

LSIS funded Improving training and related services for employers

PROVIDER END OF PROJECT REPORT

Project title: Blackburn College Employer Portal

Section 1: Introduction

(Give a brief introduction to your organisation and the project.)

Blackburn College is a large Further and Higher Education College in Lancashire in the North West of England. We offer a wide range of qualifications from entry level vocational qualifications, Apprenticeships and A-levels through to foundation degrees, degrees and professional qualifications. We have a large number of students who are studying degrees and professional qualifications on a part-time basis, paid for by their employer.

The College has a dedicated employer responsiveness team, The Training People at Blackburn College. The team are dedicated to the training and development of local, national and international businesses no matter what size or sector. They offer work-based, day-release and short training courses, as well as bespoke training courses which provide employees with the skills that their employers want.

The 'Employer Portal' is an innovative new web based service which allows employers to monitor their relationship with the College. Employers will be able to login to their own account to access staff training records, progress reviews, financial information and submit online feedback. New services will also be highlighted including sector specific information, training and corporate benefits.

Please explain how and why the project emerged?

The Employer Portal is in response to direct feedback from employers who would like greater access and control over their relationship with the College. Currently, employers are asked to complete a feedback form after any training. This form asks employers ten questions which are scored one to ten about their employer journey. From this 94.5 per cent of employers have given the College positive feedback overall (scoring questions at either eight, nine or ten). However when comparing the responses to individual questions on the form, one question has a consistently lower score. This was question five.

Question five

"I was kept informed of my employee's progress" has an 86 per cent positive response. However the average response to other questions is between 89-93 per cent.

As a result, this is one area that the College would like to improve and we believe the development of the Employer Portal would provide an opportunity for us to improve relationships with employers, and actively engage with them to gain feedback and new insights into their training needs.

What are you trying to achieve within the project?

The Employer Portal will facilitate communication between the College and our employers. It will allow employers to have greater control and access over their relationship with the College. Employers will be able to login into an on-line personalised account which will enable them to view information about their training activities with the College, and access progress reviews for employees studying at the College as well as financial information. This account will allow the College to highlight new services such as the work placement pool, explain health and safety requirements and direct enquiries to the College's website. The College annually plans its commercial provision on the basis of information relating to competitors, demand, employer feedback, capacity, labour market intelligence and historical information. The Employer Portal would benefit the College and other providers as we believe that direct communication with employers can shape future training provision. This will help enable the sector to provide courses which are suited to the needs of employers and their employees.

Section 2: Activities

Who has been involved? (Departments and/or job roles)

- Business Systems Manager for Employer Responsiveness: Blackburn College, Employer Responsiveness.
- Information Systems Manager: Blackburn College, Management Information Systems.
- I.T. Services Manager: Blackburn College, Computer Services.
- Finance Manager: Blackburn College, Finance.
- Webmaster, Blackburn College, Marketing.
- Project Manager, Intrelate Ltd.

What's happened so far?

- Meetings with internal stakeholders such as the College's Information Systems Manager, I.T. Services Manager and Webmaster to discuss specifications for the design and implementation of the project.
- Meetings have also been held with the College's Commercial Training and Development Co-ordinators to discuss how the Portal will be used and the impact on their communications with employers.
- Meetings regarding data protection and release of student/finance information have taken place.
- Data protection forms have been produced and enrolment forms amended to reflect this.
- Changes to internal systems such as Education Business Systems (EBS) and finance to enable links with the Employer Portal.
- Portal specification has been designed and finalised with Intrelate.

What has been achieved?

Blackburn College's Employer Portal is starting to take shape. All of the internal specification has been completed and Intrelate are designing the Portal. We have also started to promote the Portal amongst staff across the College who will be able to use the Portal in communications with employers. This includes meetings with the Commercial and Training Development Co-ordinators and initial briefings with lecturers across the College who have specific roles to liaise with local employers. Outside of the College, the Portal has been promoted primarily through a presentation to 90 employers at an employer forum hosted by Community Business Partners. Initial feedback from this event was positive. A number of employers expressed their surprise that Blackburn College has so many services to offer employers. The Training and Development Co-ordinators have also been highlighting the new Portal to some of their valued customers and key employers. In the next few weeks the pilot of the Portal will begin with five of the College's most important employer customers. They will be given access to their own accounts to test and give feedback in order to finalise the Portal which will be launched in May 2012.

