

How can schools encourage and support collaboration with SMEs to improve young people's employability skills and transition into work?

Michelle Judkins shares insights from new research

Schools and colleges have the duty to drive forward independent and impartial careers guidance, yet they cannot achieve this alone. While they have the freedom and scope to personalise it to meet the needs of individual young people, with this freedom comes the responsibility of ensuring that they are well informed about roles and jobs available in today's business market, and have access to a breadth of opportunities.

In London, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent 99.8 per cent of businesses, while in the South East they represent 99.6 per cent (London Enterprise Panel, 2013). However, often SME partnerships are a missed opportunity when developing careers provision and the opportunities for young people to have a stake in, contribute to and benefit from this sector of the economy could be better.

With this in mind, a team at NFER in partnership with the South East Strategic Leaders, London Councils and the London Enterprise Panel, sought to examine how SMEs and micro-businesses work together with secondary schools and colleges in London and the South East to improve young people's employability skills and successful transition into work.

This is also vital to the continuing economic success of London and the South East – the assumption being that providing suitable learning and training opportunities for young people contributes to economic regeneration and development.

Developing direct relationships between schools, colleges and SMEs, where respect, transparency and mutual benefits are valued, is crucial

'What's in it for me?'

So what are the potential benefits for educators of SME engagement? Geographically speaking, what better resource for schools and colleges than to tap into the local business market? The research clearly indicates that engagement with SMEs helps foster understanding of local business need, which in turn helps inform a more joined-up approach to skills development (and supports a personalised curriculum for specific business sectors).

For educators, it is also another avenue to provide independent, impartial information from individuals not employed by the school. This helps educators deliver a broader offer to young people. Collaboration also helps increase awareness among young people of the role of SMEs in the workplace and provides a more balanced exposure to local corporations. Similarly, a small business inherently lends itself to providing an increased awareness of work tasks through working within a small team.

The pressures and demands of a small business are undeniably explicit. Partnerships (between schools or colleges and small employers) inherently need to be mutually beneficial.

So what about the small business? What's in it for them? Well, it is a good opportunity to influence the curriculum offer, helping educators understand what their business needs and, potentially, to identify potential employees who fit their business needs and support the development of young people in their specific business area (through an Apprenticeship, for example).

Furthermore, there may be an opportunity to promote and advertise businesses, with institutions displaying partners' logos around their buildings. This in turn gives young people a chance to see which businesses are keen to invest in them.

What will facilitate effective engagement?

There is clearly enthusiasm for such collaborative working, despite some of the challenges involved. NFER identified no shortage of support for strong

Engaging with SMEs



employer-educator relationships. Why, then, are SMEs not more involved in careers provision and what is holding back this collaborative power?

Unpicking the drivers and inhibitors through the research helped guide practical ways in which to enhance existing partnerships, as well as actively encourage new ones. Many of the barriers that emerged revolved around a lack of communication – for example, employers were often unaware of named contacts within institutions who they could call to discuss partnerships, or even who to contact once they had recruited an apprentice.

Despite the existence of websites that aim to provide a platform for businesses to engage with schools and colleges (such as inspiringthefuture.org), there was clear evidence that they were generally perceived as being fairly limited in terms of helping initiate and develop relationships.

Rather, the importance of the "sell" to businesses is clear; the more informed and involved employers are, the more they will realise that schools and colleges cannot produce a "work-ready" young person alone, and that their input is crucial to the better preparation of young people to the workplace. A dedicated careers coordinator plays an important role in brokering meaningful long-term connections.

Overall, the main facilitators to effective engagement include:

- A single line of communication (face-to-face where possible) to help SMEs understand the importance of their role, smooth out queries, break-down barriers, and instil confidence in the employer, with the ultimate goal of sustaining relationships.
- In order to assist buy-in from employers, the content of careers information can be discussed together. In addition, providing employers with updates on students' progress on courses, for example, helped maintain communication channels.
- Ensuring flexibility on both sides is important. Additionally understanding the value of any commitment, however small, is critical. Providing case study examples of how employers can engage with educational institutions may help broaden the offer to allow employers to examine various strategies that can fit into their business calendars.

Case study: K&M McLoughlin Decorating

This family-owned painting and decorating company was set up in 1988, and today employs 120 people. In response to a lack of relevant training provision, the company established its own college. Its Apprenticeship programme retains more than 90 per cent of qualified apprentices.

They also work in partnership with a local college to deliver a five-week Pre-Apprenticeship and Employability Programme to improve employability skills and help foster a genuine interest in the construction industry. The programme takes on around 20 individuals every five weeks and gives young people real work experience while instilling a strong work ethic, emphasising punctuality, commitment, team-work etc.

Case study: UTC Reading

Partnerships with local industry are imperative to helping deliver college courses and SMEs play a key role in course delivery. Some sponsor BTEC units and the college aims to match each unit to a business partner. The partner agrees the unit content in an attempt to match their business needs. The partner launches and delivers the unit, supports assessment and can offer mentoring or work experience opportunities. Elsewhere, tutors can collapse the curriculum for a day in order for partner SMEs to deliver specific activities. Also, whole-

school events, where SMEs work with other larger companies, help to deliver aspects of the curriculum.

Conclusion

The research found that effective infrastructure to help guide discussions between educators and businesses could help overcome communication barriers which can result in businesses losing interest and enthusiasm. As a result, the evidence informed a Connect Card (see further information), which acts as a starting point to help bridge the gap between educator and employer, providing a platform for meaningful dialogue which could help lead to effective education-business link activities.

If only one important message is taken away from the research, it is that developing direct relationships

between schools, colleges and SMEs, where respect, transparency and mutual benefits are valued, is crucial. Increased dialogue and open-mindedness on both sides can help ensure that flexible methods of engagement are understood, providing the structure needed to progress and sustain engagement in a meaningful way for all parties.

• Michelle Judkins is an NFER research associate.

Further information

The Connect Card, the research summary and a case study report outlining examples of good educator-employer activities across London and the South East, can be found at www.nfer.ac.uk/employability


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