

Disability Rights Commission

Learning lessons:
Influencing the
thinking and
behaviour of
small and medium
enterprises (SMEs)

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Executive summary

The Learning Narratives project contributes to the broad legacy strategy of the Disability Rights Commission. It considers what the DRC has learnt through its various activities since 2000 and focuses on specific activities or over-arching themes where the DRC has had direct involvement.

Each narrative responds to questions such as ‘why did we, the DRC, try to do what we did?’, ‘what worked?’ and ‘what didn’t work and why?’ and draws on a range of data sources, not least of which is the experience and expertise of DRC staff, both past and present.

This narrative looks at a DRC campaign which aimed to build the confidence and capacity of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to recruit and retain disabled people, through communicating with SMEs directly and the intermediary bodies from which SMEs often gathered their information. It highlights positive outcomes from the different approaches taken, as well as considers what difficulties the campaign faced and why.

Influencing the thinking of SMEs: key lessons

Developing a campaign

- The development of a campaign should always be underpinned and informed by existing research and policy positions.
- Any campaign should directly be informed by the stakeholders it will affect. Establishing consultation meetings is a good way of achieving this outcome.
- An organisation will need to understand the language and

forms of communication needed to engage with relevant stakeholders.

- The objectives of a campaign must be clearly identified and communicated to stakeholders. A project plan needs to be established and should not be over-complex – keep it simple.
- It is important to test messages with target audiences before launching the campaign.
- Using radio advertising is an effective tool in reaching SMEs directly.

Influencing and supporting SMEs

- Working through key intermediaries is a good way of supporting SMEs, building the capacity of both individual businesses and the intermediaries themselves.
- Campaigns should be run in conjunction with partners who can also take ownership of the messages the campaign is seeking to give.
- When working with SMEs, a regional approach might provide more effective engagement and outcomes.
- The success of a campaign is in educating, or persuading stakeholders that the issue is of central importance to them; the key messages need to be framed in a way which makes a connection with SMEs.
- An organisation will need to be clear on the remit and role partners will be able to undertake, and plan activities accordingly.
- When producing a film for training purposes, make sure it can work in 'snippets' as well as in its entirety. This will increase its uptake and usage in training sessions.

Introduction

From 2004 to 2007, the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) had two strategic objectives in relation to employment:

- A narrower gap in employment rates between disabled and non-disabled people
- A narrower gap in earned income levels between disabled and non-disabled people.

The DRC also had an obligation to help small employers meet their new requirements under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), one million of whom fell under the DDA from 1 October 2004 when their exemption was removed. In addition, most employers fall into the small to medium enterprise (SME) bracket and so attitudinal change in this sector had the potential to yield a large positive change.

From October 2004, the DRC therefore ran a campaign which aimed to build the confidence and capacity of SMEs to recruit and retain disabled people.

Background: understanding the market

Prior to formulating the campaign, a wide-ranging literature review was undertaken internally. The DRC also ran a series of consultation meetings across Great Britain for SMEs to find out what they considered to be the key issues in relation to employing disabled people. These activities were crucial to help develop an understanding of the issues facing SMEs and to help the DRC form a better understanding of how to communicate with SMEs.

The background work to the campaign was needed because the target audience of SMEs is a challenging one for a number of reasons:¹

- The SME / micro sector is incredibly diverse – from small construction companies to international consultancies to ethnic minority-run restaurants to voluntary sector campaigning organisations.
- Nearly half of SMEs seek no external advice whatsoever – only about 5 per cent make use of Business Link. They also do not use DRC as a point of advice and DRC does not have the capacity to give 1 million small employers advice via the Helpline. However, the DRC website was also an ineffective resource for SMEs because they prefer paper information.

1 For a full discussion of these issues and an exploration of the SME sector see Howard, M (2004) 'Small Employer Literature Review'.

