

Good Practice Guide

Forming and Developing
Small Business
E-Learning Networks

A Small Firms Enterprise Development
Initiative and Centre for Enterprise
collaboration and publication.

**Small
Firms** *Enterprise
Development
Initiative*



Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	2
2. E-based networks - a quick primer.....	4
3. Principles.....	5
4. User Guide: Forming an e-based learning network	10
5. User Guide: Developing an e-based learning network.....	12
6. User Guide: Facilitating Participation.....	13
7. User Guide: Growing and sustaining an e-based learning network.....	16
8. User Guide: Technology Tools	18
9. Checklist for forming your e-based Learning Network	22
Appendix	23

Authors and Acknowledgements

This good practice guide was enhanced and edited by Duncan Brown, Development Manager, the Centre for Enterprise from contributions by Tony Robinson OBE, Chairman, the Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative and Michael Davis, Managing Director, the Centre for Enterprise. The first version of this guide was produced by SFEDI as part of a DfES supported Employer Learning Networks project. Both versions rely heavily on research and recommendations made by the West Open Learning Network (Kate Doodson and Pat Emery) in a report commissioned by SFEDI as part of this DfES supported project. Other contributors included Andrew Atherton, Director of the Foundation for SME Development and Lew Perren, Advisor to the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership. The content has been funded by the DfES and the design and print costs by the Centre for Enterprise.

November 2001

1 Introduction

1.1 The project that gave rise to this guide



www.businesseurope.com



www.smallbusinessadvice.org.uk



www.skillup.co.uk



www.shell-livewire.org

This Guide is the result of the Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative (SFEDI) / DfES project to develop small business employer learning networks. The project was founded upon SFEDI's desire to develop learning opportunities through networks, using websites already successfully engaging with small businesses. These networks could work through the website interface to help these small businesses solve their day-to-day problems.

SFEDI's aim in the project was to enhance, rather than to develop something completely new. This resulted in a network with very wide reach. The average sectoral employer learning network may reach around 100 small businesses – the four websites chosen to form the initial network currently reach over 400,000 small businesses.

The four partner websites that make up the project's e-learning network are represented alongside.

SFEDI enhanced these four existing advice and information websites with a variety of learning interventions. This included the formation of peer e-learning networks for small business users, and opening use of the websites for access to SFEDI endorsed business advice and learning.

The project experience and supporting research has created new good practice knowledge on developing small business e-learning networks, summarised in this Guide. It has also provided valuable insight for policy, with recommendations to both DfES and the Small Business Service on 'engagement with small businesses' for future learning and skills development initiatives.

The Guide brings together key learning points examples of good practice and practical tips and hints to assist those developing learning networks in the future.

1.2 This Guide – for peer learning on-line

This Guide concentrates on how 'peer learning' can be developed for small businesses through on-line means. It builds upon the success of the SFEDI small business e-learning project as well as research knowledge. This includes, first, the project research undertaken by the West Open Learning Network¹ as well as supporting evidence on peer learning and electronic methods from a number of projects developed by the Centre for Enterprise².

The project itself succeeded because small businesses engaged in great numbers with the enhanced websites, following application of new learning and networking systems. This Guide however assumes that this network is in its very early stages of development. We would recommend those seeking examples of successful networks in evolving progress to visit the project's partner sites.

In addition to this Guide, there is a body of complementary good practice knowledge on developing employer learning networks, that is important, regardless of the medium used – on-line or face-to-face. Following a workshop conducted for DfES with 17 employer learning network project directors, we have developed a series of recommendations. These are attached as an appendix to this guide.

The report explains in detail that:

- ▶ sector specific learning networks can be best for technical learning, but cross sector are best for building a better business for the future, including generic skills, such as management and leadership.
- ▶ solving specific and immediate business problems common to all the members works best, creates participation and is valued highly, but, as a result, do not worry if members come and go, dependant on the problems being addressed.
- ▶ members should be allowed to identify the problems. In this way, they'll buy into the means and the network for finding the solutions.
- ▶ a good co-ordinator/facilitator already needs to be in place before the network commences
- ▶ training provided must be of high quality, but it must allow choice in delivery means. It doesn't have to be group. It can provide informal mentors on a one-to- one basis – distance learning etc – a whole menu of possible interventions.
- ▶ partners must be involved and committed to the network
- ▶ on-line means of setting up the network should not be relied on. Word of mouth and personal recommendation are still the best means, especially if one can build on existing informal/formal networks.
- ▶ 'champions' should be used to give the network credibility, energy and legitimacy.
- ▶ information should be gathered and shared. The exclusive club of intelligence dissemination is a powerful 'hook' for members.
- ▶ a strong project team is needed to develop the network in the early days
- ▶ whatever the amount of activity you feel is necessary to keep in touch with network members, double it.

