

As Skills for Logistics (SfL) prepares to celebrate its tenth birthday by parting company with its Chief Executive this is probably as good a time as any to look back at what it has achieved so far, and where its future direction might lie.

To evaluate the impact of SfL it is necessary to define what the organisation is for. Whether there has ever been universal agreement on the answer to this question is a moot point, but it's reasonable to assert that SfL exists to "increase productivity across the logistics sector through increased investment in skills development". Or, in plain English, if people can do their jobs better, the industry will be more profitable.

The next question to ask is how to ensure the industry is populated by people doing their jobs well. The lazy answer is simply to assume that the way to improve people's skills is to train them, so what the sector needs, and what SfL needs to develop and promote, is a range of "training solutions". If these can be funded, so much the better.

This has led the organisation down a series of blind alleys, producing a series of solutions all desperately searching for problems, none of which has left a lasting legacy. The latest debacle has been the Logistics Academy. This was set up at huge public expense to deal with two questions that were not being asked – "where can I, an employer, find training" and "where can I, a provider, get some more business". As a result the Academy entered a busy, functioning market with no USP to differentiate it from the other major players already operating and its loss of funding was the inevitable result.

If Skills for Logistics is to have a sustainable future it needs first to answer the key questions about skills development – what skills need to be developed, how are they best developed, what is holding back effective skills development and where is there a market opportunity to do something about this.

But the answers to these questions don't fit the "The sector requires relevant logistics specific training solutions" approach so beloved of the outgoing chief executive. For a start, most of the areas where people need to perform their jobs better are not logistics specific at all – leadership and management, communication, team working, problem solving, relating to customers; these are the skills that differentiate the good employee from the not so good.

And secondly these skills are developed in a whole number of ways – through practice, informal coaching, and, most of all, by being effectively led and managed. Of course part of effective management will involve the procurement of training courses, but anyone who buys training in the expectation that it is going to be a solution to anything very much is likely to be disappointed.

It is management that closes skills gaps, and good training is part of management, not a substitute for it. It was about ten years ago, around the time of yet another predicted driver shortage, that Brian Weatherley observed in his Commercial Motor column “There is not a shortage of good drivers, there is a shortage of good employers for them to work for”.

And this is the crux of the matter and where SfL has the opportunity to make a difference. Trade Associations, the CILT and the substantial training provider industry all have roles in supporting employers when it comes to skills and training. If Skills for Logistics is to survive, and demonstrate value for money for the tax payer, it has to find a role none of these organisations are performing already, and do it well enough to get paid for it.

Brian Weatherley’s “good employer” will recruit effectively. They will manage someone’s trial period well and leave the employee in no doubt as to what is expected of them. They will continually review and support their progress and development and challenge under performance sooner rather than later. And they will buy what training they need with just as much discernment and purpose as they display when buying a truck or renting a warehouse. If SfL were to turn its attention to these issues, it might have a future.