



Here's how
I've changed my business
for the **better**

Case studies from businesslink.gov.uk

If you're wondering how you can make your business smarter, happier or more profitable, this book is for you. It brings together 21 of the best case studies on the Business Link website. Each one features a real business owner or manager, speaking in their own words, about how they've explored best practice and made it a reality in their business.

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WE LOOK AT THE FEEDBACK FROM THE JOBS WE'VE DONE HALF-YEARLY, AND SEARCH FOR ANY TRENDS

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Here's how I reduced supplier costs

Ros Lee is administration director for contract publishing company **McMillan-Scott**. When she joined the business, one of her first challenges was to re-think the way suppliers were managed. A thorough review and cost analysis led to a new purchasing policy and significant savings.

What I did

Look at the figures

"When we started our supplier review, the company didn't have an official purchasing policy. Like many businesses, we had grown significantly but purchasing systems hadn't caught up. Staff were still ordering supplies on an ad hoc basis.

"The first thing we did was to list all our suppliers and calculate the current spend on everything from stationery to company cars. Once we had all the information in a central database, we could look at areas for improvement.

"It was clear that there was scope to cut costs by centralising all purchasing, rationalising our supplier base and negotiating better deals with key suppliers."

Communicate with suppliers and staff

"The next step was to consult with existing suppliers and investigate alternatives. Even where there were cheaper options, we didn't dismiss existing suppliers out of hand. We talked to them face-to-face to explain

our new purchasing policy. We wanted to give them a chance to compete with the other suppliers we were considering.

"We also made sure new suppliers understood our needs and that we understood the way they operated. Developing good relationships from the outset is important. If you help your suppliers, they'll be more willing to help you.

"It was essential to put an end to ad hoc buying, so the new policy was immediately circulated to all staff. There was some initial resistance, but by talking to them and listening to their concerns we overcame it. One major staff worry was that product quality would decline, making their jobs harder. We were careful to provide a product sample for testing whenever a substitution was planned."

Monitor and review

"Some savings are apparent straight away. For example, changing our stationery supplier resulted in an immediate 20 per cent cost reduction, while

limiting supplier choice for company cars led to an average 15 per cent discount on prices.

"We also undertook a formal annual review of our purchasing policy. We compared costs year

ROS'S TOP TIPS

- "Take control and centralise your purchasing."
- "Communicate your purchasing policy to staff and make sure it's adhered to – but listen to their feedback too."
- "Balance cost savings against product quality and service levels."



“THE FIRST THING WE DID WAS TO LIST ALL OUR SUPPLIERS AND CALCULATE CURRENT SPEND ON EVERYTHING FROM STATIONERY TO COMPANY CARS. ONCE WE HAD ALL THE INFORMATION, WE COULD LOOK AT AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT.”

on year and assessed product quality and service performance across all our suppliers. Staff feedback was taken into account and key findings were communicated to suppliers where appropriate.”

What I'd do differently

Balance cost against service

“The ultimate goal of a purchasing policy is to control costs. But good supplier relationships are based on

more than just money. We learnt a few lessons in the early days.

“For example, we switched telephone suppliers to gain a huge cost saving. But the service levels didn't meet our needs and the business suffered temporarily. Before long, we reverted to our original supplier. Now, every decision we make to retain a supplier or take on a new one involves careful analysis of service levels.”



Find out more:

Manage your suppliers

businesslink.gov.uk/managesuppliers

Here's how I diversified into new areas

Mitchell Charlesworth is a chartered accountancy practice with five offices in the North West and over 100 years' experience. Aware of the need to maintain an edge in an increasingly competitive market, the company launched a specialist small business development service two years ago. The new service has increased profitability per customer and boosted business volumes. Business development manager **Greg Harris** explains how it was done.

What I did

Research the market

"Even a well-established business like ours has to evolve. Most chartered accountants offer the same basic package of services such as tax planning and payroll services. Although we were confident that ours were some of the best around, we wanted to offer something that would really add value to our clients.

"The first step in developing a new service was consulting our existing clients. Through listening to feedback, we identified a market for a trusted business development service that leveraged the chartered accountancy 'brand'. We also researched our competitors and found that there were only two other practices in our area offering a similar service."

Use what you've got

"From talking to clients, we realised that many SMEs need specialist help in developing and growing their businesses, but often don't know who to trust. Small firms tend to be wary of anyone who styles themselves as a general business consultant. They think that they'll end up spending a lot of money for promises that aren't ultimately delivered.

"In launching our own business development service we already had the advantage of the chartered accountancy brand behind us. It represents an assurance of quality that helps small business owners overcome their qualms. This meant we could logically offer new products and services to our existing customer base, that were natural extensions of our accounting services, without our customers being surprised or concerned."

GREG'S TOP TIPS

- "Do as much research as you can, among customers and competitors."
- "Allocate resources to launching and marketing your new product or service."
- "Make sure your business structure can cope with the increased demand you hope to generate."

Don't underestimate existing clients

"We initially thought the new service would expand our business by attracting new clients. In practice, I'd say about 75 per cent of the increase in business



volume we've experienced has come from existing clients. Having the service in our portfolio helps to attract new clients, but the immediate success was with people we already knew. The cost of marketing to existing customers is lower than recruiting new ones."

What I'd do differently

Be bold

"All diversification strategies carry some risk. We wanted to minimise that risk by limiting the resources we committed to the project. It's easy to say now the service has proved successful, but if I did the whole thing again I would recommend a bolder approach to the management team while still taking the risks into account. A launch event is one thing that would have created greater impact and perhaps a bigger initial marketing push."

Anticipate staffing needs

"We should have included internal training as part of the diversification process from day one. The business development service took off so quickly that we needed more trained staff to help us cope at a very early stage. If we'd developed the skills of existing employees sooner, we wouldn't have had to recruit from outside the company. It was more expensive in the long run."



