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Reflections and Findings on an Employer Engagement Resource

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Employer Engagement and Higher Level Skills Background

The ULF project has a distinctive perspective within work on skills and training as it is a union funded project which includes both employer and employee perspectives. This wider approach has enabled the project to be reflective and in doing so identify key questions for the future development of skills and training policy.

Work with a small, but growing, group of employers has yielded good qualitative data about the process of employer engagement and the role of higher level skills with a number of key questions and themes emerging. It is clear that any employer engagement tool or resources are competing with a number of agendas and assumptions. That is, the 'bottom line' whereby employers simply do not have the time or focus to reflect on their core business in an experimental way; the predominance of the 'informal training assumptions that employers see as the most flexible and cost effective way of delivering training (also known as the Jennings model or, more simply, 70:20:10 (informal training; accredited training; qualified training); an established and formalised training programme in the workplace.

The additional challenges faced in such a context is that even if one engages with the employer and gets agreement and buy in, the next step is in developing an engagement with the employees. Employee engagement is now seen as a further part of the productivity problem and in the use of our surveys we have found that without employee buy in the employer cannot generate the data that they need to support the workforce...so develops a vicious circle that does nobody any good.

However, the evidence from the project to date suggests that there is considerable scope for employers and employees to make use of higher level skills particularly, through the use of apprenticeships and that there can be mutual wins in developing intelligence on how these skills are utilised. This intelligence will also be particularly useful in understanding the effects of automation, qualifications and non-routinised 'cross training' in the workforce. This is particularly so if one considers that 70% of the workforce of the future e.g. 2030 are already in work. (IPPR 2017 2.9; Altman 2015)

What is so exciting about the project is that it does two new things: it asks 'how can education specialists and experts in the field bring their expertise to the questions around training in the workplace?' And, secondly, how can the work have immediate impact rather than recommending a new policy around curriculum change that will take at least 5 years to implement and 10- 18 years after that for the effects to be felt by learners?

Our view was that by not exposing employers alone to the question of education and training and by working together with employer voices (AELP and sector specialists ET Foundation) we could arrive at questions that could supply both educators, trainers and employers with the 'same' answers. In other words, a script we could all agree on mattered.

What we have found is that completing the surveys is a natural part of employer thinking and strategic questioning and that it meets up with dormant perceptions and expectations of staff around training, progression and the skills they use in the workplace.

For example:

(i) Taking part in the survey encourages thinking about training and skills (even if no immediate action is taken) that is helpful for the longer term development of a business. Such thinking often does not happen because of the pressure of day to day concerns (particularly in small businesses)

(ii) The survey helps prepare businesses for Brexit in terms of anticipating skill shortages and taking preventative action.

(iii) The survey produces ideas for training and skills development that are steered by the employer and their workforces. They are not prescriptive, not tied to a particular provider, and are not necessarily complex and/or costly. In other words, taking the survey could save a business a lot of time and/or money by recommending the training and skills they actually need (and whatever the survey costs in terms of time it is extremely likely to be a lot less than the potential saving from getting the right training)

Findings

What we have found so far is that:

- Employers from a range of industrial sectors are interested in using the engagement tool which shows that it is successful in being an applicable tool to any workplace as it was designed to be.
- That any size of employer is interested in using the resource (from 11 to 3000 so far).
- That employers have different motivations for engagement.
- That employee engagement is another key factor in success.
- That there are many benefits from the intelligence and these cannot be underestimated or predicted in total.

Successes

- Report and project engagement used as PR (news item on website)
- Report shared with BSI Quality Auditors with positive outcome
- Introduction of new appraisal system based on survey results
- Enhanced job role developed to manage new recruits' induction and training
- Wages increased throughout operational team
- New conversations developed within the workplace that had been avoided, unvoiced or because culture was 'stuck'

Discussion: a corrective to previous assumptions about productivity and skill utilisation

The project findings clearly indicate that the levels and character of employer engagement, use of funded productivity initiatives and training tools, and employment of higher level skills within workplaces will not be improved in the short to medium term by application of economic theory. This is because any application of economic theory to produce positive change would require economists to reach agreement. If economists did agree a shared economic theory it would then need a consistent implementation in policy as well as allowing sufficient time to produce significant changes in the operation of the UK labour market. Even assuming that all these requirements hold (which seems unlikely given historical evidence) it is probable that any theoretical economic agreement reached now would take around 20 to 25 years to have any practical effect on the labour market (as all policy impact in this area has a certain time lag.) For these reasons the theoretical orientation of the project is not towards economic theory but to the sociology and politics of both workplace cultures, and the context of skills and training policy.

Networking is vital for employer engagement with different networks being effective for different reasons. It is important that the project is aligned with research and work by employer and business gatekeepers (such as business support services, LEPs, chambers of commerce, county councils, sector skills councils and training provider networks) and current government policy (such as the industrial and careers strategies, Productivity Commission, Catapults) so their interest in and commitment to it is secured. The value of the project for gatekeepers is that it provides insight into barriers to their engagement with employers. For example, project findings about the expectations which young people have about jobs and the workplace should be linked to work done on this by the Hospitality and Tourism Sector Skills Council, for example.

