
Employer engagement - a practical perspective

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Abstract

This paper addresses many of the issues arising from the parallel session seminar I gave at the GEES Residential in Edinburgh this year. It focuses on both my presentation and discussions I had with delegates at the conference and since. I am not an academic and did not set out to present a learned paper. However, many of my clients are FE colleges with substantial HE provision and my perspective is that of the entrepreneur/businessman with a foot in the FHE world.

For many years FE has had strong links with employers and the Employer Engagement agenda is a natural extension of their commercial work; however for many in HE, linking academia with commerce is not a natural priority and leads to certain tensions. My aim was to introduce a pragmatic approach to employer engagement that would provoke discussion and effect behavioural change.

Introduction

For an entrepreneur, like myself, 'Employability, Employer Engagement and Enterprise' was an interesting choice of a conference title, and I wondered what delegates understood by it.

So what is 'employer engagement'?

Thinking a good place to start my presentation would be to define 'employer engagement', I began by asking my audience for their definition, and was a little surprised with the answer. I had already determined that many had a clear understanding of 'employability' and, to a lesser extent, of 'enterprise'. However, the answers I managed to elicit from the audience were few and mainly centred on student placements. Having given similar talks in FE, where the question leads to considerable discussion, this has caused me to reflect somewhat.

For me, student placements are a single component of a much larger range of activities that we can use to engage with employers and, in the session, we went on to explore this. Cynically, it could be argued that what government means by 'employer engagement' is that employers should pay for

services provided by colleges and universities. A considered answer would also look at how it involves the two parties, the employer and the university, working together to mutual benefit. Outcomes might include student placements, but this is just one facet of a more complex opportunity ... and I stress 'opportunity'. However, the nature of the mutual involvement will not always be academic; and I can understand how this may discourage academics. In some cases it might centre on the rental of office space, or an incubator unit, in others it might involve consultancy, research or a short course. In a few cases it will involve sponsorship; but, in the majority of cases, the employer will regard it as a commercial transaction.

FE colleges, especially the specialist ones, such as landbased colleges, are very comfortable within a business context. They provide apprenticeship training for employers and often run commercial enterprises as profit centres. Often, the latter are used for student training as well as income generation, but increasingly they are used to demonstrate commercial credibility to employers. General FE colleges often engage with both employers and the public, via 'commercial' restaurants, as well as hair and beauty salons.

HE, on the other hand, is not so 'commercial' and the word 'apprentice' is not normally found in the HE vocabulary. Many staff have never worked in commerce and few leave to join a business.

As an aside, it was also interesting to note Brian Chalkley's closing comments, where he 'confessed' to having always worked in education. This should not be condemned in any shape or form, and can be a great asset to a university. I do note, however, that departments where there is a balance of staff drawn from a business/commercial background and with a pure academic background, exhibit a better understanding of employer engagement. Some departments may be wise to consider this issue when recruiting new staff, as a 'mixed portfolio' of experience is likely to be beneficial.

Becoming an employer engagement apprentice

Let's go back to basics once again. Sir Alan Sugar is well known to consumers and TV audiences

alike. He employs a large number of people, so could be considered a 'typical' employer. Sir Alan is, of course, far from typical in many ways; quite outspoken, he is, however, a self-made millionaire and very definitely the 'Apprentice Maker'. Let's consider what the typical, or atypical, Sir Alan might say about employer engagement.

He would probably tell you that business has been doing this for years, and that employer engagement is all about customers, sales and marketing.

Some academics will find these words disturbing and point at the value of learning for its own sake, the need for a university research base etc ... but Sir Alan would probably continue unabated and stress the need to acquire and retain customers. When I discussed this at the conference, the astute amongst my audience readily understood that the words employer and customer are interchangeable. I later learnt that one member of the audience, who nodded vigorously at this stage, had a commercial background.

At this stage, the academic purists amongst my readers will cease reading this paper, and I must admit I had expected adverse comments from my seminar audience. However, the GEES community are obviously made of sterner stuff and I was amazed to find a good proportion of my audience quietly nodding in agreement... (Or were they nodding off to sleep?).