Find out more:

Assess your options for growth

businesslink.gov.uk/optionsforgrowth

Here's how I set up and used a customer-feedback programme

Joe Ibrahim is director of the painting and decorating division of **Axis Europe PLC**, a London-based construction company. Joe wanted to find a way of measuring how effectively the business was performing - and devising a customer-feedback programme was one of a number of key performance indicators (KPIs) that the firm uses to measure its efficiency.

What I did

Started simply

"We were looking for a proven way to measure our business performance and customer satisfaction seemed a good, basic place to start. So we devised a questionnaire for clients and we kept it tightly focused on the areas we wanted to measure.

"One question, for example, was, "Did the painters tidy up to your satisfaction?" The possible answers we offered clients were simple - either "yes" or "no" or a satisfaction-rating which ranged from one to ten and used faces going from scowls to smiles."

Home in on specific issues

"Any strong negative feedback is now immediately investigated, but otherwise we look at all the feedback from the jobs we've done half-yearly, present the findings on piecharts and search for any trends.

"The results haven't always been what we've expected. For example, at first a lot of our clients -

around 30 per cent - were saying that the contractors were not tidying up enough after themselves. That figure should be almost zero so we really attacked that problem.

"We had a brainstorming session with contract managers and supervisors and discovered that often poor feedback is often driven by a perception of a problem rather than a real one. What we do now is not only be tidy but also highlight the perception of ourselves as tidy by using throwaway protective materials with our logo on. It's a way of exaggerating what we're doing.

"Another common complaint discovered was about scaffolders leaving loose clips around. The scaffolders said they didn't do this but now for every clip found £5 is donated to charity."

Share the finding

"I report back all the findings from my division to other divisional directors. It's important to help them

introduce customer-feedback schemes and it also helps me again measure what we're achieving and therefore improve things further. The whole system works like a big circle, really.

JOE'S TOP TIPS

- "Start simply - you won't be able to get everything right immediately."
- "Always address negative feedback straight away - it can actually win business for you in the long term."
- "Make it as easy as possible for customers to provide feedback."



“ANY NEGATIVE FEEDBACK IS NOW IMMEDIATELY INVESTIGATED, BUT OTHERWISE WE LOOK AT ALL THE FEEDBACK FROM THE JOBS WE’VE DONE HALF-YEARLY, PRESENT THE FINDINGS ON PIECHARTS AND SEARCH FOR ANY TRENDS”

“We also have monthly meetings with all the staff where we talk about customer satisfaction, performance, KPIs and where the company is going.”

What I’d do differently

Not expect 100 per cent of clients to understand the importance of feedback

“We’re learning as we go along. For the first three

months we sent questionnaires out to clients by post with an SAE and the return levels were about 30 per cent. We then tried hand-delivering them for the next three months and we found we had 30 per cent returns again so we’ve gone back to the post. Hand-delivering takes a lot of time and 30 per cent is not a bad result.”



Find out more:

Manage your customer care

businesslink.gov.uk/customer-care

Here's how KPIs help me achieve my business goals

Established in 1987, **Lucy Bristow Appointments** is an award-winning business recruitment company with two offices in Bristol. Operations director, **Wendy Trevett**, describes how setting business targets has boosted new business and helped the company adapt to changing market conditions.

What I did

Define objectives

“Three years ago a strategic review showed that while our staff were skilled and service levels were high, our market position was threatened by large organisations undercutting our prices. Levels of repeat business were dropping and price reductions weren't an option. Staff surveys also revealed motivational issues and a lack of direction.

“It was evident that our business goals needed to shift. We adapted our business plan to increase the emphasis on new business generation and customer retention. Setting targets for key performance indicators (KPIs) was the way forward.”

Set targets

“Following management consultation, we set new monthly customer targets for each consultant, as well as targets for volume of repeat business. In addition, we set realistic weekly KPI targets for sales consultants. These included making 25 sales calls to prospective clients, meeting two clients face-to-

face and having six candidates booked in for client interviews.

“In our industry, new and repeat business depends on having a wide pool of quality candidates, so we also set targets for consultants to interview five new jobseekers every week.

“The targets were discussed with staff before implementation. This was essential to help them understand the underlying business goals. It also gave them a chance to ask questions and express concerns.”

Monitor performance

“As well as formal monthly one-to-one meetings, we have a weekly desk-side chat with each employee to discuss the previous week's performance against monthly targets and to set “mini objectives” for the coming week. This helps us spot problems early and nip them in the bud, as well as keeping motivation levels up.

“Every six weeks we have a company meeting to talk through our financial performance. It's

important that people view their own performance as part of the bigger picture and see how meeting targets impacts on the bottom line.

“Overall, KPI targets have been very effective for us. New business has increased, customer retention has

WENDY'S TOP TIPS

- “Gain agreement on KPIs from the outset.”
- “Ask employees for ideas on how targets can be met.”
- “Work closely with staff, keeping them motivated to meet targets.”



KPI TARGETS HAVE BEEN VERY EFFECTIVE FOR US. NEW BUSINESS HAS INCREASED, CUSTOMER RETENTION HAS IMPROVED AND STAFF REPORT THAT THEY FEEL MORE FOCUSED AND INVOLVED.

improved and staff report that they feel more focussed and involved.”

What I'd do differently

Establish weekly monitoring sooner

“We started off thinking monthly monitoring was sufficient, but soon found leaving it for this period of time made it harder to tackle underperformance and

left staff feeling neglected. In retrospect, we should have introduced weekly meetings a lot earlier.”

Give staff ownership

“When we started setting targets, management tended to take responsibility for ensuring they were met. We now encourage employees to take ownership by asking them for ideas and discussing options rather than handing out instructions.”



Find out more:

Setting business targets

businesslink.gov.uk/setbusinesstargets

Here's how a SWOT analysis improved my business

Chartwell Financial Services Ltd, part of the Lindley Group Ltd, is an independent financial services consultancy specialising in corporate pensions and investment. The company was bought by a new management team in 2002 and has since gone from strength to strength. From the start, the team adopted a methodical approach to planning which included a detailed SWOT analysis. Director Richard Clarke explains how the analysis has influenced the on-going growth of the company.

