

An Evaluation of Employer Learning Networks

Paul Rhodes and Alan Graver

Questions Answered Ltd

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Aims

In its second and third reports, the National Skills Task Force drew attention to the importance of group training arrangements for smaller firms in relation to both apprenticeship provision and adult workforce development. They argued that the group approach provides an effective means for small firms to meet their training needs through the sharing of resources – recognising the fact that the unit and opportunity costs of training can be relatively high for smaller firms and that many do not have access to in-house training or personnel staff. Collaborative employer groups which already operate across the country offer a method of delivering employer-led provision which involves smaller employers as members and clients, but there are many sectors, however, in which this model had never been developed and areas of the country where these employer groups did not exist.

The Department for Education and Skills provided an ‘Employer Learning Networks Challenge Fund’ of £2.5m to pump-prime 18 Employer Learning Network (ELN) projects in England (ranging from £10,000 to £250,000 of contribution) between November 2000 and July 2001. All ELNs had the common vision of encouraging employers to develop learning solutions that would allow for the sharing of resources, costs and facilities in order to meet identified training needs or gaps. This fund was intended to encourage further collaborative action by employers to increase their capacity to develop the high skilled and world-class workforces they need. The main aim of our study was to identify successful ELN models which might be copied more widely and which have the potential to be sustainable in the long run.

Other specific objectives were to evaluate:

- How ELNs were established and developed;
- Whether and in what ways ELNs have sustained themselves after the six-month pump-prime funding ceased;
- Outcomes and benefits to participating employers, partners and other types of beneficiary.

Key findings

- Within six months (May 2001), the 18 projects had created 71 separate networks. This figure increased to 90 networks by September 2001 with 2,361 employers involved to varying degrees. A further 30,000 employers may have been reached by the virtual networks. When 312 employers were interviewed six to eight months after ELNs began, between 40% and 90% of employers engaged by the 18 ELNs had not been involved with the lead organisation before and 209 employers (67%) had not previously been involved in any other kind of network activity;
- Projects ranged in size from networks of 12-15 companies, to virtual networks reaching up to 27,000 employers via the Internet. The most frequently occurring size of ELN was approximately 50 employers. ELNs were located in every part of the UK

(except Northern Ireland) and also varied by sectoral and occupational focus, type of service developed, range of partners and method of delivery;

- Within 12 months of being established 6,022 individuals (excluding users of virtual networks) were said to have used learning products or services catalysed by the ELNs. In fact 42% of all employers engaged have used an ELN product or service and this figure is rising steadily as networks mature;
- Of the employers interviewed (239), 24% had developed or improved their training plan, 16% had improved their staff induction procedures and 22% noted an increase in staff motivation because of new personal development opportunities as a result of ELN involvement;
- After the ‘pump-priming’ finished 16 of the original 18 networks continued, 1 terminated and the other by design completed its stated objective within the funding period;
- Sustainable ELNs tend to have been managed by sectorally-experienced and skilled project managers, aided by partners seen as credible by employers and which have developed new, affordable (or initially free) training products or services with network members during the project.
- The concept of getting employers to develop solutions with the support of partners co-ordinated by an impartial but credible lead body is a sound concept. However financial sustainability after six months proved problematic for projects so there is a need to lengthen the pump-priming funding period to allow sufficient time for the development of solutions for specific issues or problems;
- An infrastructure for ongoing action to address longer-term issues could be developed under the auspices of Regional Development Agencies and/or Local Learning and Skills Councils, Sector Skills Councils or Area Learning Partnerships.

Other findings

Besides the key findings, other main findings were as follows:

Establishing and Developing Employer Learning Networks

The more successful projects were those that involved employers, partners and the lead organisation in the initial bid-writing process. At least three months is required for a quality bid to be developed. The credibility of the lead organisation, in terms of the skills and experience of the designated project team, was crucial to engage partners at the outset. Partners were willing to get involved if the lead organisation was perceived as one that could be dynamic and that could generate and manage a worthwhile project that would be of mutual benefit. The delivery agent (e.g. training provider) responsible for giving service to employers engaged in the network needed to be equally credible with those businesses.

Networks require partners such as further or higher education establishments, web designers or marketing or IT consultants and training providers – a co-ordinating role is therefore essential, but an oversight for many networks was developing a brand or identity for their network. Marketing ELNs to SMEs in the first six months was difficult. Network co-ordinators had to adapt their promotional techniques to engage employers; the more personal the marketing approach, the more effective the attendance or initial participation by employers. Of 38 project managers interviewed 35 (92%) had sent initial mailings or leaflets

to employers. Thirty-one of these (82%) had followed through with a mix of telephone or face-to-face visits and this personal contact by the co-ordinator was seen as the most effective method of engaging employers in the early stages. Employer needs were identified by ELNs using a range of techniques including face-to-face visits, consultation, network meetings and questionnaires. These needs have formed the basis of the networks' objectives. Employer needs did not always relate to training or learning, but rather business improvement, and advice and guidance on other aspects of their business (IT, finance, marketing).

The management of 16 of the 18 ELNs was afforded by staff employed by the lead organisation either directly or on contract. Most had a hub-and-spoke management structure with a central directive, administrative and marketing function supporting network co-ordinators charged with the responsibility to engage employers. The successful ELNs had a network team that was responsive, available and flexible to employer needs and requests. The co-ordinators were able, had appropriate industry background, typically with experience of running an SME or working within that sectoral environment, and were afforded a near full-time role for the first six months of developing a network.

A lack of time, funding, perceived benefits and competitive issues within single sector ELNs have been barriers to engaging employers. ELNs have sought to overcome these barriers by providing 'quick wins', involving employers in developing training solutions and making the aim of the network clear. Twenty-three employers (11%) had actively taken part in piloting training materials and 14 (7%) had contributed information towards a report on training needs.

Sustainability

After DfES pump-prime funding ended, 16 of the projects continued, but 14 out of 38 project managers (37%) reported that their priorities changed post funding, for example, reacting to employer demand and introducing new courses, or formalising the way businesses collaborate within the ELN.

Employers' interest was sustained through the development of products and services (training packages, courses, on-line materials etc.) that could be tested, piloted or accessed at low cost. Regular contact, quick wins, getting employers to pay and giving network groups greater control over their own agenda were ways in which project managers said they had sustained participation.

Networks were more likely to be sustained if they:

- Continued to develop and market an attractive proposition to employers;
- Encouraged active involvement by employers (e.g. in testing new learning products with staff);
- Had a core of at least 10-15 employers regularly participating in network activities;
- Had identified an over-demand for products or services (e.g. Applemac upskilling for employees in graphics and communications firms);
- Offered low cost / subsidised training solutions;
- Maintained credibility through offering satisfying training experiences for employers and their employees;

- Delegated responsibility or increased the role of partners that had a vested (commercial) interest in developing and delivering the actual learning products or services – in this way, the networks were driven continuously towards learning solutions.

Our evaluation indicates that 11 of the original 18 networks said they had been able to sustain or even increase activity levels post-funding, whilst four had dropped activity levels. One ELN terminated and another by design completed its stated objective within the funding period.¹

The main reasons for not being able to sustain networks to the level attained using Department funding were:

- Policy decision by the lead organisation owing to pressures on them (e.g. politically or facing transition themselves);
- Competition i.e. generic competition from support agencies, for example the LSC, and other learning providers for employers' time;
- Employer apathy;
- Under-resourced, under-maintained marketing effort to refresh network members as some employers dropped out.

Active involvement of employers fluctuated throughout the networks' lifetimes implying the constant need for an impartial body to maintain, manage, market and co-ordinate activities.

Outcomes

It was never the intention that the Department's funding should seek to bring about hard, measurable outputs, rather to understand what sort of outcomes could be achieved by networks having had pump-priming. It was nevertheless encouraging that after funding ceased, outcomes for employers, employees and partners were reported as summarised below:

- One third of employers considered their ELN to be effective at identifying training and workforce development issues;
- Of 161 employers interviewed in the second panel survey (January 2002), 31 (19%) said staff had started training leading to a qualification, and up to 24 employers (15%) had staff who had already completed a qualification as a result of ELN involvement;
- 19 out of 161 employers interviewed (12%) had done (commercial) business with other members of the network for the first time as a result of their involvement;
- By the second panel survey (January 2002 – up to one year after ELNs began), only 36 of 161 employers (22%) had actually paid for network membership and even less had paid for training despite 69 (43%) having accessed training implying the still heavy subsidy required to maintain employer involvement;
- 61% of employers are convinced that continuing to participate in their networks will be worthwhile for their organisation;

¹ One ELN project was unable to make this judgement at the time of writing.

- 19 project managers across 10 of the 16 surviving ELNs identified 114 partners engaged in their network initiatives;

Qualitative analysis of research interviews indicated that key soft outcomes are:

- More employers have experienced basic skills, ICT or management skills benefits for their staff than ever expected via ELN activities e.g. 39 employers of 161 (24%) expected basic skills improvements whilst 56 (35%) experienced this benefit;
- 36 (15%) of 239 employers said they had adopted new training programmes for staff;
- 53 (22%) of these employers noted an increase in staff motivation because of new personal development opportunities catalysed by the ELN;
- Of 40 employees that had received some training via their ELN, the majority cited increased self-esteem, recognition from their employer, pursuing their personal interest in the subject and trying learning in a different situation as outcomes. Sixteen of these individuals (40%) were now more likely to go on to other ELN activities and training as a result of their involvement;
- 33 out of 40 (83%) network service users (employees) would recommend the ELN to others.

Good Practice

Our study identified 30 different factors that can affect ELN success. Generally speaking these factors are resource, design and management related.

1. *Resources*: the type of funding criteria and expectations applied to projects; the amount of funding given to establish networks; the type of financial contribution to be made by members; the amount of human resource afforded in the first six months for network development, marketing and administration.
2. *Design*: the type of products and services developed by an ELN affect success and they must be relevant and useable by employers in the network;
3. *Management*: the skills and experience of the network team; the credibility of this team and the expertise and qualities of partners to support the overall management of the ELN.

In our opinion, the two key factors for success revolve around the responsiveness and flexibility of the network team to meet changing employer demands and requests, and the qualities, credibility and (industry) experience of network co-ordinators charged with the main role of getting employers involved. Without these two essential ingredients ELNs are likely to be less successful.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The two large scale (virtual) engagement projects have been extremely difficult to evaluate for a number of reasons, chiefly relating to the difficulty in actually obtaining contact details to ask users of virtual websites about their experiences. Moreover, while virtual networks can supply information relating to the number of hits to their websites, it has been difficult to trace hard outcomes (for example achieving a qualification). As such, many of the following implications relate to the remaining 16 network projects that have sought to engage employers ultimately involving personal contact or collaborations.

The concept of getting employers to develop solutions, with the support of partners co-ordinated by an impartial but credible lead body is a sound concept that can be applied very successfully within sub-regions, regions, nationally and by sector or industry grouping. However, financial sustainability after six months proved problematic for projects so there is a need for either lengthening the funding period or ensuring further interventions, such as developing expertise to source other external funds where the same model could be rolled out.

In our view, however, there is better opportunity to develop networks under the auspices of Regional Development Agencies and / or Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSC), Sector Skills Councils (SSC) or even Area Learning Partnerships. There could then be potential for developing long-term (minimum three-year) network initiatives that could address geographical / sectoral areas of need. There is perhaps opportunity to broaden the funding agenda in order that business improvement, incorporating workforce development, skills and learning, is the anchor to which all projects must fix themselves. Longer-term, larger scale projects are favoured by project leaders involved in these 18 pilots, though there is potential for a two-stage bidding process, whereby the first stage is a funded feasibility study to prove demand and an identified workforce / learning need.

If the model were regional and sectoral there is the potential to develop Employer Learning Networks sitting aside the likely developing network of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)², set up in further education colleges and administered by LLSCs, the existing network of Area Learning Partnerships. Such a model would ensure links with regional economic objectives set by the Regional Development Agency (expressed in their regional economic and skills strategies), and tempered by LLSC stated sub-regional learning priorities expressed in their skills, workforce development and participation strategies.

This would be the preferred model for future network development – an integrated presence of networks that relate to each other. Employer networks on the one hand identifying need, with learning provider networks (including CoVEs) providing the solutions, and SSCs providing the national / regional skills intelligence to ensure that funding is reaching employers that need support in improving the competitiveness of their workforce.

² The Learning and Skills Council intends that by 2003-04, half of all general further education colleges will have developed at least one Centre of Vocational Excellence. Centres will be developed in colleges and will be based on close links between colleges, business partners, other employment interests and communities. They will allow colleges to develop, maintain and deliver high quality, specialist provision across a range of new and traditional occupations.

Dedicated network teams with adequate managerial, marketing, IT, administrative and training (delivery) resources could be developed, in turn perhaps seeking to influence a greater range of audiences than just employers – learning providers, Connexions service providers, schools and other stakeholders. Funding should also clearly state and expect identifiable outputs in future as opposed to just soft outcomes requiring projects therefore to track the effectiveness of their activities.

Methodology

The evaluation was carried out between April 2001 and March 2002.

Just after ELN funding finished (July / August 2001), a total of 312 telephone interviews were made to employers engaged in ELNs out of a total database of 2,144 developed by May 2001. Also, 38 project managers and 32 partner organisations were interviewed. As employers dropped out of networks or new ones joined up we sought to obtain fresh contact details from ELNs over the evaluation period though this often proved problematic. A panel of employers, project managers and partners (a subset of those interviewed earlier) was recruited and interviewed on two further occasions (three and six months later – October / November 2001 and January / February 2002).

In addition, a further 40 in-depth telephone interviews were made to employees that had used an ELN service. Some 50 telephone interviews were completed with employers that had decided not to join a network.

Face-to-face interviews were completed with all 18 project managers at the outset of the project and with 15 at the end of our evaluation 12 months later. In addition, we completed a total of 90 telephone interviews in three-monthly intervals with Network project managers across the 18 projects. A series of focus groups and two best practice workshops were delivered in the last two months of the study to provide further qualitative insights into the experience of running networks and in eliciting opinions about the best model for future ELN development.

Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Employer Learning Networks

In its second and third reports, the National Skills Task Force drew attention to the importance of group training arrangements for smaller firms in relation to both apprenticeship provision and adult workforce development. They argued that the group approach provides an effective means for small firms to meet their training needs through the sharing of resources – recognising the fact that the unit and opportunity costs of training can be relatively high for smaller firms and that many do not have access to in-house training or personnel staff.

Collaborative employer groups which already operate across the country offer a method of delivering employer-led provision which involves smaller employers as members and clients. Their activities have included apprenticeship training and adult workforce development. There are many sectors, however, in which this model had never been developed and areas of the country in which these employer groups did not exist.

As a result, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment made £2.5 million available to fund a number of development and pump-priming projects (the Employer Learning Networks Challenge Fund). This fund was intended to encourage further collaborative action by employers to increase their capacity to develop the high skilled and world-class workforces they need. The aim of this research was to identify successful models which might be copied more widely and which have the potential to be sustainable in the long run.

- 74 bids were received in total, and 18 projects were subsequently funded.

The majority of these are being operated by National Training Organisations (NTOs), but five of the projects were co-ordinated by other organisations such as training companies or institutes of HE/FE education. Funding was made available until 31st July 2001; however, some projects completed their funded activity in March 2001.

The primary purpose of the Employer Learning Networks (ELNs) was meeting the skills needs of the employers who were the members of the network. They had to assess both current key deficiencies in the skills of the workforce and plan provision to meet future needs. Having identified skills needs, ELNs were then responsible for managing the delivery of activities and the provision to address them.

The fund was aimed primarily at assisting small and medium-sized organisations and was designed to help establish groups of employers who can work together to share resources, expertise and knowledge to develop the skills of their staff. The fund supported both the setting up of new networks of employers and existing group training providers to develop new services.

A range of activities were appropriate to meet these objectives and for which the collaborative approach is suitable, for example, vocational education and training for young people (for example Modern Apprenticeships), adult workforce development and basic skills training (for example support with literacy and numeracy). The ELNs offered a reasonably wide geographical and sectoral spread and incorporated a number of innovative approaches. Approaches included smaller firms sharing expertise amongst themselves, groups of small employers working with providers such as FE colleges, small employers working with larger employers (acting as mentors) and projects which take a ‘virtual’ approach, using the Internet and e-mail as a way of facilitating networks.

The Aims of the Evaluation

Questions Answered Ltd. (QA) was commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the Employer Learning Networks.

In particular it looked at three interrelating aspects of ELN effectiveness:

1. Establishing and developing employer networks (stage one);
2. Sustainability of the networks (stage two);
3. Outcomes achieved by networks (stage three).

Sample Size

The over-arching aim of this evaluation is to ascertain the effectiveness of ELNs as a collective, highlighting variances as they occur. Individual sample sizes of each ELN are not statistically significant. Rather, the individual elements within this report – for example the employer panel, or the beneficiaries’ section – are qualitative and provide indicative findings.

The reasons for this decision were threefold:

1. There was a finite amount of assistance project managers could provide while still developing their networks;
2. The need to avoid research fatigue and not jeopardise the fledgling relationship between ELN and employer / partner;
3. Budget considerations.

Key Point:

It was neither budgeted for, nor possible to contact a representative sample by each of the 18 networks, although care was taken to gain as wide a spread as possible.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation methodology consisted of three overlapping stages starting in April 2001 and concluding in March 2002. The research consisted of a mixture of face-to-face interviews and telephone research with a variety of audiences, namely: employers; employee beneficiaries; lead contacts (the named individual responsible for the network); project managers; partners and non-users. Following extensive research just prior to, or just after the end of the pump priming period, a panel of employers, partners and project managers was recruited and interviewed on two further occasions. The flowchart in the Annexe A shows the relationship between each stage of the research.

Reporting Conventions

In order to appeal to employers in different sectors and locations, some networks chose to market themselves under various guises – for example Property Learning Network or Business X-Change.

Throughout this report, we will refer to Employer Learning Networks as ELNs. With the exception of the best practice workshop (chapter five) and the case studies in Annexe C of this report, individual ELNs are not named. The number of participants responding from each network was not in itself statistically significant, so it would be unjust to make assumptions at an individual network level. Instead, we will concentrate on the key themes that emerge.

In order to orientate the reader, the audience concerned is underlined, and there will be a reference to the stage of the evaluation the comment refers to or originates from. For example, QA conducted a consultation with employers, non-users, partners and project managers six to eight months after ELNs began (in July and August 2001). In the report, we refer to ‘the summer consultation’, with a footnote setting out the date and sample size, or refer back to the approximate starting point of ELN activities – January 2001; for example ‘six to eight months after ELNs began...’ again with a footnote with the sample size. For the two panel surveys, we refer simply to panel one or two, with a footnote setting out the date and sample size.

Where percentages are used, the reader is also shown the universe or sample size the figure is derived from.

Definitions and Function of the People Interviewed

The following definitions for the audiences evaluated:

Employers

‘Owner / managers or senior representatives from the companies engaged in the ELN.’

Lead Contacts

The named contact on the original bid submitted to the DfES (formerly known as the DfEE). This individual has taken the lead in setting up the network, normally with support from others in the project team. The lead contact is also normally a project manager.

Project Managers

Project managers are defined as ‘persons with an occupational remit to engage employers on behalf of the network – including network brokers’.

Partners

In this evaluation, partners are ‘organisations or individuals who have a strategic involvement or relationship with the lead organisations. They may have contributed to the bid, developed or run a training programme and / or provided resources in the form of facilities or staff time.’

Beneficiaries

Although one could argue that employers / owner managers / senior staff are also beneficiaries, in this report, beneficiaries refer to ‘employees within an organisation who have taken part in ELN activities / training.’

Non-users

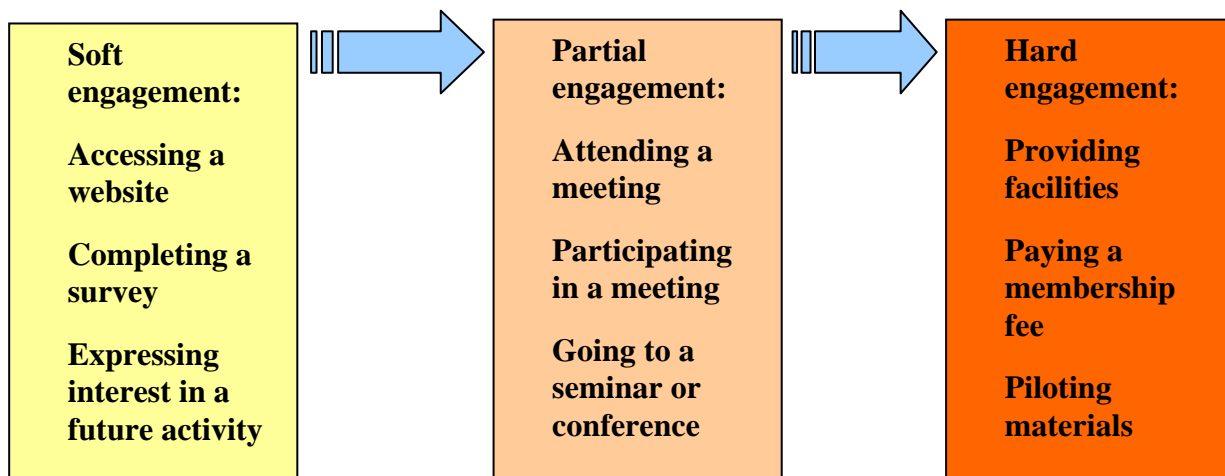
Company owner/ managers or senior representatives from the companies who were approached to join an ELN and declined.

Terms and their meaning

Due to the diverse nature of the activities undertaken by the ELNs, it was necessary at the beginning of the evaluation to attempt to classify the level of involvement with the network.

1. **Active involvement** is defined as having attended an ELN meeting and / or training and taken some form of action – e.g. helped develop materials, provided facilities, i.e. actively contributed to the employer network.
2. **Partial involvement** is defined as having attended meetings / received training, or for virtual networks, visited the website.
3. **Virtually no involvement** is defined as having done nothing beyond agreeing or signing up to the ELN. The respondent may have had no contact since that time, or may have only just signed up.

The varying definitions of ‘engagement’ have been a feature in this evaluation. By way of example, the diagram below illustrates how project managers would class employers as being ‘engaged’ in their ELN’s activities.



SME stands for small to medium-sized enterprise - typically any business employing up to 250 employees.

Single sector – used for ELNs established to meet the needs of one industrial sector – e.g. Printing or Polymers.

Cross-sector – used, conversely, for networks that are open to employers from all sectors, typically limited instead by geographical boundaries.

NTO – National Training Organisations (NTOs) formed a national network to develop skills to meet the business needs of sectors and occupational groups.

Sector Skills Council (SSC) – Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) are influential employer bodies, licensed by government that will lead the drive to significantly improve skills and productivity in industry and business sectors throughout the UK.

Next steps:

The next chapter of this report looks in detail at how ELNs were set up and established.

Chapter Two: Establishing and Developing Employer Learning Networks

Introduction

This chapter examines how ELNs were established and developed; how the projects were managed and how they agreed on a strategy. Finally we consider what was delivered in the initial stages (defined as within the first six months of a network's birth) and how employers perceived it.

How did Employer Learning Network projects agree objectives / strategy and the overall remit of their work?

The vast majority of the 18 organisations' successful bids were tailored to complement the existing work of the lead organisations. For example, some ELN bids – those being organised by an NTO – built upon existing workforce development plans, occupational standards or existing learning hubs.

The learning derived from this background research formed the basis of the overall strategy. For example, one network reacted to the need to increase the number of young people undertaking a Modern Apprenticeship.

Other ELN bids however, did not closely match existing strategies or services, but they still tended to look towards models of networked training delivery and sharing of best practice in associated or related sectors.

In almost all instances, the **overall strategy** was determined by a perceived need or absence within a sector or the workforce in particular areas. For example one ELN was formed in response to a recruitment crisis and skills shortage among managers in that sector.

The original bids to the Department were generally written in small teams, with the lead contact in charge. It was this individual's responsibility to agree the objectives and strategy in consultation with his or her team (which sometimes included partners) and the wider management structure of the organisation (for example the board of an NTO).

Key Point:

ELNs were responding to identified needs within a sector or region – and the strategy adopted was in many instances building upon the on-going work of the lead organisation (in two-thirds of cases an NTO).

The overall remit of the work

The various ELNs were driven by often very different visions and purposes. However, these purposes did focus around a set of common themes. Generally speaking, the principle behind the bids for the majority of the ELNs was to establish groups of employers who could work together to share resources, and to act as a catalyst to get employers talking and sharing best practice – and ultimately to develop solutions to identified needs.

The rationales behind these visions were very similar, and stemmed from a perceived need to make the specific sector (or region) more competitive through enhancing the skills and motivation of the workforce.

ELNs sought to increase collaborative action by employers in various ways. These were primarily to enable employers:

- To buy more easily into training;
- To establish training networks and;
- To develop the workforce at different levels within the specific sectors the ELN represented.

Key Point:

The vision behind the majority of ELNs and the objectives of the lead organisations in developing the ELNs tended to focus on the development of systems and processes. In turn these would enable the more efficient delivery of training and the development of the workforce within SMEs on a local and regional basis.

How were employers identified and brought together to explore the opportunities to develop their workforce?

Employers were identified through the lead contact's own database or through the acquisition of a partner's or externally sourced database though this didn't apply in quite the same way for web-based networks. Employers were selected on the basis of whether they fit the preferred composition of the ELN. In order to bring employers together, ELNs first had to market themselves. They set about this in a number of different ways.

Experience of engaging employers

The approaches taken by ELNs to encourage employer involvement have varied in terms of:

1. **Proposition** – the way in which the benefits of the ELN have been defined and described to employers
2. **Marketing and Persuasion** – the mix of communication techniques that have been used to gain employer involvement.

