ACHIEVING BEST PRACTICE IN YOUR BUSINESS

An introduction
The DTI drives our ambition of ‘prosperity for all’ by working to create the best environment for business success in the UK. We help people and companies become more productive by promoting enterprise, innovation and creativity.

We champion UK business at home and abroad. We invest heavily in world-class science and technology. We protect the rights of working people and consumers. And we stand up for fair and open markets in the UK, Europe and the world.

Achieving best practice in your business is a key theme within DTI’s business support solutions, providing ideas and insights into how you can improve performance across your business. By showing what works in other businesses, we can help you see what can work for you, and then support you in implementation. This brochure focuses on these solutions.
How can best practice benefit my business?

Successful companies don’t stand still – they’re always looking for ways to improve.

Simply put, best practice is about becoming more efficient, competitive and profitable.

This means:

- measuring how well your business is performing
- seeing where you need to improve and doing something about it
- learning from how others have done it.

Best practice can be applied to nearly every aspect of your business – from how you recruit staff, to how you market your business or use new technologies.

As the case studies over the next few pages show, getting best practice right can make a huge difference to your business.

Best practice can help your business:

- become more competitive
- increase sales and develop new markets
- reduce costs and become more efficient
- improve the skills of your workforce
- use technology more effectively.

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Best practice is based on the idea that the best way to learn is from the experience of others.
How can the DTI help me introduce best practice?

Best practice is based on the idea that the best way to learn is from the experience of others. While businesses and industries vary, the principles of best practice are often the same.

Our best practice solution grew out of one of the complaints we hear most often from businesses – that they don’t have the time, or enough opportunities, to talk to other businesses to exchange advice and ideas.

The DTI has been actively promoting best practice for many years, through case studies, reports and industry events. Now for the first time, all this knowledge and experience is being brought together in one place.

Our website, [www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice](http://www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice), details proven techniques that have benefited businesses of all sizes. There’s also a range of free, printed brochures you can order. Both the website and brochures contain reports, guides and case studies, as well as a range of self-assessment tools to help you measure your progress and plan for the future.

Once you’ve read this material, you may want to explore best practice in more detail. If so, you can arrange to meet a Business Link adviser, who will be able to help you decide on the best way forward. This solution might include Support to implement best business practice. This is all about providing practical and tailored support to small businesses who want to implement improvements to their internal business processes.

Read on to find out more about the help and support available.
Where can I find practical information?

Wherever the size, location or type of your business, we hope you'll find the information we offer useful. You can access this information through our website, partners and at events.

Information on our website is arranged under the simple, clear headings of Management, Operations, Sales & Marketing, People, Innovation, Communications and Technology. New material is added regularly.

Everything is written in a straightforward, practical way, and includes checklists and contact information to help you plan your next steps. For those who prefer to read on paper, documents can also be printed off or ordered in hard copy.
What are the main areas to think about?

While we cover various aspects of best practice, there are certain areas where we get the most requests for information from businesses. These are:

**Getting the best from your people**

The cliché about people being your most valuable asset is true. Many businesses are talking to their people and finding ways for them to contribute more at work.

Key issues include:
- how to find and keep the right people
- whether flexible working is the way forward.

Read more about *Managing people* and *Involving employees* at [www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/people/](http://www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/people/)

**Raising skill levels**

How do you make sure that you have the skilled, motivated workforce you need?

Key issues include:
- training and development
- adjusting to technology.

Read more about *Training & skills* at [www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/people/training-skills.htm](http://www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/people/training-skills.htm)

**Increasing productivity**

Reviewing your internal processes can deliver significant increases in efficiency and productivity.

Key issues include:
- measuring your productivity
- introducing new ways of working.

Read more about *Quality management* at [www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/operations/quality.htm](http://www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/operations/quality.htm)

**Improving co-operation**

Many businesses are finding that they can make dramatic savings by changing the way they work with partners and suppliers.

Key issues include:
- sharing information
- joint planning and collaborative working.