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- Small businesses tend to have informal HR practices. Only 31 per cent use formal recruitment and selection procedures and it may be more cost effective for them to keep it this way. Attempts to encourage them to formalise policies and procedures could have been viewed as burdensome regulation and resisted or ignored.
- Small employers recruit infrequently, perhaps one person every two years. Influencing them two years before the event may be pointless.

The campaign

The DRC's campaign had two key strands:

1. Large scale radio advertising to target SMEs directly
2. A range of marketing activity to target advisers of SMEs.

As such, between October 2004 and June 2005, the DRC conducted a range of marketing activities targeting the SME sector and advisers. The aim of the campaign was to build the confidence and capacity of small employers to recruit and retain disabled people.

The main campaign was launched in March 2005, focusing on media activity combined with radio advertising. The aim was to bust the myths and stereotypes held about disabled people, as well as tackling fears about employing disabled people and promoting awareness of the law.

Following the media launch, a range of marketing methods were then utilised to promote support mechanisms available to SMEs and build the capacity of intermediaries to educate their audiences / members on disability issues. The DRC particularly targeted:

- professional bodies (of bankers, accountants and solicitors in particular)
- trade associations
- ethnic business associations
- individual organisations who have significant influence.

This approach resulted in several concrete DRC activities, including attending trade associations exhibitions (such as

the Federation of Small Businesses and British Chambers of Commerce annual conference), business breakfasts with stakeholder organisations, promotion and distribution of a 'Top Tips' guidance document (which had been produced by the DRC's Practice Development team in consultation with SMEs), viral marketing through purchased emailing lists, and the production of a short film which was shown in cinemas and distributed on DVD.

Using intermediaries?

Using advisers and intermediaries – rather than simply concentrating on SMEs alone – may seem counter-intuitive. The DRC's research suggested, however, that SMEs were more likely to seek advice from their solicitor, bank or accountant, than from a more formal network.² The broad aim of the marketing activity was therefore to build the capacity of these existing advice-giving intermediaries so that they could offer information on disability-related employment issues, as well identify the networks or organisations the DRC would encourage intermediaries to promote. The main way in which this was done was through building partnerships with relevant trade associations and employment advice networks – an approach welcome by many:

It makes sense for it to be us doing the role of working with SMEs, especially here in Wales as we are a smaller country so we're able to have a much bigger impact. Working with organisations like ours multiplies the DRC's effectiveness.
Representative of a development agency

2 Michaelis et al. (2001) and Robson & Bennett (2000) in Howard, M (2004) 'Small Employer Literature Review'.

What worked and what didn't?

The narrative now considers elements of the SMEs campaign that worked well and those that didn't.

The Appointment – a positive experience

To provide a training resource for advisers and SMEs themselves, the DRC decided to create a short film that could be used by organisations (such as Chambers of Commerce) as the basis of an informal training session. That short film was called 'The Appointment'.

The original intention had been to produce a documentary-style education film, presenting the business case for employing disabled people and including appropriate case studies. This approach was abandoned, however, as the format was felt to be tired; instead, the DRC decided to take a fresh approach to what was a potentially off-putting idea (ie that of employing disabled people).

The idea of using a short drama was popular because of the success DRC had experienced with a previous film, 'Talk' (part of the Actions Speak Louder than Words campaign in 2000 / 2001). It was also believed that the audience would be able to empathise with the characters and therefore understand or relate to the message more positively. The eventual 'Appointment' film tackled issues around hidden impairments and disclosure at work and combined closely with the key campaign message that 'you probably already employ someone with a disability'.

The film appeared in 38 cinema screens for five weeks from December 2005 – January 2006 and was evaluated through

measuring audience opinions and using a control group. This evaluation provided some interesting findings. For example, those aged between 45–60 and women were more receptive to the film’s message, and many more of those who had seen the film thought that disabled people have a lot to offer at work compared to those who hadn’t seen the film.³

There was also increased recognition that mental health conditions could be considered a disability.