What I did

Analyse everything

"We conducted our first SWOT analysis as part of our business plan when we were buying the company. We needed to know exactly what we were taking on and how it could be improved. The SWOT analysis covered every aspect of the business. It included finance, skill levels, client base, service delivery, market conditions, competitor activity and regulatory issues.

"Thinking about how we were going to tackle each point raised provided a firm footing on which to build our strategy. In many instances, we found that a threat could also be a strength or an opportunity. For example, the fact that the pensions industry is undergoing a major legislative overhaul is a threat to our business. But it's also an opportunity because our experience and industry knowledge put us in a strong position to help clients negotiate any changes."

Repeat the exercise

"SWOT analysis provides a snapshot of the business position at a specific point in time. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats change with the market and with the growth of the business. We did three sets of analysis in our first year as owners. Each one exposed new issues to think about and helped to modify our business plan. SWOT analysis has been a useful tool for reviewing our whole operation and improving performance accordingly."

Set a timescale

"When we'd completed each SWOT analysis and made a plan, we put dates alongside each action point. This provided a focus and meant we weren't just paying lip service to the analysis. There was no point having it if it didn't act as a vehicle for change. We didn't always meet the timescale specified, but working to a defined schedule kept things moving in the right direction."

RICHARDS'S TOP TIPS

- "Use your SWOT analysis to plan ahead."
- "Put delivery dates against your plan and divide responsibilities."
- "Recognise threats, but don't get too hung up on them - they could be strengths or opportunities as well."

What I'd do differently

Review more often

"The SWOT analysis could have



“SWOT ANALYSIS PROVIDES A SNAPSHOT OF THE BUSINESS POSITION AT A SPECIFIC POINT IN TIME. STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS CHANGE WITH THE MARKET.”

been reviewed more often. When we did our second analysis, we'd addressed about 70 per cent of what we'd set out in the first analysis. An on-going review, say once a month, could have helped us get up to speed on the other 30 per cent sooner.”

Divide responsibility

“We should have split responsibilities more clearly from the outset. In the early days, there were instances where action should have been taken as a result of the SWOT analysis but everyone thought “someone else” was doing it.”



Find out more:

Review your business performance
[businesslink.gov.uk/
reviewperformance](https://businesslink.gov.uk/reviewperformance)

Here's how I moved to filing online

Jim Parsons has looked after the payroll of small businesses since 1989, first as a sole trader and, since 1999, as founder and company secretary of **Payman.co.uk Limited**. Jim believes filing his own company's PAYE return online has saved him time and money, and is a more secure way of transmitting information than the postal service.

What I did

Buy compatible software

"We'd been disenchanted with our computer software supplier for some time but when we discovered we couldn't use the software to file PAYE returns online we decided it was time to buy a new system.

"The replacement payroll system we chose is compatible with connecting to the Inland Revenue site through the Government Gateway. We can upload all the information we have on the system directly to the Inland Revenue's website. We get online updates for the software almost every month as things change and enhancements are brought in."

Register with the Government Gateway

"Before starting to file online we had to register as an employer with the Government Gateway. We just entered all our details and were then allocated

a reference number. Then we received a secure registration PIN number in the post - to activate our registration.

"Now we just put in our user name and password to access the Inland Revenue site. It's really very simple to use.

"We also registered as a bureau so we could file our clients' payroll online too. Our clients, like us, receive the Inland Revenue incentive which gives small businesses up to £825 if they successfully file online."

File my employer's end of year return online

"Payman.co.uk employs three full-timers. At the end of the tax year we use our payroll system to submit the P35 end of year return, together with a P14 for every employee who's been on the payroll. It's much better doing it all online rather than having someone key in all the information and then produce reams of printouts. Because the information is now uploaded directly from the payroll system, there's much less room for mistakes.

"Once you've filed you get a receipt - an automatic print-out with a computer-generated reference number. You also get an email to confirm that you've filed.

"We also file all our P45s online for new

JIM'S TOP TIPS

- "Don't be scared of the technology."
- "Use a suitable software package."
- "Keep all receipts and confirmation emails to prove you have filed successfully."



“THE REPLACEMENT PAYROLL SYSTEM WE CHOSE IS COMPATIBLE WITH CONNECTING TO THE INLAND REVENUE SITE THROUGH THE GOVERNMENT GATEWAY. WE CAN UPLOAD ALL THE INFORMATION WE HAVE ON THE SYSTEM DIRECTLY TO THE INLAND REVENUE WEBSITE.”

starters and P46s for new starters that don't have P45s. When someone leaves we can immediately notify the Inland Revenue by submitting their P45 online. It's all so much easier than dealing with lots of paper.”

What I'd do differently

“I've never filed our corporation tax return online but I'm thinking of trying that this year. It would have been good to have got to grips with this earlier. I hope, as with filing the PAYE online, it too can save us time and money.”



Find out more:

File returns online

businesslink.gov.uk/filereturnsonline

Here's how a good balance sheet helped me improve my business

Sandeep Sud is a qualified solicitor who also runs a school uniform business based in Hounslow, in partnership with his parents. The company, which has four full-time employees, uses its balance sheet to gauge how the business is progressing. It's also been a key factor in securing a bank loan for the improvement and expansion of the company premises.

What I did

Kept an eye on changing figures

"As a partnership we are required to produce a balance sheet as part of our annual accounts, but even if we weren't obliged to, I probably would anyway as an internal management exercise.

"A balance sheet gives a snapshot of how the business is doing at a particular time. This is useful, but you have to remember that it could change overnight. For example, if you were in debt on April 30 when you did your year-end accounts, but paid this off on May 1, you would get a completely different picture of the strength of the business."