¹ Small Business Learning Networks Project (2001) *e-Employer Learning Networks - Research and Strategy Paper*, West Open Learning Network.

² Including the Beacon Company Initiative, running in the East Midlands; and the Ideas House project (for which, see www.ideas-house.com).

② E-based networks – a quick primer

2.1 What is an e-based network?

An e-based network is a group of people who use computer networks as their primary mode of interaction³. An e-based network will generally endeavour to engineer many-to-many relationships with users, with many contributors generating many responses. Only the most successful achieve this level of interaction.

2.2 Why have an e-based network?

The site viewpoint

- ▶ Makes the site 'sticky' i.e. users stay longer on the site
- ▶ Creates loyalty and returns
- ▶ Creates an impact on sales
- ▶ Provides real benefits to the users
- ▶ Builds a sense of belonging (helps to achieve participation)

2.3 Why have an e-based network?

The user viewpoint

- ▶ Communities of **Purpose** – users come to the site for a common purpose (usually to learn, not to share).
e.g., learning how to improve job prospects.
- ▶ Communities of **Practice** – users share a common practice.
e.g. brain surgeons sharing best practice.
- ▶ Communities of **Circumstance** – users share a common situation.
e.g. cancer sufferers.
- ▶ Communities of **Interest** – users share a common interest.
e.g. cycling, breed of dogs.

³Journal of Knowledge Management Vol. 3 1999

③ Principles

The 7 Good Practice Principles for information and development of e-based employer learning networks

- 1 When forming an e-based network, encourage the development of trust, activity and results between members.
- 2 The purpose of the network must be clear; groups must serve a purpose with defined benefits over and above those achieved through other forms of communication.
- 3 Keep the technology simple. There is a lot of sophisticated discussion software available, most of it free – but it is only worth using if it enhances members' learning experiences.
- 4 Discussions have to be fast and focused – lengthy analysis is difficult to respond to and kills interest.
- 5 Build e-based networks from existing networks in the 'physical world.' This method short-cuts a lot of the time spent in building trust by utilising existing forums and adding virtual systems to widen their space for dialogue.
- 6 Provide facilitators for the e-based networks. Facilitators help to stimulate discussion and bring in answers and experiences from outside the membership.
- 7 Prevent the e-based networks from being used as 'sales pitches.' To be effective, networks have to be collaborative environments and must be moderated to put the desire for learning ahead of competitive selling.

3.1 Principle 1

Encourage the development of trust, activity and results between members

Successful relationships, clusters and learning networks – whether 'real' or 'virtual' – are built on three interrelated pillars – trust, activity, and results. These are especially important in developing e-based systems.

Trust is key at the formation stage. If members don't trust one another, individual contributions will be guarded and discussion frustrated, as they 'conceal' real intentions and refrain from open dialogue.

Trust within groups is most easily formed through transparent working arrangements. For example, all members have a personal profile, shared across the network, so that their peers can review their background and know with whom they are communicating.

Transparency will differ considerably according to whether or not an e-based network is 'open' or 'closed'. A closed network will have a defined membership group, which allows for the development of personal relationships in the 'physical' world, with e-based communications as an alternative channel. It will therefore operate on a different level to open networks, which invite contributions from all those with an interest.

Trust is decisive in successful and sustainable formation of an e-based network; it provides the foundation for continuing activity and eventual results.

Without Activity there is no momentum to sustain relationships between members. It provides a measure of progress and a source of focus for group dialogue, preventing members dropping out as they become alienated from hypothetical discussion.

The simplest form of activity – and really the only one available to open networks – is that of allowing members to post questions for the network to answer. This provides a practically related channel for sharing information. The risk is that people ask questions to which there are no answers. Eventually questioning stops. One possible solution can be the appointment of a moderator to help answer questions and focus activity.

With closed networks, especially with a strictly defined purpose, there is the alternative option of members committing to concrete action and reporting back to the group on progress. In physical networks, especially with small memberships, this can be a very effective activity form, although it has an inherent time limitation – once the members achieve their purpose, the group becomes difficult to sustain.

This latter form of activity does offer members a definite Result. Members have to believe that their activity will generate a result that will achieve their initial objectives. This means that learning networks should set always seek to clarify members' expectations and intentions at an early stage, and regularly review progress against them. Too often, networks measure activity rather than results, but results are what make participation attractive to members.

3.2. Principle 2

Be clear on the purpose

"Just because the technology exists" isn't a good reason to set up an e-based learning network. Many are seduced into setting up an e-based group by the fact that the technology is cheap to set up and e-groups are an 'in thing'. When considering setting up an network using virtual systems, ensure that you know exactly:

- ▶ **what** you are trying to achieve
- ▶ **how** an e-based employer network will help achieve that goal

It is very difficult to imitate the dynamics of personal conversation through e-based groups, but technology does offer its own distinct advantages:

- ▶ the ability to engage with a much larger audience of potential members, who draw upon a much wider base of experiences
- ▶ the opportunity to reflect on issues before responding
- ▶ the ability to run the discussion continuously over a long period at long distances

The use of e-based discussion must represent a net benefit to group members over and above the use of existing methods of communication.