Most importantly, the evaluation also helped the DRC identify whether the method was effective. Of those surveyed, 62 per cent said using a short film was an interesting approach and said it was clever in the way it made its point. 70 per cent of the audience also thought it would be suitable for showing on television.

The evaluation reinforced the DRC’s expectations regarding the project – that it was wise to frame the campaign in a drama rather than a documentary, for instance. The DRC was also able to learn about how the medium of film could be improved – for example, some felt the film was too long (at 9 minutes). One difficulty being, of course, that the film couldn’t be shortened because of the narrative involved within the film.

One major difficulty in screening ‘The Appointment’ arose as a result of using the cheaper option of purchasing blocks of screen time, rather than choosing the feature film the DRC’s film would appear before. As a result of this approach, it ended up being shown before a number of children’s films – including Harry Potter – and was considered unsuitable for this audience.

3 For the statement ‘disabled people must inform their employer about their disability’, 76 per cent of the control group agreed, compared with 54 per cent of those who had seen the film. For the statement ‘Disabled people have a lot to offer at work’, 76 per cent of the control

The positive side effect, however is that the attendance figures were very high because such films were blockbusters. Nevertheless, some important lessons follow, including:

- researching the films appearing in the cinema
- choosing films with a high certificate level
- choosing films most likely to appeal to certain demographic (eg business owners, certain age range or gender).

Regional business seminars – reaching the target audience

In partnership with regional development agencies (RDA), the DRC aimed to put on an event for advisers in each English region. From April 2005, RDAs took on responsibility for Business Links, which have a key role in advising SMEs and would enable them to fulfil their obligations around disability.

The DRC hoped a regional approach would be effective because advice organisations for SMEs tend to have a regional presence (e.g. ACAS, Business Link, Chambers of Commerce) and by working in partnership with such organisations, the DRC could deliver something that related specifically to their own needs. As such, four regional events took place, promoted primarily by the RDA, as well as Business Links and Chambers of Commerce in the region, with free attendance for all.

The DRC experienced problems in two aspects of this regional approach, first in securing the involvement of the RDAs and second in securing delegates for the events. That the DRC's target audience did not identify the issue as one of high importance or relevance to them appears to have been a barrier in both cases.

Involvement of the RDAs

On one hand, the DRC's involvement with RDAs through equality and diversity officers through each RDA generated some success. In some cases, this was because of an ongoing relationship with the relevant officer and RDA (eg in London). In others, it was because the work the DRC was doing nicely dovetailed with guidance materials or activities the RDA itself was undertaking at the time. Of the campaign itself, two RDAs in the midlands joined in because they found the business case behind it persuasive.

In other areas, though, the lack of interest from RDAs may have been due to the vagueness of the DRC's business case and its lack of regional specificity. As such, the DRC might have benefited from preparing regional data on the number of unemployed disabled people or region specific case studies to add weight to their case.

From a practical point of view, it may be that the involvement of the DRC and an external contractor made the set up process too complicated for RDAs, and from an internal perspective it was difficult to project manage with so many partners involved. For instance, through a relationship with the national ACAS training manager, the DRC was able to secure a regional training officer in each area. It was more difficult to secure the involvement of regional disability organisations, however, due to the DRC's lack of region-specific knowledge and the RDAs' lack of disability knowledge.

It has also been suggested that the lack of a DRC regional presence hindered progress. Commitment from two RDAs keen on the campaign was easier to secure because they were already familiar with the DRC and specific staff. Other regions may have perceived the proposal from a national body as the imposition of an irrelevant work programme and one that didn't meet their strategic objectives.

The DRC sought to rectify this last difficulty in its approach to the 'Raise Your Eq' campaign on the Disability Equality Duty, specifically demonstrating how mainstreaming disability into work programmes enabled public bodies to achieve their wider strategic objectives. As such, a lesson learnt from the SMEs campaign benefited later DRC work.