Looked at our profit and loss figures

"The balance sheet is useful when looked at alongside the profit and loss figures because then you get the whole picture. For example, if you borrowed lots in one particular year, but had made a profit, the profit would show on your profit and loss accounts, but what you owed would only be apparent on the balance sheet. It's important to be aware of both sets of numbers."

Used the balance sheet to secure a loan

"Having a strong balance sheet helped when it came to borrowing. When we first applied for a refurbishment loan we couldn't provide up-to-date

accounts to the bank manager. This could have been a problem, but we quickly got our accounts in order and the loan was approved straight away. Because our balance sheet was strong, the bank thought we were a good risk. Although we decided not to draw down

SANDEEP'S TOP TIPS

- "Pay your creditors – especially suppliers – as soon as possible, not only does it help your balance sheet but it improves your bargaining position."
- "Consider off-balance sheet financing if appropriate eg for leased vehicles – this will improve the asset side of your balance sheet."
- "Never have too much cash in hand. If you are cash rich this will show on your balance sheet and you should move this money to a high-interest bank account."



“BECAUSE OUR BALANCE SHEET WAS STRONG, THE BANK THOUGHT WE WERE A GOOD RISK. ALTHOUGH WE DECIDED NOT TO BE DRAWN DOWN ON THE LOAN, IT DID OPEN OUR EYES TO THE IMPORTANCE OF A STRONG BALANCE SHEET.”

on the loan - because we used cashflow instead - it did open our eyes to the importance of a strong balance sheet.”

What I'd do differently

“I would have taken the bank loan to drive expansion. In the past we've taken a cautious view of our balance

sheet and so never taken the full amount of money available to us, when really the decision to borrow should be based on the risks and rewards of the project. Your balance sheet is essential, but don't let it rule your decision making.”



Find out more:

Balance sheets: the basics

businesslink.gov.uk/balancesheets

Here's how asking our employees for ideas improved my business

Escrick Park Estate near York is a family-owned country house estate dating back to 1668. The Estate is run as a business, comprising commercial and residential property services, leisure facilities, land management and architectural consultancy. Accounts manager and administrator **Jane Whetstone** describes how staff are actively encouraged to contribute ideas.

What I did

Make consultation part of the business

"About six years ago we underwent major diversification and restructuring, which included working towards the Investors in People Standard. Investors in People really got us focussed on teamwork and communication and helped us move away from the traditional 'command' style of estate management.

"Among many changes, we introduced weekly strategy meetings with staff. Each meeting includes a session where we ask for ideas and feedback. Sometimes it's a general round-table discussion, sometimes we'll have a more in-depth brainstorming session to get ideas on a specific project or issue."

Act on good suggestions

"A good example of how our consultation process reaps benefits is our new luxury holiday home park,

The Hollicarrs. It was a huge investment and we needed to generate sales leads quickly.

"We brainstormed ideas with staff and decided to attend a leading holiday home show. Staff came up with the idea of promoting the holiday homes themselves. Not only did this save money it also gave our employees the chance of inspiring visitors with their genuine enthusiasm for The Hollicarrs. The idea was added to and developed over several meetings."

"When the show arrived, we generated over 1,500 qualified sales leads, which translated into 25 homes being sold before The Hollicarrs was even opened."

Give staff ownership

"A different employee chairs each staff meeting, so we focus on a different area of the business each week, although anyone can contribute ideas at any time. We've found that staff are more motivated to follow ideas through if they're given responsibility, so we let them run with the idea wherever practical.

"The consultation process has also encouraged better delegation. For example, staff feedback showed that people were discouraged from making suggestions because they weren't in

JANE'S TOP TIPS

- "Create an open culture that encourages ideas and feedback."
- "Hold regular staff meetings."
- "Give people ownership of their particular idea if you can."



“WE INTRODUCED WEEKLY STRATEGY MEETINGS WITH STAFF. EACH MEETING INCLUDES A SESSION WHERE WE ASK FOR IDEAS AND FEEDBACK. SOMETIMES IT’S A GENERAL ROUND-TABLE DISCUSSION, SOMETIMES WE’LL HAVE A MORE IN-DEPTH BRAINSTORMING SESSION.”

control of budgets. They felt that an idea that wasn’t in the budget was unlikely to be considered. Since then, the Estate proprietor has delegated budgets to myself and I in turn consult in detail with each department. Staff now feel that anything’s possible, within reason!”

What I’d do differently

Manage expectations

“When you’re starting out, it’s easy to give the impression that all ideas will be acted upon, which can lead to disappointment. As time goes on, we’ve got better at deciding which staff ideas are workable and which aren’t, then communicating the decision internally.”



Find out more:

Inform and consult your employees

businesslink.gov.uk/consultemployees

Here's how management training improved our business

Chris Lundie started his business, **Covert Security Agency Ltd**, in 2001. Based in Dundee, the company employs 90 staff and supplies licensed uniformed and undercover security officers to the UK commercial market. Rapid growth plus recent expansion into the contract cleaning market highlighted the need for diverse management skills. Here Chris describes how management training has been essential to the company's development.

What I did

Research training options

"Eighteen months after setting up, I had to recognise that we were no longer a start-up. Strategies for growth needed to be put in place and, while I had plenty of ideas, I wasn't sure I had the right skills.

"I enrolled in a series of professional development programmes, which I researched with help from Scottish Enterprise and through attending networking events. A network contact recommended the Business Investment for Growth programme.

"The programme teaches business owners about business planning at a strategic level. That got me focused on the bigger picture and I wanted to learn more."

Address key issues

"The next programme I joined was Plato II, organised

by Dundee University Business School. The course, which I've still to complete, involves monthly mentoring sessions with senior blue-chip managers to identify and tackle critical business issues. Specifically, it's helped me with targeted marketing.

"I've also attended various seminars and workshops organised by the Business Gateway service, covering other key areas such as team building, financial planning and quality management systems."