Read more from our website about:
- *Supply chains* at [www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/operations/supply.htm](http://www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/operations/supply.htm)

**Using technology**

From e-mail to extranets, the potential of technology to cut costs and increase sales and productivity is extraordinary. However, finding the right solution for your needs isn’t always easy.

Current big issues are:
- getting broadband
- selling over the internet
- guarding against viruses and hacking.

Read more about the *Internet* at [www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/technology/internet.htm](http://www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/technology/internet.htm)
Best practice at work

Best practice at work: Sykes Anderson

The innovative use of technology has given Sykes Anderson – a London based conveyancing solicitors – a real competitive edge.

Its website now sits at the heart of its service and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) strategy.

Each client is given their own secure, password protected account, which allows them to check their case’s progress whenever they please. This initiative has helped to reduce the number of minor calls and enquiries received, while increasing overall client satisfaction.

The site also offers specialist information and a wide variety of tools. These range from analysis of the latest legal developments to easy to use tax calculators.

But that’s not all, Sykes Anderson also uses the website to excel at marketing. For example, it has valuable links to Country Life and AOL.

This success has been widely recognised and the business has been awarded ‘Best Legal Marketing site in the UK’.

Best practice at work: Gilbert Lawton

Just like the rest of the motor industry, Altrincham based car dealership Gilbert Lawton faces an increasingly competitive market. In addition, the business has also recently relocated and expanded.

To drive the business forward in this new environment, it has focused on improving both customer and staff retention through rigorous training.

The training programme includes a range of proven techniques, such as job swaps, cross functional working groups and thorough personal development plans for each member of the team.

The results have been impressive. The business has seen its staff turnover fall and repeat orders rise year on year. In turn, recruitment costs are lower, while turnover has risen strongly.

Thanks to an investment in training, Gilbert Lawton is now well placed for growth in one of the UK’s toughest markets.

Gilbert Lawton used a variety of routes to construct their successful training programme. This led to its winning a National Training Award in 2000. For more information on the National Training Awards, and a wide selection of other case studies, visit www.nationaltrainingawards.com
Jeff Sacree turned his small, struggling, surfboard business into one of Europe’s leading specialist helmet manufacturers on the basis of a casual conversation.

His business was extremely seasonal so he was looking to find a way of diversifying his products. Speaking to a lifeboatman, he found the RNLI needed a lighter, more suitable helmet for use on the seas. He had been working on a helmet for surfers and so was well placed to supply the RNLI.

After securing the RNLI contract, the question for Jeff was where to take the business next. As the craze for new, extreme sports blossomed throughout the 1990s, a much wider market suddenly presented itself. Skateboarders, snowboarders, mountain bikers and powerboat racers all needed protection.

Gecko soon discovered that producing low-volume, handmade products was a distinct advantage when it comes to satisfying the niche markets of extreme sports.

It involved less financial risk and allowed for the continual, minor improvements that customers wanted. “Making everything by hand gives us the crucial advantage of flexibility, so we can add altimeters and video cameras, torches and two-way radio systems – pretty well anything a customer asks for” says Jeff.

Today, the Gecko trademark can be found in 15 European countries, stamped on between 5,000-6,000 helmets a year. The basic models retail at £60-£100 a time, with heavily customised versions at two or three times that price.

The RNLI helmet won a Design Council Millennium Product award and now the orders flow in all year round, removing the company’s dependence on the summer trade.

Jeff Sacree is pleased with the business’ progress, but he doesn’t get complacent. “We keep looking at designs to see if we can improve them. We never stop exploring new avenues to create the ultimate product”. 

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**Best practice at work: Gecko Headgear**

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Putting you in touch with advisers who can help you step out of your day-to-day business.
Best practice projects

A complementary element of our best practice solution is *Support to implement best business practice*. This involves putting you in touch with advisers who can help you step out of your day-to-day business to critically evaluate your business’s competitive position and define with you practical ways to enhance it.

Financial support from the DTI may also be available for businesses to implement real best practice business process improvements.