Models of Employer Engagement

The evidence from the project to date suggests four main types of emerging employer engagement models:

- (i) Engaged model- the employer and all employees are engaged and interested in the results of the survey.
- (ii) Inquiry model- the employer and employees are interested in gathering new intelligence to facilitate new conversations about skills and training.
- (iii) Test model- the employer and employees think they are recognising and promoting higher level skills and are interested in testing whether this is the case.
- (iv) Vision model – the employer would like to make visible the skills utilisation in the workforce in a more robust way.

There is currently insufficient data to draw any clear correlations between which employer engagement model an employer favours and the attitude they take towards the skill development and training needs identified in their data. As more data is collected it should be possible to determine this correlation with a reasonable degree of accuracy and in doing so facilitate conversations between employers and employees about skills and training. Evidence from the project indicates both variations in employer demand for higher level skills and the extent to which employers will consider investing in the development of these skills.

There are long standing and well known problems about the levels and character of employer engagement, use of funded productivity initiatives and training tools, and employment of higher level skills within workplaces. Findings from the project coupled with other research suggests several general factors which contribute to all these problems:

(i) It is well documented by labour economists and others involved in research in skills and training that the UK has a poorly functioning occupational labour market. In contrast a well-functioning occupational labour market is one where employers and employees have a shared understanding of the capacities related to qualification and preparedness for work. For example, Germany has one with 350 occupations recognised by employers and employees. The UK needs to work towards policies which will promote a well-functioning occupational labour market in order to promote ascent through the value chain and improved productivity. However, current sociological norms and cultural attitudes around skills and training, social partnership and vocational education make this very difficult.

(ii) There is a well-documented and long standing lack of coherent skills and training narratives at both national and local level. This is both a cause and consequence of the fact that current UK skills and training provision is piecemeal and fragmented. For example, there is no clear narrative about how various business support services are linked and what narrative there is tends to change every time these services are restructured. Another instance is that there are no clear school into work narratives or career narratives (which relates to the problem of a poorly functioning occupational labour market) one of whose consequences is that the transferable skills gained through apprenticeships and the value employers place on these are insufficiently well communicated to young people.

The problem is both that coherent training narratives are lacking in themselves and that there is limited recognition of their crucial importance in underpinning effective training and development policy. Research and work by employer and business gatekeepers (such as business support services chambers of commerce, county councils, sector skills councils and training provider networks like the Association of Employers and Learning Providers (AELP) and by unions aimed at improving training and development policy has a limited effect because it cannot be attached to coherent skills and training narratives at national and local level.

A cause and consequence of both the lack of narratives and the failure to recognise their importance is that skills and training are often thought to be someone else's problem. Governments suggest that it is the responsibility of employers, employers claim the government should do more and unions sometimes regard skills and training as being the

prerogative of the employer. Evidence from the project and other well documented research indicates that the piecemeal and fragmented nature of skills and training provision coupled with a lack of coherent skills and training narratives results in employers having difficulty in understanding what training is available, how it is regulated and how it is funded. Without an improvement in such understanding it is unlikely that workplace cultures will change for the better.

(iii) There is a well-documented and long standing lack of coherent skills and training narratives within individual companies. The use of productivity initiatives and training tools in companies without a coherent skills and training narrative will not be successful. All three elements consisting of a skills and training narrative aligned with business needs and consistent with regulation need to be in place before firm-specific skills and training policy will work. Evidence from the project suggests that even among employers with extensive higher level skills in existing employees there were no clear expectations about the higher order skills new staff and apprentices were expected to display. It is likely that this lack of clear expectations is at least in part a consequence of the lack of coherent skills and training narratives.

(iv) There is an increasing amount of evidence that young people are not particularly engaged with their own skills and training development. A number of factors already noted contribute to this including a poorly functioning occupational labour market, a lack of coherent skills and training narratives at national, local and individual employer level which result in an absence of clear vocational routes, and decreasing levels of trade union membership. These levels of engagement have consequences both for take up of apprenticeships, and skills and training development once in work. In the latter case although around 70% of workplace learning is informal in nature there is evidence that young people question whether their employer is doing a sufficient amount about their skills and training development.

(v) What the preceding factors (i-iv) indicate is that new initiatives without any corresponding broader and fundamental change in skills and training attitudes, provision and policies are not likely to be effective. For example, the recent 'T' Levels aim to offer threshold occupational competence whilst apprenticeships offer full occupational competence. However, they are not located in a coherent skills and training narrative about clear vocational routes so it remains uncertain whether they will have any more impact on vocational education provision than many previous failed initiatives.

Application to new areas of education and training approaches: Boyer's Model of Scholarship

A further expansion of the project is the clear links and support for sustainable work around Boyer's model of scholarship which has been so successfully developed in the Association of Colleges (AoC) Scholarship Project and associated Framework.

Here we set out some suggested ways that the employer engagement intelligence could work within Boyer's model and help give coherence to education and training activity:

Integration

Discovering ways that new knowledge can be used to solve real (world) problems. e.g. Co-design of skill needs; co-production of curricula with employers/learners.

Applied

Integration of knowledge from different sources.eg. developing new curricula; relating college activity to local community skill needs and social mobility outcomes; supporting a new and clearer vocabulary and practice to local businesses.

Discovery

Search for 'new' knowledge: e.g. using data to answer new hypotheses; analysing impact on learners; pedagogic impact.

Teaching

Sharing with others: e.g. pedagogies of the workplace; extending fields of knowledge and awareness of industrial practices and focus; bespoke learner support.

References

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