

Communicating with industry about employability skills

With the inclusion of employability skills in Training Packages, a model of good practice for assessing and reporting employability skills was developed by the National Training Council (NQC). One component of that model recommends professional development for trainers and assessors that links them to industry.

The professional development strategy encourages training providers and individual teachers and trainers to develop capabilities in customising and applying the model for assessing employability skills in specific industry contexts. Following is an example of a training provider who is actively communicating with industry about employability skills and has modified its approach after examining the NQC model. The example could be a useful case study in a professional development activity that focuses on communicating with industry.

Arnhemland example

The introduction of employability skills is being used by one RTO, the Arnhemland Progress Association (ALPA), as what ALPA's Henry Harper calls "a marketing opportunity" to engage with both existing and new client organisations. ALPA is a wholly indigenous owned, financially independent retail association that has owned and operated supermarkets in remote communities for more than thirty years. As an RTO, ALPA delivers retail training to eighteen locations in this region, including to its own 280 employees.

According to ALPA's Senior Training Coordinator **Henry Harper** (pictured), working with employers with regard to employability skills "facilitates dialogue that enables clients, especially managers, to define what good practice looks like to them."



Harper explains the process for defining good practice in collaboration with employers:

The process involves gathering specific information about the performance indicators [about employability skills] the client is seeking from students, while being prepared to quietly challenge any unrealistic expectations they have of entry level employees.

Harper says the response to date, from employers, is "positive and promises greater engagement and ownership by the client in the training process". This willing engagement by employers assists trainers to negotiate culturally sensitive issues with those employers, says Harper:

In our more cultural diverse workplaces, trainers can then contribute further by exploring and making explicit the tensions around what Indigenous workers consider to be effective and courteous interactions, compared to the expectations of managers and their business in more mainstream retail operations.

The scope for misunderstanding is considerable, says Harper, concerning Yolngu people. Yolngu is the term the traditional residents of Eastern Arnhemland use when referring to themselves.

All Yolngu workers enter the workplace with established culturally bound reciprocal relationships, each with a set of rules that determines the permissible scope of communications and most with a superior-subordinate aspect. [Workplace] supervisors firstly require cultural authority which usually includes seniority and to a much lesser extent vocational expertise.

Harper provides this further example of cultural tensions or sensitivities which might occur in the workplace:

A young, 'culturally weak' but vocationally competent worker will not answer questions that should have been directed to a supervisor, and few Yolngu will volunteer vocational information about themselves to an incoming manager. Both [actions] are considered inappropriate and boasting. Instead they will stand back and wait.

These and any number of situations can be "the beginning of a disaster which can be avoided", says Harper. Fortunately, the conversational topic of employability skills provides a way to resolve some of these issues:

Employability skills provide the framework to commence a dialogue to determine what specific behaviors the work environment demands and the negotiating of roles to meet these requirements.

The 'marketing' or industry engagement approach regarding employability skills used by ALPA was significantly refined after ALPA staff participated in the employability skills train-the-trainer workshops in Darwin in November 2008, funded by the National Quality Council: "The dialogue is now more succinct with a usefulness and a future focus," says Harper.

Industry engagement

Training providers are encouraged to follow the broad example of ALPA and engage with industry about "what specific behaviors the work environment demands" and negotiate the roles of trainers and assessors "to meet these requirements". To assist staff to engage with industry on these matters, staff may benefit from what is described as level two professional development in the model for assessing and reporting employability skills.

The model for assessing and reporting employability skills was developed by a project undertaken by the National Quality Council from 2006-2008 and is set out as handout No.11 of the resource: 'Level 1 workshop for implementing the model for assessing and reporting employability skills', which is available at www.employabilityskillsresources.com

The model promotes the use of professional development at two levels. While level one professional development focuses on building skills and knowledge required for implementing the model for assessing and reporting employability skills, level two professional development focuses on building skills and knowledge for improving industry specific applications of the model for assessing and reporting employability skills

The purpose of the level two professional development is to assist the development of capabilities in people in registered training organisations (RTOs) and enterprises for customising and applying the model for assessing employability skills in specific industry contexts.

For level two professional development, stakeholder engagement is critical, to ensure the ideas generated for customising the model are relevant to industry. Stakeholders could

include employers or other representatives from specific enterprises, representatives from industry bodies and representatives from Industry Skills Councils.

Some suggested ways for providers to relate with industry for level two professional development are set out in the document 'Strategies to promote industry engagement with Level 2 professional development involving employability skills' and available at www.employabilityskillsresources.com

Different ways to relate with industry include the following:

1. *engagement with industry*: promoting industry input at the front end of teaching and assessment activities
2. *customisation for industry*: promoting case studies of approaches to assessment that are customised to suit specific industries and have benefited from industry input
3. *examples from industries*: promoting relevant examples from different industries and Training Packages of how the model might or does work
4. *communication with employers*: developing information for employers, including human resource managers, about the value of the model and the professional development outcomes.

More information about level two professional development for employability skills is provided in the Appendix of the document 'Level 2 workshop for implementing the model for assessing and reporting employability skills' available at www.employabilityskillsresources.com

Opening up dialogue

Training provider ALPA provides a concrete example of how to relate to industry concerning employability skills. In the case of ALPA, the issue of employability skills has proven to be a helpful topic for opening up dialogue about employers' expectations and how training and assessing approaches can be customised to suit the individual enterprise. The ALPA case study could be a useful one to reference, in a level two professional development workshop.

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