Still the point remains; it is essential that the network has a 'real' purpose if it is to be successful and if it is to deliver results as members perceive them. Three 'typical' purposes of e-based forums:

- ▶ **Shared 'passion'**. Social, sports, pastimes, personal finance forums allow members to ask and respond to something in which they have a real interest
- ▶ **Shared 'concern'**. Communication tends to be a bit one sided, but here members post their concerns over a particular issue – the environment for example. The purpose is to show unity around a particular issue and to provide a sharing of 'facts' for others to use outside the forum. Again, this is not wholly applicable to employer based groups, except really as a mechanism for lobbying
- ▶ **Shared 'practice'**. This is most likely to be successful within an employer context. Members are proud of their particular 'profession' – HR, quality systems, IT, etc. – and want to learn and contribute to the 'practice'. So long as the network is viewed as collaborative, members contribute to help raise the standards of the 'profession' concerned.

3.3 Principle 3

Keep the technology simple

In establishing any e-forum, you have to work at the lowest level of technology, or technology appreciation, of the potential membership. This can be addressed more simply in closed networks. Members can be advised of technological requirements (usually software) and how to use it if they have a clearly defined relationship with the network.

Options start with the simplest example of an e-group, using an e-mail distribution list where individuals press 'reply to all' when responding. Beyond this, there are plenty of e-based discussion group software packages, but the additional features are worthless if members cannot easily be engaged. Probably the most effective are products such as Smartgroups or Yahoo groups, which post messages to Internet based forums and e-mail addresses, with new postings being added either by

e-mail or via the Internet. These have the advantage of allowing new members to review previous discussions and prompt greater levels of response by posting new topics via e-mail, rather than relying on members to review the website for new postings.

On-line polling services allow members quickly to post a view on a given topic. The results can be used by the on-line moderators to prioritise and stimulate further discussion.

3.4 Principle 4

Focused learning and discussion

Successful e-based networks have fast flowing discussion with direct questions and answers. E-mailing large documents which need to be printed and digested and responded to in depth, is not appropriate for these forums.

The activity in the e-based network can't be too in-depth – it takes too much time to participate. Questions such as “what should my product development strategy be?” are inappropriate, since the business plan would need to be provided and someone would need to read it in order to answer.

Networks will produce successful results when questions are straightforward and can be answered quickly, such as: “at what level of turnover do you have to register for VAT?” or “what percentage commission should I expect to pay to a recruitment agency for finding me a new sales manager at £25,000?”

3.5 Principle 5

Build e-based networks from existing networks in the 'real' world

The most effective e-based learning networks are often extensions of real groups, such as peer-based employer learning networks or tutorial groups. The advantage of this route is that a lot of the groundwork, such as mutual trust, the basis of activity and desired results, has already been covered in the 'real' forums, which are then transferred into the e-based groups.

Closed networks made up of the membership of 'real' forums can be successfully translated into virtual systems, maintaining dialogue between members in between their face-to-face contact.

It is also easier to promote e-groups by piggybacking on existing 'real world' experiences. This promotion is cheaper and more effective, since you've already established your reputation and offer in a more familiar setting, whereas building a brand which is entirely Internet based in its existence requires a lot of advertising.

3.6 Principle 6

Provide facilitators for the e-based networks

No-one would ever think of inviting a group of strangers into a room, giving them a title for discussion and leaving them to get on with it. Yet that is what many e-based networks do all the time. Some don't even bother to come up with a topic for discussion.

Whether they are open or closed, e-based networks need facilitation to stimulate interest and response, both in their formation and in their development. Effective facilitators in e-based networks provide a 'push and pull' experience. They push a line of debate in terms of controversial statements to encourage members to respond, and they pull by throwing up questions and challenges, which pull new or dormant members into the debate.

Facilitators are key to successful network development. They get things moving early on, introducing members and helping to find their common interests, and then, as ongoing moderators, to keep the direction of discussion fresh. This is ably demonstrated by www.fool.co.uk, which has moderators for forum groups.

The facilitators also play an important role in terms of quality. They normally have the ability to delete unhelpful or inappropriate comments and to keep a watching brief to ensure that responses posted by members, upon which others may act, are not completely 'off the wall'.

3.7 Principle 7

Collaboration is key

Nothing will break trust quicker than e-based network members using the questions they raise to sell their services, or where unprompted suppliers post messages promoting their services.

In an open e-based network, a good moderator will quickly pick up sales pitches and firmly, but politely, remove their contribution. In closed network, where the membership is finite and perhaps selected, the situation shouldn't arise and if it does, it needs to be nipped quickly in the bud.

