

Inside Evidence

Issue 5

Author: Curee Ltd
Date: 9th January 2009



Employer engagement

New Research: How can providers become more effective?

In issue 3 of *Inside Evidence*, we reported on research which highlighted employers' expectations and offered some principles for effective practice. In this issue, we look at a report commissioned by QIA which explored what the principles look like in practice. The report gathered together five case study examples of good practice in employer responsiveness, relating the providers' practices to the research findings. The case study providers included two general FE colleges, a sixth form college which, unusually, also had NVQ provision for employed adults in the Social Care sector, an employer owned work-based learning provider and a specialist in business development. Successful provider activity included:

- raising the profile and extent of employer-facing work in their institutions
- providing training matched to employers' business needs
- providing reliable communication channels with employers
- helping minimise costs for employers
- delivering training in a flexible way.

How did the providers raise the profile of employer facing work?

Several of the providers had developed their organisational structures in ways they believed would promote more effective employer engagement. At one of the general FE colleges, a central team used to be responsible for meeting training needs including apprenticeships,

but in 2002 responsibility was shifted to the college departments. Making this change helped to emphasise that employer facing work was a core function of all areas of the college.

The employer focus was reinforced at the college by a restructuring of departments on the basis of nine business sectors rather than subject coverage. This enabled the college to provide flexible training based on employers' requirements. A central 'Employer Engagement Team' was created, with responsibility for promoting and co-ordinating this employer-facing activity, but not for its management or delivery. Another college underwent similar developments, with dedicated staff for liaison and marketing, but drawing delivery staff from the college departments. Employer engagement featured prominently in both colleges' strategic plans.

How did the providers match training to employers' business needs?

Rather than simply promoting their training programmes, three of the providers emphasised the benefit to the employer's business performance of the training they offered. One provider had carried out research into the impact of their training programmes and claimed an increase of 17% in profitability per individual who had undertaken training with them compared to individuals that had not. But training that was not directly aimed at increasing profitability was also highly relevant to some businesses. For example, the social care NVQ provision offered by one provider helped businesses in the sector to conform with a legal requirement for certain levels of qualification among staff. Without them, the businesses could have been prevented from operating.

How did the providers set about providing reliable communication channels?

The importance of regular and reliable contact with employers was recognised by all the case study providers. One provider allocated key account managers to employer clients, and all departments had a named staff member responsible for employer facing work. Another provider's social care NVQ provision team used their close links with local employers through various groups and networks, and with their Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), for much of its market information. Here, the CoVE manager visited all major clients at least once per month to discuss their needs.

Both of the general FE colleges used a central electronic database to log details of all contacts with employers. The data, which was available to all departments, could be sorted in a variety of ways to facilitate analysis and marketing. For example, in one of the colleges it was used to identify employers who might be interested in training programmes for Digital TV installers. Fifty digital installers were enrolled onto an NVQ2 within three months as a result of a targeted mail-shot and follow up calls.

How did the providers help minimise costs to employers?

All the case study providers supplied some training to employers at the full economic cost. But most of their employer facing work involved some form of public subsidy and the

providers were adept in finding ways to attract subsidy to minimise the cost to employers. One provider clearly saw 'educating the market' about the costs of training and the availability of support from public funds as its role. Creating a central 'Employer Engagement Team' was an important step in making sure employers could benefit from this aspect of the college's expertise.

But this provider was also concerned that their expertise in accessing subsidies could hide the true cost of training from employers, who might then object to increases in the level of fees if funding streams dried up. The provider's pricing policy therefore emphasised transparency so that employers understood how the fee was determined and the difference between the actual cost of the provision and the fee that was charged.

How did the providers achieve flexible delivery of the training?

All the case study providers offered considerable flexibility in where, when and how their training was delivered, for at least part of their provision. Training was delivered on the employer's premises, or at an alternative agreed venue. It occurred on any day of the week, and at any time of day, including on night shifts. The mode of delivery offered ranged from traditional 'classroom' teaching to individualised distance learning – for example, the whole of one provider's NVQ social care provision was delivered using distance learning packs supported by regular visits from a tutor/assessor. A 'learning at work' week was developed by another provider for one employer consisting of 'bite size chunks' of learning, for example on the use of specific computer packages.

Was there any room for improvement?

Although the case study providers were successful, the researchers considered there was still room for improvement. They highlighted several aspects of employer engagement they felt the providers needed to work on. These included:

- **drawing their non-apprenticeship employer facing work into a rigorous quality assurance system.** Only one provider made employer facing work (almost all NVQ delivery) an integral part of its quality assurance procedures. Other providers included their apprenticeship provision in their overall self-assessment and quality assurance systems, but did not apply similar procedures, such as observation of learning sessions, to the rest of their employer facing work.
- **developing ways to adequately meet the training requirements of small and medium-sized employers (SMEs).** None of the providers claimed to be successful with SMEs. Most encouraged informal networking, through, for example regular business lunches, and the college providers delivered some training through self-learning programmes, which they thought were particularly appropriate for SMEs.

Take action

Could you:

- routinely log all contacts with clients or potential clients in a way that is helpful to the whole organisation, and use this information proactively in marketing?
- have systems that can determine the needs of individual local employers?
- cultivate connections with the LSC and SSCs etc to be fully informed about current and upcoming funding streams?
- employ some staff on contracts that allow flexibility in working hours, holiday times etc and staff who can assume more than one role?
- bring all your employer facing work under the umbrella of the main quality assurance arrangements of the organization?
- provide the facilities and support for SMEs to network with each other and develop self-learning programmes appropriate for the needs of SMEs?

Evidence source

Walker, E., Calvert, N., Fletcher, M., Hughes, M., Shirley, T. & Subramanian, M. (2008) Effective Practice in Employer Engagement. Commissioned by QIA:

<http://excellence.qia.org.uk/docref.aspx?o=162332>