

The Chancellor's announcement that apprenticeship funding will be routed directly to employers is the latest in a long line of policies, proposals and initiatives based on the prevailing consensus that employers must "own the skills agenda". Whether it's Labour's latest policy proposals or the Coalition's response to the Richards report, "what employers want" is taken as the mandatory starting point for policy making.

Writing in FE Week recently Michael Davis, Chief Executive of UKCES, claimed that the "only plausible reason" for reported hard to fill vacancies in the hairdressing sector was the disconnect between the training provided and the needs of employers. In my experience there is rarely only one plausible reason for anything, and almost never in the complex area of learning and development.

This simplistic worldview assumes that employer demand is articulated perfectly – all that is required is for training providers, learners and the government to shape up and respond to it. But look at what it is that employers actually want and the situation is not so straightforward.

Employers want their organisations to be successful - to thrive and to prosper. This will require, among other things, people doing their jobs well. The question is how best to ensure this happens. Too often the assumed answer is "by training them well" whereas a moment's thought will come up with "by leading and managing them well".

This more intelligent approach sees training and development as a part of good management rather than a substitute for it. So the effectiveness of training procurement and the articulation of "employer demand" will depend on the workplace culture from which they originate.

There are some excellent employers who know how to get the best out of their people, how to buy training that adds value and who rarely suffer skills gaps or shortages. At the same time there are some pretty dreadful employers who whinge and moan and blame everyone else for their shortcomings. But the vast majority are like the vast majority of the population as a whole – somewhere in the middle, wanting to do well but not always managing it.

I believe it would be a lot more constructive to acknowledge that this group needs support to improve their management of people, rather than simply pretend they are the fount of all knowledge and wisdom when it comes to the training needs of their employees. Employers tend to be good at procuring plant and equipment, they are less good when it comes to procuring training and development.

What is the good of buying a “skills solution” without a clear idea of why it’s being bought, what represents value for money and how its success will be measured? And how effective will this skills solution be without robust management to sustain whatever improvements have been derived from it? It is an unwillingness to ask and answer these questions that leads to money being squandered on ineffective training. And when the money involved does not even belong to the employer but is the taxpayer’s, the risks of getting poor value are even greater.

Who is best placed to provide this support? Business Link has gone virtual and disappeared off the radar. Trade Associations are very good at meeting immediate needs around compliance and legislation, but not so good at more thorny issues. Most Sector Skills Councils are too busy justifying their own existence to be of much use to anyone.

The most obvious answer is the learning provider but through a different sort of relationship with their employer customers. Too often both parties are trapped in a retail, solution based mindset when more in depth analysis would expose the real issues behind the skills need. The great risk of such an approach is that the actual “solution” does not lie with the products the provider is offering, hence the reason these conversations rarely take place.

A move to genuine partnership working between providers and employers, where employers see themselves as part of the skills system rather than just articulate customers of it, is essential if progress is to be made. The hope is that this ethos can be built into the new standards for providers, whether they are drawn up by this government or the next.

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