E-based groups work if they see that members' collective input results in collective benefits. Once one member starts pitching for work, that balance of benefit and reward quickly becomes distorted and the group will lose membership and focus.

4 User Guide

Forming an e-based learning network

4.1 Targeting

Target a specific group of people with a common interest, and invite their participation with a specific purpose for the community. Nurture sharing between members and focus exclusively on members' needs.

4.2 Easy Introduction

Allow easy, low commitment access to the community, so new users can experience its features without commitment. This could, for example, start with low commitment polling leading to participation in a related discussion and from there to becoming a full member. Alternatively, guest-members could be allowed to view chat-rooms/discussion boards without joining the community.

4.3 Involvement

Involve members in the development of the community. This can mean, e.g., provide opportunities for them to edit pages or host virtual events and act as guides to new members. Create a community panel that will contribute to future direction.

4.4 Clarity

Provide new members with clear, jargon free guidance and ground rules. Offer a clear statement of the community's purpose and benefits.

4.5 Simplicity

Use simple technology that will work well with normal modems and does not involve special software or browser plug-ins.

4.6 Evolution

Allow the community to reach critical mass before moving to more interactive facilities or real-time systems. There is nothing lonelier than being the only user in a chat room. Start with discussion boards and ensure that members of staff/community leaders post and respond to messages to get things moving in the early stages.

4.7 Substance

Provide some high-quality, appropriate content for use by the community. This will encourage members to visit the more interactive aspects of the site. It is vital that this content is kept current and topical. The members should feel that the site is a living community, with a continuing freshness and a substance to it. Interest won't be sustained if the information is made up of platitudes or simple news stories available from general sources.

4.8 Focus

Discussion boards should be driven by topics of specific interest to members. They should have a board host who regularly visits the site (perhaps twice a day) and keeps the discussion moving. It is also important to remove inappropriate, unfinished and spam sales messages. These will annoy other members and reduce the sense of community.

4.9 Interaction

Provide facilities for 'private' mutual interactions, as well as group interactions (e.g. discussion board allowing private email to individual as well as group responses). The overall community can be strengthened if it is made up of a web of closer individual relationships.

4.10 Transparency

Provide information on the community for new users (e.g. number of members, profile of members, hosts and history) so they can build up a picture and make informed decisions about joining and the value of knowledge on offer.

4.11 Branching

Encourage the development of sub-groups within the community and help members to create 'spin-out' communities if that is appropriate.

5 User Guide

Developing an e-based learning network

Getting a community started can be a major challenge. People are attracted to people, not to content, so that people form the principal content, not the subject matter. This is the catch 22 of getting a community started.

Naima.com, which specialises in creating online environments, suggests that 'social scaffolding' is required to enable a web community to build and survive. They suggest the following steps for building communities:

5.1 Define the purpose

The starting point is to decide the key purpose and outcomes of the community and how these will be measured.

It is crucial to define the target audience, including their likely technical competence, and gauge whether they form a 'Natural community', where people have met before, or where people gather with a specific interest. In this case, they will generally have a sense of community before they engage in the online process. If not, more facilitation and nurturing is needed to foster a sense of community.

5.2 Create distinct member-extensive gathering places

Focus relentlessly on the needs of the target community, not on the needs of the technology, sponsors, etc. Who they are, what work they do, what tools and skills they have, what kind of knowledge tools they have, what types of relationships they want and need, including social.

5.3 Create member profiles that evolve over time

More detailed member profiles evolve as the site is used more and users' interests and groupings emerge. The most effective way to build a community is to involve potential and actual users in the development process. *'Community orientated sites need to integrate users into development, making them informal partners and co-creators. Without this added measure of participation you are publishing, not fostering a community.'*⁴

5.4 Promote effective leadership and hosting

All communities require effective leadership and hosting to be successful. This encourages and facilitates participation and ensures site rules are followed.

⁴ Jennifer Fleming, *Web Navigation*

6 User Guide

Facilitating Participation

Users need to feel confident, both about providing personal details and that participating will be worthwhile. Participation must therefore be made easy. It must be clear how to participate and clear, simple and friendly instructions must be provided. Potential members will ask questions such as:

6.1 How can I participate?

The registration process should be straightforward. This is because trust will make an appearance immediately – not only in giving personal details but also in creating confidence that participation is worthwhile. Typically, there are 3 steps:

- ▶ acceptance of terms and conditions
- ▶ completion of a registration form
- ▶ acceptance of newsletters and 'freebies'

Registration forms vary of course, with some sites asking simply for names and e-mail addresses and others for much more detailed questions e.g. company size, turnover, etc. Participants have to have a high level of trust in the site to give this kind of information.

In general, registration depends on the types of community tool being entered. For example, registration may not be required to vote in a poll, but will be required to participate in a chat room.