Key Point:

Employers have been identified and brought together by a variety of means. Each ELN has adopted a distinct proposition and mix of marketing techniques.

What was the ELN proposition taken out to employers?

Some ELNs were set up with a simple objective of getting a mix of employers together to talk with each other, share ideas and intelligence and to have a regular dialogue. The proposition made by these ELNs was therefore a rather straightforward one. This proposition runs the risk of employers perceiving that the ELN could just be ‘another talking shop’. Conversely, one could also argue that these networks are employer led to a greater extent.

Other ELNs focused on what it is their target employers actually need, for example, management development training or an accredited training course specific to industry needs. Using this to attract employer interest, ELNs engaged (with differing levels of success) employers around ‘need’ rather than the concept of simply getting together to discuss issues or identify needs. Some ELNs developed a range of propositions to capture a wider variety of employer segments, and this approach seems to have worked particularly well.

What marketing methods were adopted?

“The ELN set out to engage 30 employers. With hindsight our target was overestimated, though we have engaged around 12-15 employers from different parts of the sector. It is very difficult and unrealistic to expect it to be easy to get smaller firms working together. The sector is going through a period of massive restructuring. Competition prevents many from wanting to work together.”

To summarise, the table below sets out which marketing techniques were used by project managers.

Table 2.1 Techniques that project managers have used to make employers aware of their network

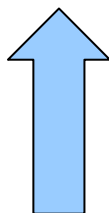
Have you used these techniques to make employers aware of your network?	Tried it
Letter from you / your organisation to the employer	92%
Promotional leaflet / brochure designed by you / your ELN sent to the employer	84%
Telephone call from you as the network co-ordinator	82%
Organised an event for employers that might potentially join your network	53%
Created a website	53%
Produced press releases or articles for inclusion in trade journals	50%
Sent e-mails to promote the network to employers	50%
Getting partners to send a letter or make a call to employers on your behalf	37%
Produced press releases or articles for inclusion in the press	32%
Got a Business Link Adviser to mention the network to employers on their visits	29%
Personal visits to employers	26%
Getting engaged employers to call other employers on your behalf	24%

Base 38³

³ Source: Summer Project Manager Survey

Effectiveness of marketing materials

Of the methods used by project managers the three most effective, in their opinion have been:

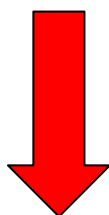


Personal contact or visits by the project manager

Telephone calls as part of an introductory and / or follow-up activity

Meeting employers at organised events

The **least effective** methods that have been tried were:



Direct mailshots (with no concerted or budgeted follow-up)

Adverts placed in local / regional press

Press releases placed in trade journals

The most effective method of engaging employers has been through direct and personal contact by an ELN project manager / co-ordinator. Even more effective is if during the first visit, the co-ordinator does something for the employer such as conduct a training needs analysis. Then, if a link can be made between the employers' training needs or gaps and the role of the ELN then 'selling' the concept becomes much easier. Websites and other dedicated materials have been used. Another marketing method that was considered effective was using a call centre to make the initial approach, with the aim of setting up a face-to-face meeting.

The use of large-scale mailshots has also taken place, although respondents did not consider this approach to be very effective. Targeted mailshots that were followed up worked better. Also effective was selling the ELN concept by linking a prevailing problem (normally sector specific and local / regional – for example a lack of IT infrastructure support) with a possible solution in the shape of ELN membership. Other ELNs focused on selling training and services, others on consultancy and tailored solutions.

Key Points:

- ELNs have utilised a variety of marketing methods to engage employers, with varying degrees of success. In general, heavy marketing has been required, with marketing accounting for a sizeable proportion of ELN start-up costs.
- Targeted marketing methods involving direct contact with the employer have proved more effective than larger scale campaigns. Similarly effective has been selling the ELN concept by demonstrating how, through membership, they would bring about an immediate business benefit.
- Direct and personal contact by an ELN project manager / co-ordinator proved the most effective method of engaging employers.

How effectively did ELN projects develop collaborative small firm membership?

The National Skills Task Force highlighted the importance of group training arrangements for smaller firms as an effective way to meet their training needs through the sharing of resources. For ELNs, targeting SMEs was a priority, although for some the difficulties involved were significant. Employers were thus targeted on the basis of whether they fitted the preferred composition of the ELN. In the words of one lead contact:

“Regardless of size, many of the needs and issues are the same. This ELN has not set out specifically to get smaller companies to work together, rather more can be gained by a mix of companies working together.”

Engaging employers has been a difficult task for most ELNs. Age-old barriers of getting employers to commit time to meetings and persuading them that they will benefit from participating remain steadfast. Most ELNs would suggest that at least a three month lead-time is required to get an employer committed to their network. However, through persistent face-to-face contact, imaginative sales propositions and the discipline of having only four to six months to get something off the ground, some ELNs have managed to hit or even exceed their targets for employers joining their networks. Did lead contacts have *any tips for success?*

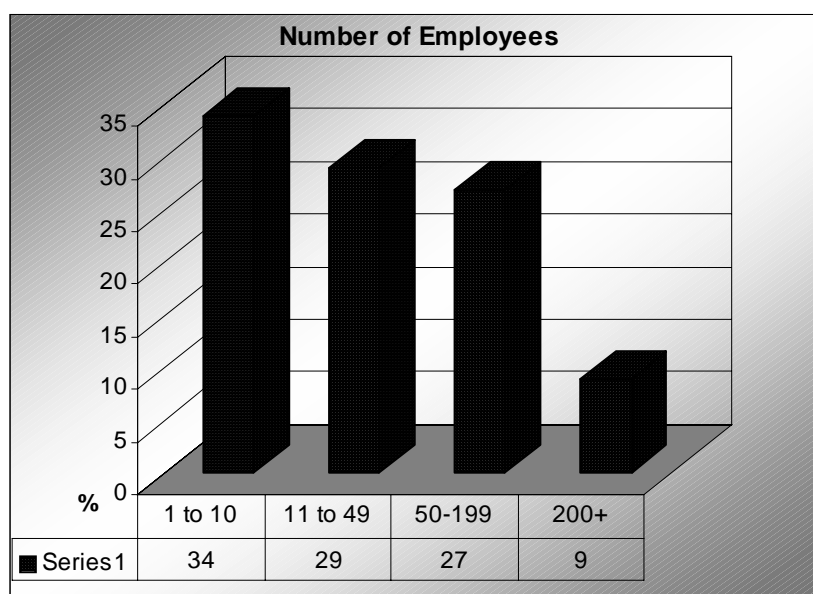
“We had to understand their business sector and talk the right language.”

“Personal referrals from someone they knew professionally was the way in with new employers.”

The actual proportion of small companies within ELNs varied from network to network, ranging from 43% up to 90%.

After six to eight months of ELN activity (July/August 2001), the research findings involving 312 employers indicated that just over one third of businesses (38%) had between 1 and 10 employees, while 56% had between 11 and 199 staff. Companies with between 11 and 49 staff were the most likely to be actively involved. The graph on the following page sets out the sizeband of the companies participating in the research.

Graph 2.1 Companies Interviewed by Sizeband



Base 312

How effectively did ELN projects establish partnerships with other key organisations that provide input?

The majority of ELNs needed external partners in order to run their networks. For example, one network brought in consultants to develop learning material and a management development centre. ELNs were generally proactive about seeking out and working with partners at an early phase in the network's inception. Six of the 11 ELNs represented in this second panel survey had involved partners in the bid-writing process, with most finding this to be a positive experience.

Lead contacts and project managers saw the opportunity to foster partnership working to be one of the primary strengths of the ELN initiative.

Prior to the ELN initiative, 14 partners (44%) consulted⁴, had no relationship at all with the lead organisation forming the network(s). The remainder were suppliers of services or products to that organisation (9 or 28%), three were partners on other funded projects (9%) or in some cases a member organisation, employee or board member / subgroup representative in some way associated with the lead body.

In total 19 partners (60%), had become aware of the ELN through direct contact with someone senior within the lead organisation responsible for the initiative. Some partners heard about the network prior to or during the bidding period, whilst others became aware after the bid had been secured and the initiative was launched.

⁴ The following is based upon interviews with 32 partners/organisations across 11 of the 18 ELNs in August / September 2001: 8-10 months after ELNs were established.

Partners were motivated to join at least in part through **self-interest**, 23 (72%) and could see a benefit to their organisation, while 22 (68%) could see the value the ELN could have to organisations in the industry and its value in coming up with specific training solutions.

Key Points:

- **ELNs were typically proactive about seeking out partners at an early stage in the initiative though perhaps didn't involve them as fully as they might in the bid writing process.**
- **Whilst it may not be essential for partners to have an existing relationship with a lead organisation responsible for ELNs, in practice it took direct and personal contact by a senior officer in that lead organisation to engage partner interest.**
- **In terms of best practice, it seems that ELNs that involved partners in the bid writing have generated a particularly positive and sustainable experience.**
- **The appeal of ELNs varied amongst partners, but they did have the common denominator of being able to offer a route to employers, often SMEs.**
- **As well as perceiving a benefit to their own organisation 23 partners (72%), also held the belief that their own organisation truly had a contribution to make. Nearly seven out of ten partners felt that ELNs could come up with specific and relevant training solutions needed by organisations in their industry.**

How partnership working has developed over time

"We have created strong links with the College."

"We have developed customised training together."

Some ELNs have been effective at fostering partnerships with partners, as the quotations above demonstrate. The best partnerships appear to be those where there is a clear and separate role for the lead organisation and for the partners themselves. For example, partners can lead on the development of a new training programme or materials that would be accredited at a later stage, whilst the lead organisation could focus on getting employers involved in network meetings.

Interestingly, some ELNs initially held back from developing a dialogue with other organisations such as RDAs or LSCs because they want to ensure that their first contact is with purpose, rather than simply stating that the ELN is operational and growing. ELNs have, however, been keener at establishing correspondence with trade or professional associations in order to keep them informed of the project's activities. In the summer consultation of project managers, (July/August 2001), 47% of 38 project managers felt that they had been either effective or very effective at getting partners involved in their network. Nearly 60% of partners interviewed said their expectations for the ELN had all been met or mostly met.

Between six to eight months after ELNs were conceived, 32 partners⁵ were asked to describe the extent of their involvement with their individual network. We found that 56% said they had hands-on involvement, with a further 13% saying they were partially involved. The first panel survey (Oct/Nov 2001) of 23 partner organisations⁶ found that the proportion of

⁵ Source: Summer Consultation, July / August 2001. Across 11 of the 18 ELN projects

⁶ 9-11 months after ELNs began, across 8 of the 18 projects.

actively involved partners had increased – to 61% – and the proportion of partially involved partners was unchanged. By comparison in the second panel survey (Jan/Feb 2002), 44% of the partners⁷ interviewed were actively involved, with 38% partially involved.

In the first panel survey (Oct/Nov 2001), project managers⁸ were asked how the number of partners engaged compared to their original predictions. Almost a quarter (24% or eight respondents) said that the number of partners engaged was higher due to heightened employer demand. Where the number of partners engaged was lower than expected (as reported by five project managers (15%)) this was due to lower than anticipated employer demand and also, significantly, to the number of competing initiatives.

Key Points:

- **On average the proportion of actively involved partners was at its peak after 12 months, and then declined. Clearly, sustaining partner involvement is a major challenge for ELNs.**
- **For 24 of 32 project managers interviewed, the number of partners engaged was ‘about the same’ as originally anticipated – pointing to the effective planning and preparation involved in setting up an ELN.**

First time Involvement

Interviews with ELN lead contacts⁹ suggested that between 70% and 90% of all employers engaged in network activities are doing so for the first time. They can be considered ‘first-timers’ in the sense that they did not previously have any, or regular, contact with the lead organisation (often an NTO). However, 132 employers out of 312 (43%)¹⁰ stated that they were involved with the organisation leading the bid for the first time.

209 employers (67%) stated that they had not previously been involved in any other kind of network activity prior to the ELN.

Key Points:

- **Although very labour intensive, ELNs were generally able to engage SMEs.**
- **Project managers stated that achieving a mix of companies is important, enabling the desired mix of resources and cultures to be achieved.**

⁷ Base 16, across eight ELNs

⁸ Base 32

⁹ May 2001, shortly before Department funding ended.

¹⁰ Source: Summer Consultation, July / August 2001

How effectively did ELN projects develop training solutions?

Training solutions

For some ELNs, the training solution needed for their sector or range of employers was obvious long before the ELN Challenge Fund came along to pump-prime their project. For others, ELNs have started from nothing in the development of new materials or courses for managers or specific segments of the workforce being targeted.

The table on pages 20-21 includes the intended training solutions. A key learning point coming out of this evaluation is the time required to develop training and especially longer-term learning solutions from scratch is considerable; sometimes taking upwards of one year. To come up with something that could be construed as innovative takes time. ELNs that were promoting an existing service or able to enhance a solution already operating were better able to 'hit the ground running'. Finally, there are ELNs where training was developed in response to employer needs – in our view, using all evidence available, this is the best approach compared to using preconceived or designed materials or packages.

The likely value that ELNs could bring in terms of developing specific training solutions (distinct from longer-term learning solutions) was a motivation for 42% of employers to join the network¹¹.

Key Points:

- **For some ELNs the training solution needed for their sector or range of employers was already known. For others, ELNs have started from scratch.**
- **Project managers said that the time taken to develop new training solutions was often considerable.**
- **Developing training solutions was a secondary aim for a small number of networks, with the emphasis falling instead on creating an employer-led network focusing upon business improvement issues wider than learning or skills.**

How were training activities identified and developed?

“Evaluation of SME needs featured from the very start of the network. Evaluation forms were distributed at the showcase events along with a diagnostic tool... The ELN has provided a fear free, low risk way in which such SMEs can network and learn together.”

Identifying and meeting employer needs is central to the premise of an Employer Learning Network. Common needs are identified by research at both a macro and micro level. **Macro / sector-wide needs** are typically identified through NTO Skills Foresight reports, employer research undertaken by the former TECs and Business Links. Such information is normally the starting point in identifying common needs, since to be of value to employers, more detailed regional or local knowledge is required. Information collected by Group Training Associations, existing employer networks or NTOs can fulfil this need. Some ELNs established regional networks which then fed back information to the project team.

¹¹ Source: Summer Consultation, July / August 2001. Base 312 employers.

At a **micro level**, employer needs were sought through face-to-face meetings with ELN consultants, by e-mail surveys, or via a training needs analysis or equivalent. Common needs were also identified at network meetings or events, along with the preferred mode of delivery. Training needs were also been identified by sector research, through knowledge gained from existing networks or GTAs (two networks), panel work (two networks) and by anecdotal insights from employers. One ELN pre-empted the training needs of employers – correctly as it turned out – and developed solutions accordingly. There is no evidence that employers have challenged the needs identified by the ELN.

Key Point:

- **Common needs were identified by a combination of existing information, such as sector Workforce Development Plans, and consultation with employers by a variety of methods.**

What was delivered?

In the original proposal documents submitted to the Department, ELNs proposed a range of products and services to be developed. These products and services tended to fall into two groups:

1. Products and services **directly linked to the establishment and running of the ELN**, for example a members' website;
2. Products and services **for learning, training and development** offered through the ELN, for example training needs analyses.

For a small number of ELNs, the establishment of the network was the service that they wanted to develop. Therefore, creating websites, newsletters and signposting services were the main priorities.

Some, but certainly not all of the products have actually been implemented. Examples of products and services that have not been introduced are video-conferencing, on-line surveying of members and bulk purchasing. In the first six months of an ELN's development, training activities generally built upon existing provision, with the ELN serving as a new vehicle with which to market these products or services. Overall, there were few beneficiaries at the early stages of ELN development (first six months).

Products and services relating to training have varied from the generic 'offering advice and guidance' to more innovative approaches to learning, including on-line solutions. At least two ELNs offered an approach to learning based upon a complete 360-degree circle of potential learning solutions. Another ELN offered a modular learning system with learning materials being first piloted then (ultimately) rolled out. Other products include tailored courses offered through colleges, tools for professional development and accreditation (including a piece of software for paperless NVQ assessment), advice and videos on best practice, and establishing shared training facilities.

Key Point:

- ELNs established a variety of products and services, ranging from network tools such as dedicated websites to specific training-related services, for example new courses or learning materials (some still under development).

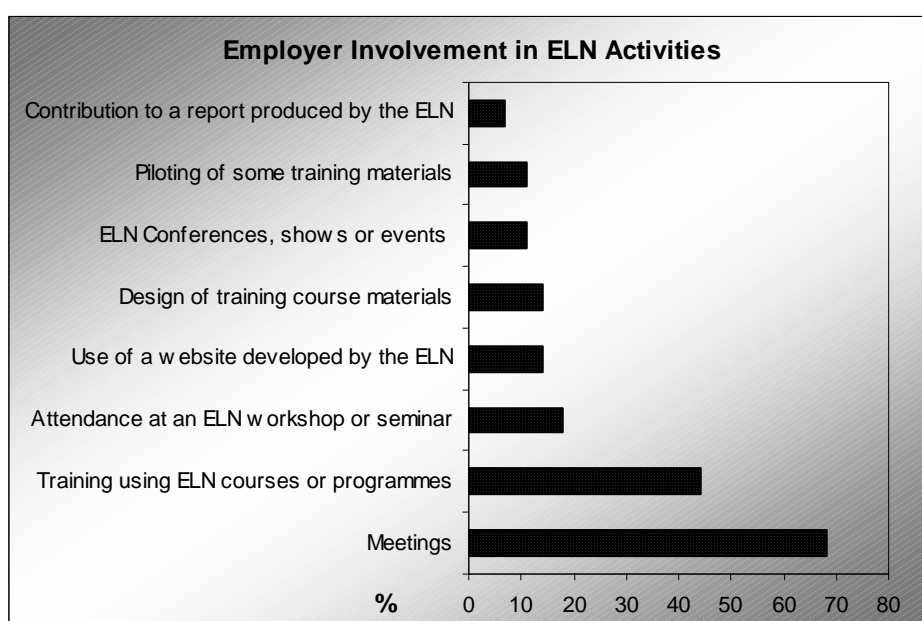
This was the situation after six to eight months – what happened next?

At or around the six to eight month point¹², 22 partners (68%) believed that ELNs could come up with specific and relevant training solutions needed by organisations in their industry. At the same point, 16 partners (50%) were offering training solutions or services at this point. In the second panel survey (Jan/Feb 2002), lead contacts were asked whether the ELN had launched any new products or services. In total, six out of 15 ELNs had introduced new products or services. Examples included new technology resource centres, products for the short and long term unemployed and formal learning using the Internet.

“The ELN has launched six new services including ‘Inside Local Enterprise’ consisting of group visits to member sites with feedback from owner / managers and ‘Intertrading’ where members do business with one another.”

In the first panel survey¹³, (9-11 months after ELN activity began) employers were asked to identify what ELN activities they had been involved in. The graph below illustrates their responses.

Graph 2.2 Employer Involvement in ELN Activities



Base 209 employers

Seven in ten actively or partially involved employers (146 of 209) were involved in some kind of training activity. Analysis over the evaluation period indicates that the proportion of employers using ELN products or services is remaining stable or increasing slightly.

¹² Source: Summer Consultation, July / August 2001. Base 32

¹³ October / November 2001. Base 239

Have employers used an ELN service or product yet?

Table 2.2 Whether employers have used an ELN service or product yet

Used services?	After 6-8 months	After 9-11 months	After 12 months	Overall Change
YES	34%	39%	42%	+8%
NO	66%	61%	58%	-8%

It is also significant for the whole evaluation that the services seem at last to be filtering through to employees some 12 months or more after ELN inception. Overall, 38 employers in the first panel survey (16%)¹⁴ said that some of their employees had accessed ELN services or products. The activities undertaken included on-line learning, NVQs, IT courses and seminars piloting training materials. The level of **employer engagement** has changed over time. The proportion of actively involved employers was highest in the Summer Consultation (Jul/Aug 2001); that is at or around the six to eight month point, while the first panel survey (Oct/Nov 2001) saw the highest proportion of partially involved employers.

Key Point:

- The proportion of employers who have used an ELN service appears to be increasing gradually over time, while the level of engagement has varied.
- The peak in active involvement was recorded at or around the six-month point, just after the funding ended. At nine months in, the proportion of partially involved employers was at its highest point.

Network typologies

There are basically three types of Employer Learning Network:

1. The first is the ‘new network’ where gatherings of employers have been brought together specifically by and for the ELN project;
2. The second is a ‘bolt-on network’ where the ELN is actually building on an existing network or similar arrangement i.e. the gathering of employers and partners is not solely because of the ELN, rather its activities are complementary;
3. Finally, there is the ‘virtual network’ where people don’t meet as such; rather they correspond using electronic media and technology through the vehicle set up by an ELN¹⁵.

¹⁴ October /November 2001. Base 161

¹⁵ A virtual / e-based network is defined as “a group of people who use computer networks as their primary mode of interaction. Source: Journal of Knowledge Management, vol 3 1999.

Engagement versus delivery projects

There is also a distinction to be drawn between ELNs that seek to deliver products or services and those that are trying to engage with employers, then offer something later on. To quote one lead contact:

“The majority of the ELN projects were about setting up limited but 'real' groups of small businesses for learning purposes, or funding employees of the different project organisations physically to get in touch with small businesses and set up learning groups. Our ‘engagement with large numbers of small businesses’ project does not fit in with these ‘delivery projects’ because the clients are yours not ours and our aim was to be creative and ambitious in our partnership in order to reach significant numbers of small businesses.”

Other typologies

Other types of ELNs include the following: Single / clustered sectors; cross sector; specific occupational focus; single location; multi-location and traditional¹⁶.

Table 2.3 on the following two pages examines each of the 18 ELNs by the criteria set out above.

¹⁶ A traditional network could be defined as a group of people who physically meet as the primary mode of interaction.

Table 2.3	Single/ clustered sectors	Cross sector	Occupational focus	Single- Location	Multi- location	Virtual	Traditional	Cost	Product Service	Other characteristics
ELN										
Glass ELN	✓				✓ (UK)	✓		Rank 1 £250K	9 WDPs bespoke training kit paperless accreditation	Regular & successful dialogue with employers; project influences partners
Sport and Recreation ELN	✓				✓		✓	Rank 2 £225K	5 networks 175 cos. Engaged 339 trainees	Targets exceeded Funding in place for all 5 networks
E-skills ELN		✓	✓ (IT systems support technicians)		(✓)	(✓)	(✓)	Rank 3 £220K	New qualification	Involvement of 40 GTAs
SFEDI – cross-sector ELN		✓			✓	✓		Rank 4 £211K	4 enhanced websites and SFEDI endorsed on- line materials	
Cross Sector ELN (Business Link Wessex)		✓	✓ owner managers	✓ (Hamps.)		(✓) inter- active website	✓	Rank 5 £183K	5 local area networks website peer support	Range of outcomes inc. traditional and virtual
Languages ELN	✓			✓ (NW)			✓	Rank 6 £150K	Needs analysis	Use of SBS disappointing for SME recruitment
Land-based industries ELN	✓		✓ owners & employers		✓	✓	✓	Rank 7 £145K	Dedicated network	3 different sub-sectors

Footwear Manufacturing, Leather Production, Leathergoods and Shoe Repair Industries ELN	✓		✓		✓		✓	Rank 8 £133K	Modular learning programme	Difficulty setting up 5 networks
Electrotechnical ELN	✓				✓ (5)		✓	Rank 9 £129K	Reg. Gps formed	Each region had diff. sub-sectoral, occupational and training outcome focus
ELN	Single/ clustered sectors	Cross sector	Occupational focus	Single Location	Multi- location	Virtual	Traditional	Cost	Product Service	Other characteristics
Retail and Distribution	✓		✓	✓ (SW-5 groups)			✓	Rank 10 £126K	5 gps formed Potential accredited course	Some things worked & others didn't
Publishing ELN (Magazine, Newspaper, Directory & Database)	✓				✓		✓	Rank 11 £126K	Modular course Seminars	3 different projects building on membership lists
Property Services	✓			✓	(✓)	✓	(✓)	Rank 12 £125.5 K	Learners enrolled – 215 Module take- up – 618 Orgs. participating – 75	On-line learning and assessment
Bakery ELN	✓				✓		✓	Rank 13 £120K	9 networks Needs analysis	England & Scotland projects

Polymer ELN	✓				✓		✓	Rank 14 £85K	Meetings; bids Sustainability Plans	Project was to set up networks and evaluate them
Printing, Graphics and Communications ELN	✓			✓ (NW)			✓	Rank 15 £52K	5 bespoke training courses	Failures & successes learnt – marketing; choice of course etc.
IT Services ELN (ATG)	✓		✓ (MA focus)	✓			✓	Rank 16 £50K	Customised training in mix of media inc. online	
Social Housing	✓		✓	✓			✓	Rank 17 £49K	Learning programmes Website	Management devt. Programmes for RSLs
Body Repair and Refinishing Trade ELN	✓			✓ Wiltshire		(✓)	✓	Rank 18 £11K	Free training pilot	High rate of drop-out after free training

How were ELN projects managed?

Within six months, the 18 projects had created 71 separate networks, and there had generally been better employer engagement where a project manager had been assigned to run individual networks. In all cases there was a lead contact or project manager taking the ELN forward. Normally, this project manager was in turn answerable to a Board / Chief Executive or Steering Committee. ELNs that were run as a partnership had representatives from each of the partner organisations in the project team. Where local networks existed, there was often a regional advisory group of some kind for employers to feed into the ELN.

The management structure and co-ordination of the ELN (or number of ELNs)

The management of 16 of the 18 ELNs was afforded by staff employed by the lead organisation either directly or on contract. Most had a hub-and-spoke management structure with a central directive, administrative and marketing function supporting network co-ordinators charged with the responsibility to engage employers.

