

What shall we sell?

A How to do more business with business mini-guide

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With greater demands being placed on all learning providers to rely less on funding and to earn more of their income from employers, some providers are thinking about spending more on promoting their offer. Others are asking: what do employers want to buy? In a demand-led market this is the right question.

Analysing market reports and reviewing Labour Market Intelligence (LMI), surveys and other investigations are activities which only add value in the demand-led world of learning and skills when they help providers to pinpoint gaps in the market. It is here that opportunities lie because it is far easier, and much less expensive in terms of all types of resource, to find out what employers are spending on learning and skills products and services rather than trying to persuade them to buy something they have not considered buying.

Finding those gaps in the market is an activity built around the answers to three key questions.

1. What are employers buying right now? - The answer to this question will indicate what is selling today.
2. What do employers want to buy more of? - The answer here points to current unmet demands.
3. What would employers like to buy, but can't? - This answer indicates where the real potential in the market lies, because it points to what employers are ready to pay for if only they could find it.

Concentrating on these questions keeps learning providers focused on market areas where there is demand, and it is very important to differentiate between need and demand. An organisation might *need* to know more about any number of issues, from new legislation and new qualifications to new business systems and processes. Until the need-to-know becomes urgent, for example, when new regulations come into force, there will be little or no demand in the majority of employer organisations. Thus, it is important to remain focused on demand. This can be challenging as it leads providers to focus on what employers want, or demand, which is not necessarily what those providers are geared up to deliver.

However, what employers buy is no secret. They buy business benefits. In many cases these are not the same as learner benefits, something which can cause learning providers problems. Providers can usually promote learner benefits extremely effectively but sometimes struggle to define and promote business benefits.

In its simplest terms a business benefit is one which can be shown to increase profit measurably or one which can be demonstrated to cut a business's costs - now.

Hypothetical benefits, for example, those which could accrue to a business over time, which include having a highly skilled, well-trained and well-motivated workforce, are not perceived by employers as business benefits. They are advantages or enabling conditions. Businesses want to know that as a direct result of a training input they will gain a defined benefit. Many providers sell just that, offering guarantees about improvements and changes that purchasers will see following their investment quite apart from any qualifications and improved life chances which programme participants gain.

Successful learning providers in the future will need to establish benefits with all their customers – learners and employers – if they are to succeed in encouraging more employers to buy from them.

So when evaluating the impact of their learning programmes providers now need to include investigations into how those programmes have made a difference to the employer organisation as well as to the lives of the programme participants. Only then will they know the business benefits they can supply and hence what, for the future, they are likely to be able to sell.

Margaret Adams is a former college manager who helps colleges and learning providers to earn more of their income from the private sector.

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