As the diagram below shows, *Support to implement best business practice* follows a simple three-stage process:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Investigation</th>
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<td>The first stage involves a free, in-depth evaluation of your business’s competitive performance, working with a Business Link adviser. This is carried out in the form of a market proven benchmarking exercise, which assesses your business performance against a defined set of companies, including those of your size, industry and sector. Based on the results of this evaluation and analysis, in consultation with you, the adviser creates a practical, detailed action plan for your business that identifies key areas for improvement and highlights potential sources of help.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Implementing best practice</th>
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<tr>
<td>In many cases the necessary changes are best made by the business themselves. Alternatively, your Business Link adviser might recommend a tailored implementation project for your business. If so, they’ll help you choose an accredited expert from their national register. This expert consultant will have a proven record of working with small businesses and will give you the advice and support you need to devise and run your project. In most cases, when a tailored project is recommended and undertaken, the DTI will also provide the funds for half of your project costs, up to a maximum of £5,000. You will provide the other half. Your Business Link adviser will explain to you the exact funding arrangements for your project. Throughout the project your Business Link adviser will be on hand to ensure things run smoothly.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Your Business Link adviser will arrange a follow-up meeting six to twelve months after the project to review progress. This includes another benchmarking exercise to measure the project’s benefits and impact on your business performance and suggest potential for on-going improvement.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
To ensure your project runs smoothly, your Business Link adviser will be on hand to help you from start to finish.
How are the accredited experts chosen?

The best practice experts on the National Business Link Consultants Register are chosen for their qualifications and ‘real life’ commercial experience working successfully with small businesses. Normally, you will be offered three suitable experts to choose from. It’s your decision which one you work with on your project.

As part of the evaluation at the end of projects, Business Link advisers seek feedback from businesses on the performance of each expert. This information is then fed back into the national register and made available to new businesses that are embarking on a project.

Will I receive help in managing the project?

To ensure your project runs smoothly, your Business Link adviser will be on hand to help you from start to finish.

What if I’m not happy with the expert?

Any concerns you have regarding the conduct or advice of your expert consultant should be raised with your Business Link adviser. He or she will work to either resolve your issues or source an alternative expert from the National Business Link Consultants Register.

In addition, you will be asked for feedback on the performance of your expert consultant at the conclusion of your project. Your feedback will then form part of the expert’s annual accreditation reassessment process.

Is any information I provide confidential?

When your company data, including financial information, is entered in the benchmarking database the information is made completely anonymous.

Data will only be used in a benchmarking comparison where there are enough companies to ensure an individual business’s data cannot be recognised.

In addition, your local Business Link and the manager of the database, acting on behalf of the DTI, will ensure that your information is held in a way that’s fully compliant with the Data Protection Act.
Larger best practice projects

From the second half of 2004 we propose to support some larger projects if they involve a number of businesses in a supply chain or if they aim to increase the performance of a large number of employees.

- Supply chain projects will give large or middle market companies the opportunity to host a best practice project with three or four suppliers.

- High performance workplace projects will be targeted at larger businesses working in partnership with their employees through Trade Unions.

These projects can attract funding of up to £25,000 but, unlike smaller projects, applicants will need to complete a formal application. This will enable them to nominate the expert they wish to work with on their project.

The free, in-depth evaluation before the start of a project remains an integral part of the process, as does the follow-up diagnostic to measure the benefits.

For more information about larger best practice projects, please speak to your Business Link adviser or the DTI. See ‘Next steps’ for contact details.
Next steps

If you’re interested in best practice, your first port of call should be to visit our website or call our phoneline.

Read best practice information
Achieving best practice in your business is backed by the DTI.
To access free information and publications on best practice:
  - visit our website www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice
  - call the DTI Publications Orderline on 0870 150 2500 or visit www.dti.gov.uk/publications

Contact a Business Link adviser
Business Link is a key source of independent and objective information and advice for small and medium sized businesses. Its aim is to help businesses innovate, improve, grow and be more competitive by analysing their development needs and providing access to the most appropriate Government, private or voluntary support.
  - Call 0845 600 9 006 or
  - visit the Business Link website at www.businesslink.gov.uk

Find more about funding for larger best practice projects
Contact the DTI by calling 020 7215 5000.