The management structure varied depending on the number of networks being established. However, there were many broad similarities. Typically a project team was appointed, drawn from the staff of the lead organisation with occasional external consultants. Although there are individual variations, teams tend to consist of the following:

- Project leader;
- Marketing officer;
- Administrative officer(s);
- Person responsible for website development / event co-ordination / development of learning materials;
- Regional ELN managers (in multi-network ELNs).

Feedback throughout this evaluation suggests that ELNs require a project manager / lead contact to facilitate and lead the network with employer support. Therefore the role of project manager is crucial, and must be able to operate on a number of levels. One example of best practice involves two project managers with a number of years of industry experience, including chairing a Group Training Association. The lead contact provided financial management, with the two project managers giving strategic direction. Each of the GTAs involved had a nominated manager to run the network at a local level.

The more innovative ELNs also engaged more committed employers as ELN champions. These individuals served as an ambassador for the network and a contact point for both the lead organisation and network members.

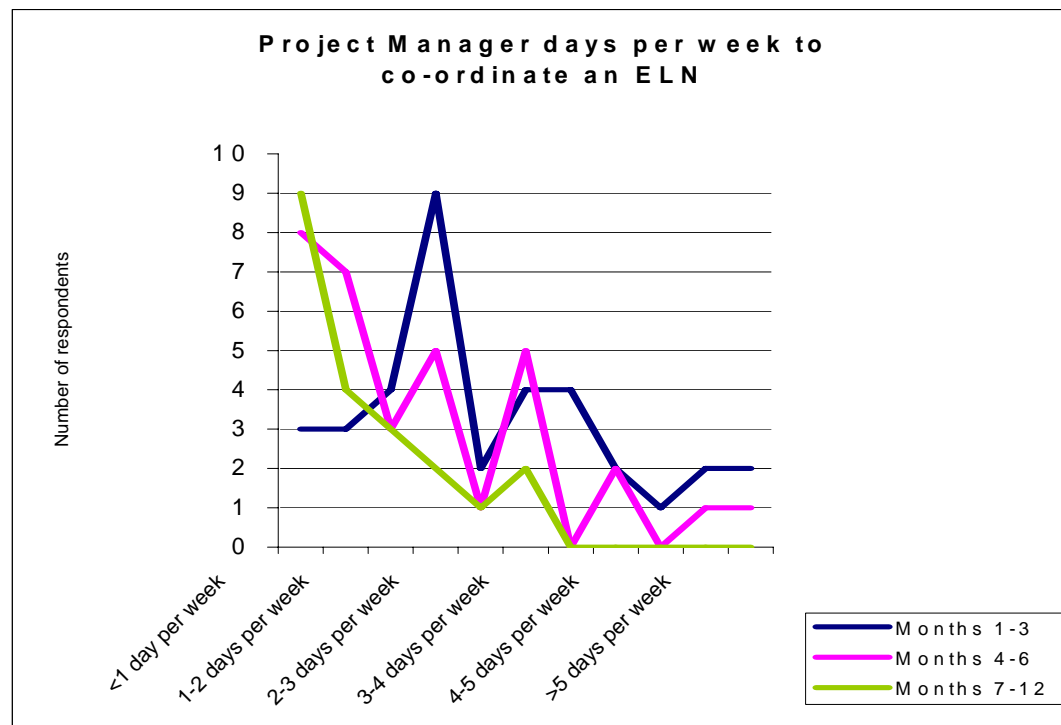
Key Point:

- ELNs have developed hub-and-spoke management structures revolving around a central project team – later in the study we found that most ELNs had underestimated and under-budgeted for the time resource required for project management, administration and marketing in the first six months of their network’s lifetime.

Resources dedicated to sustaining a network

After six to eight months, a total of 25 project managers (66%)¹⁷ said they had been able to put “*about the right amount of time*” in to develop their network. Twelve (32%) said they had not had enough time to develop the network. We asked how much time per week a project manager had put in during the first three months of its lifetime, months 4-6 and, where appropriate, months 7-12. (see graph below).

Graph 2.2 Project Manager days per week to co-ordinate an ELN



The graph illustrates that a significantly greater amount of time was put in on average during the first three months than in the second quarter of the ELN’s development. Of concern is that for two of the respondents up to six and a half days per week were required in the first three months to service the network’s development.

¹⁷ Source: Summer Project Manager Survey. Base 38

When project managers looked back on the progress of the ELN in the second panel survey (Jan/Feb 2002) 15 (80%) agreed that the first three months of the ELN were the most taxing and often a difficult period.

Key Point:

- **Sustaining networks requires continued effort and resources. The momentum gathered in the first six months of a project is unlikely to be sufficient to entirely withdraw project management or co-ordination from the lead organisation.**

How did ELN projects differ in terms of management by NTO or other lead organisations and do they differ in credibility?

Management

Overall, 13 of the 18 ELNs were managed by a NTO. Regardless of the status of the lead organisation, ELNs do tend to share a similar management structure. Eleven of the 13 NTO-managed ELNs could be classed as traditional networks, which lend themselves to the type of management structure described earlier, and four of the five ELNs not managed by an NTO are also 'traditional'.

However, ELNs not managed by a NTO tended to focus on one specific geographical area, and to have a cross-sectoral remit. By contrast, NTO-managed ELNs were more likely to have national coverage (extending in some cases, through partner organisations to Wales and Scotland) through one or more networks. The management structure of multi-network ELNs is inherently more complex. There were of course exceptions to this rule; for example three ELNs managed by NTOs specifically targeted particular areas where there was a particular need or where their profile had previously been low.

Key Points:

- **13 of the 18 ELNs were managed by a NTO.**
- **The management structure adopted tended to reflect the type of network.**
- **ELNs managed by a NTO were more likely to have wider geographical coverage and multi layer management structure.**

Credibility

Involvement in the ELN has raised the profile of NTOs / lead organisations and generally increased awareness levels and credibility in the eyes of employers. A key achievement for NTOs involved with ELNs has been in securing a new opportunity for the organisation, both in terms of engaging and working closely with employers within their sector(s).

Out of 103 employers¹⁸ that compared ELNs to other initiatives akin to employer groupings, four in ten felt that their ELN was credible or very credible. There is no apparent difference between ELNs managed by a NTO and the others. In later surveys, an indication of the credibility of the ELN can perhaps be seen in the proportion of employers prepared to recommend the network to others. In the two panel surveys, 55 employers (23%) and 51 respondents (32%) respectively had recommended the ELN to others.

A total of 56% (18) of partners¹⁹ had been involved in a similar initiative to their employer network including trade association networks, training provider networks, business service

¹⁸ Source: Summer Consultation July/August 2001. Base 312

¹⁹ Source: Summer Consultation July/August 2001. Base 32

centre networks, and TEC/LSC networks. 12 out of 18 partners felt that the ELN was credible or very credible when compared with other networks that they mentioned. None suggested that their ELN was not credible. Just over half (17 or 52%) of the 32 partners interviewed had recommended the ELN to others when asked in the first panel survey (Oct/Nov 2001) and 10 partners (63%)²⁰ stated this in the second panel survey (Jan/Feb 2002) – this indicates that while the extent of partner involvement has fallen, their support remains. Interestingly, in the first panel survey (Oct/Nov 2001) only 12 project managers (32%)²¹ could say with confidence that their ELN was very credible compared with other employer groupings.

Key Point:

Credibility is needed in two different circumstances:

- i. The lead organisation must be credible pre-and post ELN project bidding to engage the support of the right partners and stakeholders;**
- ii. The delivery agent responsible for giving service to employers engaged in the network must be equally credible – this is not always the same organisation as that holding the contract with the Department.**

To what extent were ELNs truly driven by employers rather than providers / other organisations?

ELNs tend to be driven by employers in terms of identifying needs but always co-ordinated and mostly led by the lead organisation. Six to eight months after ELNs began, employers gave examples of how the ELN had listened and responded to their needs, firstly in identifying workforce training and development needs. In total, 110 (35%)²² considered the ELN to be either very capable or capable of identifying workforce training and development requirements. Generally speaking, the longer an employer had been involved in a network, the more likely they were to state this.

To what extent did ELN projects set targets and objectives and how successful were they in achieving these?

As part of their original bid to the Department, would-be ELNs were required to set quantifiable, time-bound targets. In some cases respondents considered the original bid to be evidence of having a strategic plan, while others devised one subsequently.

Across 17 of the 18 ELNs, collectively within their original bids they had anticipated being able to engage between 2,990 and 3,206 employers within their first six months of operation. Four to five months in, we identified 2,144 to 2,157 employers that had, to a lesser or greater extent,

²⁰ Base 16 partners

²¹ Base 32 project managers

²² Source: Summer Consultation, July / August 2001. Base 312

been involved in network activities. In total, 141 (45%)²³ had attended meetings, 92 (29%) had tried ELN training courses or programmes whilst smaller proportions had helped design training course materials (29 employers, 9%) or piloted training materials (23 employers, or 7%).

In terms of actual success even those using a membership or existing list did not always achieve the conversion rate they had anticipated. Those that aimed for lower numbers of employers tended to achieve or exceed their target.

Measuring success

No ELN had funding withheld by the Department for not meeting contractual obligations. Measures of success are necessarily quantifiable, normally a number of employers or employees performing a certain task. One set of success criteria for ELNs related specifically to the setting up of the network. This can also be seen as a learning experience, for, in the words of one lead contact;

“The emphasis is on involving SMEs first and offering training second. The exchange of views and networking is in itself a learning experience, since none of the SMEs involved have hitherto been involved in a network.”

Examples of this kind of success criteria are:

- Establishing a database of contacts;
- Contacting a set number of employers and.

The second set of criteria involved training and learning. Such criteria included:

- The number of employers undergoing training needs analysis;
- Taking up training programmes or learning services.

For virtual, website-based ELNs, criteria include:

- Number of unique visits;
- Number of pages viewed;
- Number of registered members;
- Number of repeat visitors.²⁴

The timescale of the project had a decisive influence on the setting of the success criteria, and the need for identifiable outcomes to be discerned. ELNs were required to submit a final report to the Department, setting out the lessons learned and crucially, whether or not the original targets were met. Four of the 18 ELNs did not meet their stated success criteria. In one instance,

²³ Source: Summer Consultation, July / August 2001. Base 312 employers

²⁴ Source: SFEDI “Good Practice Guide: Forming and Developing Small Business E. Learning Networks”

employers could not be persuaded to attend network meetings, with the result that the ELN could not progress. Difficulties engaging employers were also critical for two other ELNs, with the result that targets were not met. The final ELN not meeting its stated success criteria was stopped in its tracks by the foot and mouth outbreak.

This finding is confirmed by 12 of the 15 lead contacts that said that the ELN had met or exceeded all of their intended outputs.

Key Points:

- **Success criteria related either to the setting up of the network(s) or engagement in training or learning. Criteria had to be quantifiable and achieved by certain milestones.**
- **The six-month funding period has a decisive influence of the type of criteria chosen.**
- **The vast majority of ELNs have strategic direction, good management and evaluation systems in place. The timescales involved means that many do not have a strategic plan.**

How effective did those receiving the training consider the network and the training they received to be?

The key audiences in this evaluation were asked to rate how effective the training or service received from the ELN was.

ELNs are not simply about delivering training. At their broadest level they are about encouraging business improvement – learning and training being a possible solution within this larger mix of issues. Therefore at key junctures in this evaluation, employers, beneficiaries, partners and project managers were asked to comment on how well the network was faring in terms of promoting its aims to employers and also how effective the products and services offered (including training) were.

Effectiveness of ELN promotion

Project managers, partners and employers all tended to agree that the promotion of the ELN and its objectives has been accomplished successfully²⁵. The extent to which a network was considered to have listened to and met members needs varies considerably.

Project managers felt that they had been effective in sustaining employer interest. Unsurprisingly perhaps, they also considered that they had succeeded in marketing the network to employers, although just under half were unsure how effectively yet they had been able to listen to and respond to employer needs. Partners were fairly cautious in their praise, but nevertheless felt that the ELNs had generally captured and sustained their interest. 28 of the 40 (70%) employee beneficiaries interviewed rated their experience as either good, very good or excellent.

²⁵ Source: Summer Consultation 2001, six to eight months after ELNs began.

When interviewed six to eight months after an ELN activity began (July / August 2001), 110 employers (35%) considered the ELN to be effective at identifying training and workforce development issues. However, more than half of this number was unable to give an example of this occurring. Overall, 209 employers (60%) were either actively or partially involved. Just over two-thirds of these employers had attended one or more meetings, and the vast majority were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience.

In total, 92 out of 209 employers (44%) had taken part in ELN training of some kind. Two-thirds of those who had received training said they were satisfied with the content. The table on the following page sets out the findings in full:

Table 2.4 Levels of satisfaction with ELN training

	Number	%	Level of satisfaction (%)				
			1 (not at all satisfied)	2	3	4	5 (very satisfied)
Meetings	141	68	1	1	14	57	28
Training using ELN courses or programmes	92	44	0	6	22	37	34
Attendance at an ELN workshop or seminar	38	18	3	3	11	63	21
Use of a website developed by the ELN	29	14	0	14	24	48	14
Design of training course materials	29	14	3	7	24	52	14
ELN Conferences, shows or events	22	11	9	0	23	50	18
Piloting of some training materials	23	11	0	9	44	26	22
Contribution to a report produced by the ELN	14	7	0	7	29	57	7

Base 209

Key Points:

- Employers, project managers and partners were all in agreement that the ELNs had effectively communicated their aims and objectives to employers.
- 20 partners (61%) had developed training products or services for the ELN.

Quality

The next section of the report examines the perceived quality of ELN products and services.

In the summer consultation²⁶, 106 employers (34%) had used ELN products or services so far. Overall, the majority of those employers who used an ELN product or service considered the quality to be good or excellent.

²⁶ July / August 2001, after six to eight months of ELN activity.

Table 2.5 Perceived quality of ELN products and services

	Number taken part	%	Perceived quality (%)				
			1 (Very Poor Quality)	2	3	4	5 (Excellent Quality)
Workshops and seminars	49	46	2	0	6	49	43
On-line training materials	28	26	4	0	29	36	32
Management training programmes	22	21	0	5	14	41	41
Modular learning programmes	21	20	5	5	14	52	24
Modern Apprenticeship provision	18	17	11	11	33	28	17
Customised training	18	17	0	11	6	50	33
Supply of professional trainers	18	17	6	0	33	22	39
Shared training centre/ facilities	15	14	0	0	13	53	27
On-line assessment tools	15	14	7	0	40	27	27
1-2-1 business coaching	13	12	0	8	23	46	23
Bulk purchase of training	7	7	0	14	43	14	29
Virtual networks	6	6	0	33	17	17	33
Large – smaller firm mentoring	5	5	20	0	20	20	40

Base 106

In the second panel survey (January 2002), 68 employers interviewed (42%)²⁷, said that they had used a product or service designed by or sponsored by the ELN. Modern Apprenticeship provision, modular learning programmes and network meetings and seminars were among the best used and highest rated products or services used.

Key Points:

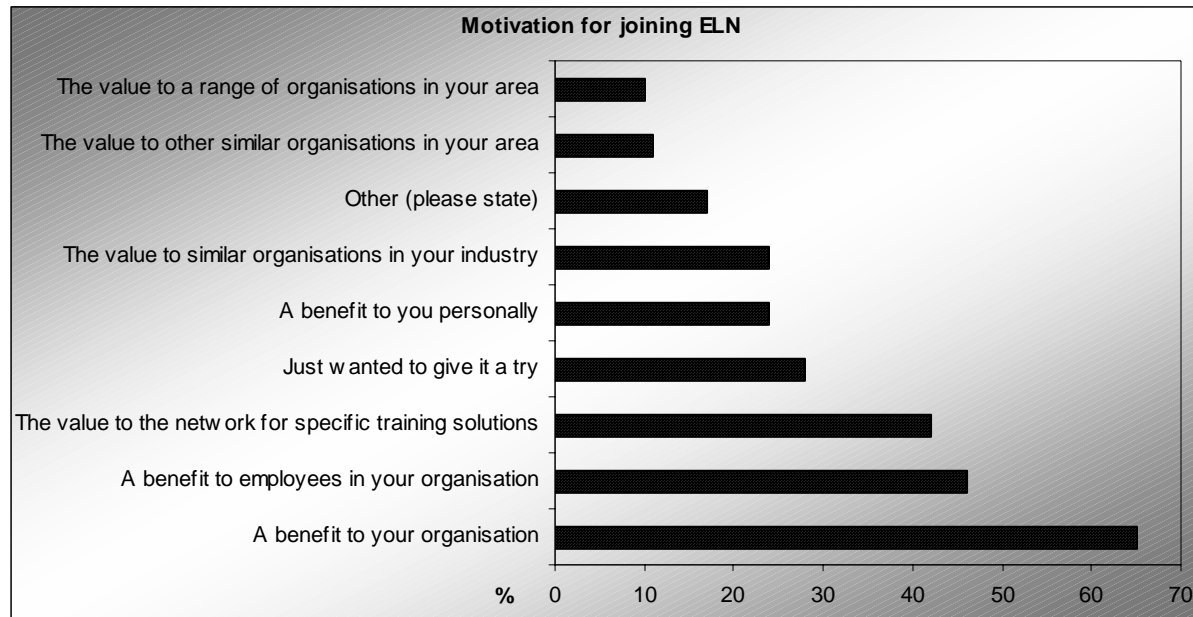
- Only 34% of employers (106 /312) had used an ELN product or service at the 6-8 month mark (September 2001), rising to 42% (68 /161) in January 2002, 12 months after ELNs were conceived.
- Workshops and seminars, along with customised training have received the highest satisfaction ratings.
- More generic provision (Modern Apprenticeships), and ‘untried’ virtual networks received the lowest ratings.
- Most employers generally approved of the quality of products and services offered by ELNs, with relatively low numbers rating any product or service as poor or very poor.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that poor training may lead employers to leave the network.

²⁷ Base 161 employers

Motivation for joining

The main motivation for joining an ELN was a perceived benefit to the company concerned and its employees. The likely value that ELNs could bring in terms of developing specific training solutions was also a major motivation. To a lesser extent, a quarter of respondents could see the benefit to other employers in their industry / sector. ‘Other’ motivations were a desire to find out if funding was available for training and to network with other businesses.

Graph 2.3 Motivation for joining ELN



Summer Employer Consultation 2001. Base 312

Reasons for not joining

The main reason non-users did not join was that the ELN was not perceived as relevant to their business needs, all training was done internally and that there was no time to get involved. For example, non-users said:

“I did post details on the staff notice board and looked at training provisions, but at that time of contact they were up-to-date on training.”

Generally speaking, non-users could perhaps be persuaded to join if there was customised training or one-to-one coaching on offer. Other suggestions included:

1. The offer of a course or learning that they needed e.g. exporting skills
2. Evidence that by joining it would bring in more business
3. Information about training so that they could access it if they wanted to

Key Point:

- The majority of companies predictably joined because the ELN might benefit the company and its employees.

The main barriers for engaging employers

The main barriers for getting employers engaged can be summarised as being:

1. **Time** – the lack of time to take part in any ELN activities

“It has been very difficult to get the smaller companies involved, generally they say they have not got the time and cannot spare the staff.”

2. **Lack of benefit** – perceived or actual lack of employer benefit

“There was and still is a degree of healthy scepticism. Many SMEs have been party to trade associations, professional networks and chamber associations. None of these traditional and lower level networks fulfilled their business and personal development needs.”

3. **Funding** – lack of funding to support employers’ identified training needs

“For 21-25 year olds – there is no money for adult training, except the unemployed – but that is no good for employers. People want to maintain employees but don’t want to train them in case they leave.”

4. **Sectoral issues** – the composition of sectors has had an effect on participation, in so far as those marked by micro-businesses, family-owned businesses and sole traders have struggled to participate

“It appears that employers in the same sector are less willing to work together.”

Overcoming Barriers

Ways in which ELNs tried to overcome these barriers included:

- More emphasis on face-to-face visits to explain the benefits of ELN participation;
- Thinking of ways in which employers can see ‘quick wins’;
- Involving employers in the design of a training solution for an identified need;
- Development of business clusters that in turn generate positive word of mouth;
- Development of virtual networks that don’t rely on regular meetings;
- Make the proposition ‘a business solution’ rather than ‘come to a meeting’.

Key Points:

- A lack of time, funding, perceived benefits and competitive issues within single sector ELNs have been barriers to engaging employers.
- ELNs have sought to overcome these barriers by providing ‘quick wins’, involving employers in developing training solutions and making the aim of the network clear.

What were the unique selling points of ELNs and what were the barriers to employers receiving them?

Employers, partners, project managers and non-users were asked what were the best things about the ELN, and also what were the barriers or major drawbacks. A summary of these responses can be seen below:

Unique Selling Points

- A credible network meeting near the employers’ work base;
- Network team responsive to employer needs and requests;
- Able (adequately resourced and wholly devoted to network) project managers with credibility in employers’ eyes;
- Funding in place for offering ‘no cost’ initial training / learning solutions;
- A conduit through which employers can discuss business improvement;
- Quality networking with employers who have something in common;
- Solutions-oriented network – strategic and operational through composition of the network group;
- Strong brand.

Barriers

- It takes time to build up credibility and prove effectiveness;
- Project team not as responsive as employers would like if administrative / back-up support has been underestimated – employers want a direct line to the network manager – if this is not possible, engagement is lost.
- Employers are generally resistant to commit to anything unless it involves no financial cost to them. During the DfES funded period to the end of July 2001 employer contributions tended to be in kind as opposed to financial. By January 2002, only around 36 employers (22%) had actually paid for membership and a slightly lower proportion had paid for training (69 employers – 43% – had accessed some of it in some form).

Key Points:

- Accessible meetings, an effective network team and free or no cost training solutions were the main unique selling points of ELNs.
- Barriers were the time taken to build credibility and a lack of resources available to respond to employer requests.
- Employer contributions during this evaluation have remained predominantly in kind, that is giving up their time or offering facilities or input.

- **Only 22% of employers had paid for training (as of January 2002).**

Summary

Establishing and developing Employer Learning Networks

All 18 projects were launched in different guises within the first six months. This implies that ELNs had agreed their objectives, brought together databases of employer contacts, marketed the initiative to employers and partners and held meetings. Virtual networks had developed websites and established channels of communication.

- Within six months, the 18 projects had created 71 separate networks. This figure increased to 90 networks after nine months with 2,361 employers involved to varying degrees. A further 30,000 employers may have been reached by the virtual networks.

The funding has essentially allowed for staff to dedicate a greater proportion of their time in devising ways of promoting the network to employers. Personal contact by the co-ordinator was the most effective way of engaging employers interested.

Across 17 of the 18 ELNs, collectively within their original bids they had anticipated being able to engage between 2,990 and 3,206 employers within their first six months of operation. Four to five months in, we identified 2,144 to 2,157 employers that had been involved in network activities.

The main motivation for getting involved in an ELN was, for 203 (65%) of employers, a perceived benefit to their organisation; or for 144 (46%) a benefit to their employees. 131 (42%) of employers joined the network with the expectation of accessing specific training solutions. 87 employers (28%) *“just wanted to give it a try.”*

- Within 12 months of being established 6,022 individuals are said to have used learning products or services developed or promoted by an ELN, excluded were those engaged by virtual networks. In fact 42% of all employers engaged have used an ELN product or service and this figure continues to rise steadily as networks mature.

The optimum size for each network was 20 employers, with the average number being 28. This provided a critical mass that also allowed for drop-out and was still viable and manageable by the network co-ordinator.

Networks attracted employers for different reasons. Sustainable networks were solutions orientated and those that offered quick early wins – for example subsidised training, or activities that helped businesses either legally or financially – and a structure for progression.

- Over the period of the evaluation, the percentage of employers that say that ELNs have listened to and met their needs ranged from 43% to 63%. A similar proportion (45%-60%) was actively or partially involved in their network. One-third of employers

considered their ELN to be effective at identifying training and workforce development issues.

The fact that ELNs were a low cost, low risk initiative was very important at the early stages.

- 61% of employers said continued participation in their ELN would be worthwhile.

In order to access the learning or training agenda a responsive, available network team was crucial. Project managers had to have a suitable industry background, preferably with experience of running an SME.

- Sustainable ELNs tend to have been managed by sectorally-experienced and skilled project managers, aided by partners seen as credible by employers and which have developed new, affordable (or initially free) training products or services with network members during the project.

Chapter Three: Sustainability of the Networks

Introduction

Employer Learning Networks received funding from the Department for 12 months. This pump-priming period was intended to facilitate the creation and establishment of ELNs, but clearly, to achieve some of the other objectives – for example tackling the poor image of a sector through management development – was always seen as more of a long-term undertaking. Therefore, from the outset networks were designed and established with sustainability as an integral goal.

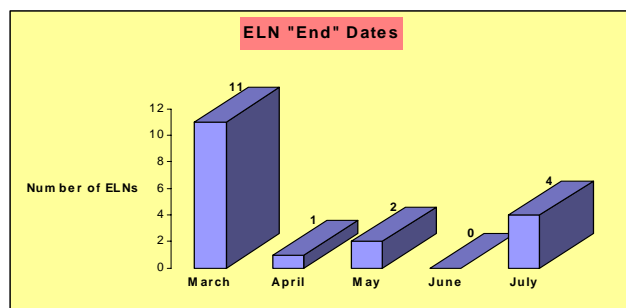
This chapter of the report examines the steps ELNs took to achieve sustainability and the factors that led to either success or failure. In particular, the issue of securing further funding is examined in depth. The views of lead contacts, project managers, partners and employers have been sought on these issues.

How effectively did Employer Learning Network projects and the networks develop after July 2001 when Departmental funding ceased?

“Nothing good ever happened instantly, this is not a Dot.Com network!”