Section 3: Success factors and challenges

In this project what have been the critical success factors (up to three) and why?

1. Build on existing systems

It is important to consider/review what internal systems the organisation already has in place. The Employer Portal would be difficult to develop without the College's established customer relationship management (CRM) system. The CRM has enabled us to extract existing information without the need to duplicate the same fields in the Portal, therefore saving time and resources.

2. Internal relationships

Without the support of a range of people across the College (see above) the Employer Portal would not extract the necessary information for each employer account. Involving colleagues at an early stage ensured that the internal systems were in place before approaching an external supplier.

3. A trusted supplier

A supplier you can trust is worth their weight in gold. Blackburn College has worked with Intrelate for about four years and they have supported the College's development of its CRM and book and pay on-line systems. Their knowledge of these systems and the College has been invaluable in visualising the end product and suggesting improvements along the way.

What have been the key challenges? (up to three)

1. Taking into consideration all the project activities and ensuring that they are undertaken in a timely and logical sequence.
2. Availability and capacity to deliver. As a result of initial meetings it became apparent that the finance feature of the Portal would not be available until August. The finance department are upgrading their system in August and as a result it made sense to build this into the Portal after the upgrade.

3. Getting buy-in from curriculum staff. Staff have received briefings on the forthcoming Portal and we have been keen to highlight the benefits of the system ensuring that it does not impact on their existing commitments and time.

And how did you overcome the challenges?

Meetings were held with all internal parties within the first few weeks of the project. This ensured that everyone was involved from the beginning and the project plan was discussed and agreed by all concerned. This discussion allowed individuals to raise issues on delivery and the timing of individual actions, ensuring that the final project plan was in a logical sequence.

Any challenges (as above) were identified at the start, and solutions built into the project plan. Regular updates were sent to all parties to make sure that they were kept informed of the project's progress and any changes to the project plan.

Section 4: How has something changed?

What difference has the project made?

The Employer Portal is the beginning of a change in the way the College communicates with employers. To date, the differences have been changes to the College's internal communications and systems. Briefings have taken place with the College's Commercial Training and Development Co-ordinators as it will mean a different way of working in terms of generating and receiving employer feedback. Currently the Training and Development Co-ordinators send out feedback forms prompted by the College's CRM system once a training course has been completed. The Portal will enable this feedback form to be sent out automatically via their account, thus saving the Co-ordinators time and resources.

When the Portal is fully operational we expect that it will provide greater transparency for employers enabling them to view their history with the College and their current training activities. It will reduce time and resources within the College by providing information which is currently unavailable, for example a list of employers who would like to take a work placement.

The Portal is a new, innovative and interactive service which is in line with increasing technology developments. Internal and external feedback so far on the Portal has been positive and it is hoped the Portal will generate a new way of thinking across the College.

What impact has the project had so far (for learners, staff, employers) - or what impact might it have?

The Portal will have a great impact on the way employers communicate with the College and receive information from us. Employers will be able to access their own College account and in turn, we will be able to communicate electronically with them about the courses and training they need specifically for their business, industry or sector. By using the Portal it is envisaged that the College will be able to provide a better service to employers whilst still maintaining a quality, personal service. It is

also anticipated that the Portal will allow the College to contact more employers without any additional extra cost.

Internally we have already been able to evidence the Portal to support tender applications and show the way the College is developing its employer relations.

How are you measuring the impact?

Once the Portal is launched, we will be able to measure impact in a number of ways.