Best Practice sites

www.bbc.co.uk for ease of use and clear instructional text

www.fool.co.uk for general welcome, community feel and freebies for registration

6.2 What are the rules?

Netiquette, as it is known in web speak, is vital to an online community. Most successful communities tend to cite this as one of the most important ways to sustain a healthy community.

Rules are posted but, as with everything on the web, they need to be short and sweet. It is also important that users are made aware of less obvious aspects such as:

- ▶ sarcasm does not come across in text
- ▶ USING CAPITALS IS EQUIVALENT TO SHOUTING

▶ icons are in place that aim to help support text e.g:

:) means you are happy,

;) means you are winking etc.

They are really a bit of fun!

Other rules might include the importance of never giving personal details (home address, telephone number). Whether this is relevant in a business community would depend on the nature of the community.

Best Practice site

www.bbc.co.uk for reminding users of the rules

3 golden rules are flagged up each time messages are posted

6.3 Can I keep my identity private?

Keeping members' identity private until they choose to reveal it is an issue of trust.

Best Practice site

www.fool.co.uk for encouraging use of a nickname

This allows the site to keep real information without divulging your name to other users.

6.4 When will I get feedback?

This is a problem with most sites. Usually users have to return to the site to receive replies to questions, which risks users losing interest in participating.

Best Practice site

www.bbc.co.uk has a useful feedback mechanism

After posting a question, users can tick a check box to allow email responses directly.

6.5 Should I trust what people tell me?

A successful e-network depends on peer trust, which can only be gained through the information on site. The main factors influencing trust are:

- ▶ Overall feeling on the site
- ▶ Amount of log-in information required
- ▶ Tone and content of discussion on site
- ▶ Use of message board hosts
- ▶ Support systems, help pages, about us, contact us, spam reporting procedures, rule keeping etc

There are crucial issues around how users act on information provided by the community. Some devices include:

- ▶ Signposting ways to contact an expert if the subject is sensitive
- ▶ Informing users where they can check information
- ▶ Posting a disclaimer. This is an important aspect of any site, particularly one providing community services.

6.6 What can I learn about the people in this community?

Many sites allow users to fill in a member profile, providing the level of information with which they feel comfortable. Other users click on names to view these profiles. This can be helpful where people are giving advice, e.g. IT advice, and users want to investigate their background.

Best Practice site

www.ivillage.co.uk for member profiling

6.7 Where do I turn for help?

Help pages are critical to the success of the site. They can take the form of Frequently Asked Questions – FAQs – (e.g. fool.co.uk), a beginner's guide to discussion boards, or more detailed instructions. One site has a mentor scheme for new users whereby people are available to give tours of the site. Providing a contact email and phone number can also be helpful.

Best Practice site

www.bbc.co.uk for effective help pages

7 User Guide

Growing and sustaining an e-based learning network

7.1 Growing the network

The quality of the user experience is the main way to encourage participation and return. When users benefit from participation, they are likely to continue to do so, especially if they feel part of a community.

The users themselves create the vitality of the network and it is essential that those designing the site provide mechanisms on site to take advantage of user 'energy'. These include:

- ▶ ensuring there are sufficient channels of communication
- ▶ providing appropriate means of self empowerment
- ▶ providing a facility for members to create their own sub-groups
- ▶ allowing users self expression to talk to each other
- ▶ embedding controls to prevent abuse
- ▶ providing sufficient ways to find help

Throughout, growth means sending the message that users are important. It is noticeable that the best e-networks have developed this focus on member activity to a high degree. Another benefit of this is in allowing members to contribute more of their knowledge, therefore creating content for each other.

A good site allows users to take control. A good example is www.ivillage.co.uk where Board Hosts are members of the e-based network (or seemingly so). Other roles are undertaken within the network community rather than employed facilitators. This gives a strong feeling of the network managing itself.

In general, successful e-networks are large sites, targeting very specific markets, with well defined user profiles.

Successful devices to encourage users to return include the organisation and promotion of cyclic events:

- ▶ regular emailed newsletters
- ▶ one-off emailed newsletters with particular themes
- ▶ ever changing site content
- ▶ guru or celebrity discussions

7.2 Sustaining the network

The effort and resource required to maintain an e-network are often greater than setting it up. Minimum roles which need to be fulfilled are:

- ▶ subject matter expert
- ▶ content manager to edit, categorise, manipulate
- ▶ facilitator
- ▶ help desk
- ▶ member recruitment and member keeper

7.3 Measuring success

Success is less about hard line return on investment (though it is appreciated this is a crucial factor, particularly for commercial sites) and more about recognising the value of the community to its members. 'It is about measuring how well the community is meeting the business challenges it is intended to address'³

Common activity measures used to assess the general health of the e-network, include (depending on the type of e-network):

- ▶ unique visits
- ▶ number of pages viewed
- ▶ length of time in community
- ▶ % of home visitors who click to the community
- ▶ number of registered members
- ▶ number of postings per period
- ▶ number of page additions where applicable
- ▶ for live events, peak visits concurrently and overall
- ▶ number of repeat visits
- ▶ number of frequent visitors

However dynamics are far more critical than visitor numbers. Attention to building an e-based network is the key. Even the briefest visit to a site can give an immediate impression as to whether the site is active or not.