Most projects were given the go ahead by the Department in November 2000 with an anticipated average six-month period of funded activity to establish the networks. In practice, most projects appear to have had around four to five months to deliver stated outputs as part of the contract, and this put some ELNs under pressure to work more quickly in generating employer interest than envisaged. This in turn led to a staggering of project end dates, as shown in the graph below:

Graph 3.1 ELN end dates (2001)



Consequently, the initial months of the ELN were an intense period of marketing and setting wheels in motion; developing training, forging links with partners, developing a brand identity and so forth. Other ELNs, particularly bolt on networks, were able to quickly set about delivering actual training and development to network members. ELNs with a single, direct proposition were able to deliver at least part of their intended package and were then left with the question – “What next?”

Broadly speaking the second six-month period was about consolidation and ensuring sustainability through accessing further funding. This was a critical period in the development of the ELNs, since without the impetus provided by the Department's funding, the level of activity usually dropped, changed shape or emphasis, or ceased altogether. The transition from NTOs to Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) also led to a decrease in activity levels among ELNs led by NTOs.

Network development after funding ceased – predicted

In May 2001, as Department funding ceased / or was drawing to a close, lead contacts were asked to plot the course of their ELN between a) August and December 2001 and b) January 2002 onwards.

Months 8-12 (August to December 2001) was about building momentum, strengthening links with companies in the network and delivering the proposed products and services. Marketing would continue in all ELNs, whether by gaining SME champions, developing case studies, improving websites, and hosting more events. Partnership working would continue, with more emphasis perhaps placed on developing relationships with LSCs and the RDAs.

The second year (beyond January 2002), evaluation of delivery and training was likely to be a feature of ELNs at this stage, determined to a greater extent by the conditions attached to further funding. For sector-based ELNs, if the network was managing to sustain itself, there was the potential to involve suppliers and other linked companies in the network. At this point, lead contacts predicted that initiatives like virtual academies and centres of excellence should be fully operational. Accredited learning materials should also be available some 12-14 months after the ELN project started.

Network development after funding ceased – actual

When interviewed around six to eight months after network activity started, and pump-primed funding ceased, project manager interviews²⁸ provided a number of insights into how networks actually developed, sustained themselves and how the plans for the coming months were being adopted.

Two network projects ceased at this stage, but for the remainder work continued. Generally speaking, the networks were still at an early stage of development. For example: technology-reliant ELNs were often still establishing themselves, as project teams and employers became accustomed to the realities of 'virtual networks'.

ELNs that had taken a strong training and development premise to employers had achieved a number of significant outcomes by this stage. Piloting of training and learning was taking place²⁹.

²⁸ Source: Summer consultation, July / August 2001. Base 38

²⁹ Please refer to Chapter Four: Outcomes

Key Points:

- In the short term (to the end of 2001), networks were consolidated, with lead organisations exploring the possibilities offered by the LSC, RDAs and other partners such as FE / HE institutions. Beyond January 2002, learning structures and materials should be in place.
- Piloting and delivering training products either for free or on a paid basis were also central to the plans of project managers.
- Seeking out new funding opportunities and means to engage employers were also common experiences across many ELNs.
- The level of activity declined for most ELNs when the impetus of the Department funding was removed. Whilst not unexpected, this is a crucial finding for the evaluation.

Numbers engaged

After six to eight months of ELN activity, we found that across these 38 project managers (representing 18 of the ELN projects) a total of **90 networks (groupings)** were represented³⁰. This compares to **71 separate networks** across the 18 developing ELNs in May 2001, suggesting that the number of discrete networks increased, typically as regional networks came into their own.

The number of employers engaged in the network is also significant, since as the number of actively involved employers was declining, there was clearly the need to refresh the ranks with new employers.

In the main, ELNs were developing in line broadly with project managers' expectations, though perhaps not their aspirations.

In terms of network development, 25 project managers (75%)³¹ stated that the number of partners engaged was the same or higher than anticipated. In total, nine project managers (27%) felt that the number of employers engaged was higher than anticipated, while eight project managers (24%) stated this about the number of employees in the ELN.

The benefits for partner organisations, according to project managers were primarily a way into the SME market, a chance to be involved in something up-to-date in the industry and a chance to increase business.

Key Points:

- The number of discrete networks increased between the 5-6 month point (May 2001) and the 6-8 month point (July / August 2001) from 71 to 90. Two of the 18 ELN projects ceased when pump-prime funding ceased.

³⁰ Source: Summer consultation of employers, July/ August 2001.

³¹ Source: First panel survey. Base 32

- ELNs were generally developing in line with project managers' expectations.
- Whilst activity levels declined in general terms after DfES funding ran out, ELNs continued to evolve and give rise to further networks and opportunities for lead organisations and partners – in this way, sustainability appeared to have been achieved in the majority of ELN projects some 6-12 months into their lifetimes.

Achieving priorities

To remain on track, the steer of an experienced lead contact / project manager is required. In the second panel survey (January 2002), 19 project managers of the 32 interviewed (58%) said that they had achieved all their stated priorities and 10 (32%) had achieved some. For example:

“Follow up through the European Social Fund was very beneficial in carrying the project on... Regional networking has helped to clarify priorities and allowed for the smoother operation of the project.”

Priorities continued to change and 11 project managers (37%) reported that their priorities had changed in the three months since the last survey – for example reacting to employer demand and introducing a new course, or formalising the way businesses collaborate within the ELN.

Key Points:

- The majority of project managers stated that they were continuing to achieve at least some of their priorities after network funding ceased.
- Project managers have to be flexible, since priorities can change, especially in response to employer demand.

What factors appear to enhance sustainability and what factors were associated with networks that declined?

“To sustain networks it will be important to extend employers' involvement. Continue marketing the project aggressively. Update training where necessary and maintain the quality. Secure sufficient funding.”

Lead contacts were hopeful that they have a transferable concept – an employer network. As such, sustainability may be achieved if ELNs fall within the remits of organisations that define budgetary priorities including LSCs and RDAs. They feel, on the whole, there is the potential to develop sectoral networks at a sub-regional / regional level and make it relevant to a range of agencies in those economies thus making it attractive from a funding point of view. Success relies on mutual benefit between the funding agency and the organisation contracting in to lead the ELN.

There are a number of macro and micro factors at work that could be said to enhance ELN sustainability, encapsulated in the quotation above.

Employers were asked in the first panel survey (October / November 2001) to name the best things about being involved in an ELN, factors which are likely to ensure sustainability. The top three responses were:

1. Networking / sharing experiences / making contacts / best practice – response from 41 employers (31%);
2. Access to training delivery – local / on-site / home / in-house – response from 28 employers (21%)³²;
3. Quality of training / opportunity for qualification / management development – response from 20 employers (15%).

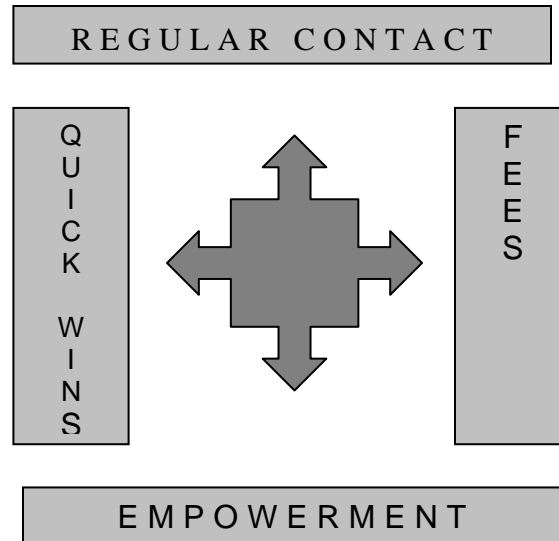
Key Point:

- From an employer perspective, factors that may lead to sustainable networks relate to accessible, cheap training (not the same as long-term commitment to learning of course); the quality of training; regular contact, customised elements for the sector or region and the ability to network with peers.

³² Not all employers chose to answer this question. Therefore, this figure, and the two that follow it are based upon 133 responses

Sustaining employers' interest

There are **four key ways** in which project managers sustained employer interest. Interestingly, this included charging employers for goods and services.



Regular Contact

“By hard work – talking to them on the phone between meetings to get them to attend the next one.”

Quick Wins

“Agree work plan with short-term, achievable targets.”

“They pay a fee and regard it as an investment.”

Empowerment

“They have seen the benefits of accessing training needs as a group rather than isolated individuals.”

“We allow them to set the agenda.”

Fees

“Very helpful over cost, venue etc. Very quick and precise response.”

Key Point:

- Project managers identified regular contact, quick wins, employer empowerment and a fee structure as four key factors in sustainable ELNs.

Engaging employers, employees and partners

The key factors where more employers, employees and partners had been engaged were:

- Attractive proposition;
- SMEs engaged;
- Realistic targets;
- Over-demand for products or services;
- Credibility of lead and partner organisations.

Where demand was lower than anticipated, the main reasons were:

- Policy decision by the ELN;
- Competing initiatives;
- Employer apathy;
- Lack of resources;
- Wrong staff in post at the ELN.

Finally, where the numbers involved in the ELN were about the same as expected, the chief reasons were:

- Maintained interest;
- Realistic targets;
- Clear expectations as to partner input;
- Face-to-face contact.

The ability to identify and engage (and subsequently re-engage) employers, employees (where appropriate) and partners is a factor in achieving a sustainable network. The table on the next page contains quotations from project managers about why ELNs have over or underachieved in terms of involving employers, employees and partners.

Table 3.1 Factors Affecting Employer, Employee And Partner Engagement – Project Manager Quotations		
Employers	Employees	Partners
<p>Over achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieved target well within time set so NTO asked them to continue recruiting; • Far exceeded initial targets; • Heavy selling through existing contacts; • Still businesses are coming on-line as normal practice, a year ago many found the technology alien; • The package proved to meet the needs of employers; • Very good initial response exceeding initial expectations; • Well-organised meetings and good response to promotions. • 	<p>Over achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80-100 occasions of training access; • A consequence of above decision to restrict number of employer members; • As project funds not meant for actual training delivery, no actual target figure; • Employee development scheme target was 150- achieved 227; • Gone over 1000 mark, convenient distance learning helps;. • Quite surprised at the number of hits per employer; • Surprising number of participants from some SMEs. 	<p>Over achieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost a question of too many being available to be able to utilise them all; • Have been looking to bring in Industry experts to deliver on-site training; • It became necessary to find extra resources, by engaging more partners; • More interest than expected from private training organisations and translators; • All very active and supportive.
<p>Underachieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieved 90% –one partner went into receivership; • All round apathy from employers; • It was a policy decision to restrict numbers; • Local employers have a very cynical outlook to training schemes; • Many proved difficult to target; • Very poor response – general downturn in training; • Very poor start due to wrong person being put in the project managers position. • 	<p>Underachieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the last survey meeting they found these and other initiatives were clashing and employers were being fed same info by various organisations – decided to suspend ELNs and group to reassess; • Cannot access employees if employers are not interested; • Disappointing level of response to training products; • Unable to get through to employers the importance of training. 	<p>Underachieved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disappointed particularly with (name of partner); • Have fallen by the wayside through lack of response from employers.
<p>Same as expected</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 93% of target achieved so far and growing especially via referrals; • 94% achieved at present; • As expected, though varying a lot between regions; • Interest has been maintained; • More successful with their own members but less with non-members, no other partners required; • Not an over ambitious initial target; • Targeted specific organisations to respond to expressed need. 	<p>Same as expected</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A large number are small organisations; • As expected from SMEs; • Difficult to access figures from so long ago, network finished in March but attendance at seminars was a sell out; • Difficult to monitor; • Interest has been maintained; • More successful with their own members but less with non-members, no other partners required; • Predictions were realistic. 	<p>Same as expected</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arranged on a needs basis; • Interest has been maintained; • Just needed initial partners–no need to sign on more; • Just used the four FE colleges targeted; • More successful with their own members but less with non-members, no other partners required; • Various centres as well as original partners; • Accessd expert deliveries for custom-made ELN products.

Source: First project manager panel survey. October / November 2001. Base

Extent of Employer Involvement

A crucial factor in ELN sustainability is the extent to which employers remain actively involved. The table below details how employers' level of engagement has changed over time.

Table 3.2 Extent of employer involvement

Involvement	After 6-8 months	After 9-11 months	After 12-13 months	Comment
Active	18%	7%	9%	Much lower but picking up again
Partial	42%	47%	36%	Increasing then dropping away
Virtually none	36%	36%	39%	Same then increasing
No longer involved	3%	6%	12%	Higher
Other	0%	5%	3%	Intermittent involvement
Sample	312	239	161	

When interviewed in the two panel surveys³³, after 9-11 months and 12-13 months, proportionally less than half as many employers as the previous July (six to eight months after ELNs began³⁴) considered themselves actively involved. The proportion of partially involved employers increased in October but then declined in January (12-13 months in). When coupled with the increase in employers with virtually no involvement or the rising proportion who had left the ELN, this raises serious concerns overall about sustaining employer engagement.

Key Points:

- The proportion of actively involved employers halved between the 6-8 month mark and the 11-13 month point, while the number of employers with virtually no involvement or who have left the ELN increased.
- The term 'engagement' was open to various interpretations by employers.
- Active involvement was not continuous, rather an employer's level of involvement varied.
- The fact that there has been a lull in ELN activities while further funding was secured was reflected in the level of employer involvement. In recently staged focus groups with a number of networks there was in some, talk of a need for a relaunch or revitalisation of activities this year (2002).
- The ability to re-engage employers will be an important factor in ensuring sustainability.

³³ First panel survey October / November 2001, base 239 employers. Second panel January / February 2002, base 161

³⁴ Base 312 employers

Sustaining Interest

ELNs had mixed success at sustaining the interest of employers³⁵. The most common ways in which this was achieved is set out below:

- 1 Meetings and e-mails were the main methods used, with 25 employers citing this (16%);
- 2 Continued access to website was noted by 12 employers (7%);
- 3 Finding out how other companies deal with problems (networking) was a response from 10 employers (7%).

Key Point:

- **ELNs that are sustaining employers' interest are doing this chiefly by regular communication, meetings, access to a website and on-going training offers.**

Another indicator of whether an employer has bought into the ELN concept is perhaps how long they perceive the network can continue and how long they themselves predict staying a part of its activities.

At (or around) the six to eight month point, (July / August 2001), employers³⁶ were asked how long – in their opinion – the network was likely to continue, then how long they themselves could see themselves being a part of the ELN. Three clear findings appeared:

- 1) The majority of employers (171 or 55%) were not able to predict how long the ELN will continue, or, to a lesser extent, predict the likely duration of their own involvement.
- 2) Of the remainder, 86 (28%) expected both the ELN and their own involvement to stretch beyond three years.
- 3) 32 employers (10%) expected the ELN and their involvement with it to last less than one year.

Key Point:

- **The majority of employers are unsure how long the network and their involvement will continue.**
- **However, of those that can predict a future for their own and their network's involvement, their outlook is far from myopic – a three year lifetime is expected for a meaningful network to effect change.**

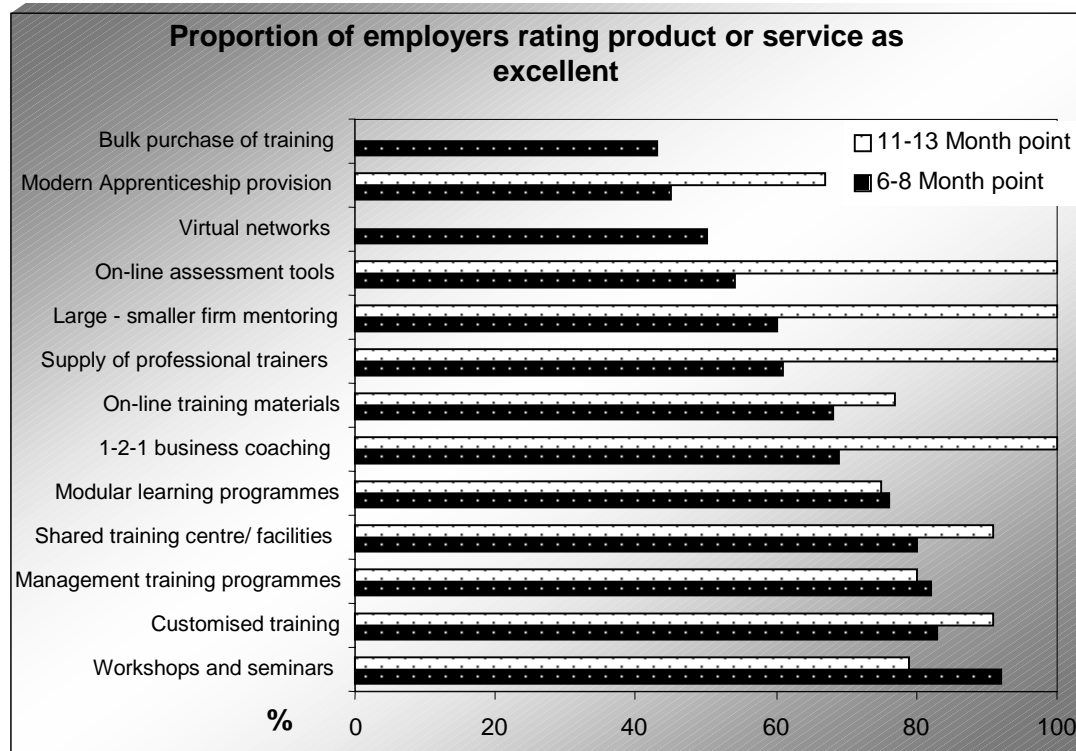
³⁵ Source: Second panel survey, January / February 2002. Base 161

³⁶ Base 312

Quality

Regardless of marketing and communication processes, if the product on offer is not good enough, then interest will not be sustained. Six to eight months after ELN activity commenced, employers were asked to rate the training solution experienced. A subset of these employers, the employer panel, was asked the same question four, then six months later. While January's smaller sample size makes comparing like with like difficult, it is fair to say that the number of employers attending conferences or accessing professional trainers had decreased, although satisfaction levels have generally increased. Month-on-month, the only area that showed an increase in employer usage was customised training.

Graph 3.2 Proportion of employers rating product or service as good or excellent



Base: 6-8 months: 312. 11-13 months: 161. NB. No employers had been involved in either bulk purchasing or virtual networks at the time of the Second panel survey.

The small sample of 40 beneficiaries³⁷ also gave generally favourable opinions of the training undertaken – mainly on-line learning or modular courses. However, some respondents did highlight technical difficulties affecting the quality of the product and the lack of human interaction.

³⁷ Source: Second panel survey January/ February 2002

In terms of quality, some key beneficiary perceptions were:

- 33 (83%) ➡ considered the activity to be professional;
- 25 (63%) ➡ felt it was organised rather than last minute;
- 35 (88%) ➡ said the activity was relevant;
- 33 (83%) ➡ considered the activity to be useful;
- 21 (52%) ➡ found the activity to be interactive rather than passive;
- 18 (45%) ➡ considered the activity to be entertaining.

Surpassing expectations

We have already established that the majority of employers joined an ELN in the expectation of gaining business and personal benefits. In the second panel survey (January 2002 at which point most ELNs were between 11 and 13 months old), we sought to delve a little deeper into what expectations employers had, and to what extent these had been achieved.

Employer expectations had generally been surpassed, with a greater proportion having already experienced a particular outcome than the proportion that expected it.

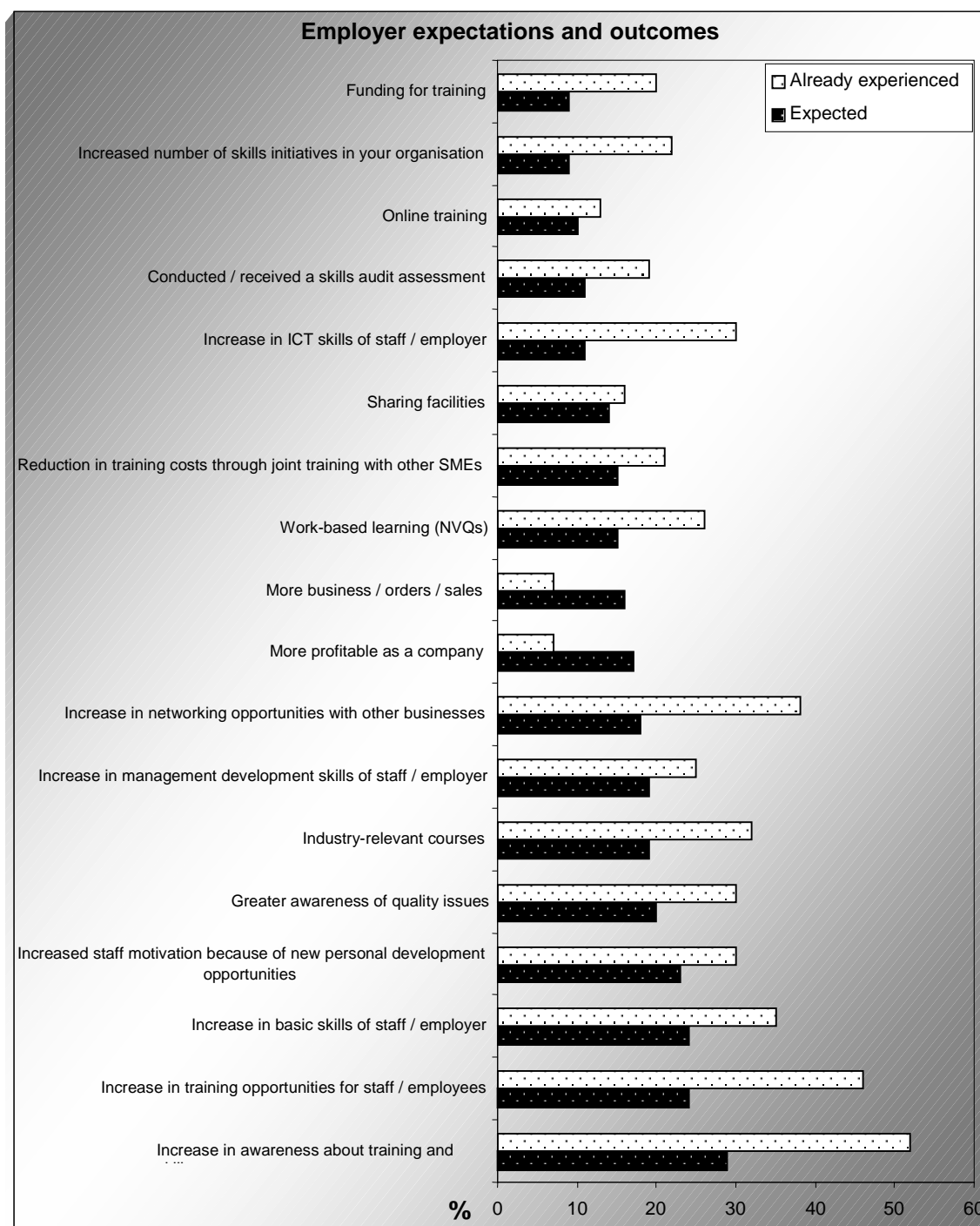
The important exception to this rule was bottom line benefits – becoming more profitable as a company and bringing in more business / orders / sales. Fewer employers had experienced these outcomes than had anticipated them. It is extremely interesting from a concept point of view to note that some employers had expectations linked to ‘business improvement’ rather than specifically ‘learning’ outcomes. This may have wider implications for the funding and criteria for any future ELN funding whether by the DfES, or with other government departments.

Key Points:

- **ELNs met and surpassed employer expectations regarding networking and training.**
- **ELNs also met employer expectations in respect of raising awareness of training, skills and learning opportunities for staff in their organisations.**
- **Employer expectations of bottom line benefits were far less likely to have been met.**

For 105 employers (65%), there have been outcomes as a result of ELN involvement. As the graph on the next page illustrates, an increase in awareness about training and skills and training opportunities for staff / employees were the most common expectations, and these were also the most likely outcomes to have been met.

Graph 3.3 Employer expectations and outcomes



Base 105, excludes 56 employers with no stated expectations / outcomes

Continuous improvement

The ability to adapt ELN products and services over time is likely to be a factor in sustainable ELNs. Project managers were asked to rate how successful ELN products and services had proved. For example, piloting of new learning products and services was attempted by 22 of the 32 project managers interviewed (70%)³⁸, with 11 (33%) stating that

³⁸ Source: First panel survey October / November 2001.

they had been very successful. By comparison, a slightly higher proportion (12 respondents or 36%) considered the ELN to be very successful at the ‘continuous review of products and services to improve them’. Only nine project managers (27%) considered themselves to be either successful or very successful at increasing membership of the ELN.

Key Point:

- **11 of the 32 project managers were, in their opinion, very successful at reviewing products and services, and a similar proportion had succeeded in increasing membership of the network.**

There are a number of lessons learned through this evaluation with project managers up to three months after Departmental funding ceased³⁹. Some of the key learning points were:

- *“An embryonic period is needed to build trust and relationships in the network. Experimental learn-buddying, shadowing, peer group learning and on-line learning are good ways of achieving this in practice.”*
- *“Continued funding from the DfES would have helped sustain the network. Employers have not sustained it by themselves.”*
- *“Employers are more likely to understand their involvement in terms of communication with their NTO rather than being part of an ELN.”*
- *“Essential that there is a continuing role for a co-ordinating body to market the network to employers and sustain it through acting on employers' wishes – initially about listening to needs and feedback what peers think. Focus on workplace development, not off-the-job training.”*
- *“It might be beneficial to share experience across sectors.”*
- *“The majority of employers are hands-on managers in small companies under great pressure and unable to give of their time. Larger employers have shown apathy, which does not bode well for future chances, especially as our ‘last chance’ virtual network seems not to be gaining support either.”*
- *“Project funding for worthwhile causes is granted but only over a short period, leading to a battering-ram mentality to solve ingrained problems that would better benefit from a longer-term approach.”*
- *“SMEs must be engaged by identifying and discussing a genuine business need.”*

Factors associated with declining networks

One particularly pertinent example from this piece of research is the foot and mouth crisis, which severely hampered one ELN’s efforts to engage the farming community, which itself was unable to attend network meetings and found itself faced with more pressing priorities.

