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Using employer networks to reinforce learning: Results Consortium Ltd (working on behalf of Ixion Holdings)

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Brief description

This example explains how to improve the impact of learning from courses in business improvement techniques, by setting up employer peer networks to share ideas, and by using learning networks to empower groups of ex-learners to apply their knowledge to promote quality improvement.

Overview – the provider’s message

‘In the past, delegates enjoyed our training courses very much. They had a sense of achievement and the company awarded certificates and “medals” for every module they completed. So why was it that when I made a follow-up visit to someone who had all the medals, he couldn’t remember a really basic procedure? I knew we could do something better.



Part of the answer lay in Business Improvement Techniques, a qualification that uses workers’ own experience in focused projects to overcome difficulties and streamline their work.

The companies involved benefited during the six months of the programme, but while some continued to improve, the impetus was lost in others when we left. Perhaps we could help?’ Then a potential client asked to talk to someone who had been on the programme, resulting in a factory visit that proved productive to both the visitors and the host company. It was a eureka moment! I realised that companies might need an independent eye to help them to implement the techniques we taught, but would they be prepared to share ideas and help each other?’ The idea of a peer network evolved gradually, but the result has been a thriving group with delegates from a wide range of industries who value each other’s ideas.’

Paul Caffery

The good practice in detail

Empowering staff to develop solutions to problems

'Results Training is one of our best providers', says Karen Martin, of Ixion Holdings, who hold the contract with the Skills Funding Agency. 'They never let us down, and deliver very good outcomes for clients. Some providers adopt a tick-box approach to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) delivery, but Results Training is always looking for ways to add value to the service they give to their clients, building very strong relationships with them. They measure the impact too, so they can demonstrate the benefits of their excellent training. Employers recognise this and choose Results Training even where the competition offers cheaper programmes. We are very keen to continue to work with Results Training, and have recently negotiated a new contract with the company.'

When inspectors visited Results Training as part of their inspection of Ixion Holdings, in January 2011, the [inspection report](#) noted learners' achievements:

'Learners make substantial improvements to their employers' businesses through improving work-flow processes, eliminating problems and faults, developing attitude and mindset to inspect their own work at every stage, cost reduction and improvements to delivery by problem solving.'



At Inspectorate International, the impact is clear. Bob Randall began his role, as Change Champion with a background in engineering. The company works with metals and minerals, assaying, testing, and analysing samples for a range of international clients. He says the Business Improvement Techniques (BIT) qualification raises people's awareness and gives them the tools to use their knowledge effectively. His role is to encourage experts to improve the way they work by sharing that knowledge. The company has seen tangible benefits from their projects. For instance, laboratory processes use a lot of glassware, which has to be cleaned meticulously. Moving individual items between buildings wasted time and sometimes led to needless and costly breakages. Because project team staff came from across the company, they could take a wider view and devise effective action to improve both these aspects, saving time, money, and improving safety. The real benefit, he says, is that people buy into something they have devised themselves. 'You can tell people to do things differently, and they will, while you're watching, but unless they understand why, they won't want to change their work.' To encourage employees further, the company has introduced awards for individuals who come up with the best improvements.

Bob says the inter-company networking group has been very productive, bringing useful insights into how others overcome problems. The relationship with Munton's, who also have laboratories, has been particularly valuable, and other network members helped the company to review their strategic planning processes and the way they monitor their work. Even when ideas are not directly applicable, the fresh view of an independent peer group is really valuable.

Claire Morris is a chemist who analyses samples using an inductively coupled plasma optical emission spectrometer. She enjoyed her course. 'I was already using some techniques without being able to articulate what they were. The course confirmed my hunches were

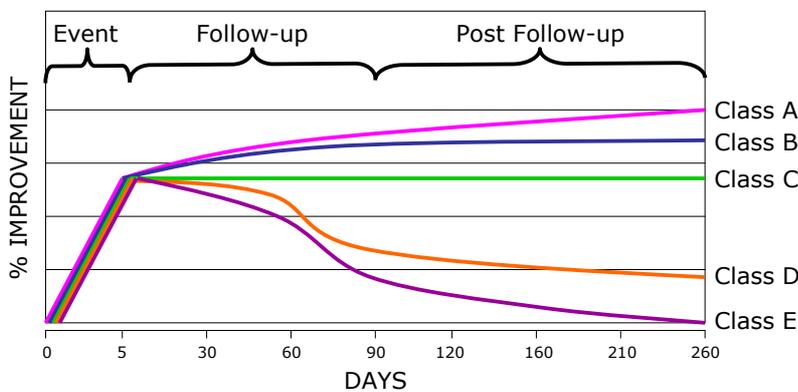
right,' she says. 'A strong management presence in our group also helped to get things done. This ensures that everyone has to buy into the culture of improvement, because they are part of the team and there's nowhere to hide!' Their most successful project streamlined processes for precious metals so that the initial phase to determine a target date to report results was cut from a week to two days.



Networks that help employers to develop

The [inspection report](#) said:

'Partnerships with various employers and subcontractors, based on mutual trust and respect, are sound... subcontractors work diligently to share good practice to improve the quality of training.'



Results Training analysed the effect of the BIT courses and found that the impact varied widely. While everyone benefited initially, some companies continued to use the techniques to great effect, while in others performance declined once the assessors left. Yet all had learned the techniques to change. Perhaps more training was not the answer?

'What creates the initiative to make improvement?' asks Paul Caffery. 'How do you realise it? We had given them the tools, so why weren't they using them? Perhaps they needed a little help from a critical friend.'

One day, a potential client asked Paul if he could talk to an existing customer. 'One of our clients agreed to open their business, and give a presentation and a tour of their facilities'. After the visit, Paul noticed that the rapport between the two client companies was strong and they were communicating openly about their issues. But the best result happened later, when the original client got a boost from reflecting on their achievements and celebrating them with their visitors, and the visitors saw how their hosts had solved a problem and immediately implemented an improvement on their return. It was a eureka moment for me.'

Describing this experience to his local enterprise agency, he suggested starting a network for small businesses to share problems and ideas, invite guest speakers and create a fellowship with a principle to 'Pay it Forward'; when a member benefits, they take the next opportunity to help someone else rather than wait for an opportunity to pay it back.



Alastair Wesson is Lean Manufacturing Process Manager at Munton's Plc, manufacturing malt and brewing products in Stowmarket, Suffolk. When Paul

Caffrey offered them training in Business Improvement Techniques in 2008, his approach impressed managers, so they agreed to run a course.

Learners thoroughly enjoyed training and their projects benefited the business too, from small changes to major process redesign. 'It's most successful when shop-floor workers and team managers in the same department work together to solve a problem,' says Alastair. 'It shows the guys that their contributions are valuable, but that they have to consider all the implications as they must live with the result. They are proud to take ownership.'

Alastair is very keen to continue improving his business, and was enthusiastic about Paul's suggestion that companies could meet to share ideas. He hosted a very successful meeting at Munton's. 'It's good to discuss problems with like minded people', he says. 'It allows me to stand back and take an objective view. Although the businesses are quite diverse, we have a common interest in improvements. Sharing what we know has brought us good rewards in learning from others' experience of what works and what doesn't. It's well worth the time invested to get independent feedback on what we do.'

Provider background



[Results Consortium Ltd](#) is a training company founded in 2002 and based in Great Dunmow, Essex, providing a range of training to industrial clients. As well as the Business Improvement Techniques programme, the company provides specialist training for the automotive industry, in laboratory techniques, and in mentoring and coaching for a wide range of other businesses. It holds subcontracts with [Ixion Holdings](#) and [Havering College](#).

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