Capitalise on learning

"I was sceptical about business coaching, but following a recommendation via my local Chamber of Commerce I've been using a coach, Richard Norris of Action International, for about a year.

"His input has been instrumental in putting strategies and systems in place, particularly financial systems, to capitalise on what I've learnt. In the last year, we've tripled our turnover, increased conversion rates on sales leads, added 22 per cent to profit margins and achieved 100 per cent staff retention.

CHRIS'S TOP TIPS

- "Don't let learning stop when a training programme finishes – it's a continual process."
- "Think about business coaching."
- "Work with trainers and coaches who have the capacity to grow with you."



“STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH NEEDED TO BE PUT IN PLACE AND, WHILE I HAD PLENTY OF IDEAS, I WASN'T SURE I HAD THE RIGHT SKILLS”

“Before coaching, I was the world’s worst delegator, but Richard’s training has helped me overcome that. Coaching has also improved my time management skills and helped me plan succession. Overall, coaching sessions keep me focused on business development.”

What I’d do differently

Get financial training sooner

“Putting financial systems in place is crucial in the

early years. I wish I’d undertaken professional training in financial planning at an earlier stage.”

“The right training programmes can be hugely beneficial, but I’ve learnt that self-development is equally important. I didn’t realise at first the number of ideas you can get from management books. I now read at least one per quarter and make myself a list of ideas to follow up.”



Find out more:

Skills and training for directors and owners

businesslink.gov.uk/trainingdirectors

Here's how a training needs analysis improved our business

Energy and telecommunications consultancy provider, **The Inenco Group Ltd**, is based in Lytham St Annes, Lancashire. The company underwent a management buyout last year. Director **Chris Lee** explains how a Training Needs Analysis (TNA) allowed the company to tailor its training and boost staff motivation.

What we did

Assess current provision

"Our TNA originated with a staff survey conducted prior to the management buyout, which showed that staff felt under-developed and neglected. Training was one of the chosen means of addressing this issue, as well as being part of our aim to pursue Investors in People (IiP) accreditation. Training was previously available but it was conducted on an ad-hoc basis with no proper evaluation of whether it supported our business goals.

"We set up a focus group made up of departmental managers and began with a review of current training provision, coupled with an analysis of what skills the company needed in the light of our corporate objectives. This allowed us to identify skill gaps and areas for improvement. Recommendations were then passed to the Board for approval and our intentions communicated to all staff."

Conduct staff interviews

"We originally thought that we would have to interview all 140 staff to assess individual training needs. We approached Business Link for guidance and they recommended grouping staff according to their role.

"The group approach worked well, allowing us to identify specific skill sets for each role in a relatively short space of time. The meetings also enabled us to ask staff about their personal goals within the company and to explore the types of training that would be appropriate for different parts of the business."

Make decisions

"On completion of staff interviews, we set priorities and a timetable, which has now become a formal company training plan with an allocated budget. We got further advice on training methods from Business Link and now make much more use of external courses.

"We also use more internal coaching and mentoring schemes, which are proving highly cost-effective, and have formulated a post-training questionnaire to help us evaluate the success of the training against our objectives. Overall, staff morale and attitude have improved noticeably and

CHRIS'S TOP TIPS

- "Get management commitment from the outset."
- "Communicate plans to staff and get their buy in."
- "Balance personal development needs against overall business objectives."



“ON COMPLETION OF INTERVIEWS, WE SET PRIORITIES AND A TIMETABLE, WHICH HAS NOW BECOME A FORMAL COMPANY TRAINING PLAN.”

we’re confident that this will decrease staff turnover.”

What I’d do differently

Encourage initiative

“The management focus group we set up was useful for kick-starting our TNA, but we probably relied on it too heavily. These days, we encourage initiative among all staff members by holding regular review and feedback sessions. This way everyone in the company takes responsibility for maintaining and improving training standards.”

Simplify paperwork

“We wanted our TNA to be thorough and well documented. However, at one stage, we got bogged down with producing a series of over-complicated spreadsheets. Too much information, poorly presented, can stop you seeing the wood for the trees. Now, we stick to simple tables and include only the key points.”



Find out more:

Fit the training to your needs

businesslink.gov.uk/fittrainingtoneeds

Here's how networking locally improved our business

Motivation Through Training is a Liverpool-based company that provides specialist training and consultancy services to the tourism and leisure industries. Partners **Katy Moussaada** and **Viv Cuthill** have made networking a conscious part of their business development plan. Here Katy describes how she uses local networks for knowledge exchange and identifying new business opportunities.

What I did

Research opportunities

"Effective networking doesn't just happen, you have to put in the effort. When time is at a premium it helps to research networks in your area so that you can concentrate on those that will benefit your business most.

"I looked at trade-specific opportunities as well as more general opportunities provided by organisations like my local Business Link and the Mersey Partnership, which is a regional development body. Professional organisations are a good place to start. I became a member of the Tourism Society and the Institute of Travel and Tourism, which gave me access to networks of tourism professionals in the North West.

"Membership of an appropriate organisation also makes it easier to keep up to date with forthcoming events such as seminars, lectures or social evenings that you might want to attend."

Give and take

"Exchanging information with local tourism businesses is one of the key benefits of networking. I learn a lot about what's going on in the industry by talking to people at events.

"For example, several travel operators I've spoken to recently have remarked on the increase in verbal and physical attacks on their staff. As a result we're currently developing a personal safety training course to help companies deal with the problem.

"I've also found that passing on a piece of advice or being available to discuss a problem has resulted in a piece of business or a referral on more than one occasion."

Fly the company flag

"Networking has been an excellent way of publicising our company name, to the extent that we no longer advertise our services. However, it's important not to appear pushy or turn a conversation into an outright sales pitch.

"I always take business cards with me to an event, but I hand them out with care. If the moment isn't right, I make a note of the person's name and company and send them a polite email later.