Employer apathy and **time pressures** were the main contributing factors with the one network that neither achieved its stated targets or progressed once Department funding ran out. This network did not manage to convince a sufficient number of employers that their time was profitably spent away from the workplace at a network meeting. In this example, the ELN work was being performed by just one individual, therefore one could argue that without a team of motivated, committed people, the chances of achieving success are reduced considerably.

³⁹ Source: First panel survey, October / November 2001. Base 32.

Another network did not continue after the funding ceased. The purpose of this network was to inform other subsequent projects being established. In this case, albeit requiring a re-launch, the project did manage to get a group of employers together for network meetings. However there was no exit strategy for the network members, so the early gains were lost.

It is fair to say that for all networks, but particularly those that are virtual or technology-reliant have taken longer than anticipated to establish themselves. There is no evidence that the virtual networks are declining however, indeed on the contrary, with the necessary infrastructure in place there is the potential (though this is hard to measure from an evaluative point of view) to engage far greater numbers of employers than by more traditional meetings. ELNs that were originally intending to utilise virtual conferencing and on-line discussions had to settle for e-mail and more familiar communication methods.

Sense of identity

“The company is coming to the end of our training and will not need it after that.”

As discussed in chapter two, a number of ELNs marketed themselves to employers without referring explicitly to the term ‘Employer Learning Network’ at all. Employers contacted in this evaluation were frequently unaware of being part of a network, having, in their mind, simply accessed training or learning through the lead organisation.

Networks that sold themselves to employers on the basis of a single proposition (for example management training) are now struggling to maintain employer interest once that proposition has been accomplished. Similarly partners brought in to serve that one specific purpose are also likely to curtail their involvement once the training etc has taken place. Employers in this type of ELN are also less likely to feel part of a network. For example, one employer explained why he was no longer involved – *“the training was a one off and I’ve had no contact since.”*

Interestingly, in the **best practice workshops** and **focus groups**, one thing lead contacts and project managers wished they’d done better was to create a brand and corporate identity for their network – something that employers could relate to and instantly recognise as something other than ‘a bit of training’.

Drop-out

Project managers⁴⁰ gave the following reasons for employers dropping out:

14 (37%) of project managers said employers have “no time for anything”

9 (24%) said employers have “no time for meetings”

8 (21%) said that employers “don’t see the value of the network to them”

8 (21%) also said that employers perceive the ELN to be “not relevant to them”

Overall, 14 respondents (38%) had encountered an experience whereby an employer joined their network for a short period of time then discontinued their involvement.

⁴⁰ Source: Summer consultation, July /August 2001. Base 38

The quotations below illustrate some of the reasons given.

- *“Apathy is typical in our region”*
- *“Business pressures made it difficult for the employers to commit time”*
- *“The contact (person) moved from the company creating a gap in communication”*
- *“They were impatient with the speed of delivery and various regional problems”*
- *“Some simply lose interest I guess”*
- *“Some had specialised training needs that the ELN could not make available yet”*
- *“Their experience of the events attended did not fulfil their expectations”*
- *“They didn’t see any immediate benefits”*

These comments point to employers’ expectations for quick and visible results that have meaning to them or their staff. They do not appear to welcome drawn out discussions, rather activities and actions that take their business forward.

Key Points:

- 25 of the 38 project managers (66%) felt the targets for engaging employers to be realistic or very realistic. Their confidence was based upon past experience and / or the availability of a sufficient database of contacts.
- The main barrier to getting employers involved in the first place, and then retaining their interest, is the lack of time they have. In project managers’ view (across all ELNs) the optimum number of employers needed to sustain any network is 20 employers, whilst the average was 28 (skewed by a couple of larger ‘member-oriented’ networks).
- Employers lose interest in the network if their expectations are not met. Having something to offer early on appears to sustain interest. As a recent paper from Tony Robinson of SFEDI highlights⁴¹, many businesses are interested almost exclusively in the “here and now”.
- Furthermore there are other potential threats to the sustainability of an ELN, which revolve around the project manager him or herself. When asked how long they felt their network would continue, 16 (42%) couldn’t or wouldn’t say. Eighteen respondents (47%) gave no answer.
- Inability to arouse sufficient employer interest quickly; ineffectual preparation and marketing are factors associated with declining networks.
- Technology-reliant networks tended to be slower to establish themselves but may prove more successful in the long term. Although how to translate hits to a website into training outcomes is problematic.
- ELNs which were marketed to employers on the basis of tackling a short term, specific issue have struggled to maintain employer interest once the initial goal was accomplished.
- ELNs marketed to employers as addressing one particular issue are more likely to decline.

⁴¹ Source: “Government Sponsored Workforce Development Initiatives for Small Firms – There is another way...” By Tony Robinson, SFEDI August 2001

To what extent did the participation of the appropriate partner organisation make the project more sustainable?

“ELNs are a chance to link our training programmes to interested employers.”

ELNs can be an good vehicle for partners – training providers, marketing and IT professionals, FE and HE institutions, GTAs, industry-training boards, public sector institutions (for example LearnDirect) to access the SME market, develop new products or diversify. Without the credibility and expertise of partners, ELNs would not have the resources or know how to deliver the kind of training employers demand. A total of 18 partners⁴² (56%) had been involved in a similar initiative to their employer network including trade association networks.

Therefore there is a mutual benefit to engaging partners in ELNs. A total of 114 partner organisations are present in 10 ELNs⁴³, with the most typical number of partners being six. There was one note of caution from one NTO as to their efforts to piggy-back / link in with the industry's established trade association:

“The trade associations are membership driven but only cover 30% of the sector whilst we at the NTO must serve everyone. Network meetings must therefore be open to all and are forced to be separate from the opportunity to link in with trade association meetings, which is unfortunate. Somewhere, in the future there must be a compromise as the trade association agenda can only reach certain parts of the overall sector”

When asked about the appeal of the ELN, nearly two-thirds of partners said it was the opportunity to consult other employers, and ‘put something back’ into the industry. Another third responded that they were interested in promoting / lobbying for training via the ELN. As well as perceiving a benefit to their own organisation (72%), nearly two-thirds of partners also held the belief that their own organisation truly had a contribution to make. There appears also to have been the feeling amongst nearly seven out of ten partners that ELNs could come up with specific and relevant training solutions needed by organisations in their industry.

Participation and Contribution

“The kudos we give to the project and marketing and PR assistance”

Only six partners⁴⁴ had contributed funds to the ELN at the six to eight month mark, and nearly 60% of respondents (19) did not know what products or services might be paid for?

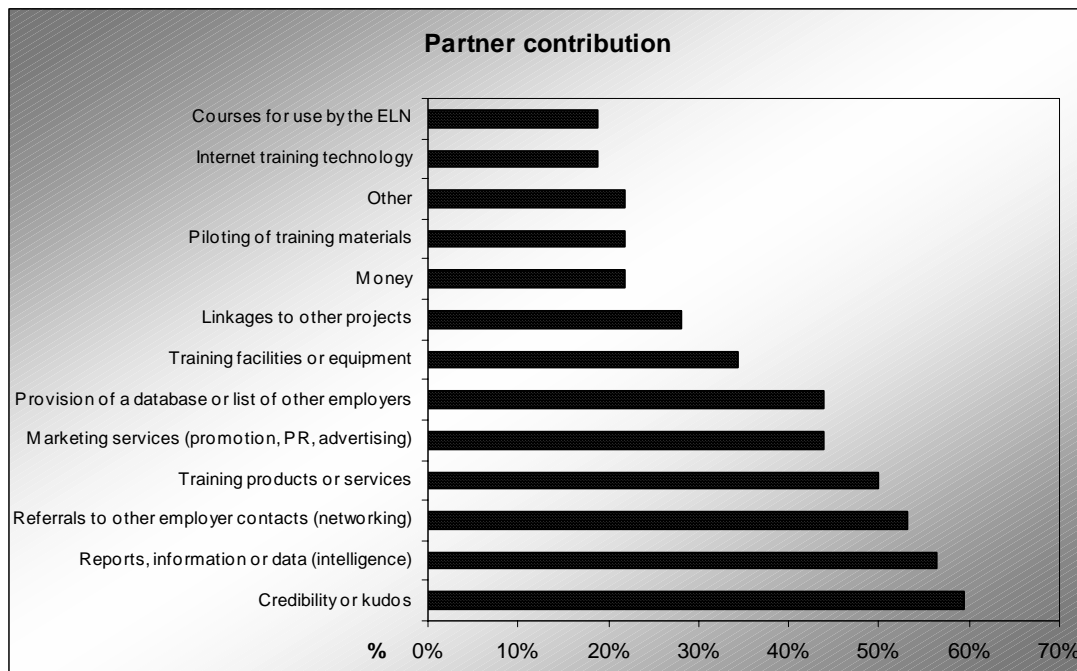
The graph on the next page sets out other partner contributions to the ELN. Credibility, intelligence and networking were the chief contributions identified by partners.

⁴² Source: Summer consultation 2001, 32 partners across 11 ELNs.

⁴³ Source: Second panel survey, January 2002

⁴⁴ Source: Summer consultation, July / August 2001. Base 32

Graph 3.4 Partner contribution



Base 32

Partners were asked which training products or services they had provided and / or used in relation to the ELN. 'Modern Apprenticeship provision' has been the most prevalent service provided by partners. The quality of training solutions was generally more than satisfactory. However 'Virtual Networks' may need to be improved. Fourteen partners (61%) taking part in the first panel survey⁴⁵ had developed training products or services for the network, ranging from marketing material to NVQ courses.

Twelve partners (52%) had also provided facilities or new learning opportunities for other network members to use since the network came into being. Conversely, two-thirds of partners stated that they had gained intelligence from being involved with an ELN that will allow them to improve their products or service, and just six (26%) reported a financial gain.

Key Points:

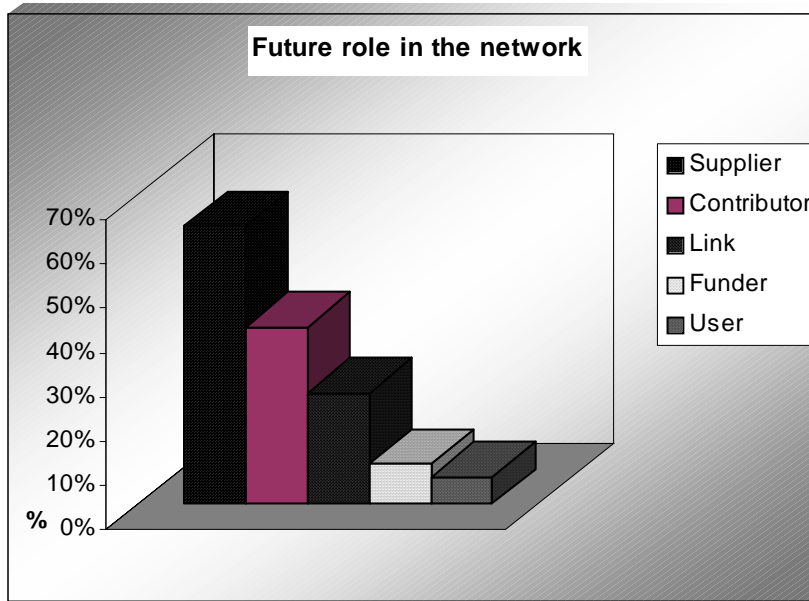
- **Partners have made a variety of contributions to their network including physical / tangible ones and also in-kind contributions that still have a value. Interestingly, just 32 out of 161 said they had contributed money to the ELN.**
- **While partners themselves are unlikely to be future sources of funding for ELNs themselves, they lie at the heart of many of the products and services that ELNs could charge for, or use to attract other funding.**
- **Without appropriate partner organisations, many ELNs would not have been able to meet their initial targets, much less sustain themselves in the medium to long term.**
- **Partner organisations bring credibility and resources to an ELN.**
- **ELNs, which focus on networking, do not rely on partners to the same extent.**

⁴⁵ October / November 2001. Base 23

Future role of the partner organisations

After six to eight months of ELN activity, Partners⁴⁶ were asked what future role they saw their organisations having within the network.

Graph 3.5 Future role in the network



Base 32

Twenty partners (63%) said that their organisation was a ‘supplier of services to the network’ in the long term. A total 40% (13) of the partners see their organisation as ‘a contributor in kind to the network’. Only a small proportion felt their organisation would fund or use the network in the long term (three respondents).

One example of potential, best practice can be seen by 10 of the partners (25%) who said they would be *“an organisation that can link the ELN to other funded projects.”* Another derives from one project manager with a priority to: *“involve partners more closely in both bids and supplying reductions in cost of training.”*

Key Points:

- Partners able to contribute to the ELN on a number of levels – developing and supplying services; contributing as a member, helping to spot opportunities – will undoubtedly contribute to the sustainability of ELNs.
- There is however no evidence that ELNs without partner organisations are any less sustainable, since they have different objectives.

⁴⁶ Source: Summer partner consultation, July / August 2001

To what extent did Employer Learning Network projects continue after Departmental funding ended?

“It is fundamental to the principle of the ELN that the employers sustain their own involvement and are not just led by a management team”.

In total, 16 out of 18 ELNs continued in some form after the initial Department funding ceased. The table below sets out what happened to each ELN.

Table 3.3 ELN outcomes post funding

<u>ELN</u>	<u>Activity ceased</u>	<u>Activity declined</u>	<u>Activity levels remained the same</u>	<u>Activity levels increased</u>	<u>Comments</u>
Bakery ELN		4			Lack of administrative co-ordination after funding contributed to a loss of impetus.
Body Repair and Refinishing Trade ELN	4				This network did not continue after funding period ended.
Cross Sector ELN (Business Link Wessex)				4	Number of employers has increased, as has the number of products and services offered. Declined sponsorship offer in order to remain independent.
Electrotechnical ELN			4		Increased awareness of existing products rather than introduced new ones – one outcome was greater awareness of training routes by SMEs
Footwear Manufacturing, Leather Production, Leathergoods and Shoe Repair Industries ELN			4		The main outcome has been the opportunity for the ELN members to tackle their training needs.
Glass NTO			4		Funded by NTO, the number of employers has fallen by 10%, while the number of partners has increased.
E-Skills ELN				4	Working closely with NTOs to meet national work based learning targets.
IT Services ELN (ATG)				4	Post funding, the network is larger, with better resources to push MAs
Land based ELN				4	Accessed Local Initiative Funds from LSC, and working with LLSCs to achieve ELN outcomes.
Language ELN				4	Obtained ESF Objective Three funding to work in five sub-regions.

Publishing ELN (Magazine, Newspaper, Directory & Database)	–	–	–	–	Lead contact unavailable for comment.
Polymer ELN				4	Stimulated skills and development initiatives for SMEs, seen an increase in the number of SMEs gaining nationally recognised qualifications and introducing new initiatives.
Printing, Graphics and Communications ELN		4			‘Political reasons’ prevented meetings from continuing after funding ceased. Planning a re-launch.
Property Services NTO		4			After through pilot, working with LearnDirect to deliver modules.
Retail and Distribution	4				Met stated targets. Network in operation only as long as Department funding available. Lessons learnt used to develop other networks nation-wide.
SFEDI – Cross sector ELN				4	Exceeded delivery targets and secured funding from a variety of sources, for example iIP UK. Enhanced SME engagement and enhanced four websites.
Social Housing Network		4			Planning a second phase of activity in conjunction with a NHS Trust.
Sport and Recreation ELN			4		Activity levels stayed the same or increased since funding ceased. Accessed a variety of funding sources.

Key Points:

- ELNs that managed to increase their levels of activity did so through accessing further funding, examining innovative ways of increasing employer involvement and using the ELN forum as a vehicle to achieve national learning targets.
- ELNs that saw the level of activity decline or stop had typically not found or sought further funding. Even in these networks, the positive outcomes from the six-month funding period continued to be seen.
- ELNs that struggled to find further funds are more likely to have seen the level of activity drop, or at best stay the same.
- There is a very mixed picture on tapping into external funding. Some ELNs have manoeuvred their networks into applicable funding streams, while others have struggled. The expertise of the project manager and culture of the lead organisation are critical factors in this regard. Some project managers have strong views about the role of the LSC and how future funding should be made available through them for the development of sub-regional or regional (sector-focused) networks.

Numbers achieved post funding⁴⁷

QA identified four sustainability issues that were tested out on lead contacts. Each was asked: “Since DfES funding ceased has any of the following occurred?”

The results are shown in the table below.

Table 3.4 Sustainability Issues

Sustainability issue	Increase	Comments made by lead contacts (February 2002)
Number of employers engaged	10	<i>“Although we have not monitored the exact number, it was originally 200+ and is now probably about 1,000.”</i>
Number of partners engaged	5	<i>“As a result, the number of Modern Apprenticeships in our sector has jumped from 150 to 600 – this is excellent news.”</i>
Number of networks	2	<i>“Our current proposals include extending our on-line learning, a new technical resource centre in the North East. The ELN is also looking to create executive forums through which directors and managing directors act as links between SMEs and the public sector by contributing to and developing industry strategy.”</i>
Number of services / products on offer	6	<i>“It is still a single network, but with many more services / products on offer for the long and short-term unemployed – for example Modern Apprenticeship programmes.”</i>

Base=15. As this was a multi-response question, so the total exceeds 15.

Key Points:

- No ELN is yet financed solely by member contributions. Employer resistance, and the need to offer value for money means that at this stage in the development of ELNs additional support has been required to fund activities and staff.
- The ability to secure further funds rests to a greater extent with the ability of the lead contact to seek out likely opportunities and submit a credible bid. Multi-network ELNs have an advantage because they can move to where funds are available.





Funding from other sources

After 9-11 months of ELN activity⁴⁸, 32 project managers across 13 ELNs were asked whether they had tried any of the following means of generating income.



⁴⁷ Based upon 15 closure interviews, February 2002

⁴⁸ Source: First Panel Survey, October / November 2001

12 (36%) had introduced		Membership fee;
26 (79%) had levied		Payment for training services;
18 (55%) had tried		Writing bids for external funding;
1 (3%) had introduced		On-line subscription for training products;
16 (48%) had done		Something else.

Examples of doing ‘something else’ include developing commercially viable products – for example ISO 9000.

Payment for training services was clearly the preferred option to charging for membership. Throughout this evaluation, the majority of ELN members had access to free or subsidised training, so it is still unclear and untested whether employers will actually pay a sufficient sum for ELN products and services in order to make the networks sustainable. In some cases, the ELN has to shoulder the majority of the cost in order to persuade employers of the worth of training.

ELNs have been able to access European funding, unlock LSC funds for basic skills and vocational learning and development and ally themselves closely with NTO and potentially Sector Skills Councils. To do this, ELNs have demonstrated value in a number of areas including:

- Capacity building;
- Employer-led learning and development;
- Developing basic skills;
- Linking the ELN to identified LSC sector / workforce development priorities stated in their respective corporate strategy documents;
- Linking in with FE/HE partners involved with ESF bids looking at the policy field of ‘adaptability and entrepreneurship’ focusing;
- Addressing skills gaps;
- Latching onto LIF funding priorities;
- Projects that would meet RDA skills development fund objectives.

One ELN (involving Group Training Associations) is linking the ELN activities to activities to reach national targets for Modern Apprenticeships. The ELN may be able to access additional funds from the central LSC. One lead contact pointed to the potential for suppliers / sponsors:

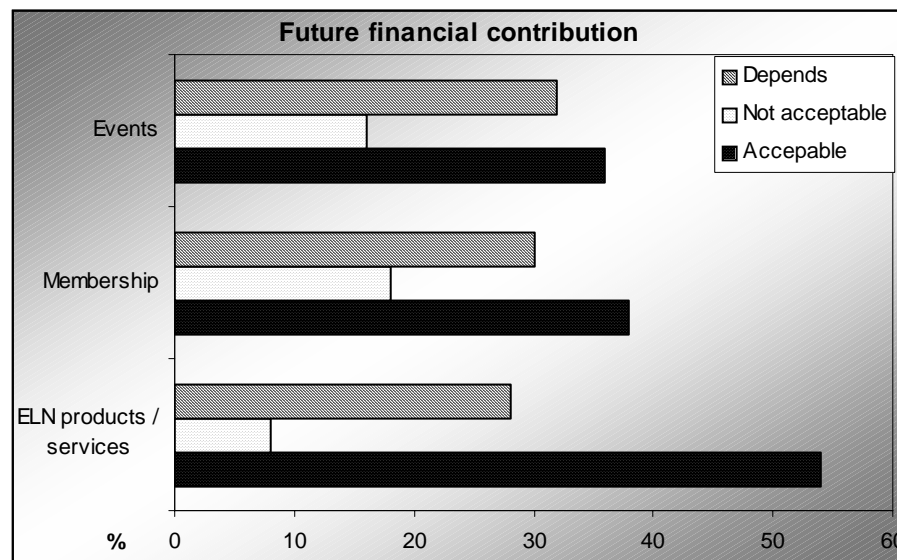
“Perhaps employers will contribute towards the cost of courses, but actually suppliers to the industry are better potential sponsors than the network participants.”

Future paid services

Employers were generally realistic and open to charges in order to ensure the ELN’s sustainability. This was particularly the case with specific products and services, and to a

lesser extent for membership and attending events. In every case, between a quarter and a third of respondents said “*It depends*” – highlighting the importance of fixing sensible prices. The graph on the following page illustrates employer opinion as to how an ELN could sustain itself financially.

Graph 3.6 Future financial contribution



Source: Summer consultation 2001. Base 265

The panel surveys reveal that only about 20% of employers had paid for ELN membership and a slightly smaller proportion had paid money towards a service provided by the network. There is still a great deal of subsidised training taking place even 12-15 months after ELNs started.

Non-users identified customised training, a shared training centre and one-to-one business coaching as the services that may encourage them to (re) join. Virtual, on-line products and services were less popular, indicating that face-to-face contact remains important.

In July / August 2001, that is around the six to eight month point, it was a priority for 21 project managers⁴⁹ (54%) to deliver training products and services on a fee basis, and 12 (32%) were trying to increase the number of employers paying for ELN services. One way to achieve this is by gaining accreditation for new learning models or courses. Seven (18%) were very successful in this regard, with a similar proportion either successful or quite successful. Over half of project managers (21 respondents or 55%) did not consider this to be applicable to their network.

⁴⁹ Base 38

Summary

Sustainability

As employers' needs changed ELNs were required to change with them. Without the benefit of pump-prime funding, managing and maintaining networks was almost as intensive for co-ordinators as it had been in the first six months.

To sustain activities to the level when DfES funding was available required ELN lead organisations to be commercially shrewd, astute in securing further funding and prepared to investigate the potential for employer levy, membership fees or other financial contributions.

- 11 of the original 18 networks said they had been able to sustain or even extend activity levels post-funding, whilst four had dropped activity levels, and two did not continue beyond the funding period. The activity levels of one ELN are not known.

The role of partners became increasingly important as the networks matured in that, for example,

- 19 project managers across 10 of the ELNs identified no fewer than 114 partners involved in their activities one year after conception.

Sustaining employer interest was achieved by developing a range of networking, learning or training services. These included: workshops and seminars; on-line training materials; management training programmes; basic skills training; ICT training; modular learning programmes; Modern Apprenticeship provision; customised training; supply of professional trainers; shared training centre / facilities; and 1-2-1 business coaching.

- 106 out of 312 employers (34%) had used and rated their satisfaction with these services. The most used services were workshops and seminars by 49 employers (16%), on-line training materials by 28 employers (9%) management training programmes by 22 employers and modular learning programmes by 21 employers (7%). Of all services used those perceived as the highest quality were workshops and seminars and customised training.

Sustainability is often interpreted as the ability of a project to be self-financing.

- Only one in five employers (32 out of 161 interviewed in January 2002) had paid for network membership, and that only less than 30 employers had paid for training despite 69 having received this benefit. ELNs can't sustain themselves, it would appear, within 12- 15 months by employer contributions alone.

The implication is that ELNs must seek out alternative external funding opportunities.

However, sustainability in this study also means the survival and evolution of networks, the ability to continue a dialogue with employers and the development of collaborative working amongst employer groups. There are a number of factors that appear to help sustain, or undermine, the sustainability of ELNs, set out on the table on the next page.

Table 3.5 Factors affecting Sustainability

Positive factors Sustainable networks	Negative factors Less likely to be sustainable networks
Effective and committed project team (adequately skilled and resourced)	One man band managed network
Setting realistic, time-bound targets	No feasibility study or evidence of training need / demand
Credibility of project team and partners	Rushed, poor quality training
Effective use of partner organisations	No follow up communication
Effective communication channels	Unable to engage or sustain employer involvement
Quality of customised products and services	Ineffectual pilot materials or unable to agree what training required
Ability to improve and adapt products and services	Unwilling to adapt
On-going improvement to products and services	Off-the-shelf products or services
Capacity to innovate	Nothing fresh to offer beyond initial training
Ability to secure further funding and high % of private sector matched funding	Delays / inability to secure more funding
Clear identity	ELN identity indistinct from training or service.
Exceeding (managing) expectations	Lack of credibility
Valued networking	Personnel changes / lack of continuity within network team
Increasing membership	Insufficient pump-priming (funding)

Chapter Four: Outcomes Achieved by Networks

Introduction

It was never the intention that the Department's funding should seek to bring about hard, measurable outputs rather to understand what sort of outcomes could be achieved by networks having had pump-priming. This chapter examines the outcomes and impacts that can be attributed to ELN activity over 8-15 months.

How effective were the Employer Learning Networks in developing both hard and soft training outcomes for clients.

Hard Training Outcomes

"We are beginning to develop training for what we actually need not what we are told we need."