The Support to implement best business practice part of the solution is available in England through Business Link. Similar support exists in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Scotland
For more information about best practice and other business support products available in Scotland, please contact Business Gateway on:
  - 08456 096611
  - www.bgateway.com

Wales
For more information about best practice and other business support products available in Wales, please contact Business Eye/Llygad Busnes on:
  - 08457 969798
  - www.businesseye.org.uk or
  - www.llygadbusnes.org.uk

Northern Ireland
For more information about best practice and other business support products available in Northern Ireland, please contact Invest Northern Ireland on:
  - 028 9023 9090
  - www.investni.com
The DTI’s Business Support Solutions: practical help for your business

The solutions outlined in this brochure are part of the DTI's range of tailored business support. They are designed to meet different stages of your business's development and growth. They are easy to access and use.

The solutions, listed below, are grouped into four themes reflecting the areas in which your business is most likely to need help: innovation, best practice, raising finance and regional financial support.

Information can be obtained online at [www.dti.gov.uk/bss](http://www.dti.gov.uk/bss) or at [www.businesslink.gov.uk](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk)

### Succeeding through innovation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The product</th>
<th>Who is it for?</th>
<th>What does it provide?</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Transfer Networks</td>
<td>All businesses wanting to grow by exploiting technology.</td>
<td>A grant to an intermediary to set up a network in a priority technology area, bringing together businesses, universities and others with an interest in technology applications.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Research and Development</td>
<td>All UK-based businesses wishing to exploit technology.</td>
<td>Funding for collaborative R&amp;D projects between businesses, universities and other potential collaborators.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant for Investigating an Innovative Idea</td>
<td>Small businesses wishing to exploit an innovative idea.</td>
<td>Reimbursed consultancy to help businesses get advice on the steps needed to implement their ideas.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant for Research and Development</td>
<td>Small businesses with an innovative product or technology.</td>
<td>A grant to help businesses carry out R&amp;D that could lead to a technologically innovative product or process.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Transfer Partnerships</td>
<td>All businesses needing expert help to innovate.</td>
<td>A grant to cover part of the cost of using a person to transfer and embed knowledge into a business from the UK knowledge base via a strategic project.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## Achieving best practice in your business

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The product</th>
<th>Who is it for?</th>
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<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to Best Business Practice</td>
<td>All businesses wishing to find out how to improve their performance through better ways of working</td>
<td>Materials on best practice, networking events, organised visits to businesses successfully implementing best practice</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support to Implement Best Business Practice</td>
<td>Small businesses wanting practical help in implementing best practice. (Also open to larger firms for certain projects.)</td>
<td>A free diagnostic run by a Business Link adviser, with subsidised consultancy for selected projects</td>
<td>2, 4</td>
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</table>

## Raising finance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The product</th>
<th>Who is it for?</th>
<th>What does it provide?</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Firms Loan Guarantee</td>
<td>Small businesses with viable proposals unable to obtain conventional loans because of a lack of security</td>
<td>A government guarantee covering 75% of the loan, encouraging commercial lenders to provide loans to businesses lacking security. Borrowers pay DTI a premium of 2% pa in return for the guarantee</td>
<td>3, 4</td>
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</table>

## Regional investment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The product</th>
<th>Who is it for?</th>
<th>What does it provide?</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selective Finance for Investment in England</td>
<td>All businesses located in or considering relocating to one of the ‘Assisted Areas’</td>
<td>A grant towards a project’s capital cost, subject to criteria on productivity, job numbers and quality, and need.</td>
<td>2, 4</td>
</tr>
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**Notes:**

1. The DTI is delivering the Technology Strategy and Programme through these products. Applications can only be made in the priority technology areas specified by the Strategy. More details are available at [www.dti.gov.uk/technologyprogramme](http://www.dti.gov.uk/technologyprogramme)
2. Available in England only. In many cases similar schemes are offered by the appropriate organisations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. All other solutions are UK-wide.
3. The DTI also funds various programmes to provide SMEs with better access to venture capital.
4. Participants may be contacted on behalf of DTI as part of the department’s routine evaluation and monitoring system.