"Remember that

KATY'S TOP TIPS

- "Make networking part of your business plan and allocate time to it."
- "Research, research, research."
- "Try everything that sounds promising, but monitor long-term effectiveness."



“NETWORKING HAS BEEN AN EXCELLENT WAY OF PUBLICISING OUR COMPANY NAME, TO THE EXTENT THAT WE NO LONGER ADVERTISE OUR SERVICES”

networking is longer-term activity, not a quick fix. I've often been contacted months after an event by someone who remembered me.”

What I'd do differently

Make more time

“In the early days, networking was a bit ad-hoc and tended to happen only when I thought I had a couple of hours to spare. I now devote a proportion of my time

to it every week and include costings in our annual budget to ensure that it remains a business priority.”

Monitor effectiveness

“When I started networking, monitoring progress was a subjective affair. Nowadays I keep a database of my networking activities and contacts, so that I can make a rational long-term assessment of benefits against effort and cost.”



Find out more:

Learning through networking with others
[businesslink.gov.uk/
networkwithothers](https://businesslink.gov.uk/networkwithothers)

Here's how we saved money and increased profits by considering the environment

Richard Cook, managing director of diary and promotional-gift manufacturer **Gilt Edged Promotions**, admits he was slightly cynical when the logistics director suggested implementing an environmental policy. However, he now estimates that the policy saves the company around £2,000 a year and urges other firms to do the same.

What we did

Research environmental issues

"The issue first came to light when our logistics director was invited to a breakfast meeting hosted by our local Chamber of Commerce. It was explained to all delegates that cutting waste would not just benefit the environment but also increase our competitiveness. It struck quite a chord with our logistics director, who went on to attend a series of free networking meetings organised by the Chamber of Commerce, where he gathered information on how to draw up an environmental policy.

"The first I knew about it was when he presented a draft policy to me. At first I thought it was a strange issue to pick up on - it's not something that typically comes up on a manager's radar. Now however, environmental concerns come up in our monthly company meetings quite regularly."

Decide where we can cut waste

"In order to decide where we could cut waste we brought in an independent company that was offering free assessments - similar to the service that the government agency Envirowise now provides. This was in 2000 and they came back and did further assessments in 2001 and 2003.

"The first report the company gave us showed we could cut paper and cardboard waste, water consumption, photocopying, electricity use and heating costs. By following their suggestions we were able to cut our energy bills by 15 per cent in the first year.

"The biggest difference was in the amount of landfill waste we produce - it used to be more than 30 tonnes a year but now it is down to 20 tonnes. We've made so much progress that we're in the great position of having very few savings left to make."

RICHARD'S TOP TIPS

- "Make use of the free advice available from organisations such as Envirowise - they can help you establish a policy and increase its effectiveness."
- "Get your staff involved - the success of your policy will often be dependent on their commitment to it."
- "Plan ahead - having a policy in place that exceeds regulatory requirements may save you time and effort later."

Make sure employees follow the policy

"We make sure that our employees continue to meet our environmental policy in a variety of ways. For example, we've appointed designated people to look after each office by making sure lights and PCs are switched off at the end of each day. We also do other things such as



“TO DECIDE WHERE WE COULD CUT WASTE WE BROUGHT IN AN INDEPENDENT COMPANY THAT WAS OFFERING FREE ASSESSMENTS – SIMILAR TO THE SERVICE THAT ENVIROWISE NOW PROVIDES”

providing bins for drinks cans to be recycled. This is not something that brings us any financial gain but it makes staff more aware of environmental issues. We also publish in-house leaflets twice a year for all staff reminding them of what our targets for cutting waste are. Each department is also monitored individually to see where cost savings can be made while benefiting the environment.”

What I'd do differently

“The only thing I would have done differently is to have implemented the policy sooner. I'm pleased it's in place now because I think many of the things we're doing will become a regulatory necessity in the future.”



Find out more:

Save money by reducing waste and the use of raw materials

businesslink.gov.uk/reducewaste

Here's how ensuring accessibility for staff and customers has helped our business

When **Adam Thomas** had a serious road accident his employer, **Richard Smithies** of **Design Matters**, worked hard to ensure he could return to work and continue to contribute to its growth. Now the business is fully accessible and has built a strong position as designer and supplier of both standard and specially designed accessible kitchens. Adam explains what they did and how they did it.

What we did

Consider the physical aspects of accessibility

"When I had the road accident, I was in hospital for six months. Throughout that time, my boss Richard was continually thinking about how he could help get me back to work. The premises at the time were fairly inaccessible. There were steps throughout the showroom, for example. Before I returned, he had ensured there was level access from the street, ramps for the steps, locks at eye-level for wheelchair users and accessible toilet facilities. He had also reworked the back office so I would be able to get to my desk easily in my wheelchair."

Change our working practices

"While I was in hospital, Richard was keeping me up to date with everything going on in the business. I was always stronger on the creative and technical drawing sides of the business, so he adapted a drawing board and kept bringing in designs for me to work on. Richard said he would do all the onsite work and I would concentrate on the technical and creative sides. It was just playing to our strengths really and it's worked really well ever since."

Made the most of our accessibility

"Richard felt making the business and premises accessible for people with disabilities was the best

thing to do for the long-term - and he's been proven right. Since the Disability Discrimination Act came into force, people with disabilities have increasingly had more confidence to demand their rights. "Since returning to work, we've grown the business in two ways. Firstly the core business has grown because the changes

ADAM'S TOP TIPS

- "Get the right advice – talk to the Disability Rights Commission or the Centre for Accessible Environments who can put you in touch with proven consultants."
- "Look at any money you spend as business development not just a cost – it hasn't cost us much really and it's allowed us to grow our customer base and reputation."
- "Make use of the help available – the Access to Work scheme provides a government contribution to the cost of adaptations or special equipment you may require."



