Loughborough College
Using technology to connect employers and learners (November 2015)

Summary

Understanding what employers are looking for is a vital component of employability. Through its Bridge to Work initiative, Loughborough College aims to help young people aged 14-18 gain an insight into employers’ expectations before they apply for jobs or apprenticeships. This is achieved through collaborative conferencing and social software, which enable learners to take part in real-time presentations and discussions with local and national employers as well as communicating at any time with their tutors and with one another. The scheme has had the added benefit of bringing together employers and potential employees.

Organisation

Established in 1909 with a current learner population of 11,000, Loughborough College provides some higher education courses as well as further education and training in Leicestershire. Courses offered range from A-levels to vocational programmes, apprenticeships and degrees.

The challenge

The Bridge to Work team started from the premise that one-way communication does not enable learners to explore in any depth what is required of them in the workplace. ‘Telling and informing’ is more likely to limit than promote understanding. On the other hand, taking part in questioning and discussion sessions with employers helps learners ‘buy into’ preparing for work, increases their sense of responsibility and provides authentic experience of workplace communication.

While face-to-face discussion between employers and learners remains the ideal, restrictions of distance, travel and time make this impossible to achieve on any scale. As a result, conferencing software was investigated to provide the next best option. This led to the discovery of a further challenge – learners lacked the self-presentation skills needed to develop relationships with employers that would ultimately lead to apprenticeships or employment.
The solution

To overcome these barriers to learners’ success, the college’s Bridge to Work team set up a series of webinars using Adobe Connect conferencing software to bring together learners and employers from local and national firms. Through the webinars, learners gained first-hand knowledge of what employability entails as well as developing confidence and skills in talking to employers. Apprentices currently on placement have also provided their personal insights to bring to life the culture of the workplace for learners still at college.

Webinar examples

» Two apprentices at Caterpillar shared their experiences with prospective apprentices at Loughborough College, identifying the skills that helped them most when they arrived in the workplace. Being able to question apprentices in work not only helped college learners see the importance of their studies but also developed their understanding of how best to make use of the available time and facilities to prepare for work.

» In a different approach, a senior manager from Barratt Homes used the conferencing software to outline an employer’s expectations of applicants. The formal presentation style adopted by the speaker demonstrated the different styles of communication used in business. A 30-minute question and answer session which followed the presentation gave learners the opportunity to obtain insights previously unobtainable on such a scale and with such immediacy.

Making it happen

Loughborough College’s learner engagement team began with an initiative to improve learners’ employability and presentation skills before they took part in the webinars with employers.

This took the form of mock interviews. A local business was approached to choose three learners to be interviewed in front of their peers at a college-wide employability fair, with the aim of hiring one for a fictional post. Each learner was given the job specification and a specific set of characteristics (e.g. over-confident, nervous or ‘just right’). The selected learners then worked closely with the college’s learner engagement team and local business connector while they prepared for their roles. Some of these preparations took place face to face but the majority were supported online using Adobe Connect as the conferencing platform, backed up by Twitter and a Moodle forum.

Next the learners took part in an online interview workshop with local employers and used a video blog to record how they felt as they prepared for the interview. The reflective nature of this part of the exercise was designed to increase learners’ ownership of their role as interviewees, and to demonstrate the unfolding process to others. In addition, social software enabled the three learners to gain support at any time, sharing thoughts with peers and receiving guidance from tutors even though they were on different courses with different timetables.

On the day of the face-to-face interview, the interviewees took the stage in front of a panel of learners and were interviewed by the local business representative. The learner panel used interactive voting pads after each
question to identify who they thought had answered the questions best. The use of voting devices encouraged learners to participate who would not normally have had the courage to speak.

Impact

These accounts show how digital can make communication between a national company and large groups of learners both accessible and achievable, and that the experience of taking part in an online conferencing environment adds greatly to the employability skills of young learners. The interview activities preceding the webinars enabled learners to improve their confidence and skill when speaking to others in a formal situation; they then had the opportunity to present their views alongside others in an online conference, giving them an unusual range of evidence of presentational and communication skills. Finally, the activities not only opened learners’ eyes to the soft skills they need in the workplace, but also encouraged them to assess how far they had acquired those capabilities, and to seek help to improve where necessary:

“Thanks to Bridge to Work and my course tutor, Paul Scott, I have been given the chance to meet and coordinate with big companies and businesses for apprenticeships that otherwise would have been difficult to reach individually opening even more doors and opportunities for myself and others.”

Vijay Parmar, learner, Loughborough College

Taking what was learnt from the webinar experience, the Bridge to Work team subsequently held an interviewing skills event. This was so well received that learners were entered into and reached the final of the Barclays Bank Champion of Champions competition. The contest was part of the Prepare for Work employability programme supported by Quizdom software:

“The judges were very impressed with the Loughborough College team’s performance. They did not know one another at the outset, but by working together as a team they were able to produce an event that was relevant for their peers and build upon the strengths of each team
"member."

Sylvia Perrins, CEO of The National Skills Academy for Financial Services and a member of the judging panel

The Bridge to Work initiative has helped many learners gain a better understanding of their own employability skills. Both learners and companies have benefitted from having direct access to one another, and the process has opened up new opportunities for both parties. The webinar conducted by Caterpillar created such a sense of connection with the world of work that it produced some immediate results:

“Many learners applied to the company the moment we had finished. There was a lot of interest with many encouraged to hear the company employs more than 140 apprentices each year – with at least 20% expected to be female.”

Emma Pattison, lead job coach, Loughborough College

Key points

» Learners and employers both benefit from taking part in an online conference. Employers have a chance to assess prospective applicants while learners gain invaluable skills in communicating in a business environment

» Online conferencing enables learners to take greater responsibility for their learning, encouraging them to assess their own capabilities and to take action where needed

» By using the technology, learners acquire digital capabilities and experience of real value in employment

» Apprentices in the workplace can be invited in to a webinar to share their knowledge and experience

» Webinars via conferencing software can support delivery in the workplace, including peer-to-peer discussion across multiple locations

More information

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