

Working with employers

A quick start guide to engaging with local businesses

Information and communication technologies play a role in almost every business, even the smallest ones. This means there are many possibilities for IT learners to get involved with local businesses in some shape or form.

This guide contains tips on:

- ways of working with local businesses
- how to find businesses to work with
- points to take into consideration.

It also includes examples of the different ways education providers can work with local businesses to benefit their learners.

The benefits to learners

Involvement with a local business can:

- develop learners' understanding of enterprise and business issues
- raise learners' awareness of the skills and attitudes that employers are seeking
- pose real-life IT challenges which form the basis of exciting learning projects
- motivate reluctant learners
- encourage learners to recognise how they can learn in multiple environments.

Ways of working with a local business

Working with a local business can take many forms, all of which have value.

The term 'local business' can include public sector organisations and voluntary groups, as well as private businesses.

Try the following approaches:

- **Fact-finding missions**
Learners visit a local business to research a specific topic, such as how the business uses IT to manage the supply chain.
- **Hot seat**
A representative of a local business comes to your premises and answers questions posed by the learners. The visitor is invited to take the 'hot seat', hence the title of the activity. The rules are simple: the learners can ask any question they like, but the person in the hot seat can refuse to answer the question.

- **Employer challenge**

A local business sets a challenge for learners, based on a real problem that they are trying to solve. Learners' proposed solutions are judged by someone from the business. Learners may even help the business to implement the solution.

- **Enterprise project**

Learners set up and run their own IT-related business. There are a number of national bodies and initiatives that can help with this, such as Young Enterprise and The Prince's Trust.

How to find a local business

Personal contacts are still enormously important in the business world, so the strategies below are more likely to be successful in getting you an introduction.

- Ask your colleagues if they have any friends or relatives who run local businesses.
- Ask your learners if any of them have family members who own or manage local businesses.
- Ask former learners who now work for (or run) local businesses.

Or, use an intermediary who works in the business support sector (see Using intermediaries).

Using intermediaries

There are a number of intermediaries who may be able to offer you advice and contacts.

National Education Business Partnership Network

Education Business Partnerships (EBPs) help identify and introduce local businesses to education providers and vice versa. Most providers will already have a relationship in place with their local EBP. If not, the national website www.nebpn.org will give you an overview of the service provided and a link to your local services.

Business Link

Each area of England has its own government-supported Business Link. The services provided by local Business Links vary considerably. The national website www.businesslink.gov.uk will give you an idea of the sort of information businesses need, but will not tell you how Business Link operates in your locality. For that information you will need to approach your local Business Link. Examples of local Business Link websites include:

- www.businesslinksw.co.uk
- www.blinkdandc.com
- www.businesslinksolutions.co.uk
- www.cambs.businesslink.co.uk

Enterprise agencies and other local organisations

If you have a local enterprise agency, they are well worth talking to and will have many useful contacts. Put the words 'enterprise agency' and a geographical tag into a search engine to see if you have a local agency. There may also be organisations in your area specialising in supporting particular businesses, such as start-ups agencies, minority ethnic business or businesses in a particular sector, such as cultural industries.

You might also find it helpful to consult your business development or careers officer if your organisation has one. They may be able to recommend some local contacts or know of any existing relationships with local businesses.

Points to consider

- Don't be over-ambitious.
- Identify how the relationship with a local business could be mutually beneficial.
- Don't overburden the business with too many learners or too many requests.
- Prepare your learners well before they have any contact with a local business. Make sure they understand the behaviour expected and understand issues such as commercially sensitive information.
- Ensure every minute spent with a local business is used productively.
- Sell the benefits of working with your learners:
 - the business can develop and explore ideas about using IT before approaching suppliers
 - the business may find suitable new recruits among your learners
 - the business will be able to influence what the learners learn, making learning more relevant to the needs of employers.

A business describes the benefits of working with learners from the local college:

"... we get an input into their training, [it] also gives the college an up-to-date view of what we as employers expect in the trade."

"... people are pre-prepared for the situations they might encounter, not only does it make them more confident in interviews to obtain their first jobs and positions even, but it will actually help them throughout their own life..."

