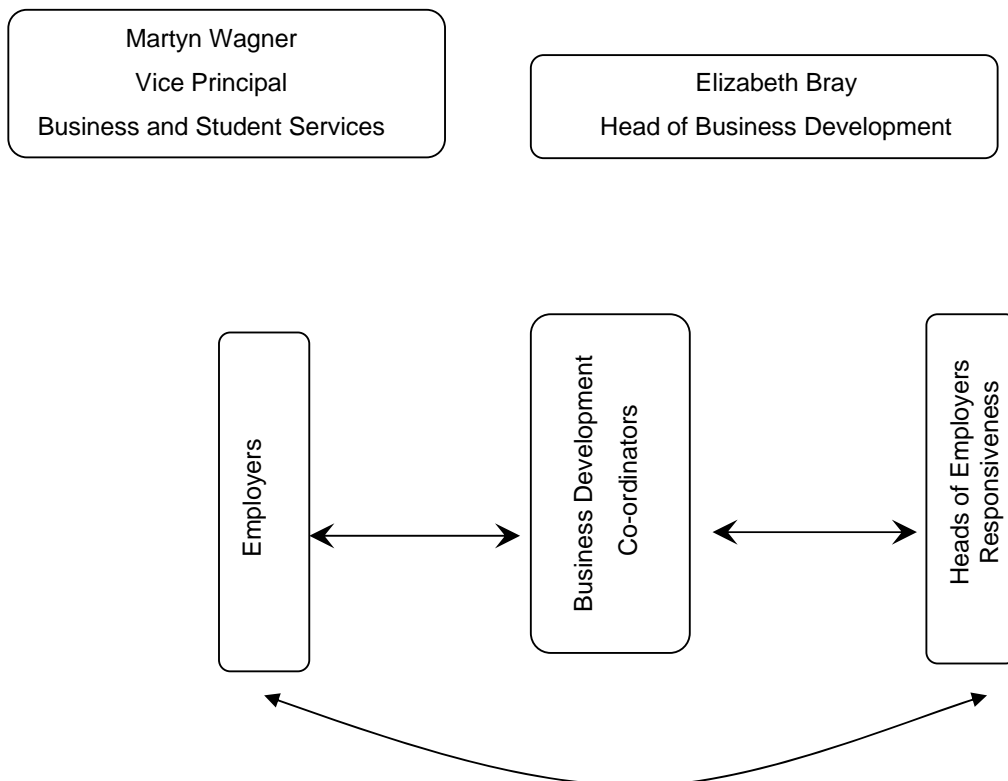
Whatever we can develop to extend our service and grow the college business will be done in the context of maintaining high quality standards. We will also continue to work with companies to develop their staff skills in business improvement.

8. Appendix 1

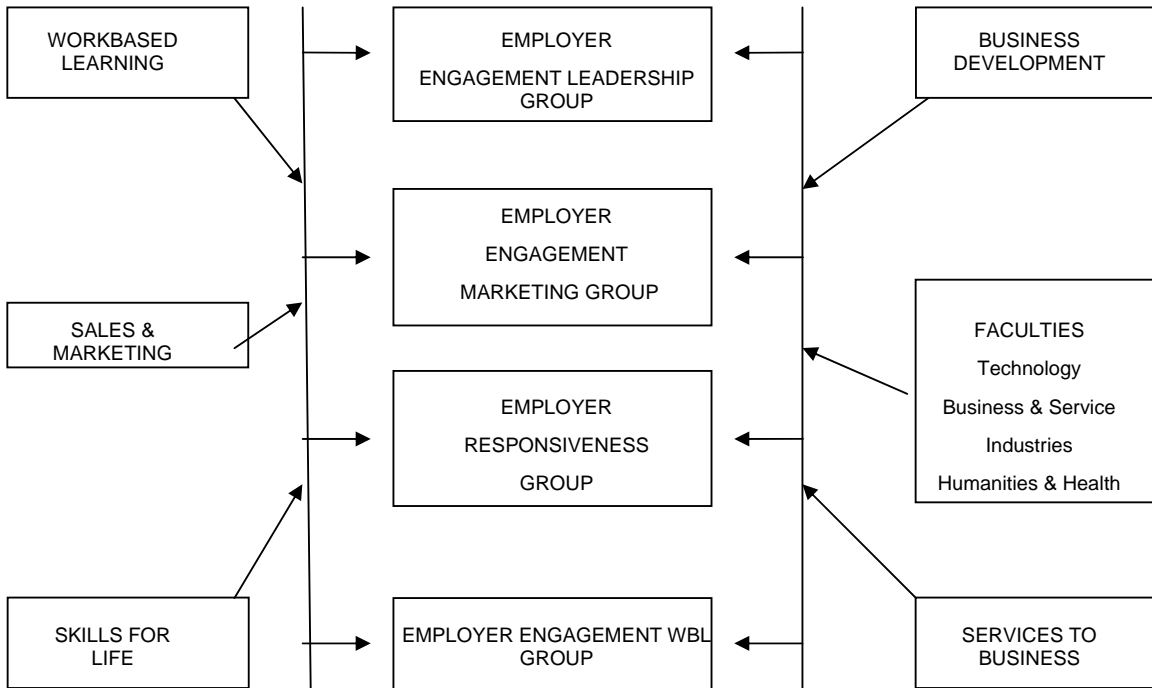
STRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATION

West Suffolk College is structured to integrate its employer responsiveness service within curriculum faculties whilst identifying clear management responsibilities separately for employer responsive (mainly off-site provision) and the college-based provision (mainly full-time and higher education). The overall responsibility for all employer-based provision sits with the Vice Principal, Business and Student Services. The business development team provides a cross college service acting as a resource for employer engagement, liaising with faculty managers to provide services for employers as well as obtaining new business, managing full-cost provision and projects, tendering and managing partner providers. Usually the first point of contact for an employer is a member of the business development team of co-ordinators who will assess the needs then liaise with appropriate curriculum staff to ensure the solution is implemented.

STRUCTURE FOR EMPLOYER RESPONSIVENESS



EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT COMMUNICATION



Communication is facilitated across all employer engagement staff through a series of regular meetings. The Employer Engagement Leadership Group sets strategy and processes and implements good practice. The Employer Responsiveness Group has a wider membership providing regular updating on quality and funding issues, particularly related to Train to Gain and sharing information and good practice on employer engagement activities. A separate Work-based Learning Group includes all assessors and focuses on performance of the large apprenticeship programme. The Marketing Group is a small representative group which advises on marketing strategies and agrees marketing activities.

9. References

<http://www.westsuffolk-ac.co.uk/>