- Number of employers registered.
- Number of hits to the Portal and by individual pages.
- Change in satisfaction score through our feedback forms.
- An increase in commercial income.
- An increase in the number of work placement opportunities generated through the work placement pool.
- Number of bookings generated via the Portal.
- Number of Apprenticeship enquiries.

We will also gain qualitative feedback and testimonials to find out what services employers find useful and why, and what they would like to see developed further on the Portal.

Section 5: Reflections on learning

What changes did you make as you went along and why?

The project plan was amended to reflect the delay in providing employers with full financial information due to the upgrade of the College's finance system in August. When the Portal is launched in May 2012, employers will only be able to see invoicing information. Once the internal finance system is updated in August, employers will be able to view their cash, credit and cheque payments.

Changes were made to the project plan after internal meetings due to timescales and order of activities. It became apparent that certain activities needed to be completed before others, for example a number of amendments to CRM and EBS to allow them to link up to the Portal as well as changes to the College's Apprenticeship, commercial and higher education (HE) enrolment forms to include the data protection declaration.

What has worked well?

- Implementing the College's CRM first, meant that data is not duplicated and resources are not wasted populating two different systems. It also ensures that the College can provide a more efficient service.
- Explaining the benefits and impact to individuals along the way allows the Portal to be promoted at the earliest opportunity and to ensure that there is buy-in from all parties across the College.
- The established internal relationships across the College ensure that all individuals work together as a team to enable the project to be delivered in a

timely and efficient manner.

What needs improving?

We are already considering other improvements to the Portal as colleagues across the College are making suggestions based on their meetings with employers. As with our CRM system, we have created internal contingencies in terms of staffing and resources to continually improve and develop the system once it is fully operational.

If you did this project again what changes might you make?

One of the constraints of the project has been the funding timescales. Whilst we had discussed the concept of an Employer Portal, we had not previously had the resources to pursue this development. It almost certainly would not have taken place in the near future without this funding. Therefore, implementing the process once confirmation of the funding allocation had been received was an immediate pressure in terms of time and 'buy-in' from the departments involved.

Bearing this in mind, in future applications we would consider the timescales, implementation and delivery dates ahead of funding approval. However, whilst we have had to work quickly to write the application, secure the funding and implement the development plan, the funding deadlines have provided a useful focus and helped drive the project on.

Section 6: What learning and outcomes from the project could be shared with the wider sector?

What else could be useful to capture what's coming out of the project?

- Essential to have the internal structures in place and ensure that all parties are consulted at an early stage. This includes a good Project Manager and reliable suppliers.
- It is important to have a good foundation of business systems within the organisation. Don't rush to deliver a project before other systems are in place. It was vital that the College had solid EBS, finance and CRM systems in place prior to the Portal.
- Follow a critical path of actions and stages. Certain elements must be in place before any further activities can be completed. Follow a clear project plan, with timed milestones, include regular meetings and ensure that the project is closely reviewed and monitored.

What resources will be created that would be useful to share?

- The critical path used would provide a model of good practice. A Gantt chart showing the critical path taken will be available from 26 April 2012.
- Share work placement pool with other Colleges.
- Case studies and testimonials from employers using the Portal will be available from August 2012 onwards.

How could we use the learning from the project to drive forward the Further Education and Skills sector?

The Employer Portal would provide an excellent example of good practice in building and maintaining good employer relations. This is a key area of growth for all Further Education Colleges and once the Portal is established there would be a number of case studies which would benefit the sector.

Section 7: Future planning

What next?

The Employer Portal is the start of the journey for the College in terms of further developing employer relations. The aim is to add to the Portal with new services depending on employers requirements. This could be for example, bespoke online courses or webinars accessed via the Portal; news tailored to the interests of individual employers and on-line forums facilitating employer discussions.

What is the legacy?

The Employer Portal is designed to be a long lasting legacy which will support the College as its relationships with Employers increase. The number of employers accessing the Portal will increase and it will become an important communication tool enabling the College to support employers with their training needs, tailor training provision, gain feedback and provide them with a range of services.

Section 8: Further information

Please supply contact details to help people who want to know more about the project.

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