



## NCVO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

### Good employment practice case study

#### Collaboration on HR: Learning Curve

This short-term NCVO funded pilot project was carried out by the Learning Curve in partnership with the members of the Enhance sub-regional workforce development project in the South West Region.

**The Learning Curve** was established as a partnership project by the 5 Councils for Voluntary Service in Wiltshire and Swindon in December 1997, with National Lottery funding, in response to research carried out by members of the consortium. They were incorporated as a separate charity in 2002.

The Learning Curve works in partnerships developing, promoting and delivering learning to Voluntary and Community Organisations across the South West. It offers development services, training and learning opportunities, advice and information on training and learning. It works with the Learning and Skills Council and other partners to develop community learning and to represent and promote the interests of the voluntary and community sector in the learning agenda.

### The project

The project explored ways in which voluntary sector partners in Wiltshire and Swindon could share, swap and trade development resources amongst themselves, and take advantage of resources that may be available from the statutory and private sectors.

This project was proposed partly in response to the short term nature of the many funding streams that VCOS have made use of in the past to access development opportunities, the current restrictions on the use of Learning and Skills funding and the aim of the voluntary sector to become less reliant on short-term funding.

For this Training Swap Shop project, three different initiatives were explored:

- a. Learning Exchange
- b. Swapping Training Resources
- c. Private and Statutory contribution

#### **a. Learning Exchange**

This innovative initiative was carried out by a group of nine students who formed a self-teach group to tutor each other through the Institute of Leadership and Management course in Coaching and Mentoring. The group developed from individuals within the Learning Curve Network wishing to take a qualification in coaching but finding the available options to be too expensive.

All the students were experienced NVQ management assessors or qualified trainers. They designed the course content from that listed in the ILM curriculum booklet with particular reference to the required outcomes for each section. The students 'bid' to run the section they felt most appropriate based on their knowledge, confidence and experience and devised a delivery timetable of around four months. Their proposal was then approved by the ILM.

Each student delivered at least one session with most of the sessions being delivered jointly by two students. The course also required practical coaching/mentoring, including co-coaching of fellow students and a work based assignment. A comprehensive learning diary was kept by each student, and one student contributed a pack introducing coaching that she had written herself.

Students also reviewed one book each from the reading list and distributed the review to the others.

Objectivity was built into the course by using outside assessors for the work-based assignment and the internal verification procedure. All completed and passed the course with some opting to be assessed at NVQ level 4 and some at level 5. All students expressed immense commitment to the course despite some personal setbacks; one student felt this was partly because of the relationships within the group and partly because of the ownership of the course that each individual felt. An unexpected benefit was the effect of the co-coaching where the availability of in-depth feedback enabled the group to see how powerful a tool coaching is for effecting change and development. Members of the group also benefited by the experience of setting up a network for mutual support and development, and extended individual knowledge and skills not directly connected to the course content.

The Adult Learning Inspectorate was very impressed by the unique delivery of the course and its results, and there was some suggestion that it might be used as a model of peer learning.

Because of the success of the course the Learning Curve plan to offer it in the future. However, it is acknowledged that the teaching and learning background of the members of this particular group contributed significantly to its success and this would be difficult to replicate. It is not clear how far down the NVQ levels Learning Exchange tutoring would be successful. The Learning Curve therefore proposes to provide a facilitator for future groups to share the knowledge already gained and who could also be used for any sections a group felt unable to teach on a Learning Exchange basis. For the students to reap the full benefits of peer group learning, the facilitator will need to be careful to leave 'ownership' of the project firmly within the group.

## **b. Swapping Training Resources**

This second part of the project researched the feasibility of a barter scheme to exchange different development opportunities.

Initial research explored existing systems such as LETS and Timebank which use indirect bartering systems. The idea is that a group offers its own resources into a general scheme, and gains 'credit' when another group uses that resource. 'Credit' can be 'spent' against any other resource offered within the scheme. The existing systems were found to be quite complicated although they offered useful reference.

Initially local infrastructure organisations were approached to take part in the pilot but with mixed results. A more direct approach was then taken by the Learning Curve sending its Network members a form to complete with the type of resource they were willing to offer and what they were looking to gain. Around 14-15% of groups responded with nine groups keenly interested in taking the project further. These initial approaches highlighted the need to explain clearly and carefully what the system is designed to do as the majority of groups were unfamiliar with the concept, some assuming that the scheme was yet another way of accessing funding.

The Timebank Access-based software was considered to run the system but was not considered user friendly. A non-administered system with users recording their own 'debits' and 'credits' was also considered but not thought suitable because of the wide range of services offered and required. A simple administered Access system was then created and piloted internally although not with users. Although funding for an administrator would need to be found it was thought feasible that this could be made integral to the system, with administrative time donated by the Learning Curve as a credit, being offset against other resources drawn down from the system by the Learning Curve as debits.

It was at first hoped that credit within the system could be built up within a very simple time-based system. However as the responses received were so varied a time-based system could give unfair results e.g. a morning session given by a trainer being offset by the simple loan of a flipchart stand. Future work on this project would therefore need to include the development of a weighting system to balance the value of the resources offered for exchange.

Current restructuring of the Learning Curve means that this project is now on hold for a short time but it is believed that the potential is there to go 'live' using the nine interested groups to pilot the project and to represent and market the scheme to attract more contributors.

### **c. Private and Statutory contribution**

The third strand of the project was to investigate resources which private or statutory organisations might make available to the voluntary sector. Initial research has been carried out into companies that could be approached as part of a register of resources available and partners such as the NCVO have been asked for examples.

Research on the internet has also been carried out; the Business in the Community website has proved particularly useful. This has not been carried forward further because of the recent plans for restructuring of the Learning Curve, it is currently unclear how the system would be kept up to date and monitored in the longer term and the Learning Curve did not want to set up the register without knowing how they would carry out this role.