8 User Guide

Technology Tools

In this section, we give a summary review of three of the most widely used e-based networking tools.

8.1 Polling

Most polls and surveys are easy to use, light-hearted and can introduce an element of fun. Apart from the information they gather, they encourage participation, especially for first-time users, as the interaction is impersonal, feedback is instant and no threat is perceived.

A polling question usually consists of a question with 3 possible answers. The user simply clicks their answer and submits it. A page of results usually appears to give the user an idea of voting to date (and, implicitly, whether they agree with other voters, thus encouraging a perception of community).

Polling question can also be linked to opportunities to discuss the point. In this way, polling can serve as an easy introduction to more in-depth engagement.

Best Practice site

www.ivillage.co.uk for encouraging voters to participate in related discussion

8.2 Chat Rooms

Chat rooms are a text version of a conference call, being in real-time or synchronous. They are a fast and furious method of communication and participants need to think fast and be conversant with netiquette and associated icons.

Users are always required to log in to chat rooms. A successful format involves live interviews with celebrities/gurus. The method tends to be many-to-one, with the web editor filtering questions to which the guest replies. It is a more comfortable experience, as there is no pressure to participate; users can observe as long as they like (or 'lurk' in web-speak).

Unmanaged chat rooms can present difficulties for new users. For instance, if two or more users are chatting, it can be difficult to enter into the discussion.

Best Practice site

www.bbc.co.uk for clear and easy to understand chat room facilities
www.bussinesseurope.com for its guru sessions

8.3 Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are where users post and read messages. This e-based network tool seems to be the most popular and probably the most successful.

Boards usually have threaded discussions (whereby answers are tagged to initial questions). However, sometimes the thread is not obvious and discussions can be difficult to understand. For instance, it is not unusual to be able to find replies, but no initial question. This is a software issue and some sites have resolved it.

Responses can normally only be viewed by returning to the site, which is good for the network, but can be annoying to the questioner. It is preferable if the discussion board can email responses to questions directly to the initiator. The discussions that work best have a Board Host to cajole, calm down or reply as necessary.

Sometimes the host is a member of the e-based network, whereas in others, particularly where the appropriate feedback is critical, the board host(s) is an employed facilitator.

There appears to be an optimum number of participants for a successful discussion board. Too few and there is no lively debate, too many and the discussion passes too quickly for individual questions to be given a response.

People need to have a strong interest in the subject to take part. There are many examples of boards that have tried hard to strike up interest and failed.

Best Practice Sites

www.bbc.co.uk where:

- a posting notes the contributor's name and number of contributions
- a check box is provided to request an email reply when a question is answered

www.ivillage.co.uk where:

- it is easy to see the start of a conversation and replies
- there are icons to show 'freshness' of message
- there are icons to sum up the content of the message e.g. idea or question.

www.fool.co.uk – for its Board Hosts

www.hawkshead.com – for its instructional text.

8.4 Overview of Participation Tools

Type of Tool	Description	Disadvantages	Advantages
Chat, discussions and debate (live)	Simultaneous communication by people who are online at the same time. Can be public or private. Both versions can have many-to-many or one-to-one communication.	Is not monitored. Needs a separate piece of software and not all are compatible with each other.	Can have real time discussions.
Polls/surveys	Vote in answer to a simple question.	Can be simplistic and demanding of users rather than allowing them to contribute.	Offers easy first step to interaction. Allows user instant feedback.
Auditorium events and trade shows	Mostly view-only.	Not interactive.	Can provide access to high value knowledge.
Forums or message boards (Threaded or topic based)	Users post a message and come back to see if anyone has answered it. Communication is asynchronous. With the threaded version, messages are turned into topics. A message will be attached to the message to which it is replying and so does not appear in chronological order.	Can be too organised. Not great for social communities as people drift in conversation.	Helps to understand conversations and keeps topics organised. Can work well on a question and answer basis.

Type of Tool	Description	Disadvantages	Advantages
Conferencing or message boards (Linear)	Users post a message and come back to see if anyone has answered it. Communication is asynchronous. With linear systems each reply is given a post in chronological order.	Difficult to conclude. Hard to find the start of a conversation. Hard to find info at a later date.	Appears like a real conversation
Newsgroups	Cross between public message boards and email list. Subscription based.	You have to remember to collect your news	Cheap and easy to run
Email - Mailing List discussion and newsletters	Email post-boxes which 'starburst' any messages sent to them. Can be used for updating through newsletters or as a discussion centre	A large discussion group can accumulate a large number of emails coming through your in-box	Cheap and easy to run a good way of keeping large groups informed.