How do you acquire customers/employers?

Obtaining new customers is hard work, so my first piece of advice is that you should first consider your existing customers. Ask yourself, when did you last contact them? Have you rung them recently, met them face-to-face or sent them an email in the last three months? If not, why not?

The more enterprising university departments maintain contact on a regular basis and, if you are not careful, the company who took a student on placement last year may well become someone else's customer if ignored for many months.

Secondly, consider a fact of human nature. We all prefer to do business with people we like and respect. When purchasing a product or service it isn't just about price; if it were we would all be doing our shopping at discount stores! This domestic analogy also applies to business - we prefer doing business with people we like and with businesses that make the process easy and enjoyable. Does your department answer employer enquiries promptly and efficiently? Are you easy to do business with?

Thirdly, use all the techniques that the Apprentices use. We live in a world where 'Google' is a verb and 'YouTube', 'Facebook' and 'MySpace' are a reality. The world of the printed prospectus is not dead, but we need to integrate the various new technologies with the traditional, if we are to reach our customers.

So who are your customers?

If you are a fan of *The Apprentice* you probably also watch *Dragons Den*. I've spent some time talking to one of the Dragons; Rachel Elnaugh who, at 24, formed Red Letter Days and built a multi-million pound business.

Rachel recounts how she researched and defined her typical customer. Her customer was a middle class woman, age between 35 and 55. Rachel could tell you what she read, which brands she was loyal to, where she shopped, and a lot more.

The question is, do you know who your typical employer customer is? Who in their business makes the decisions, who wields the chequebook and what problems do they have that your department can solve?

Spending your unlimited marketing budget

It probably comes as no surprise that no conference delegate confessed to an unlimited marketing budget (in fact some asked what a marketing budget was!).

Like most people, my audiences are often under the impression that large budgets are necessary to market to businesses. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are hundreds of marketing methods that cost just a few pence or are totally free. Consider, for example, email. We all have it on our desks, it costs nothing to use and yet when did you last receive an email from your plumber or hairdresser? They have special offers for boiler maintenance and new salon opening hours from time to time, but I've never been asked for my email address, so they can't contact me by my preferred method of communication!

Whilst it is true that we are regularly spammed with unsolicited mail, most businesses and universities neglect the power of email to engage customers/employers. Email is just one form of marketing that is effectively free and, as part of an Emarketing strategy, can be employed by any GEES department.

Emarketing ...you mean a website?

There is a popular misapprehension that Emarketing

is all about owning a website. It isn't. A website is one aspect of an Emarketing plan; but only one. As well as the social networking sites mentioned previously, you might also consider:

- Blogs – these are no longer the domain of geeks, there are some very good business blogs out there, including many that relate to the more 'commercial' aspects of our disciplines. , eg:
 - ◇ <http://www.contamland.co.uk/> - a portal for professionals who work within the contaminated land industry
 - ◇ <http://xpressdigest.org.uk/>- the daily digest of regeneration news
 - ◇ <http://www.wastersblog.com/> - 'Wasters' resource management blog
 - ◇ <http://www.terrainfirma.co.uk/blog.html> – environmental and sustainability consultancy blog
- SEO – 'search engine optimisation' is absolutely vital if your website is to make an impact. Don't be persuaded that you need to pay a fortune to a specialist for this service; it is easy to do it yourself.
- Pay Per Click Advertising (PPC) – these are the small adverts that appear on the right of a search page. Google Adwords are my preferred system as it is low cost, effective and easy to set up.
- Google Analytics – this is a free piece of software that provides all the information I have suggested you need elsewhere in this article
- Autoresponders – this is the bit of software that allows you to put one of those "Subscribe to our newsletter" forms on your website and then automates the process of sending newsletters etc. Autoresponders work 24/365 and can automatically reply to, or contact customers when your office is unattended.
- Google Maps – these provide free listings of where people search for information in a geographic area.
- Google Alerts – discover who is talking about you, your business and your competitors?

