

Partnership and relevance in work-based learning

Robert Nurden explores how employees and employers can profit from training.

Gone are the days when poor basic skills were seen as the employee's problem, a deficiency which individuals had to put right for themselves. The realisation that this is an issue for the whole business, from the boardroom to the broom cupboard, is gaining acceptance right across work-based adult learning and provides the rationale for the work of the Workplace Basic Skills Network (WBSN).

Bringing LLN training to working adults is a complex process involving broker, learner, tutor, provider, employer, union learning rep and funding agency. The secret of success is for all parties to listen to the others' needs. Employers must be convinced of the good sense of staff being involved in *Skills for Life*, and practitioners need to be aware of the demands and constraints on a business organisation.

Engaging employers

The engagement of employers is paramount. Delivery must fit in with their needs, not those of the provider. This can be achieved through a thorough organisational needs analysis which is part of the



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organisation's long-term development plans. When employers see improved communication, numeracy and language skills as part of these plans, rather than as bolt-on provision, there is the best chance of success.

The belief in partnership underpins the training that the Network offers to practitioners.

We train adult LLN teachers to be consultants and collaborators. Tutors should possess analytical and negotiation skills, knowledge of business and industry, and an awareness of other stakeholders, such as government bodies and unions. In this way, they can support organisations to make the best use of all their staff. The Network is signed up to a process of participation between stakeholders, providers, brokers – for example, small business advisers, Investors in People assessors and local Chambers of Commerce – and union learning representatives.

Eddie Little, Director of Operations WBSN.

If employers are to embrace *Skills for Life*, they need to see a direct link between training and profit. This was the trigger for Vitacress Salads, a provider of top-quality produce to supermarkets. The company was finding that mistakes on the production line were costing hundreds of thousands of pounds a year. The errors were invariably the result of staff putting the wrong sell-by date on bags of salad, so that production had to be stopped and the process started all over again.

In addressing the problem, management at the Hampshire firm saw the sense in introducing language, literacy and numeracy learning. It started with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for production staff, and paid them for the hour a week they spent improving their English with a tutor from the local college.



Identifying the priorities

Practitioners have to be aware, that small, medium and large businesses are likely to have very different priorities. The owner/manager of a small company will want staff to be more efficient and autonomous, so that management can spend less time on supervision and more on developing the business. A large organisation, on the other hand, may see workplace training more as an issue of quality or of branding, or as a way of gaining an award such as *Investors in People* or of enhancing customer loyalty. The point is that each organisation has different priorities and values: there are no standard solutions.

Employer Training Pilots

The importance of partnership is recognised by government which has introduced the Employer Training Pilots (<http://etp.lsc.gov.uk>), which will form the basis of the National Employer Training Programme to be launched in April 2006. The Pilots have shown that, by working directly with employers, brokers can more easily persuade them of the benefits of *Skills for Life* and Level 2 training for their staff. Then there are the other players in the process: brokers such as Business Link, and the union learning reps who, with TUC backing, are paying an increasingly important role in building bridges between staff and management.

Once engaged in dialogue, managers are better able to identify staff needs and, as a result of a substantial government compensation package, are more willing to release employees for training during company time. What's more, ETPs are successfully reaching those employers who have never previously engaged in training their workforces.

Relevant to the workplace and to the learner

LLN must, of course, always be made relevant to the

It was obviously important for staff to be able to read, understand and follow our stringent hygiene regulations. Very soon, standards improved, productivity rose, and profits increased. And there was an unexpected bonus: morale and teamwork improved, absenteeism was cut, and staff retention rates rose.

Tony Alcock,
Human Resources Manager,
Vitacress Salads.

Electrical engineering company W Lucy of Oxford introduced language training for 400 staff when it moved to new premises. Not surprisingly, there was a problem with staff retention and how best to manage the transition from one workplace to another.

Carol Clark, Human Resources Manager, said the task had to be tackled carefully.

It was clear there was a need for basic skills training, which we treated as part of an overall programme of training and development. Literacy and numeracy provision became an essential part of our business improvement programme.

The programme proved to be highly democratic. Every staff member was involved in re-training.

- Operatives were required to attain an NVQ2 in performing operations.
- Team leaders worked towards an NVQ3 in supervisory management.
- Managers were expected to get an NVQ4 in management.
- Senior managers were required to obtain a qualification at NVQ Level 5.

We are now experiencing a change in attitude to learning among employees. They are gaining in confidence. There is nothing more satisfying than giving someone the opportunity to change and enrich their lives.

modern workplace. This might involve meeting health and safety requirements, use of metrication and the euro, introducing and using new technology, new international standards and working practices, new demands for quality and flatter management structures.

Time-conscious managers are often persuaded of the value of LLN training by being reminded of how ICT has radically altered the workplace, as much for them as for the rest of their workforce. Being literate and numerate now means more than writing good English and adding up accurately; it also means being competent in using a range of electronic equipment.

An emphasis on the needs of the business does not mean that individuals miss out on the personal benefits of such training. Many, after following an LLN course, attest to the fact that they can now help their children with their homework, read signs and newspapers, and generally function better as a citizen. When it gets the mix right, the partnership approach is a winner for everyone involved. ■

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The Workplace Basic Skills Network, based at Lancaster University, is a membership organisation dedicated to the provision of language, literacy and numeracy in the workplace. It supports *Skills for Life* and builds professional capacity in workplace basic skills through sharing and disseminating good practice and continuing professional development.