9 Checklist for forming your e-based Learning Network

- How will the e-group:
 - a. Facilitate trust?
 - b. Enable activity?
 - c. Demonstrate results?

- Is the purpose of the e-group clearly defined and does it represent a benefits package worthy of consideration by its members?

- What software package is the simplest and most accessible to use for the target membership?

- Are the discussion topics capable of providing focused questions and answers?

- What 'real' world forums are there that could be used as the platform for building up the virtual groups?

- Who will be responsible for kick starting and maintaining a quality experience for forum members?

- How will the forum promote the benefits of collaboration between members?

Appendix 3

Employer Learning networks workshop – London

Workshop outcomes

Which aspects of (developing) the learning networks worked well?

- ▶ Where the learning network is sector-specific, the provision of ‘technical’ learning works well (eg. property valuation related materials in the property sector). However, where the learning networks are cross sectoral, then generic material is more successful (eg. aspects of management development etc.)
- ▶ Cross sectoral networks tend to work best as participants are more prepared to share solutions to problems since it will not affect their competitive advantage within their own sector.
- ▶ When the network focuses on solving specific problems common to the members of the network, then it is more successful in attracting and retaining members. However, this may also mean that the network has a limited ‘shelf’ life, since members may drop away as the major problem or their specific problems are addressed and solved.
- ▶ Networks should not always expect to attract and maintain major, long term commitment. They can be equally successful if they provide a ‘win’ or ‘quick fix’ for network members which will encourage them to join/participate in networks in the future.
- ▶ Networks seem to work best if the infrastructure for supporting it has been set up beforehand and if a facilitator/co-ordinator is provided to give impetus and shape to the network.
- ▶ Networks should encourage participation right from the start, particularly in the definition of common problems to be addressed. If members are involved in identifying the problems, they are more likely to ‘buy into’ the solutions and actively participate in the network.
- ▶ If training provided through the network is of good quality, this will give credibility to the network and encourage existing members to stay and new members to join. Training does not have to be group training, networks can be used to identify and provide mentors and trainers for one-to-one discussion and solution of problems and training.
- ▶ Partners can be a great asset in helping to set up networks and identifying potential network members. These partners do not have to be close, geographically, they can be regional partners, some of whom may be used in future to sustain/support the networks.
- ▶ In nearly all cases, direct contact was the best way of setting up networks. This direct contact was best when it took place as a result of a referral or introduction.

- ▶ Contact by e-mail was cheaper than direct marketing in setting up and running networks and the marketing savings – literature, postage, printing etc. – could be passed on to the running of the network/ provision of solutions.
- ▶ Regular contact with the network (not necessarily meetings) was important in keeping the network together. Regular update bulletins were important to keep members informed on progress.
- ▶ A network member website containing updates, results of surveys, calls for specific problem related assistance, special offers, short, downloadable ‘chunks’ of training etc. was a useful benefit of belonging to a network and helped to keep members in touch with the network and participating.
- ▶ The identification of sector ‘experts’/champions who can be called upon to assist with problem solution or to provide resources to host or facilitate network training helps both with network credibility and with attractiveness of belonging to the network.
- ▶ The gathering and sharing of information within a network is a significant ‘hook’ for members
- ▶ The formation of the initial project team to put the network together was crucial. A combination of all or some of the following were required:
 - a lead partner
 - a strong and diverse delivery partnership
 - a professional network broker
 - an owner manager from a small company willing to take the network forward and take over in future or act as a champion to recruit other members

Which aspects of (developing) learning networks did not work and should be avoided/handled differently in future?

- ▶ Use network partners who primarily have a strategic interest in the network, rather than a desire solely to tap into it for their own purposes.
- ▶ Early communications mustn't make assumptions about what's wanted; use the network to set an agenda
- ▶ Never underestimate the amount of resource required to access small businesses or the amount of time it will take to set up the network. Equally, it takes a lot of resource to run the network and maintain interest. Significant time and money resources need to be in place from the very beginning to ensure success.
- ▶ National networks are very unwieldy and are less likely to succeed than regional or local networks, which are more likely to be able to address the specific needs of their audience. Once the network is national, it is likely to dilute its relevance to all its members (unless it is sector specific and based purely on an immediate, 'technical' training need).
- ▶ Participation in a network is unlikely to succeed if it is purely web based and set up around web forums (ie discussing/solving problems through chat lines/email advice). However, small businesses in particular are not likely to join the network if it relies solely on meetings of network members or provides training only during the day/week. The networks must be flexible in how they operate to provide methods for all members to contribute and participate.
- ▶ Sending out literature does not work in recruiting small businesses into networks (some may not even be able to read it). Personal contact/visits must be used, even if only to follow up initial literature.
- ▶ A complete mix of business sizes within a network usually ends up with no-one being satisfied. Try to ensure your network recruitment targets businesses of similar sizes – their problems and solutions are more likely to be similar, and therefore easier to satisfy. Equally, network groupings should not be too large.
- ▶ Jargon and words like 'network' and 'initiative' are not popular, particularly among small businesses. Keep communication jargon-free and user friendly.
- ▶ An initial focus on training needs analysis by the network implies a long term commitment and is more likely to scare off the smaller businesses who mainly want 'quick fix' solutions to immediate problems. Provision of solutions (including training) should be demand-led by the network members, not pushed by the providers/supporters of the network. Any training provided should be business performance/demand-led, not simply provided as training per se.

