

Employer Training Pilots

Robert Nurden explains the Workplace Basic Skills Network involvement in Employer Training Pilots

Employer Training Pilots (ETPs), which will form the basis of the government's National Employer Training Programme in April 2006, are widely acknowledged as a positive initiative which is already making headway.

It has been found that by working directly with employers, brokers are more easily able to persuade them of the benefits of basic skills and Level 2 training for their staff. Once engaged in dialogue, bosses are better able to identify staff needs and, as a result of a substantial government compensation package, are more willing to release employees for vocational or basic skills training during company time. What's more, ETPs are successfully reaching those employers who have never previously engaged in training their workforces. Other bodies such as the CBI and TUC are behind the scheme, too.

But while the main thrust of the project is clearly the right one, there are some aspects that still need refining and improving. The Workplace Basic Skills Network at Lancaster University, while fully behind the initiative as a whole, finds, for example, that while NVQs are being successfully promoted by the LSCs trialling the scheme, this is not always so straightforward with basic skills – literacy, language skills and numeracy. It believes that there needs to be more emphasis on the delivery of the Skills for Life agenda.

In a number of ETP areas there has been an understandable temptation to cut and run for NVQs, and this has been to the detriment of retention and achievement. Had the Skills for Life aspects of screening, diagnostic support and embedded delivery been an integral part of the programme, the outcomes would have been greatly enhanced. Many ETPs are recognising this and are modifying their delivery.

Lancashire ETP

'It would be wrong to think that one approach precludes the other,' said Sue Batt, Director of Regional Development at the Network. 'Both approaches go hand-in-hand, indeed that is what embedding basic skills is all about. This is one of the Network's strongest areas of expertise and it is one where we believe we can make a positive contribution.'

Over the past few months, trainers from the Network have held three workshops for Lancashire LSC brokers charged with delivering ETPs to employers. The first focused on marketing, and the second on organisational needs analysis. The third looked both at the role of occupational standards and the opportunity to broker embedded basic skills training solutions to employers, as well as the implications of the National Tests. The sessions were generally well received by participants, with the third session being particularly useful.

'Most of our course work is traditionally with providers, adds Sue Batt. 'But with this initiative I would like to think that we are forging a new partnership with business brokers, developers and advisers that will set a trend for the future. Evidence suggests that further training for brokers would improve the level of understanding of Skills for Life within the business world.'

To this end, the Network has established a five-point plan for the training of brokers, dependent on need:

Five-point plan

- 1 Awareness-raising on the teaching and learning infrastructure and the implications for workplace delivery.
- 2 The role of Skills for Life in underpinning vocational training.
- 3 The role of occupational standards and the opportunity to broker embedded basic skills training solutions to employers, including the potential of the 'Get On' model, if appropriate.
- 4 Awareness-raising on adopting the curriculum for the workplace.
- 5 Awareness-raising on adapting materials for the workplace and on customised curriculum design.

The Lancashire ETP project comes in the wake of long-term formal and informal discussions that the Network's regional development staff have been having with those charged with managing and delivering the pilots. Using those findings, the Network wrote a proposal to support stakeholders engaged in brokering and delivering ETPs, and Lancashire LSC – the first LSC to employ the Network's services – chose those sections it considered most

beneficial. Following the success of the Lancashire partnership, the Network is now in discussions with other LSCs to deliver a similar package.

Training for providers and managers

It just happened that Lancashire opted for a workshop directed at brokers, but the Network's proposal also offers training for ETP providers, managers and administrators. Broadly speaking, it sees a need to continue to build capacity and capability of both brokers and providers already engaged in marketing and setting up workplace Skills for Life programmes – as opposed to NVQs – to ensure that a large number of programmes are delivered.

To this end, relationships with human resources departments and middle managers should also be built on in order to develop a company-wide response and buy-in from senior managers in order to underpin longer-term working relationships and help with repeat business. This is where training in marketing and organisational needs analysis comes in.

Because one-third of employers are engaged by providers, they too must be aware of organisational issues involving employers. The Network is also offering training in the importance of being aware of staffing structures, recruitment, staff suitability, and the Skills for Life agenda generally.

There are opportunities for dissemination of good practice among the LSCs involved in delivering ETPs. In this way elements of success can be more widely shared and built upon, and the newer pilots can benefit from the experience of those pilots that have been established longer.

The Skills for Life agenda is complex, and managers and administrators frequently need some hand-holding. The Network training is helping improve communication with providers and the clarification of the roles of brokers, providers and union learning representatives. As ever in basic skills, the key to real progress is through partnership and co-operation between all the stakeholders.

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