“MAKING THE BUSINESS AND PREMISES ACCESSIBLE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WAS THE BEST THING TO DO FOR THE LONG-TERM. WE’VE BEEN ABLE TO MAKE THE DESIGN AND INSTALLATION OF ACCESSIBLE KITCHENS A HUGE SELLING POINT.”

Richard has made allowed me to continue to contribute and play a full role. And secondly we’ve been able to expand and make the design and installation of accessible kitchens a huge unique selling point.”

What we’d do differently

Think about accessibility before taking on premises

“We would have ensured our first premises were accessible from the start. As the business has grown we have moved to a larger showroom which allowed us to find a building that needed minimal modifications.”



Find out more:

Access and facilities for disabled people
businesslink.gov.uk/accessandfacilities

Here's how lean manufacturing systems increased our productivity

Autoglym Ltd produces a range of vehicle care products at its factory in Letchworth. The company has implemented a number of lean manufacturing techniques in recent years, including a complete overhaul of its product assembly area. Manufacturing manager **Mark Evans** explains the benefits.

What I did

Get advice

"We became interested in lean manufacturing via a DTI-sponsored scheme with Cranfield University's School of Industrial and Manufacturing Sciences (SIMS). Senior managers attended a series of workshops while SIMS did an audit of our factory and provided consultancy support to get us started. We made successful improvements to workplace organisation, production processes and material planning systems.

"However, rapid growth and increasing demand prompted us to revisit our lean manufacturing systems last year. To get a fresh perspective on our processes, we contacted the Manufacturing Advisory Service for the East of England (MAS). Two MAS consultants conducted an initial review and together we identified our product assembly area as a particular area for improvement."

Involve the team

"MAS worked with me and a team of assembly line workers to look at changing our processes. It was important that the people actually doing the job understood the benefits. We focused on our key product, Life Shine, which is a vehicle care kit comprising 24 components.

"Initially MAS guided us through several simulations to get us thinking about a 'just in time' approach, where the right quantity of the right component moves through each stage of the assembly process as needed.

"They then helped us to design a new flexible manpower line. Our team tested different versions before picking the best solution. The solution still had glitches, so MAS then worked with us on the factory floor to trial the new system and make modifications."

Put new processes into practice

"We implemented the new system immediately. The Life Shine kits are now assembled in half the time, using the same number of people. We estimate we'll make an annual cost saving of over £100,000.

MARK'S TOP TIPS

- "Ensure that top-level management buys into the project from the outset."
- "Get advice from an organisation like MAS - it's not free, but it's a great investment."
- "Consult employees and give them ownership."



“WE IMPLEMENTED THE NEW SYSTEM IMMEDIATELY. WE ESTIMATE WE’LL MAKE AN ANNUAL COST SAVING OF OVER £100,000. CUSTOMERS BENEFIT AS WELL BECAUSE LEAD TIMES ARE SHORTER AND DELIVERY DATES ARE MORE ACCURATE.”

Customers benefit as well because lead times are shorter and delivery dates are more accurate.

“We’ve since rolled out the new processes in other parts of the factory to great effect. What’s more, our employees have since identified a string of additional improvements that we’ve put into practice.”

What I’d do differently

Involve the whole workforce

“Although we’ve communicated the new approach throughout the company, we should have involved the whole workforce earlier. At the time, it seemed impossible because we couldn’t shut down production, but in retrospect we could have found other ways to get them involved.”



Find out more:

Manufacturing innovation

businesslink.gov.uk/

[manufacturinginnovation](https://businesslink.gov.uk/manufacturinginnovation)

Here's how accounting software brought efficiency savings to my business

Anne Herbert is managing director of **PhotoArtistry**, a digital printing service for artists and photographers based in Northampton. After a few years of keeping manual accounts, Anne realised there would be business benefits in introducing accounting software. Here Anne explains how she chose the right package for her business and what she is now able to do at the touch of a button.

What I did

Go electric

"PhotoArtistry had been running for three years before I decided to introduce an accounting software package. Until then I had run the business as a hobby alongside my full-time job, so the accounts were manageable by hand. It just required keeping a copy of each invoice sent out and each payment made.

"When I decided to run the business full-time, I knew that an accounting package would make things easier and quicker. I wanted it to calculate VAT, run reports to see how much I was spending with each supplier, and to be able to easily compare how much the business was spending compared with how much it was bringing in."

Upgrade when necessary

"I started off with a basic package from a well-

known supplier, but as the business grew I realised I needed something that would link with our online orders, so I upgraded to another version. Using software from the same supplier meant I could easily migrate all customer and supplier records from one package to the other. This was something I took into consideration when choosing the package. I also know there is another version I can upgrade to if necessary in the future.

"I was attracted to the particular supplier because it has a good reputation and is widely known. I also knew that other businesses I had worked for used its software and found it reliable."

Utilise support services

"When buying the package, I decided it would be beneficial to pay for the telephone support service. As a small-business owner, if accounting or computing

is not your speciality, you don't want to spend half your day under the desk trying to work out which wire connects where.

"Although the support package makes up a fair proportion of our total spend, we benefit from it. When we were installing the package, we had a few problems

ANNE'S TOP TIPS

- "Choose accounting software that can grow with your business."
- "Plan early on for the future and budget for any new software you expect to buy."
- "Seriously consider taking any support package offered, even if it means paying more."



“I KNEW THAT AN ACCOUNTING PACKAGE WOULD MAKE THINGS EASIER AND QUICKER. I WANTED IT TO CALCULATE VAT, RUN REPORTS TO SEE HOW MUCH THE BUSINESS WAS SPENDING COMPARED WITH HOW MUCH IT WAS BRINGING IN.”

- the helpline was able to guide us towards a solution over the telephone.”

What I'd do differently

Upgrade sooner

“If I had the money, I might have upgraded our accounting package sooner. As we got more

online orders I was spending a lot of time printing out people's details and inputting them into our accounting package. It is also difficult trying to make changes to the business while you are very busy, so it is worth planning what you will need and when in the early stages.”