- ▶ It is more important to provide facilitators to the network, rather than trainers. As above, demand-led solutions gain more 'buy in' than supply led ones.
 - Be realistic about how much can be achieved by the network and be flexible about how long it may continue (in its present form). Members' needs from the network will change or die out and keeping it going in a set format for the sake of it may ensure its ultimate death anyway. Be prepared to let it continually reinvent itself dependent upon the changing needs of its members.
- ▶ Don't oversell what the network can do for members. It is better to exceed expectations than disappoint them (eg. Initiatives/funding available at the start of a network, to which members are signposted, which cease to exist during the course of the network) . Start small, with realistic goals.
- ▶ If the aim of the network is to encourage staff development in micro organisations, then it has to engage with and involve the owner manager first to convince them of the credibility of the development on offer. In medium-sized companies, (50+) it may be possible to appeal directly to the staff.

As a general rule and in the words of one of the project managers, "if it does work, pursue it ruthlessly and if it doesn't work, drop it ruthlessly."

Sustainability of Employer Learning Networks

a) *What do project managers mean by sustaining the networks? What is it that they want to sustain?*

Project managers wanted to ensure the continuation of a wide range of things, including the following:

- ▶ Getting people together to discuss and solve problems
- ▶ Provision of training, improvement of training uptake, improvement of attitude towards training, improved training capability (train the trainer in small companies)
- ▶ Provision of tailored/specific interventions to develop businesses.
- ▶ Provision of an infrastructure within which business problems could be solved/solutions provided to an increasing number of businesses
- ▶ Gathering of feedback/measurement from companies in the area of business improvements from training/problem solving.
- ▶ Gathering of exemplars and case studies to inspire/inform others.
- ▶ Engagement with the network/engagement between members of the network

b) *Where could the money be found to sustain the networks?*

Most project managers agreed that the highest investment in the network was in setting it up and that subsequent costs were lower once the network developed its own momentum. Money was still required to support the network, however, and the following were some of the ways in which it was believed money could be raised:

- ▶ Annual conferences (paid attendance)
- ▶ Purchasing of training from the network by network members
- ▶ Sale of materials and media by the network
- ▶ Subscriptions to the network by members
- ▶ Sponsorship of the network (either in cash or kind)
- ▶ Payment for evaluation material/surveys etc.
- ▶ Pass on the network to providers to run and support (eg. FE)
- ▶ Put a paid value on as much as possible within the network – people will pay to remain in the network if they can see the value/quality of what they're receiving.
- ▶ Combine some of the networks to increase commercial opportunity
- ▶ Allow unsuccessful branches of the network to die out to release funds for successful areas

c) *Pointers for Achieving Sustainability of the Networks*

- ▶ The networks must be demand led and address specific issues, or they will fizzle out. However, it is important to recognise that as needs are dealt with, the necessity for the network may diminish and the network may wind up. Dependent upon the reasons for which they have been set up, not all networks need to be sustained and they should be allowed to finish once they have achieved their task.
- ▶ Networks that have no central (paid for/sponsored) facilitator/co-ordinator eventually die out since the group will not automatically take on the role of sustaining itself.
- ▶ Cross sector groups tend to have a wider spectrum of needs and a greater ability to resource a solution to those needs within them. Consequently, they are also more likely to be sustainable long term.
- ▶ Networks that provide some 'added value' to being a member, eg. discounted buying, sharing of data etc. are more likely to continue in existence than those that do not.
- ▶ Networks should involve an employee/employer partnership wherever possible and employers must be actively involved in the network.

- ▶ The network must be seen to be addressing business (not simply training) needs.
- ▶ A realistic and rational pricing policy has to be determined.
- ▶ Networks must have a formal and well directed marketing policy/ strategy.
- ▶ The provision of training or services through the network must be in line with identified employer needs – identified by the network, not prior to its inception.
- ▶ Networks should apply and co-ordinate best practice for the sector, group of businesses.
- ▶ Solutions offered by networks must be flexible and competitive (ie through group delivery/buying power)
- ▶ The network must be receptive to changing needs and continue to evolve in order to survive



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