Six to eight months after ELN activity began (September 2001), 109 employers⁵⁰ (35%) considered their ELN to be either very capable or capable of identifying workforce training and development requirements. ICT, management training and basic skills work were the top three needs identified by employers overall. As the quotation above illustrates, some employer-led training was also taking place.

Overall, it was estimated that more than 800 employees have been involved in the outcome of work started by ELNs⁵¹, mainly through accessing a range of training. The number of employees involved for each company ranged from just one to 100.

In the two panel surveys, a small number of employers identified training benefits they had experienced as a result of involvement with the ELN. Fifty-seven out of 239 employers interviewed in the first panel survey⁵² (24%) had developed or improved their training plan as a result of ELN involvement and 38 (16%) had improved their staff induction procedures for new recruits. In total, 17 employers (7%) out of the 161 interviewed in the second panel survey⁵³ said that they had committed to Investors in People as a result of involvement with the ELN and 32 companies (20%) had improved their awareness of quality issues. We shall look in more detail at training benefits for employers later in this chapter, but 64 companies (40%) had benefited from training in various forms.

Of 161 employers interviewed in the second panel survey, 31 (19%) identified staff who had started training leading to a qualification, and up to 24 employers (15%) had staff who had already completed a qualification as a result of ELN involvement.

⁵⁰ Base 312

⁵¹ Source: Second panel survey, base 161 companies

⁵² At or around the 9-11 month mark (October / November 2001)

⁵³ At or around the 11-13 month mark (January / February 2002)

Key Points:

By the time ELNs were around 11-13 months old:

- Just under half of all employers interviewed had increased their awareness of training or skills.
- 19% of employers identified staff who had started training leading to a qualification and between 12% and 15% had staff who had completed a qualification as a result of ELN involvement.
- At a company level, 24% of employers had developed or improved their training plan.
- These are arguably quite impressive results, but we should bear in mind the backdrop of declining numbers of employers involved over time with ELNs. Nevertheless a small core of actively involved employers appear to have recorded identifiable hard outcomes.

Soft training outcomes





“The best thing about ELN involvement so far? Staff motivation has improved.”

So-called soft training outcomes are those where there is unlikely to be a definite outcome or measurable result. Soft outcomes typically relate to more intangible elements, such as motivation, confidence, knowledge, understanding and awareness. In the first panel survey, 53 of the 239 employers (22%) noted an increase in staff motivation because of new personal development opportunities. In the second panel survey, 48 of 161 employers (30%) identified this outcome.

The knock on effect on other employers was also identified: *“other members of staff have ‘dipped into’ certain modules from time to time without actually being involved.”*

Also, employees have learnt from one another through networking – *“Networking to find out other people's approaches to problems.”*

A small sample of 40 beneficiaries⁵⁴ was asked what they had gained as a result of ELN involvement. Here are the findings in relation to soft outcomes. These findings are not representative of all ELNs and should be treated with caution.

3 individuals (8%)		Increased self-esteem
10 (25%)		Gained recognition from their employer (kudos)
16 (40%)		Had furthered their personal interest in the subject
10 (25%)		Had tried learning in a different situation.

⁵⁴ Source: Second panel survey. Base 40 across 4 ELNs

Key Points:

- Two in five employers could point to improved staff motivation as a result of ELN involvement.
- Other staff had accessed training or learning materials unofficially.
- Clearly, more than half of employers involved in ELNs have not benefited from training: pointing to the difficulties of setting up and sustaining a network, certainly for those ELNs that had a training delivery focus.
- However, the long-term benefits to involving employers in network activities are likely to be felt by employees in turn. Over the course of this evaluation, this process has begun.
- The small sample of beneficiaries interviewed cited increased self-esteem, recognition from their employer, pursuing their personal interest in the subject and trying learning in a different situation as soft outcomes.

How many individuals participating in Employer Learning Networks obtained training qualifications or accreditation of skills?

To reiterate, 31 of the 161 employers (19%) identified staff who had started training that will lead to a qualification and between 12% and 15% had employees who had already gained a qualification. In total, 17 of 40 (43%) employee beneficiaries interviewed had either achieved or were working towards a recognised qualification (or a unit thereof).

There is no information available to quantify how many individuals participating in ELNs have gone on to further education or training. Moreover, employee beneficiaries were often only nominally aware of being part of an ELN, so correct attribution would be difficult. However, in total, seven (18%) beneficiaries⁵⁵ had followed up their ELN-related training or learning, be it moving to the next module of on-line learning, a more advanced NVQ qualification or simply because continuous learning is the norm in that profession.

Key Point:

- As a result of the ELNs, one in five companies (31 out of 161) had staff who started training towards a recognised qualification and up to one in six identified staff who had already gained a qualification.

How effective has the provision from Employer Learning Networks been in alleviating skill shortages for participants?

“Training needs analysis done by network leading to vocational qualifications”

In order to engage employers, ELNs often had to target specific skills shortages within an industry or occupation group. For example, seeking to improve the skills of IT technicians. Therefore, a mark of the effectiveness of the ELN will be the extent to which those gaps have been addressed. Furthermore, 31 employers (19%)⁵⁶ interviewed in the second employer panel had received a skills audit assessment.

⁵⁵ Base 40

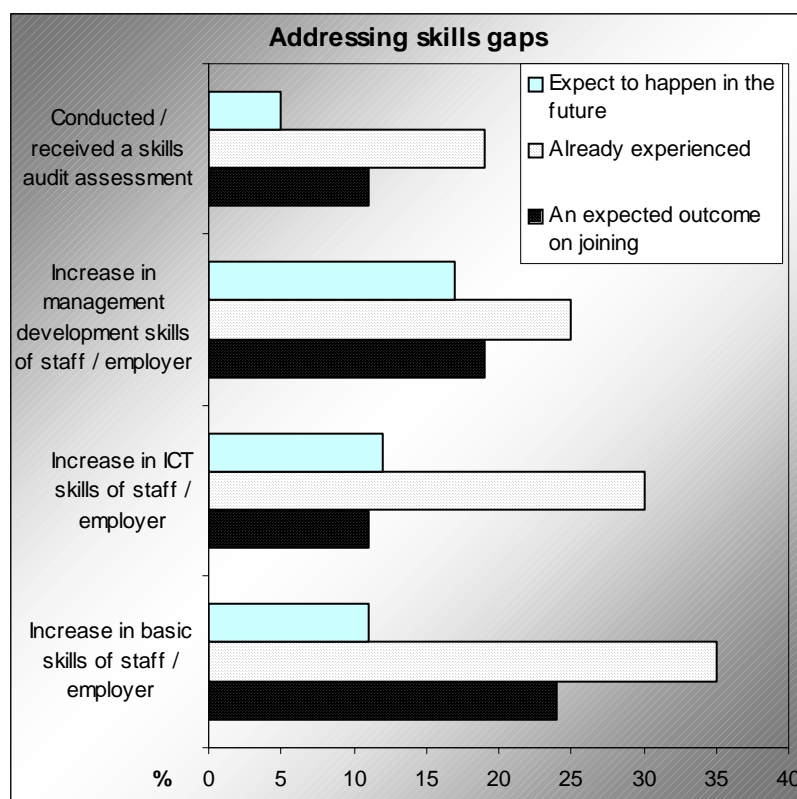
⁵⁶ Base 161

As we have seen, employers highlighted IT, basic skills and management training, as the top three skills needs. Looking at these three skills needs in turn, we see an indication of how effective ELNs have been at tackling these particular skills shortages (the figures in brackets illustrate the proportion of project managers who stated that these benefits had been enjoyed by employers as a result of the ELN).

- 25 (58%) of employers noted an increase in the basic skills of staff and employer;
- 18 (74%) of employers had seen an increase in ICT skills of its staff;
- 22 (63%) identified management development skills improving.⁵⁷

Moreover, ELNs involved with vocational learning are also working with the unemployed, who represent an additional (unquantified) set of beneficiaries in this evaluation. In the second panel survey (January 2002), we asked employers whether addressing these skills gaps had been expected, if it had occurred, and if not, whether it was an expected outcome. Employer responses are shown in the graph below.

Graph 4.1 Addressing skills gaps



Source: Second panel survey 2002. Base 161

The findings from the summer consultation of employers and partners revealed that self-interest has been the principle motivation for employers and partners – an anticipation that their organisation or their employees will benefit from ELN outcomes. Twenty-one out of 38 project managers (54%) considered that the ELN had been either successful or very successful at making training more accessible.

⁵⁷ Source: First panel survey October / November 2001. Base 239 employers

Earlier in this chapter, we discussed how employers had seen improvement to employee skills in relation to IT, basic skills and management development skills. Employees were involved in a range of activities, including IT courses, vocational qualifications and work-specific courses. There was also more generic training being accessed, typically health and safety or hygiene. There have also been other softer outcomes that demonstrate improvements in the skills of workers. The example below illustrates how employees have been engaged and become more aware of their training needs as a result. More importantly, in this instance they are also acting on those needs.

“Their discussions have led them to develop their own training plans tailored to their specific local needs.”

Key Points:

- **An increasing proportion of employers and employees has benefited from improved basic skills and ICT skills. The proportion accessing management development training fell between the 9-11 month point and the 11-13 month mark (October 2001 and January 2002).**
- **More employers have experienced basic skills, ICT or management skills benefits than had been expected. However, project managers seem to think that even greater proportions of employers have probably derived these benefits than is reported by employers themselves.**
- **Employers noted a series of examples relating to how employees had taken part in training that had led to improvements in their performance, outlook and awareness of training.**

How far do individuals participating in Employer Learning Networks consider that it had enhanced their professional / skills / personal development?

As we have seen, some employers and partners have seen tangible skills benefits, and increased uptake and awareness of training opportunities. A small sample of beneficiaries (40), across just three ELNs were interviewed. While their responses are by no means representative, they do provide an indication of how the professional / skills and personal development set in place by the ELN is filtering into the larger workforce.

30% of employee beneficiaries⁵⁸ (12 respondents) identified the chance to learn something new as a positive outcome of their ELN experience. 40% had already, or expected to achieve professional advancement as a result of the training received. Respondents were also asked to identify examples of how they had applied what they had learned. Many of these cited improved personal skills, for example listening, concentration, reliability and organisation. Responses included applying particular skills, for example: *“Difficult experiences at work related to disciplinary action but had learnt skills to deal with this”*.

This evaluation also sought to draw up more qualitative responses from employers about how they have applied something that they have learned or tried through the network in either

⁵⁸ Source: Second panel survey, January / February 2002

work or life. Individual employers had applied IT skills, improved communication with staff and developed new systems for mentoring, assessment and training.

Key Points:

- **Employee beneficiaries identified personal outcomes that had helped them in the workplace, both in terms of technical skills and softer, ‘people’ skills.**
- **Employers also highlighted a range of benefits ranging from improved confidence, new IT skills, specific courses, advising other network members, personal development planning and developing a more integrated approach to business as a result of the ELN.**

What were the benefits to employers?

ELNs were set up to facilitate employers working together and accessing suitable training. In the first panel survey, 18 of the 32 project managers⁵⁹ (55%) were very confident that continued participation in the network would bring employers benefits, with six (18%) expressing themselves ‘quite confident’. By the second panel survey (January 2002), 14 of the 19 (74%) project managers were very confident that if employers remained in the network it would be worth their while.

The level of potential benefits of ELN involvement was clearly a crucial factor influencing an employer’s decision to get involved. In total, 140 employers of the 312 interviewed when ELNs were between six and eight months old (July and August 2001 – 45%) felt that there were potentially lots of benefits, while over one-third (115 employers or 37%) considered that the ELN would be ‘of some benefit’. Interestingly, 31 employers (10%) didn’t have an opinion of the likely benefits to them or their business, and 18 respondents (6%) felt that the ELN would be ‘no benefit at all’ – but joined anyway! Also, if the initial contact was not followed up, the employer was likely to either leave the ELN or do nothing – either way not a positive advocate for the ELN.

After six to eight months, between 18% and 43% (between 56 and 134 employers) reported that they had experienced some benefit from ELN involvement.

Networking

Many of the employers interviewed made comments relating to the opportunity to network, with some ELNs introducing new services (for example executive committees) precisely for this purpose. Nineteen (12%) employers had done business with other members of the network for the first time⁶⁰.

The findings show that employers have benefited from being able to discuss problems and business practice with like-minded individuals in industry. For example:

“Group discussions with other companies help with solutions to our problems”
“Been able to get licenses to carry out specific work”

⁵⁹ Base: 33

⁶⁰ Source: Second panel survey. Base 161

“Been able to resolve internal confusion over new data protection act”

“Hearing tales from other people in industry – e.g. encouragement from their success and learning from what other companies have done successfully.”

Key Point:

- The benefits of networking have enabled employers to resolve business problems and for a small proportion, create new business relationships.

Training benefits

When interviewed 6-8 months after ELNs began (Jul/Aug 2001) 164 (54%) of employers anticipated taking part in training or using another ELN service in the next nine months. While the proportion of companies using an ELN product or service did increase after this point, it did not reach the level anticipated by employers. This is perhaps explained by the fall off in activity experienced by some ELNs and over-optimistic employer forecasts about future training.

Project managers⁶¹ were asked what benefits employers had accessed as a result of ELN involvement. The majority – 15 (79%) – argued that companies had not only increased their awareness about training and skills but had seen a fiscal benefit in the form of reduced costs by accessing joint training.

Graph 4.2 Employer training (Project Manager Perspective)



Base: 19

Training benefits

In the two panel surveys, employers were asked to identify training benefits:

- 39% (between 63 and 93 employers) had seen an increase in training opportunities for staff;
- 16% (between 26 and 38 employers) had introduced new training programmes for staff;
- Overall, 43% (103 employers) had increased their awareness about training or skills, rising to 52% in the second panel survey⁶² (84 employers);
- Between 39% and 46% (74–93 employers) had seen an increase in training opportunities;
- In the second panel survey, 52 of the 161 employers (32%) had experienced industry relevant courses;
- 42 employers (26%) had staff involved with work-based learning (NVQs);

⁶¹ Source: Second panel survey. Base 19

⁶² Albeit with a smaller sample size: 161 employers in January compared to 239 in October.

- 21 employers (13%) had taken part in on-line learning.

Another spin-off of training activity is the way the company is perceived by customers and competitors (akin to committing to Investors in People). In the words of one employer:

“Customer awareness...it makes us look more attractive if [we’re] seen to be looking at ways of bettering ourselves”.

Some partner organisations had also experienced training benefits for their own staff, for example eight partners from 23 interviewed (35%) had seen an increase in training opportunities for staff as a result of ELN involvement, falling to seven partners (44%) in the second panel survey⁶³.

Key Points:

- **Project managers were confident that employers had benefited from increased awareness and access to training.**
- **The chief early benefits to being involved in an ELN were networking opportunities (particularly the sharing of problems) and the chance to access (customised) training. These have remained true.**
- **11-13 months on, 58 employers (42%) had used an ELN product or service and a similar proportion had seen an increase in training opportunities.**

Have ELNs listened to employers and met their needs?

“Listening to what contractors want whereas, in the past, college courses have contained lots of irrelevant material the lads never use.”

At or around the six to eight month mark (September 2001), many employers were unable to give an example of how the ELN had listened to and responded to their needs. By **January 2002**, the time of the second and final panel survey, 69 employers (43%) agreed that the ELN had listened to and responded to their needs⁶⁴. Common needs identified included; developing ICT skills; management training; increasing basic skills in the workplace, and courses for new recruits.

Table 4.1 Whether ELNs have listened to employers and met their needs

Listened?	After 6-8 months	After 9-11 months	After 12 months	Change
YES	57% (Very effectively, effectively or quite effectively)	63%	43%	-14%
NO		29%		
Other		8%		

⁶³ Base 23 and 16 respectively

⁶⁴ Source: Second Employer Panel, January 2002. Base 161.

Looking at the full set of responses made by employers⁶⁵, we are of the opinion that ELNs made significant progress between August and October / November in listening to and meeting the needs of their members. Since that time, the level has fallen to below August 2001 levels, indicating that either ELNs are becoming complacent or no longer have the resources or suitable propositions to engage employers with.

Key Points:

- **One third of employers considered the ELN to be effective at identifying training and workforce development issues.**
- **Employers cited examples of ELNs responding to identified training needs.**
- **The majority of ELNs cannot claim to be employer led, rather they help to identify and respond to employer needs. The skills of the lead contact are still very much required to maintain impetus.**

Confidence that continuing to participate would be worthwhile

With use of products and services gradually increasing, but the perception that ELNs were not listening and responding to employers increasing, will employers remain involved with an ELN? Will the benefits be worth the commitment required?

Employers were asked how confident they were that continued participation in the network would bring the organisation and its employees benefits. Over the evaluation period, employers' confidence that involvement in the ELN would bring benefits has remained relatively stable.

Table 4.2 Confidence levels in the network bringing benefits

Confidence	After 9-11 months⁶⁶	After 12 months⁶⁷	Overall Change
Very / quite confident	58%	61%	+3%
Not very / not at all confident	25%	27%	+2%

Those that were quite confident or very confident were so because:

- *“Feedback from other employers is good”*
- *“The quality of the initiative is very high”*
- *“Networking will save money e.g. sharing IT problems rather than employing costly specialists”*
- *“Opportunity to learn cheaply and not buy in expensive professionals”*

⁶⁵ Source: First panel survey October / November 2001. Base 239

⁶⁶ Source: First panel survey. Base 239

⁶⁷ Source: Second panel survey. Base 161

Those that were not confident said so because:

- *“If I asked them for support I daresay it would be forthcoming but I would have to be proactive”*
- *“Current situation with agriculture is poor. I cannot envisage spending anything on training”*
- *“No report or any other follow up from initial visit”*

Examples of using new learning or skills in work or life

In total, 61 of the 161 employers (38%) stated that being part of the network had enabled them to achieve something that they would not otherwise have achieved. Employers were also asked to give a real example of how involvement with the ELN had translated to life applications or the workplace setting. Benefits listed included:

- *70 staff learned Outlook 2000 on a course and are more confident with e-mails, contacts and tasks functions;*
- *Advertising sales course had improved customer service skills;*
- *Better EXCEL and PowerPoint skills being used;*
- *Helped employer train other estate agents (capacity building);*
- *Extra training to help employer become an assessor;*
- *Made more aware of cultural differences.*

Key Points:

- **Despite falling numbers of employers stating that the ELN was listening and meeting their needs, confidence that involvement would (or would continue to) bring benefits, remained stable to optimistic.**
- **38% of employers stated that being part of the network had enabled them to achieve something that they would not otherwise have achieved.**
- **Employers were able to give examples of how benefits had translated into the workplace.**

Summary

Outcomes

Although collecting hard, measurable outputs were not stipulated in the Department's bid to would-be ELNs, there have been a series of outcomes in the six to nine months after funding ceased outcomes for employers, employees and partners.

ELNs were reporting outcomes for employers and employees from the six-month mark – for example improved confidence or awareness of training. There was a range of outcomes for a diminishing number of actively involved employers – from increased take up of training and qualifications and attendance at networking meetings to learn from other employers.

- 39% of employers had seen an increase in training opportunities for staff;
- 24% of employers had developed or improved their training plan as a result of ELN involvement.

Many types of soft outcomes for employers and employees are achievable from the six-month point, with 42% of employers accessing ELN products or services 12-14 months after ELNs began. Confidence that continued participation would be worthwhile increased slightly over the evaluation period. There is some evidence of networking leading to new business relationships and spin out companies.

By the time ELN projects were 11-13 months old we estimate that collectively they have:

- Affected and signed up in some way 2,361 separate employing organisations though this figure may be larger if we include two very separately styled virtual 'engagement projects'.
- Marketed and promoted services to upwards of 32,700 businesses.
- Affected 6,022 employees or beneficiaries in receipt of some form of training / learning borne out of the work of the networks again rising dramatically to 36,000 when one includes the other types of network projects
- More employers have experienced basic skills, ICT or management skills benefits for their staff than had been expected via ELN activities e.g. 39 employers of 161 (24%) expected basic skills improvements whilst 56 (35%) experienced this benefit;
- 33 out of 40 employee beneficiaries would recommend the ELN to others.

As the chart on the next page shows, the estimated cost per participant to 'affect' or 'engage' employees is £320 for 16 ELN projects, and £13 for the two large scale, virtual engagement projects.

Total fund towards 18 ELN projects lasting six months
per project to July 2001
£2,391,141

16 projects that could be evaluated in terms of
employer and employee outcomes received
collective funding of

£1,929,972

2 projects markedly different in terms of approach
and aims of engaging employers using virtual
methods received funding of

£461,169

Number of employers affected after 11-13 months

Min. 1,561

different employing organisations engaged / signed up
by the 16 projects

2,361 +

if we include an estimated 800 employers engaged by
one of the two projects analysed separately (see right)
because of more complex ways of analysing employer
engagement

30,500

(could include a proportion of
employees as well as employers –
website / virtual engagement)

Cost to 'affect' or 'engage' each organisation

£1,236.37 (16 projects)
£923,33 (17 projects)

£15.12

Number of employees affected after 11-13 months

6,022

36,000+

(of which 9,000 are likely to be mostly employees
from one project, but a large proportion of the
others may be employers from the other project)

Cost to 'affect' or 'engage' employees

£320.49

£12.81

Chapter Five: Best Practice Toolkit for Future Practitioners

Best practice and hints for future practitioners

In order to inform best practice, two workshops were held with two selected ELNs to explore what had gone well, lessons learned and to arrive at a toolkit of ELN criteria to inform any future funding bids.

Two Employer Learning Network projects were identified as exemplifying best practice for differing reasons, namely:

Sport and Recreation ELN – because it clearly exceeded contract outputs by a fair margin and we wished to understand how this had occurred. Furthermore, in their final report to the Department, the lead organisation suggested that each of the five regional networks established with the help of the DfES funding had a sustainable future and we wished to understand the expertise in developing links to other projects and external funding.

The Business X-Change – because it met all contract targets from scratch and because it appears from both project management team and employers' perspectives to have been marketed well in a project that had a cross-sectoral remit. This was a project that appeared to be truly employer led.

A short summary of the two projects appears below, followed by issues arising from the two workshops and finally the toolkit in draft form.

Sport and Recreation ELN – best practice

Overview

One of the key objectives of this project was to establish employer networks in geographical areas where the NTO for sport, recreation and allied occupations had previously been under-represented. The five employer groups were established in London, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, East Midlands, West Midlands and Yorkshire. The project effectively started in January 2001, with a scheduled completion at the end of June. In practice this time was too short to ensure all project aspirations were met, though the outputs were achieved. Each network was separately resourced and co-ordinated by a project manager who didn't have the luxury of working full-time, but who nevertheless had a clear responsibility for driving their regional networks forward. The project centred on the training and development needs for small and micro businesses, with each network developing its own agenda and priorities. With £225,000 DfES funding the main outcomes and outputs of the project by the end of this funding period were:

Table 5.1 Main outcomes and outputs of projects

Activity	London	Hants & IoW	East Midlands	West Midlands	Yorkshire	Total Project
Number of employers who joined/participated	14	39	20	37	36	146
Number of other organisations – FEs, LSCs	6	11	3	3	5	28
Number of employer network meetings	2	4	3	9	3	21
Approx. number of employees involved	36+	120	80	110	60+	406+
No. of employers using Partner in Success	2	35	3+	100+	29	169+
No. of employers using MAPS Performer	2	4	0	0	7+	13+
No. of employers using PRIDE for employees	7	3	0	3	7	20+
No. of completed People Skills Scoreboard	2	12	0	20	6	40
Approx. number of Indiv. Learning A/Cs opened	10+	60	10	50-100	10	140-190+
Was the Internet used for communication	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	-
Was SPRITO website used?	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	-
Number of employees who received training	14	95	80	Up to 150	After project end	Up to 339
Approx. cost of providing training	£1,000	£6,000	£8,175	£10,000	£12,000 to end of year	£37,175 inc. one est. to end year
Approx. value of match funding by others	£12,000	£23,300	£35,000	£25,000	£12,000	£107,300
Are networks continuing after project completion?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	-

Three of the five networks have been fully sustained since DfES funding ceased in 2001 with increased numbers of employers engaged and services used. The other two networks exist but in a different guise to the originally recognisable ELN format.

The Business X-Change – best practice

Overview

The second and final best practice workshop was with the Business X-Change, a cross-sector network, which was started from scratch with the DfES⁶⁸ pump-prime funding. This network has been particularly successful at listening to and responding to employer needs with customised, effective training. The Business X-Change is a business-to-business network set up specifically to assist small and medium (SME) businesses in Hampshire, the Isle of Wight and latterly Dorset. It is non-profit making and seeks to bring together like-minded owners and managers to share ideas, knowledge and resources across all sectors of industry. It is run by the members for the benefit of the members, and was sponsored by The Business Link X-Change until 31st March 2002.

The vision for Business X-Change is to encourage further collaborative action by employers to increase their capacity to develop the high skilled and world-class workforces they need. The primary aim is to assist small and medium-sized organisations to establish groups of employers who can work together to share resources, expertise and knowledge to develop the skills of their staff. This is achieved through meetings that are led by employers and facilitated by a network broker.

“We have very good mentors who allow us to use their expertise to the full”

The emphasis is on gaining confidence and trust.

“I joined because the content was attractive and there were companies in the same position as mine who could help me solve some of my problems. That has happened and more than that I have made contacts that are saving me money. I don’t want to re-invent the wheel if/when someone’s already done it.”

However, it is very labour intensive. *“This network is about personal, regular contact through telephone, e-mail or meetings”*

The network operates on three levels: 1) Information exchange – hot tips 2) Best practice swapping and 3) Inter-trading / consortia approaches / supply chain development (high level stage). There are a series of products and services designed to provide learning opportunities – master classes for example; promote business relationships – Intertrading and events; and skill development – personal business plans and an interactive website.

“Training is incredibly relevant and focused and aimed at the people who are attending.”

