Summary

Before they start to look for work students need to understand how to present themselves and their capabilities in a compelling way. St Helens College is using LinkedIn accounts to enable foundation degree students to showcase their achievements and form relationships with potential employers.

LinkedIn is the most commonly used platform for business and professional people. Using LinkedIn accounts students can establish a profile, develop their self-presentation skills while still on the course and start to build business contacts so they can leave college well prepared for the next stage of their careers.

Challenge

The first challenge was to show students that competition is fierce and they need more than just evidence of qualifications if they want to go on to further learning or get into work. It is becoming increasingly important to demonstrate the ability to learn, communicate and work with others in a professional way; students who can present their learning journey effectively will stand out from the crowd.

But first, the college needed to improve the digital skills of its students and staff, and help staff embrace the growing importance of developing employability skills as part of the curriculum.

Solution

Involving former students and local employers to act as mentors helped to add real credibility.

The former students were able to explain the value of LinkedIn as a tool for professional networking and how to build a professional profile, describe how to spot and fill in gaps in a profile, and offer ideas about what to share as well as how to present it.

Next, a group of employers joined with second-year students to act as the panel for first-year students’ mock interviews. These were recorded and reviewed to help students learn the importance of staying professional throughout an interview. They learned how to align information on their profiles with what
they say during an interview and found out how to spot gaps in their profiles so that they could take steps to improve their employability.

Involving employers had the added advantage of opening up local employment opportunities.

Students also took part in peer-to-peer evaluations and online interviews so they could continually test and improve their self-presentation.

Teaching staff responded to the project by starting to introduce changes in the way they plan, deliver and assess their courses, and the college supported them in this by allowing time for learning new approaches and skills within the weekly allowance for continuing professional development (CPD). Teachers were also encouraged to set up their own LinkedIn accounts so that they could access support and mentoring from colleagues in the LinkedIn community and discover for themselves the value of this contemporary professional network.

The project has now been expanded on a teacher-by-teacher basis and the college provides ongoing support through its professional support services staff and the e-learning manager, who took the lead on the initiative.

A large number of students have either found employment or been offered a place at Chester University as a result of their LinkedIn profiles and this is an early measure of the project’s success. Others have found work placements through their profiles.

**Impact**

Students now:

» Are more careful about their spelling and grammar. Being exposed to a more demanding audience has shown them how important this is

» Understand how to use social media in general. The college teaches about the impact of unguarded postings on social media as part of the preparation for using LinkedIn and students recognise the importance of careful image management through reflection on the results of a self-search on Google

» Develop better communication and digital literacy skills. Learners are re-organising their social and business web presences to separate how they address friends and employers

» Use LinkedIn to provide dynamic, updatable evidence of achievement through linking LinkedIn profiles to their e-portfolios. Tutors can also recommend students via the platform

These early successes led the college to roll out use of LinkedIn college-wide during 2015 and the profile of technology to enhance student employability is going from strength to strength. Students now use the collaboration tool Padlet to research and share information about potential employers.
Key points

St Helens College’s tips for using technology to develop learners’ employability:

» Help students and staff to understand what candidates need to do to stand out in a competitive jobs market
» Invest in developing the digital skills of students and staff
» Enlist the help of local employers and former students to offer their perspectives from both sides of the jobs market

More information

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