Martin Polmountier, Steve Andrews Tyres

IT enterprise at Chichester

IT learners in the second year of the BTEC National course at Chichester College are about to launch four businesses offering IT technical support to the staff and students of the college. They are being supported by business mentors from Chichester Business School and The Prince's Trust.

Carole Holmes, Curriculum Team Manager, described how she has helped her learners get this far.

“At first I went around Chichester knocking on doors, hoping to find businesses to work with us. But that was not really effective. So I came up with the idea of enabling the students to set up businesses within the college. It has taken a year to get to this point, as I had to do a lot of planning with the students.

I realised I could not support the students’ businesses myself, so I arranged for the Business School and The Prince’s Trust to provide mentors. They advise the students about such things as developing a business plan.

I also had to think about how the project would link to assessment requirements. I have planned how students will generate evidence of their skills and knowledge for assessment purposes.

I have made sure students know their starting points and fully understand the skills and knowledge they are aiming to develop during the project. They know that, although they are working in teams, their individual contributions will be recorded and recognised. You have to get the students on board at the very beginning. They are not used to working so autonomously. They have to get used to seeing me in a different role – leading them along the path, but not giving them the answers.

It’s a lot more challenging for the students, but it helps them to become independent and gives them the confidence to move forward in the world of work and business.”

Possible scenarios of further projects with local businesses

Learners find out how IT is used in manufacturing

Before embarking on an engineering degree, Bharat is working for a year at a manufacturing company that produces components for ships. The company have asked him to carry out a project that involves adding bar codes to components so they can be tracked during manufacture. The history of each component will be recorded on a database, which will be reviewed for quality assurance purposes.

Bharat has been invited to go back to his old school to tell IT learners about his project and set them a challenge.

Working in small teams, can they produce a simulation of the kind of process he is trying to develop?

After several weeks Bharat returns to ‘judge’ whether the challenge has been met. Each team runs its simulation. Bharat scores them on their grasp of the key concepts and their team work. The most successful team uses a simple idea – a production line for paper aircraft in which each sheet of paper has a bar code, with key dimensions checked at each

stage and results recorded in a database, culminating in a final flight test and 'quality score' for each plane.

Learners help a young designer to go global

Anita is a young jewellery designer who has a stall in a local shopping centre. Her designs appeal particularly to young Muslims, so she wants to tap into this market by selling online. However, she has few IT skills and is unsure how to go about this. When she rings her local Business Link, the business adviser mentions that she might get help from IT learners at a local learning provider. She meets the IT teacher, who helps Anita formulate a challenge for the learners. She then meets the learners, shows them her products and sets the challenge. Working in teams, the learners not only have to research and present various online trading options, but also outline the IT skills that Anita will need in order to implement each option.

After several weeks Anita returns and the teams present their findings. Anita now feels able to discuss her options with an adviser from her local Business Link. She returns a few months later to show the learners how she is getting on with implementing her online shop. She describes some of the problems she has run into and the learners research how to overcome them and share their ideas with Anita.

Learners help a small business to computerise

Gerri and Toni run a small gardening business. One of their customers is an IT teacher. The teacher notices that their invoices are handwritten, so asks them if they would like help from a group of IT learners with a view to computerising their business. They are very interested, but also very busy. The teacher explains that they will need to give up about five hours of their time, spread over several months, to work with the learners.

Gerri and Toni arrive for their first meeting with the learners to find them equipped with pens and sticky notes. Together they map the information needs of potential and current customers, the bank, the tax office and the people carrying out the gardening work (Gerri and Toni themselves).

By their second visit, each team has prepared a short presentation on a particular aspect of computerising the business. For instance, one team has looked at how the business might use a simple customer database. Another has looked at a website, another at financial processes, and another at how the internet might help them to research and source plants and gardening materials. Gerri and Toni decide to go ahead and buy a computer. They return for a third visit at which three teams present possible specifications for computer systems – one 'top end' solution, one middle solution and one 'entry level' solution. A fourth team presents an analysis of the IT skills they may need and suggests several options for possible training. Gerri and Toni now feel informed enough to approach a local computer supplier for advice on the best system for their business.

Advice boundaries

You will notice that, in these scenarios, the learners do not recommend a particular IT solution or IT system. They may propose several potential solutions but do not make recommendations or give advice, as they are not qualified to do so. It is important that the business fully understands the limitations of what the learners can offer and seeks professional advice when needed.