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P A R T N E R S H I P S  
working together - a partnership approach to NVQs





## A Business Approach To Partnership

### The background

In the 1998 policy paper 'Lifelong Learning: A New Learning Culture for All' the government set out some key themes for the further education and training sector:

- Increasing provision in further education.
- Widening access to education and training.
- Meeting the skills needs of the regional economy.
- Improving quality and raising standards.

To support these measures various additional funding streams were introduced within the further education sector. These included:

- The Incentive Fund (now called the Skills Fund).
- The Strategic Collaboration Fund.

East Antrim Institute and Springvale Training Organisation held

discussions with the Department for Education Northern Ireland (DENI) to enable them to link into the funding and form a workable partnership agreement. It took six months of continuous discussions to set up the partnership, which was to form a strategic alliance by combining the resources of both organisations; East Antrim Institute to supply the expertise in the delivery of NVQs and Springvale to provide the expertise in training. The purpose of the partnership was to provide industry with a product that it required.

A contract was drawn up between East Antrim Institute and Springvale to establish the aims and objectives of the partnership.

### The aims and objectives of the partnership were to:

- Deliver work-based training for industry.
- Address identified skills shortages within the Northern Ireland workforce.

- Provide access to the FE curriculum to those who have traditionally not availed.

### The structure of the partnership between East Antrim Institute and Springvale.

East Antrim Institute provides candidate registration and is responsible for the internal verification, quality control and administrative support. Both East Antrim Institute and Springvale employ assessors for the programmes however Springvale provides the methodology, day to day operational management and training for the NVQ system.

### Relationship between the partnership and the client organisation

A contract is drawn up between the partnership and the client organisation which specifies the roles and responsibilities of each party and the scope and timescale of the training provision.

## Initial teething problems

It was apparent that some employers lacked confidence in the NVQ systems. Presentations to directors, managers, supervisors and employees led to the partnership being given the opportunity to pilot this new approach. The client organisations were soon convinced the NVQ system had the potential of upskilling their workforce and providing productivity improvements.

## The partnership in practice

In 1999 a pilot programme was initiated in Ulster Weavers Home Fashions Ltd taking production staff through the NVQ level 2 in Performing Manufacturing Operations. The programme has expanded from this pilot and the partnership now works with a range of organisations including: Ulster Weavers Apparel Ltd, Albion PLC, GEM, EM Solutions, Creative Composites, Cawoods, John Hogg Group, Melmount Foods, Moldall Ltd, Translink, HCL, Goldenvale and Safeways.

The range of NVQs on offer has expanded to cover:

- Maintenance
- Customer Service
- Information Technology
- Administration
- Team Leader
- Management.

Initially there were 3.5 full-time assessors employed on the project. This has now expanded to 19.

The NVQ assessment is integrated totally within the client organisations, with the assessors working from within an appointed area.

At the beginning of the process the assessors shadow employees for 2–3 days to ensure they become familiar with the opportunities to gather evidence and the quality procedure operated within the organisation, which can be used within the assessment process. The assessor then carries out accreditation of prior learning interviews and skills analyses with each employee and draws up assessment plans indicating the types of evidence which can be used. The assessor takes a lead role for level 1 and 2 NVQs, but from level 3 and above the NVQ becomes more candidate driven.

Monthly meetings with the client organisations ensure that they are always aware of the performance and progress of their employees and the organisations are more than satisfied with the way the process is moulded and totally integrated into their organisation.

The Business Development Manager of Springvale, manages the team of assessors who meet once a month.

There are also regular meetings between the Directors of Springvale and East Antrim Institute, the Deputy Director of East Antrim Institute and the Business Development Manager at Springvale, to discuss the operational management of the programme and plan future developments. These meetings are used to review new and existing contracts, the number of candidates, outputs, forecasts and budget in order to identify any areas of concern and adjust the resources accordingly to ensure efficient and effective use of resources.

## Benefits of the partnership

- Flexibility of staffing allows a match between resources and the requirements of the client organisations.
- A diverse skills base which can be drawn upon at short notice.
- Policy and strategy in place to develop the team to meet ever changing client markets.
- Complementary resources from partners.
- The use of existing systems reduces administration costs.
- Provides opportunities for those employees who would not have used traditional forms of education and training.
- Cross community training within the organisational environment.
- Upskilling of the Northern Ireland workforce.

By December 2001 over 500 employees had completed an NVQ programme through this partnership. Of the initial starters, 80% of the women and 90% of the men had no formal qualifications and 35% of those on the programme were over 35 years of age. The three-way partnership between East Antrim Institute, Springvale and the client organisations has been effective in increasing participation in training and meeting the aims set out in the lifelong learning document.

East Antrim Institute and Springvale have a partnership which provides a clear focus, a commitment to continuous quality improvement and the provision of lifelong learning for all.