Marketing events to SME advisers

The DRC experienced some problems with its external contractor regarding the levels of publicity for events, since it was unclear contractually whose responsibility this was. There was also a mix-up in the focus of the marketing work: whilst the contractor promoted events as a disability catch up / legal event – and thus focusing heavily on the disability angle – the DRC believed the events needed to be promoted as opportunities to learn about widening recruitment and filling skills gaps. Developing the right message, therefore, is key – though it is possible that business advisers might have seen neither message as relevant to them.

A further difficulty in reaching advisers or SMEs arose from misunderstanding the DRC's partner organisations: the DRC had hoped RDAs and Business Links would be able to promote the events, but they had very few promotional mechanisms in place to reach advisers or SMEs. In addition, the restructuring of Business Links to bring them under the RDA umbrella caused disruption in the way they communicated with these audiences.

The sum of these difficulties meant that the DRC achieved a low level of attendance at the events: having aimed for 60-75 attendees, some 30 attended each event. Although those that did attend provided positive feedback, the events simply weren't of the same scale that had been hoped for.

Seminar for BME businesses: tailoring advice

As part of the campaign aimed at SMEs, the DRC's Practice Development team also conducted an evening seminar for small businesses run by black and minority ethnic people (BME). The team took a different approach to the bulk of the campaign by working at a local level with the Leicester Asian Business Association (LABA). The LABA had good links with local BME businesses and communicated with them regularly – a key resource that the DRC could tap into. The LABA was also an active association and the event was therefore well attended.

Although one of the main concerns of the audience at these particular events was how to make reasonable adjustments to their services under Part 3 of the DDA – relating to the provision of goods and service – the DRC was pleased to be able to work directly with the BME business community. Typically, the BME business community tend to feel excluded from 'mainstream' advice providers, so LABA's relationship with the DRC was beneficial since it allowed LABA to offer the DRC advice about tailoring messages for this subsection of the SME market and about how and where to run a meeting so that BME business people would feel comfortable in attending.

Feedback from stakeholders on DRC's campaign approach

From those it has worked with, feedback from the Chamber of Commerce and trade organisation representatives on the DRC's partnership building approach indicates that it has been an effective way of disseminating its message, and helped to give the DRC a more positive profile amongst those who know about them:

Small businesses... will always have feelings about public sector bodies trying to get them to do things, but I think they'll feel that less with the DRC than most because of the work they've done through us [small business group], and will see them more as a body that can help them. **Small business group**

They [the DRC] were clever, because businesses are more likely to pick up and read something from body they're member of rather than a public body they maybe have or haven't heard of.

Business organisation representative

Other commissions have been too public sector focused, whilst the DRC has not, speaking a language of business. **Business organisation representative**

Though aspects of the campaign regarding the DRC's communication with intermediaries were mixed in their successes, this feedback indicates that there may be some success to be had in investing in long term stakeholder

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relationships with advice giving organisations who work with SMEs. This is particularly the case when both the DRC and the intermediaries focus on the benefits to the business of integrating disability and equality in their employment and business practice.

What's needed in future?

There are some broader lessons, developed by the experience of the SMEs campaign above, which might make such approaches more effective in the future:

- Build a more robust business case for recruiting and employing disabled people and develop more relevant and tailored cases for engaging advisers. Test these messages with target audiences prior to use in a campaign.
- Build region-specific knowledge and information on experiences of SMEs and disability. This could be achieved through solid partnership work with regional partners, who should be familiar with their area and have access to relevant audience / market research.
- Ensure a practical contribution (not just financial) from RDAs to ensure their commitment to the project.
- Build ongoing long term relationships with regional public bodies and advice networks and learn as far as possible from how RDAs / Business Links influence SMEs behaviour.
- Establish links with local business networks, as they tend be familiar with their local market and how best to reach businesses at a local and regional level.

These steps, combined with some of the DRC's successful methods used in its own SMEs campaign, can help go some way to ensure a national organisation can communicate its messages effectively with SMEs at a regional and local level.