A key objective is to support the setting up of new networks of employers. This includes seeking to establish new groupings in sectors and geographical areas where there are currently significant gaps in provision⁶⁹. As the networks evolve and develop, spin-off collaborative networks will emerge. The network has recently seen the launch of its first joint venture company. One broker is now specialising in collaborative networks.

⁶⁸ Formerly known as the DfEE

⁶⁹ Source: Original bid for funding submitted to the DfES, 2000

Over the lifetime of the network, more than 125 companies have joined, two-thirds of whom had no previous relationship with the Business Link. Upwards of 250 companies and 750 employees have been engaged in some form. The maximum membership is 150 across five networks.

A possible model for the Employer Learning Network of the future

In no way does the checklist below guarantee that networks will be successful, as they will invariably differ in mission, geographical, sectoral, business improvement and learning focus. However, QA devised some materials that would encourage participants at the two (separate) best practice workshops to make selections and commit to what they considered the more successful ingredients for a network. These ingredients would provide value for money both for a funding agency such as the DfES or DTI, and employers and their employees. This might be regarded by some as a 'toolkit' for future practitioners resulting from this yearlong extensive evaluation. A full list of the criteria is in the annexe D of this report.

Best practice checklist

- ☐ The right skills, qualities and experience of the project co-ordinators themselves (Advert might be around £30k for a regional network manager, full-time post for three years; specified skills and experience including ICT and must have a driving licence!) Industry experience, network experience and ability to deal with a range of employers is crucial
- ☐ Brand and corporate identity established for the network
- ☐ Marketing techniques to engage employers that are personal and responsive
- ☐ If event marketing is in the mix try and make sure there is something else happening during the same event – something network oriented and something business / seminar oriented to give the best possible hook for employers to come.
The 'Winning Companies' event with 90 companies and 30 employer exhibitors is an example of an event that could be replicated, since the event led to increased membership and at least five new business relationships.
- ☐ Network managers' flexibility in order to work evenings, weekends as necessary and with adequate marketing and administrative support – often underestimated in terms of both time and budget
Networks are very resource hungry, and a key role for the project manager is to be clear about what services are free (included in membership) and which have to be paid for. Otherwise the project manager will be swamped and exploited.
- ☐ Networks that involve face-to-face / group networking i.e. not reliant on virtual networking as a principle means of getting employers to share ideas, intelligence and problems.
Success is dependent on regular and sustained contact

- ☐ The credibility of the lead organisation must be good to engage partners pre and post bidding stages
- ☐ The organisation delivering services to employers must have credibility (NB this might not be the same as the lead-contracting organisation however)
- ☐ Developing products and services during the lifetime of the ELN – not before – the solutions should be born within the network and taken forward by organisations with a remit to provide business improvement, learning and training solutions
- ☐ Ensuring mechanisms for getting employer feedback on their satisfaction with the network's progress and / or the quality of services they receive or use
- ☐ Devising quick wins that might include no cost risk assessment, business diagnostics or needs analysis followed through with funding for initial steps into workforce and staff development. Must be budgeted within the ELN funding with enough to cover a percentage towards central costs, percentage towards revenue costs for staff and a percentage for delivery of (training / learning) solutions to employers or their employees
- ☐ Forward strategy built into the initial bid and reviewed at key stages of the network's development to ensure sustainability in terms of service, funding and meeting of changing employer needs

The table on the following pages details the responses from the two best practice workshops.

Table 5.2 Responses from the best practice workshops

Theme	Selections – best practice model (workshop 1) Selected by regional network project managers who had experience promoting ‘single sector’ ⁷⁰ networks	Selections – best practice model (workshop 2)
Who should write the bid?	Should be written by lead organisation alone plus consultation with other partners	Should be written by lead organisation and other partners
How long to prepare a bid?	Three months +	Two to three months
What should be the funding criteria?	Funding to find out a problem or range of employer needs (feasibility) but not feasibility necessarily, and also to ‘solve’ as well as find out a problem	Something new to create additional outcomes Funding to build on something in place
What funding amount should ELNs be given?	Between £300,000-£500,000	£150,000 per year
For how long?	Three years	Two years
In what way?	25% up front	33% up front
FUNDING SUMMARY We think the Department would be well advised to try this workshop material aspect with the larger group of ELNs as this was particularly well debated in these two workshops.	£300,000 per network to cover three years’ project – i.e. £100,000 per network per annum with matched funding in years two and three so that overall around £500,000 investment is made – funding to include agreed number of beneficiaries, outcomes and outputs	£200,000 required to fund four brokers plus expenses and administrative support per year for two years. Funding would be 33% up front then at agreed milestones

⁷⁰ Single sector is defined in this instance as an overarching sector of ‘sport, recreation and allied occupations’ but some individual networks were in fact covering six sub-sectors within this larger sector such as health and fitness, outdoors, caravan parks etc.

Theme	Selections – best practice model (workshop 1) Selected by regional network project managers who had experience promoting ‘single sector’ networks	Selections – best practice model (workshop 2)
What type of network should be funded?	Multi location Engagement project / network and Delivery project network linked together	Cross-sector
	Single sector (by NTO / SSC definition)	Cross-sector but moving towards a collaborative network over time
	Range of occupations with support of owner / manager	Owner / manager with others involved
What sort of products and services should be funded?	(In order of priority) Accredited learning Learning in the workplace Training assessment tools	All of the options: Accredited learning New models of learning Non-accredited learning Enhancing existing learning models Learning in the workplace On-line learning Website with new materials and courses Training assessment tools Centre of Excellence (facility) Learning feasibility / Strategy development
What attributes does a network manager or director need?	Industry experience	Industry experience Network experience But not: Cross-sectoral expertise
	Leadership ability Credible Communicator	Top three are: Enthusiastic Leadership ability Communicator
How much time should a network manager devote to the ELN up to month 6?	Between 20%-40% of time	40% of time
And months 7-12?	20% of time	40% of time

Theme	Selections – best practice model (workshop 1) Selected by regional network project managers who had experience promoting ‘single sector’ networks	Selections – best practice model (workshop 2)
What attributes does a network broker / co-ordinator need?	<p>The top three are:</p> <p>Responsive Administrator Enthusiastic</p> <p>The next most important four attributes would be:</p> <p>Flexible Reliable Hard skinned Marketer</p>	<p>Dedicated Enthusiastic Responsive Communicator</p> <p>Plus facilitation and people skills</p>
How much time should a network manager devote to the ELN up to month 6?	100% of time	75% of time
And months 7-12?	100% of time	50% of time
What budget through Govt. funding for each of these in the 12 months of an ELN?	15% of project costs per annum	£40,000
	£33k (regional)	£40,000
	£18-19k	£25,000
	£20k	
	10% of project costs	
	Not funded through this route	
	£30-50k for training budget	
	Nil	
Best way to launch an ELN?	<p>Low-key launch through letters / calls</p> <p>Face-to-face appointments</p> <p>Presentations at other events</p> <p>No launch as such – marketed as something different to the ELN</p>	<p>Major event / conference</p> <p>Regional launches</p> <p>Inaugural meeting(s) with employers</p> <p>Not virtual / website launch</p>
Best way to market an ELN?	<p>Face-to-face meetings</p> <p>Brochure / flier</p> <p>Trade journals</p> <p>plus a direct phone number for employers to call the network manager</p>	<p>Major event / conference</p> <p>Series of roadshows</p> <p>Brochure / flier</p> <p>E-mail correspondence</p> <p>Not: Press or Advertising</p>

Theme	Selections – best practice model (workshop 1) Selected by regional network project managers who had experience promoting ‘single sector’ networks	Selections – best practice model (workshop 2)
How should employers pay?	Discounted rate if you’re a member of the network	Graduated fees
Networking?	Led by the lead body / NTO but suggest ‘helped rather than led’	Led by members
Best form of communication with employers?	Face-to-face network meetings / groups 1-2-1 meetings	Face-to-face network meetings / groups E-mail correspondence Events 1-2-1 meetings
How frequent?	Ad hoc – as and when appropriate (at the developing stage) Every two to three months (mature stage)	Weekly (minimum)
Optimum size for an ELN?	31-40 employers	26-30 employers
What should partners contribute most?	Intelligence & Information Human resources Training delivery	Learning expertise Training delivery
What should the ELN’s overall objectives be?	ELN designed to meet longer-term general problems ELN designed to provide new types of training solution but also to ensure that there are lifelong learning, CPD outcomes	ELN designed to meet longer-term general problems ELN designed to provide new types of training solution ELN designed to assist employers reduce training costs ELN designed to tackle sector-specific problems or perhaps changed to ‘cross-sector problems’
What’s the best lifetime for an ELN to aim for?	Three years though each network will evolve and change in this time then into something else after three to four years	Shouldn’t be specified

Three of the five regional co-ordinators from SPRITO and three of the six brokers (together with five employer members) from Business X-Change were able to attend best practice sessions with the evaluators to discuss key learning points and hint at learning lessons that might help future practitioners wishing to devise a project comprising regional networks for their sectors / industries.

Table 5.3 Key issues and learning points

<i>Issue</i>	Learning Point
The bidding lead-time was too short and the contracting delay with the Department jeopardised the project almost before it started.	A smooth contracting process is an essential ingredient of getting a development project underway.
The bid was created in partnership with employer letters of support	Doing a bid in isolation will more likely result in a less engaging and successful project. However, since employers are the recipients of the network, and often enter into it ‘blind’ – it is perhaps impractical to include them at this stage. Letters of support from employers included in the bid may be an adequate compromise.
It is too easy to underestimate the amount of time required to launch a network	The project manager for a network needs FTE time allocation for the first 6-12 months and a more realistic budget for administrative support is necessary. Network brokers / project managers should allow 75% of their time in the first 12 months. The project director should set aside 40% of their time for at least the first year.
Flexibility is key when you’re getting employers engaged	A network can’t be run by one person – if they’re in the field visiting an employer, there needs to be suitable back-up should other requests come through. The personality and abilities of the project manager shape each network – giving it a distinct character.
Employers need a hook to get involved and this is not always ‘learning’	The emphasis in the early days must be on getting into businesses and listening to their needs even if they don’t relate to learning. Employers are very wary about entering a network that is going to try to sell them training. Gaining trust is the most important initial goal for an ELN.
Business improvement is perhaps the wider agenda rather than simply learning and is more appealing to businesses in initial stages of network development	The employer network aspect of the project is ironically perhaps more important than the learning aspect in the first stages of development. Relating to the point above, an Employer

	Learning Network is potentially off-putting, so the emphasis has to be at least in part on business improvement.
Networks should not be too prescriptive and the project managers should retain the right to move away from strict contract frameworks if the net effect is a good one – namely employers networking and moving towards developing learning or training solutions	Interpretation of a network's needs is not something you can teach a network manager – it is part instinct and part management. The skill is in developing a critical mass of employers willing to network then building on whatever their identified needs are then starting to raise the learning and business improvement agenda through that network. The successful networks within Business X-Change had a loose structure, that contained enough activities to engage employers whilst being responsive to their needs.
It is sometimes more successful to start from scratch than build on existing networks – as such the concept is transferable in any region, sub-region or smaller locality where a core of employers can be identified with common needs	Despite the common-sense attitude to build on things in place, sometimes existing networks carry with them 'baggage', history and a local context that an ELN is not best served plugging into. Another positive by-product of targeting a network in a 'new' location is that anyone engaged is likely to be a 'first-time' learner equivalent or employer not traditionally known for engaging in training or learning issues.
Learning is not only academic – as perceived by employer as in the main – it is learning in a network environment about business improvement from other employers	The Employer Learning Networks are employer networks where learning takes place as well as where learning is an outcome. "The best thing is sharing information – why re-invent the wheel!"
Heavyweight marketing is needed to engage employers using a range of techniques – the more personal the better.	A big launch is not necessarily the key – rather a steady development of employer relationships through letter, phone and face-to-face visit follow through and use of materials such as case studies. A combination of a major launch event, regional launches (in the form of a roadshow) and inaugural meetings with employers (combined with follow-up e-shots) have proved effective. Mixed methodologies are recommended.
Develop and promote a strong brand for the network – one which emanates credibility	A strong identity for the network will encourage employers to stay involved for longer. The credibility of the lead organisation is important in engaging partners / employers initially
The quality of partners and the support	Finding the right partners who can support the

they give in the first 12 months of a network is invaluable	delivery of a local / regional project (such as a FE / HE institution) is crucial in building up credibility and adequate delivery mechanisms to meet employers' needs.
Credibility is king	Employers respond to legislative, and financial issues – use this authority (e.g. HSE) to get in with employers initially – consider marketing to their accountants
FE / HE partners involved need to have credibility and have a commitment or identifiable focus / department dealing specifically with SME / institution liaison	Universities or colleges with an employer unit geared towards developing employer learning or training solutions will have more sway with employers
There's a huge difference in developing training as opposed to learning solutions	Most employers ask for training and view this as short-term business-specific to meet goals – developing a longer-term culture of lifelong learning and CPD takes much more than a six-month pump-prime funded project to achieve amongst newly engaged employers. The Business X-Change develops learning solutions based upon members' needs. To achieve this, trust is required on the employers' part, and credibility on the network's.
Link any training, learning solution or workforce investment to a nationally recognised business standard or something deemed as important to the industry or sector that the employers belong to – this might include things like Investors in People or quality marks.	Demonstrate to employers that by offering training to employees not only is it great for skills development, but also that there are other by-products – or indeed that achievement of a standard requires the investment in staff and so one complements the other.
To reach employees you must engage employer co-operation	Introducing any training or learning for employee benefit needs to go through a process of 'vetting' by the employer who has to be convinced of the benefit to their business
Quick wins	Examples include: Risk assessment; training needs analysis; no cost business diagnostic By joining the network, employers access the services of the consultant effectively 'for free' – for example to create personal development plans. Attending a single training course can repay the membership cost for a small employer
Developing products and services before the network is launched is not important	Whilst 'quick wins' are ideal for a network it is probably better to ensure that there are no pre-devised products / services available – employers usually like to see instant returns on what they perceive as customised needs. As a network develops, the offering becomes less nebulous and aspirational, and more duty

	bound to deliver. Clearly, ELNs seeking further funds will build on products and services already developed.
Products and services that include training and learning solutions but also wider business improvement tools make a powerful cocktail	<p>No cost training that gets employers early on to say, “that was easier than I thought – I’ll try something else organised through the network” is the first objective. Development of a wider portfolio of employer business solutions is the second and long-term objective.</p> <p>Training has to have a value placed upon it. “For every pound the employer puts in, we put in two. This creates a psychological contract between us.”</p>
The qualities, skills, background and attributes of the project co-ordinators or managers are possibly the primary cause of a network’s success or failure	<p>Every network needs a driver that is (full-time), dedicated, adequately supported by administration and marketing resource. Most of all that person must be responsive and credible to the employers being targeted as network members.</p> <p>The selection and training of project managers is perhaps the most crucial aspect of a successful ELN. <i>“It wouldn’t have worked without him.. The beauty of this was there was follow-up without the pressure.”</i></p>
<i>Responsibilities of the project manager</i>	The network may be hindered if a project manager has functional responsibility for more than one network or association. The ELN will develop more freely if unhindered by political considerations.
Employer led or employer driven?	ELNs, it seems, will most likely be employer led but not driven in the sense that they will organise the meetings and network activities themselves – this will perhaps always be the role for an impartial co-ordinator organisation. A network should create the perception of being for the members by the members, supported by the project manager.
Competitive issues	Cross-sectoral networks (arguably) better address business development issues. However, single sector networks may emerge in the form of collaborative networks.

Key points:

- The bid is best written by the lead organisation, perhaps with some contribution from partners. Three months lead-time is preferred, but two months is sufficient to submit a credible bid.
- ELNs should seek to solve problems and create new, additional outcomes.
- Funding is required for at least two years with a budget of between £30,000 and £40,000 per project manager per year. An initial allocation of between 25% and 33% is required, with later instalments at agreed milestones.
- Networks with more than one location, that both engage and deliver to owner managers (in the first instance) should be supported.
- A range of products and services should be offered, both accredited and non-accredited.
- The project director requires industry experience and must be commercially able, responsive, enthusiastic and something of an administrator.
- Project managers / network brokers should be dedicated, enthusiastic, and an able communicator with good people skills along with industry and network experience.
- Key messages should include 'Do more business'; 'It's a training opportunity/ become a learning organisation'; 'tailored training' and 'make more profit'.
- Fees should be either graduated or discounted for members.
- Employers should lead the agenda for their ELN – helped or supported by the project manager who can broker solutions with partner organisations and training providers.
- Face-to-face communication is best, followed by e-mail correspondence, events and other meetings.
- Communication with members should be frequent, at least during the early stages.
- The optimum size of a network is between 25- 40 employers.
- ELNs should be designed to meet longer-term general problems, deliver quick wins at the outset and ultimately provide new types of training and reduce employers' costs
- An ELN should have a lifetime of at least three years.

Chapter Six: Conclusions

Establishing and developing Employer Learning Networks

All 18 projects were launched in different guises. Within the first six months ELNs had agreed their objectives, brought together databases of employer contacts, marketed their initiative to those employers and set in motion preliminary meetings, or in the case of virtual networks had developed websites and established channels of communication. At the same time, the networks concentrated efforts on engaging partners (such as higher, further education, training providers, marketing and IT consultants) and sharing the vision with them. As well as perceiving a benefit to their own organisation, 23 partners (72%)⁷¹ also held the belief that their own organisation truly had a contribution to make. At the time, six to eight months after ELN activity began, there also appeared to be the feeling amongst nearly seven out of ten partners that ELNs could come up with specific and relevant training solutions needed by organisations in their industry.

The funding has essentially allowed for staff (either employed by the lead organisation or on contract) to dedicate a greater proportion of their time in devising ways of promoting the network to employers. Through trial and error, the lesson learned was that personal contact by the co-ordinator was the most effective way of engaging employers interested.

Across 17 of the 18 ELNs, collectively within their original bids they had anticipated being able to engage between 2,990 and 3,206 employers within their first six months of operation. Four to five months in, we identified 2,144 to 2,157 employers that had, to a lesser or greater extent, been involved in network activities. In total, 141 (45%)⁷² had attended meetings, 92 (29%) had tried ELN training courses or programmes whilst smaller proportions had helped design training course materials (29 employers, 9%) or piloted training materials (23 employers, or 7%).

With hindsight, we found the optimum size for each network to be 20 employers (though the average was 28) as this provided a critical mass from which opinions could be drawn, which could also cater for drop-out and still be viable. It was also a pragmatic number of employers for a network co-ordinator to manage and maintain.

The main motivation for getting involved in an ELN was, for 203 (65%) of employers, a perceived benefit to their organisation; or for 144 (46%) a benefit to their employees. 131 (42%) of employers joined the network with the expectation of accessing specific training solutions. 87 employers (28%) *“just wanted to give it a try.”*

Networks were attracting employers for different reasons. Initially networks attract varied expectations, with those expecting early business benefits through to those willing to experiment. We can say with confidence that sustainable networks were those that offered quick early wins – for example training needs analysis, subsidised training, or activities that helped businesses either legally or financially. Networks that were seen to be solutions-orientated tended to be the most effective. Employers, partners, project managers identified

⁷¹ Source: Summer consultation, July / August 2001. Base 32

⁷² Source: Summer consultation, July / August 2001. Base 312

the best things about an ELN. The fact that ELNs were low cost, low risk initiatives was very important at the early stages. In order to access the learning or training agenda at the heart of ELNs, a responsive, available network team was crucial, able to respond quickly to employer needs, and playing a brokering role between employers and partners. Project managers had to have a suitable industry background.

Sustainability

As employers' needs changed ELNs were required to change with them. As such, the first implication was that managing and maintaining networks was almost as intensive for co-ordinators as it had been in the first six months – the difference being now, that the pump-prime funding had ended.

Pump-priming by its very nature helps catalyse initiatives, but to be truly responsive to employer needs, resource and support may be required to an even greater extent after the early phase of network development has taken place. To sustain activities to the level when DfES funding was available, required ELN lead organisations to be commercially shrewd, funding savvy and prepared to investigate the potential for employer levy, membership or other financial contribution.

Furthermore, the role of partners became increasingly important as the networks matured in that, for example, a college would take on the responsibility to devise the training solution identified by the employer members and would have a vested interest in ensuring that their product / service was tested, piloted or paid for. This would guarantee momentum for the network. Nineteen project managers across 10 of the ELNs identified no fewer than 114 partners involved in their activities one year after conception.

Our evaluation indicates that nine of the original 18 networks said they had been able to sustain or even extend activity levels post-funding, whilst six said they had dropped activity levels, one terminated and another by design completed its stated objective within the funding period.⁷³

And so it was that sustaining employer interest was achieved by developing a range of networking, learning or training services. These included: workshops and seminars; on-line training materials; management training programmes; basic skills training; ICT training; modular learning programmes; Modern Apprenticeship provision; customised training; supply of professional trainers; shared training centre / facilities; on-line assessment tools; 1-2-1 business coaching; bulk purchase of training; virtual networks and large – smaller firm mentoring.

One hundred and six out of 312 employers (34%)⁷⁴, interviewed shortly after the DfES funding had ceased, had used and rated their satisfaction with these services. The most used services were workshops and seminars by 49 employers (16%), on-line training materials by 28 employers (9%) management training programmes and modular learning programmes by 22 employers respectively (7%). Of all services used those perceived as the highest quality were workshops and seminars and customised training.

⁷³ One ELN project was unable to make this judgement at the time of writing.

⁷⁴ Source: Summer consultation, July / August 2001, six to eight months after most ELNs began their activities.

Sustainability is often interpreted as the ability of a project to be self-financing, but we found that only one in five employers (32 out of 161 interviewed in the second panel survey)⁷⁵ had paid for network membership, and that less than 30 employers had paid for training despite 69 having received this benefit. ELNs can't sustain themselves, it would appear, within 12-15 months by employer contributions alone. The implication is that ELNs must seek out alternative external funding opportunities.

However, sustainability in this study also means the survival and evolution of networks, the ability to continue a dialogue with employers and the development of collaborative working amongst employer groups. There are a number of factors that appear to help sustain, or undermine, the sustainability of ELNs:

Table 6.1 Positive and negative factors surrounding the sustainability of ELNs

Positive factors sustainable networks	Negative factors less likely to be sustained
Effective and committed project team (adequately skilled and resourced)	One man band managed network
Setting realistic, time-bound targets	No feasibility study or evidence of training need / demand
Credibility of project team and partners	Rushed, poor quality training
Effective use of partner organisations	No follow up communication
Effective communication channels	Unable to engage or sustain employer involvement
Quality of customised products and services	Ineffectual pilot materials or unable to agree what training required
Ability to improve and adapt products and services	Unwilling to adapt
On-going improvement to products and services	Off-the-shelf products or services
Capacity to innovate	Nothing fresh to offer beyond initial training
Ability to secure further funding and high % of private sector matched funding	Delays / inability to secure more funding
Clear identity	ELN identity indistinct from training or service.
Exceeding (managing) expectations	Lack of credibility
Valued networking	Personnel changes / lack of continuity within network team
Increasing membership	Insufficient pump-priming (funding)

Outcomes

The Department's pump priming did not consistently seek to bring about hard, measurable outcomes, rather it sought to establish the sort of outcomes that might be achieved within six months. Collecting measurable outcomes beyond the pump-priming period was not stipulated in the original bid submissions.

ELNs were reporting outcomes for employers and employees from the six-month mark – for example improved confidence or awareness of training / personal development.

⁷⁵ January / February 2002, 11-13 months after ELNs began.

The executive summary emphasises the range of outcomes and our evidence suggests that many types of soft outcomes for employers and employees are achievable from the six-month point.

It would be reasonable in the future for any funding agency to suggest a range of measurable outputs and outcomes that ELNs should pursue within a 12 to 18 months period.

These might include for example:

- The number of employers improving (or writing for the first time) a training plan;
- The number of employers increasing their training budget;
- The number of employers offering on and off-the-job training for their staff;
- The number of employees achieving a qualification;
- The number of staff improving Basic, ICT or management skills;
- Number of organisations paying for services or membership;
- The proportion of employers rating ELN services as effective;
- Number of employers doing business with one another for the first time;
- Number of employers accessed for the first time;
- The number of employers that increase the hours spent on HR / workforce development;
- Number of individuals who progress their learning as a result of the ELN;
- The number of employers with less than 10 staff engaged.

How long do projects need to run to be effective?

Our opinion, mirrored by those of lead organisations, employers and partners suggests that real impact and differences could be made by networks in a two to three-year period, during which time a range of business improvement, learning and workforce development priorities could be defined and solutions brought to bear. However, if the Department views the engagement of employers in network collaborations as being effective then a minimum of 12 months is required. Outcomes and outputs could be effectively achieved between 12 and 24 months if this was the driving agenda.

If the Department wants networks to be self-sustaining, then it is likely that at least three years is needed, and the need for an impartial, co-ordinating organisation is still likely to exist.

Should feasibility/ scoping studies be commissioned?

Our view is that lead organisations should bring together evidence of demand or need, using empirical secondary research, to develop their bid to the Department as a matter of course i.e. not paid to do this. The fund should be action-oriented.

Are there any Government initiatives that could be used as a vehicle for ELNs?

Employer networks exist in many guises already – through trade associations, memberships, local working groups, chambers of commerce, skills foresight employer groups, group training association networks, RDA-funded cluster networks, professional organisations and many informal or ad hoc alliances formed by employers sharing a common need. Each of these have overcome the obstacle of getting employers to work together – albeit on very different issues. However, we feel the right mechanism for promoting the learning agenda to employers has to lie with existing organisations that have a remit to encourage competitiveness, business improvement, workforce development, lifelong learning and sectoral advantage. The lead organisations told us that the concept of their ELN was highly transferable. The pilots have afforded these organisations to develop, as they see it, a model that could be rolled out in different locations, based on the level of intervention needed in a given sector or local economy.