Many FE colleges are now using Adwords (the small adverts that appear on the right hand side of a search page) to market themselves effectively to employers. Others are using autoresponders to send employers regular updates on things of interest to their employer community. This ranges from technical and legislation updates, to the

opportunity to tender for work, and could be applied by any GEES department.

But what about our website?

Websites shouldn't be ignored, but the sad truth is that the majority of websites, both business and academic sites, provide a poor user experience and are often off-putting. Search Engine Optimisation can help, but the reality is that it is largely down to you. The site's content is by far the most important consideration, but you also need to ask yourself some questions. Who visits your website? Why do they visit? How do they find you - typed URL, referred by another site, Googled a search term? What search terms did they use? Which pages are most popular? Why? Where do visitors live? Town, country etc. What are your visitors' names? What is their email address?

Many of the above questions may appear impossible to answer but the truth is today we have the technology to answer all of these and many more ... and most of this information is free for the asking.

This is fine for business, but it doesn't apply to education

I completed my session by looking at how I had applied the above to education clients. Several FHE clients have engaged me to advise them on employer engagement and we looked at one example - Pershore College. Pershore College is the UK's premier horticultural college; its alumni are to be found worldwide, where they manage botanical collections, private and public gardens and broadcast in countries as far apart as the UK and New Zealand.

Many of the above strategies were utilised to engage employers in the sector. We also set up an advisory group to facilitate engagement with the industry. Chaired independently by Prof Stefan Buczacki (ex-chair of BBC Gardeners' Question Time), the group comprises the UK's leading horticultural employers and employer bodies. They include the Royal Horticultural Society, National Trust; English Heritage; Webbs of Wychbold (Garden Centre of the Year); HRI Wellesbourne, the University of Warwick; Midland Regional Growers; Midland Parks Forum; Bransford Webbs, Institute of Groundsmanship, etc.

The response from the industry has been supportive. Not only did we get a 96% positive response to invitations to join, we also had CEOs and MDs contacting us for a place on the group. This type of employer engagement is key to ensuring Pershore not only satisfies government employer targets and measures, but also generates a host other benefits.

Engaging employers for the GEES Conference

Despite the conference being, at least in part, about employer issues, I was surprised not to see more input from employers. However, I must congratulate Sharon Gedye on her employer engagement skills. Whilst researching the conference topic, Sharon searched online for 'Employer Engagement Strategies' and was directed to Google. There were over a million pages to pick from, but there on page one of Google was my webpage and Google Adwords advert and within minutes she was able to click through to my website and contact me. This is an example of Employer Engagement in reverse, but does demonstrate the potential of Emarketing for both businesses and university departments

Conclusions

Some people may have found my presentation a little provocative. It challenges the status quo and

brings into question accepted practices and norms. Like it or not, though, employer engagement is a fact of life and universities are being measured on it.

Rather than seeing it as a threat, I see it as an opportunity. Through employer engagement there are many benefits. More student placements might be one benefit, but I would suggest that you might also find sponsorship, links to real time business problems for you and your students to solve, access to ideas, and applications for existing ideas you would never otherwise consider.

Employer engagement shouldn't be considered as a distraction or problem. Consider it as an answer, and your academic life could be much richer in all senses of the word.

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To date, the GEES Subject Centre has co-ordinated and funded about 200 workshops in GEES departments. This programme has been specifically designed to support the GEES communities' learning, teaching and assessment needs.

Current workshop topics include:

- Independent learning
- Fieldwork
- E-Learning
- Problem based learning
- Key skills
- Practicals and Laboratory Work
- Student Transition and Retention
- Learning Outcomes and Assessment
- Work-based learning

- Linking Teaching & Research
- Personal Development Planning (PDP)
- Employability
- Developing an Inclusive Curriculum
- Entrepreneurship and Enterprise
- Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Please be aware that, historically, these workshops are quickly filled. If you would like more information about how a workshop could benefit your department or you would like to express your interest for a workshop in 2009, please contact info@plymouth.ac.uk or visit www.gees.ac.uk.