The concept of getting employers to develop solutions, with the support of partners co-ordinated by an impartial but credible lead body is a sound concept that can be applied very successfully within sub-regions, regions, nationally and by sector or industry grouping.

In our view, however, there is better opportunity to make funding available through the network of Regional Development Agencies and / or Local Learning and Skills Councils to which organisations such as the newly forming Sector Skills Councils, Business Links or even Area Learning Partnerships might apply for network project funding giving rise to the potential for developing long-term (minimum three year) network initiatives. We feel also that there is the opportunity to broaden the funding agenda in order that business improvement, incorporating workforce development, skills and learning, is the anchor to which all projects must fix themselves. Sector-specific ELN projects will perhaps be those most easily established and prove to be effective in a shorter period of time contrasted with less-traditional initiatives that require more complex solutions including cross-sectoral and virtual networks. Cross-sectoral networks may be particularly effective if they bring together employers that have a supply-chain relationship so that commercial and learning outcomes can be achieved. Vehicles through which these kind of networks would work include Small Business Service (Business Links) though the emphasis would more likely relate to enterprise.

If the model were regional and sectoral there is the potential to develop Employer Learning Networks sitting aside the likely developing network of CoVES, the existing network of Area Learning Partnerships and Business Links ensuring links with regional economic objectives, tempered by LLSC stated sub-regional learning priorities.

ELNs that have tried to access external funding, and link their ELN to other existing funding or organisational remits identified the following: (This in itself gives us an indication of what initiatives / funding pilot projects have identified for ensuring sustained network activity).

- Learning and Skills Councils (funds for basic skills, vocational learning and LIF bids);
- Regional Development Agencies (skills development fund);
- Employment Service;

- Community Development Funds;
- Rural Development Associations;
- European Social Fund;
- Learning Skills Development Agency;
- Small Business Service;
- Private sector contributions (matched funding contributions).

How should the Department identify projects to support – those that react to specific problems that they know of or those that have a broad-brush approach?

Our study identified 30 different factors that might affect ELN success. These included the amount of human resource afforded and budgeted for network development in the first six months; the type of network developed; the type of products or services to be supported; the skills and experience of the network team; the scope and scale of marketing techniques to be employed; optimum network size and composition; credibility; and the expertise and qualities of partners.

In our opinion, the key factors for success revolve around the responsiveness and flexibility of the network team to meet changing employer demands and requests, and the qualities, credibility and (industry) experience of network co-ordinators charged with the main role of getting employers involved. Without these two essential ingredients ELNs are likely to be less successful.

In terms of whether ELNs should be developed to tackle short-term specific problems, or develop longer-term more broad-brush approaches, our response is ambiguous in that we feel ELNs have to achieve both. They need to have a long-term vision and strategy – i.e. developing workforce skills, targeting intervention at businesses that could collaborate more effectively and become more competitive – but at the same time, operationally, they have to be ready, able and willing to adapt to changing employer (short-term) priorities. It can be neither one nor the other. To keep employers engaged, the activities that networks undertake have to be refreshed and often customised.

What should the selection criteria be for future ELN projects?

The criteria for the DfES pump-prime funding for pilots included the credibility of the bid and the potential to be self-sustaining in the long-term. Our evaluation suggests that any future funding ought to be aimed at bids (and networks) that can demonstrate:

Additionality

Activities that will create additionality i.e. outcomes and outputs that could not be achieved ordinarily through existing employer initiatives.

Valued by employers

They will provide a value for small businesses measured through level of engagement and satisfaction with services provided.

Customised

The demand for, and potential subsequent use of, commercially viable, customised learning and training solutions by the private and public sector employers targeted.

Sustainability

That the network(s) could be self-sustaining within a three-year period without Departmental funding support.

Synergy

Complementary priorities to those identified in other plans (specifically RDA regional economic strategy, LSC workforce development plans and SSC plans).

Competitiveness and skills development

That beneficiaries (users) will have access to learning that will increase their skills and qualifications, increasing job competence and contributing to national learning targets.

As sub-criteria, we would recommend that the Department gives guidelines in relation to the need for each bid to have:

Credibility – the way in which the bidder can demonstrate that it has credibility with partners it wishes to attract to the initiative, and that training providers / service deliverers can demonstrate rapport and credibility with SMEs to be targeted.

Commitment – the amount of time being afforded by the lead organisation in particular the extent to which full-time post(s) can be dedicated to network development in the first 12 months of the project.

Skills and experience – of the project team assigned to create, develop and maintain the networks, especially the background and industry experience of those chosen to co-ordinate the networks and engage employers.

Annexes

The report annexes contain the following:

Annexe A - Evaluation methodology diagram

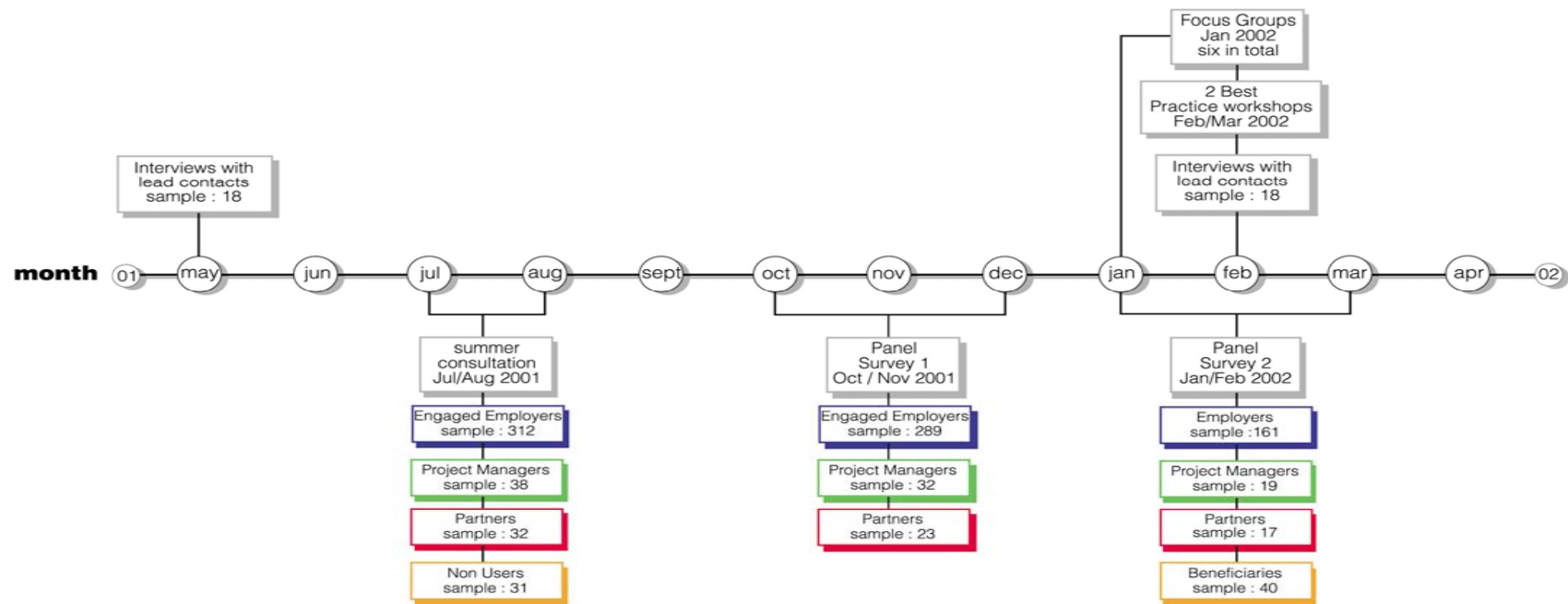
Annexe B - Details of all 18 successful ELN projects

Annexe C - Case Studies

Annexe D - Best practice workshop toolkit

Annexe A

face - to - face interviews



telephone interviews

Summary of the ELN projects being evaluated for the Department

It is useful for the reader to have this short summary for each of the successful Employer Learning Network projects that have been developed. It is clear that there is considerable diversity in terms of size, scope and objectives between the successful bids, and it is one task of this evaluation to pull out the factors that have led to success or failure.

Sector: IT Services. **Location/coverage:** Thames Valley.

Summary: The project aims to develop an Employer Learning Network, with an initial target of 30 SMEs from the IT services industry signing up by March 2001. The network will provide a shared training centre for small firms in the sector, it will support Modern Apprenticeship provision and a range of customised training through a mixture of media including supervision in the workplace and through on-line services.

Sector: Printing. **Location/coverage:** Lancashire and Greater Manchester area.

Summary: The project will develop an Employer Learning Network for small firms in the printing sector, bringing them together to identify common training needs including basic skills, key skills, Modern Apprenticeships and adult upskilling. There are over 1,000 small printing firms in the area. The initial target is to engage 35 employers in the network.

Sector: Cross-sectoral. **Location/coverage:** Hampshire

Summary: The project aims to establish a number of groups of small employers that can work together on addressing a range of cross-sectoral training needs to enhance management capabilities, develop workforce skills and increase small firm sustainability. The project aims to use a variety of methods including: 1-2-1 business coaches, counsellors and mentors; work-based learning; DIY learning through a range of on-line and distance approaches; it will also aim to promote small business enterprise to young people.

Sector: Social Housing Sector. **Location/coverage:** West and East Midlands

Summary: The project aims to set up a management training programme for small employers in the community housing sector. This will involve: action learning groups for senior managers to address common training needs; the identification of senior management potential and training needs for middle and first line managers, linked to an appropriate management development programme for network members; mentoring networks for people with management potential (with a particular emphasis on encouraging more women and people from ethnic minorities into management roles). Thirty employers will initially be targeted.

Sector: Transport/Distribution. **Location/coverage:** South West

Summary: The project aims to pilot a programme of mentoring arrangements between networks of small employers coupled with larger firms. Under the proposal, a selected manager from a large retailer will engage with a linked network of micro-enterprises, with a target of 30 small firms to be initially engaged. The aim is to use the network links to spread industry best practice from the larger firms and to stimulate further learning among the small firm members of the network.

Sector: IT (cross-sector training for IT professionals/system support staff in SMEs)

Location/coverage: Various

Summary: This bid was submitted by the e-skills NTO with the involvement of the Confederation of Group Training Schemes - a body representing around 100 existing group training associations (GTAs). It looks to develop the services offered by a number of existing GTAs into the IT field in which they currently do little.

Sector: Footwear and Leather Industries. **Location/coverage:** Various

Summary: The project aims to develop Five new Employer Learning Networks in the footwear and leather goods sector, targeting 150 companies initially. The bid reflects an identified need to develop the skills of managers in the sector, in particular to meet the growing demands of international competition.

Sector: Glass manufacture. **Location/coverage:** North West, West Midlands, Yorkshire & Humber

Summary: The project aims to foster local networks of employers across three regions, initially involving 100 firms, and will look to develop the use of virtual networks on the Internet to support the groups. The project will also look to use the SME groups to pool their buying power to economically purchase local training provision to meet their collective and individual needs.

Sector: Land-based industries (precision farming, floristry and garden centres)

Location/coverage: Various

Summary: The bid includes proposals for two discrete projects, the first will look to establish a dedicated employer-led learning network for florists and garden centre operatives, the second will pilot provision of a specialist employer-led learning network for approximately 100 businesses moving into precision farming. The sector is one with a very high SME presence (98%). The project will build on previous experience of running group training in other parts of the sector.

Sector: Electrotechnical (electrical installation, control systems and maintenance)

Location/coverage: Various

Summary: The project aims to establish five employer learning groups linked in each case to a FE college, with the colleges acting as brokerage centres for the employers. The networks will develop responses to shared vocational learning needs. The areas which it will address include training for the existing workforce, accreditation of prior learning and training for new entrants to the industry, and training for Modern Apprenticeships in small firms in the sector.

Sector: Polymer manufacture. **Location/coverage:** Various

Summary: The project aims to establish five Employer Learning Networks in areas of the country where there is a heavy concentration of SMEs in the sector. The industry has a significant SME presence of around 5,000 employers, with total employment of around 300,000.

Sector: Property services (including surveying). **Location/coverage:** Various

Summary: The project aims to develop an Employer Learning Network to meet common training needs across the sector on a not-for-profit basis. The initial intention is to develop on-line learning materials for technical practitioners in the sector, including surveyors. The large employers will contribute a network of training centres and professional trainers. The initial intention is to pilot networks in four areas, starting with 10 SMEs involved in each.

Sector: Magazine and newspaper publishing. **Location/coverage:** Various

Summary: The project will develop three Employer Learning Networks covering magazine, newspaper and directory and database publishing. Magazine publishing will include developing a modular programme covering the fundamental areas of interactive publishing. Newspaper publishing will include opportunities to train employees at all levels. The directory and database publishing strand will use a series of new media workshops and seminars.

Sector: Sport, leisure and recreation. **Location/coverage:** Various

Summary: The project aims to establish five networks with a target of 10-25 employers involved in each. The networks will lead in identifying and addressing common training needs, they are expected to use interactive and flexible ICT based learning tools. The networks will be used to promote MAs, Graduate Apprenticeships, ILAs and encourage commitment to liP.

Sector: Language skills, cross-sectoral. **Location/coverage:** North West

Summary: The project aims to develop five learning centres to support the development of language skills across the North West of England through employer networks. The networks will address the difficulties of small firms in accessing language services, including raising awareness of the range of technologies available to assist.

Sector: Motor Industry – body repair and finishing. **Location/coverage:** Wiltshire

Summary: This project looks to develop a network of employers who would share facilities to offer collaborative training and meet the common needs of the sector. It aims to involve 70 organisations of 2–50 employees and is supported by the Motor Industry Training Council.

Sector: Bakery. **Location/coverage:** Various

Summary: The project aims to involve small employers in establishing 18, initially small, Employer Learning Networks to work together to share resources, expertise and knowledge. The sector has a significant small firm presence (over 70%), and currently low levels of training activity. The preliminary target is for each network to start with 10 employers and part of the funding will support development officers to work on fostering those networks

Sector: Cross-sectoral. **Location/coverage:** Various

Summary: To develop a virtual training centre in partnership with a private sector partner BusinessEurope.com. The project makes use of the private partner to overcome the resistance which many small firms have to government-branded training, but it will nevertheless signpost firms to a range of initiatives including IiP, ILAs and Modern Apprenticeships. Thirty thousand small firms will be targeted to use the facility. The on-line training centre will provide training packages, best practice advice to small firms on collaborative training, and will incorporate learning from peer companies and signposting to local collaborative business support and agencies. A range of partners will be invited to participate in the project including Small Business Service, Ufi, IiP UK, and the National Federation of Enterprise Agencies.

Case Studies

Introduction

These are the main findings from our series of focus groups with the following ELNs. The findings have been integrated into the main body of the report. We have concentrated on the following ELNs as they provide a picture of the most prevalent type of ELN.

1. Printing, Graphics and Communications Employer Learning Network
2. Social Housing Employer Learning Network
3. Property Learning Network

Printing, Graphics and Communications Employer Learning Network

Background

April 2001 saw the launch of the printing, graphics and communications Employer Learning Network in the North West of England. The event was the culmination of a thorough marketing process that had involved two consultants employed by the PGCNTO (lead organisation) working their way through a database of over 1,100 firms and visiting around 50 of them at their workplace to identify training and skills needs (a) lacking currently or (b) most in need locally.

The courses were originally free using some of the money provided by the DfES for the network's activities, but led to individual trade associations putting on further courses but with a fee of around £25 attached.

Employer views

Employers were motivated mainly by self-interest and *"to have a voice"*.

Employers felt that there would always need to be an external driver for the network, such as the NTO. If the North West network were relaunched in 2002, interest would need to be renewed again. Employers were not willing to pay, so network funding would always be required by the NTO and from other sources to cover its own costs for staff and administration, but also to pay for local learning providers to develop suitable skills and training solutions. According to one source, at least £50,000 per local area network would be required to get an ELN going and develop something useful for a 6-12 month period.

Employee views

"Generally training gave people in our company the tools to do their jobs better with greater ease."

The two employees interviewed were very keen on the network and one was responsible for promoting the opportunities it offered within his workplace. However, other employees who have attended courses were not aware of the network. The main benefit of the finance for non-financial managers' courses was the acquisition of knowledge that can be directly applied. The employees felt that the courses were not particularly innovative, but felt that modular courses were useful.

Without the Employer Learning Network the training would **not** have taken place. The timing of the training, the numbers attending and the level of the training would have been different if the company had to pay for it. Employees said that there had been very little follow up since the course. If the ELN is to continue it needs to take appropriate steps to identify training needs.

The North West Printing Employer Learning Network will be relaunched in 2002 asserts Richard Beamish, Chief Executive of PGCNTO.

Social Housing Employer Learning Network

Background

The Social Housing network was set up as a Management Development Network for registered social landlords. It is run by Central Consultancy Services (CCS), part of Central Group Services, a not-for-profit membership organisation to *“meet the needs of managers at all levels”*

The overall feeling was that the network had got off to a good start, with a responsive, good quality project team and had started to change the mindset of individuals participating in training. The amount of work involved was approximately ten times the amount originally anticipated. Take up of training has also been lower than anticipated, although hard-won gains are being made.

Outcomes

“They were significantly challenged for perhaps the first time in their careers.”

Establishing a Development Centre was considered one of the most significant achievements of the ELN. Another was developing management training that concentrated on management development – the process of self-examination and *“learning to learn”* – rather than traditional management learning. In the context of the social housing sector, this training is innovative and the onus is on the individual to take responsibility for his/her own development. The consultants help senior managers to see their development in context and its likely impact on their organisation. Action learning is becoming more prevalent and the network is at the vanguard in this respect.

“There is a new market there, one that is interested, willing to think beyond a very traditional approach to management development and training.”

Project Management

The project team chose to adopt a flexible approach to project management. The end result was (or will be) that the training is demand-led, with real buy-in from those taking part.

Benefits and drawbacks

The network has been able to consider a number of fundamental issues, including; Does performance actually matter? The individual’s role in an organisation; The ability of a manager to lead and influence change and the need to invest in learning.

The Future

The amount of on-going follow up was still substantial. A similar level of investment will be required in stage two of the network (starting March 2002).

The Property Learning Network

Background

The Property Learning Network was launched in May 2001 and run by Property Services National Training Organisation (PSNTO). The network's objective was

“ To develop, and pilot in four RDA regions, a Learning Network capable of delivering training to current or emerging property practitioners in SMEs throughout England and Wales in an accessible, cost effective manner,”

PSNTO will become a sector hub with a remit to distribute learning on behalf of Ufi. Learners access the Learndirect courses through PSNTO's web portal and will be able to enrol for learndirect and non-learndirect modules at the same time. Although there have been a series of delays, the network is ready to be launched officially in Spring 2002.

Outcomes and additionality

“Learning has evolved in tune with the marketplace.”

One notable achievement was that the network *“had acted as a catalyst”* to bring representatives together from across the sector to upskill through on-line learning. Before the network began, the cost of courses and their generic nature proved a major barrier for employers in the sector. The PLN offered training tailored to the sector, including soft skills (customer service) and IT.

“It was available before, but not with property in mind. Something that is property specific is important.”

The use of ICT has been welcomed by employers who are unable to free up more time for face-to-face meetings with the knock on loss of time and fees. The time taken to develop new modules and an unforeseen delay in obtaining LSC funding through the Ufi intermediary delayed the full roll out of the network until Spring 2002. From PSNTO's viewpoint, another major benefit was the effectiveness of partnership working to create the building blocks for this and other networks. There were concerns about the transition period to SSCs, although ultimately: *“There is a chance to get people to work to a greater, common standard. That's exciting and innovative.”*

Impacts

It was acknowledged that it was early days and real impacts have been few (215 learners in the context of the whole sector 400,000 strong). The ELN has the potential to increase industry standards, raise the sector's credibility and encourage employees to take responsibility for their own learning. However, more time is needed:

“Learning lasts a lifetime, but this and other government learning seems to last only a short time. That is not sustainability, you need a longer-term vision that people can work towards and get smaller companies involved.”

Annexe D

Best Practice Toolkit

The evaluators devised a series of evaluation criteria for ELNs. The criteria form the basis of Chapter Five – Best Practice Workshops.

Theme	Options (pre-determined by evaluators – numbered for cross-referencing with the selections made – groups could change or add selections if they felt it necessary)
1. Who should write the bid?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Written by lead organisation alone Written by lead organisation and other partners Written by lead organisation and employers Written by an external consultant
2. How long to prepare a bid?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1-2 weeks 3-4 weeks 1-2 months 2-3 months 3 months +
3. What should be the funding criteria?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Something new to create additional outcomes Funding to build on something in place Funding to find out a problem or employer needs Funding to improve existing products or services
4. What amount of funding should ELNs be given?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> £10,000 £50,000 £125,000 £150,000 £200,000 £250,000 £300,000 £500,000 £1,000,000
5. Timescale for funding?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6 months 1 year 18 months 2 years 3 years 4 years 5 years
6. Funding allocation?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 33% up front 50% up front 100% up front In arrears – quarterly payments In arrears – monthly payments In arrears – by agreed milestones Post-project lump-sum Funding for feasibility then review
7. What type of network	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Single location

should be funded?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Multi location 3. Cross-sector 4. Virtual network (no meetings) 5. Engagement project / network 6. Delivery project network
8. Network type?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Single sector 2. Cross sector 3. Other
9. Network type (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Single occupation 2. Range of occupations 3. Owner / manager
10. What sort of products and services should be funded?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accredited learning 2. New models of learning 3. Non-accredited learning 4. Enhancing existing learning models 5. Learning in the workplace 6. Online learning 7. Website with new materials and courses 8. Training assessment tools 9. Centre of Excellence (facility) 10. Learning feasibility / strategy development
11. What attributes does a network manager or director need?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Industry experience 2. Network experience 3. Cross-sectoral expertise 4. Learning / training background 5. Someone who is commercially able 6. Qualified
12. What attributes does a network manager or director need? (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dedicated 2. Administrator 3. Enthusiastic 4. Marketer 5. Hard skinned 6. Credible 7. Flexible 8. Reliable 9. Team-player 10. Innovative 11. Leadership ability 12. Responsive 13. Communicator
13. How much time should a network manager devote to the ELN up to month 6?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 20% of time 2. 40% of time 3. 60% of time 4. 80% of time 5. 100% of time 6. Other
14. And months 7-12?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 20% of time 2. 40% of time

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3. 60% of time 4. 80% of time 5. 100% of time 6. Other
15. What attributes does a network broker / co-ordinator need?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Industry experience 2. Network experience 3. Cross-sectoral expertise 4. Learning / training background 5. Someone who is commercially able 6. Qualified
16. What attributes does a network broker / co-ordinator need? (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dedicated 2. Administrator 3. Enthusiastic 4. Marketer 5. Hard skinned 6. Credible 7. Flexible 8. Reliable 9. Team-player 10. Innovative 11. Leadership ability 12. Responsive 13. Communicator
17. How much time should a Network manager devote to the ELN up to month 6?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 20% of time 2. 40% of time 3. 60% of time 4. 80% of time 5. 100% of time 6. Other
18. And months 7-12?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 20% of time 2. 40% of time 3. 60% of time 4. 80% of time 5. 100% of time 6. Other
19. What budget through Government funding for each of these in the 12 months of an ELN?	1. Director
	2. Network manager / co-ordinator / broker
	3. Administrator
	4. Marketing support
	5. IT / technical support
	6. Consultant / advisers
	7. Trainers
	8. Partners

20. Best way to launch an ELN?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Major event / conference 2. Regional launches 3. Inaugural meeting(s) with employers 4. Low-key launch through letters / calls 5. Virtual / website launch 6. Face-to-face appointments 7. Presentations at other events 8. Publicity / public relations 9. No launch – marketed as s/thing different to the ELN
21. Best way to market an ELN?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Major event / conference 2. Series of roadshows 3. Brochure / flier 4. Website – on-line marketing 5. Face-to-face meetings 6. E-mail correspondence 7. Trade journals 8. Press Advertising
22. Best message to engage employers?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It's a network 2. It's free 3. It's a training opportunity 4. It's happening near you 5. Meet new people 6. Do more business 7. Develop your workforce 8. Reduce training costs 9. Share facilities 10. Share expertise 11. Share problems 12. It's virtual 13. There's no meetings 14. Have your say 15. Pilot new products and services 16. Tailored training solutions for your industry 17. Get your staff qualified 18. Don't mention it's an Employer Learning Network! 19. Something else (group to define)
23. Payment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Free 2. Market rate 3. Volume discounts 4. Graduated fees
24. Networking	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Led by the Lead organisation / NTO 2. Led by members
25. Best form of communication with employers?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Face-to-face network meetings / groups 2. E-mail correspondence 3. On-line group discussions 4. Events 5. 1-2-1 meetings

26. How frequent?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ad hoc – as and when appropriate 2. Weekly 3. Monthly 4. Every 2-3 months
27. Optimum size for an ELN?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 5 employers 2. 6-10 employers 3. 11-15 employers 4. 16-20 employers 5. 21-25 employers 6. 26-30 employers 7. 31-40 employers 8. 41-50 employers 9. 51-75 employers 10. 76-100 employers 11. More than 100 employers
28. Partner contributions?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Funding 2. Intelligence and Information 3. Human resources 4. Learning expertise 5. Training delivery
29. What should the ELN's overall objectives be?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ELN designed to meet short-term, specific problems 2. ELN designed to meet longer-term general problems 3. ELN designed to provide new types of training solution 4. ELN designed to assist employers reduce training costs 5. ELN designed to be all things to all employers 6. ELN designed to tackle occupation-specific problems 7. ELN designed to tackle sector-specific problems
30. What's the best lifetime for an ELN to aim for?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 3 months 2. 6 months 3. 12 months 4. 2 years 5. 3 years 6. 4-5 years 7. Shouldn't be specified