Find out more:

Accounting software: the basics
[businesslink.gov.uk/
accountingsoftware](https://businesslink.gov.uk/accountingsoftware)

Here's how I reduced costs by using Voice Over Internet Protocol communications technology

Nicholas Wilde is the finance director and company secretary at **Stamco Timber**, a timber and builders merchant which employs 110 staff. The company has four offices in the South East, which are linked on the same computer and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) system. Wilde believes the VoIP installation has already paid for itself and saved the company additional money.

What I did

Choose a supplier

"In 2000, we opened a new branch and wanted to install a telephone system. We put the contract out to tender and one firm suggested VoIP, which we decided was our best option.

"We like to be at the forefront of technology and VoIP was cutting-edge at the time. We also already had a leased line between two sites that we could use to keep the installation costs down. A leased line is a dedicated line between locations only used by one company. When you use broadband, that line can be shared with other users too."

Buy the right equipment

"When it came to installation, all we needed were

computer network cards and specialist handsets to convert voice data into computer data. Each handset cost £450, with the total cost of installation coming in around £20,000.

"I know it sounds expensive, but the system gives us a great deal of flexibility and has already paid for itself. Although some of our branches are as far as 40 miles apart, calls can be transferred from one extension to another in another office seamlessly - and the quality of the line is as good as a normal analogue line.

"We pay £700 per month for our leased line, but this was a cost we already incurred as we use the line for our IT system. But we no longer receive phone bills, so we're saving £300 to £400 a month."

Present the right image

"I think VoIP helps present a professional image to the customer. When people ring they get routed through to our customer service centre even though they telephoned their local branch. If all lines are engaged the call gets routed back to one of our other

NICHOLAS' TOP TIPS

- "VoIP is most useful for a multi-branch set up. If you only have one site the advantages will be minimal."
- "Research your provider well. Do site visits and check where they buy equipment."
- "Get as much training on the system as possible and ensure someone in the company knows it inside out. It can get expensive if you have to go outside each time you want to tweak it."



“THE SYSTEM GIVES US GREAT FLEXIBILITY AND HAS ALREADY PAID FOR ITSELF. ALTHOUGH SOME OF OUR BRANCHES ARE 40 MILES APART, CALLS CAN BE TRANSFERRED FROM ONE EXTENSION TO ANOTHER IN ANOTHER OFFICE SEAMLESSLY.”

offices. It means customers never get an engaged tone and then call our competitors instead.

“All of our calls between sites and departments are free and those to external people cost standard phone-service provider prices. You can ring people who don't have VoIP and the quality of the line remains as good.”

What I'd do differently

Connect branches from the outset

“I would have installed leased lines between all our offices from the start. Some are joined by broadband lines, which can cause problems if they go down. This happened to us twice in the last month - once for about a week. We are just in the process of changing all the lines to leased lines which should prevent it happening again.”



Find out more:

Get the most from your phone system
businesslink.gov.uk/phonesystem

Here's how an online shop helped my business

Commercial Lamp Supplies, an Exeter-based lighting consumables and fittings supplier, was enjoying modest success, but owner-manager **David Madams** wanted to raise sales without embarking on an expensive marketing push. Since launching its online shop the business has started exporting and boosted turnover by 20 per cent.

What I did

Define how the business will develop

"Before setting up our online shop we used to sell our products direct to other businesses through catalogues and sales representatives. In order to get the most out of our new sales channel we drew up a brief covering what we wanted to achieve.

"We decided that raising turnover and opening up new sales channels were the key objectives. But we also wanted the website to help us convert more enquiries into sales. We got so many enquiries by phone and email, which took up a lot of our time to process. We found that we were losing out as we did not have an automated process to capture these potential customers.

"Having identified these areas the online shop has really helped us to refocus our business plan. Turnover is up by several hundred thousand pounds a year and we've opened up new sales channels - we got a £70,000 order from South Korea just a week after the site's launch."

DAVID'S TOP TIPS

- "Contact your local Technology Means Business adviser on Tel 0845 600 9 006 - they can help you implement the right e-commerce solution for your business."

Integrate business processes

"Launching the website forced us to review and change how the business operates. Overall this has benefited the business enormously. By automating our processes we can track buying habits and use this data to improve our offerings. We've also overhauled our buying patterns, increased our warehousing capability and improved our delivery activities - saving us money. Customer orders now come straight into our database from the website, reducing our processing costs. More importantly the website has improved our cashflow. Since we've started accepting payments online we've been receiving them far sooner than before."

Use the website to raise the business' profile

"No matter how good your online shop is, if you don't update it people don't come back. So we've worked hard to ensure the website has a fresh look. By doing this and by using our company name as the URL, www.commercial-lamps.co.uk, we've been able to reach a much wider audience, giving us the ability to increase sales.

"We now sell across the UK and into parts of Europe and Asia. And because our business is effectively open 24 hours a day, seven days a week we can compete with much larger businesses. In order to maintain this performance we've



“TURNOVER IS UP BY SEVERAL HUNDRED THOUSAND POUNDS AND WE’VE OPENED UP NEW SALES CHANNELS – WE GOT ONE ORDER FROM SOUTH KOREA A WEEK AFTER LAUNCH”

registered the website on several search engines, which in turn is generating lots of enquiries.”

What I’d do differently

Get full product listing on the website from day one

“When we launched the website we didn’t put our full product range on the website - we didn’t appreciate how big demand would be. This meant we couldn’t fulfil all the order requests we were getting on some

lines, while the others on the website weren’t selling in comparable quantities.”

Make the most of the help available

“Perhaps if I’d known more about the help available from Technology Means Business I could have used my resources even better. I now know that they can offer practical help with the whole process of setting up and managing an online presence for my business.”



Find out more:

Create an online shop

businesslink.gov.uk/onlineshop

Here's how supply chain software improved my business

The **Hi-Technology Group Limited**, based in Waterlooville in Hampshire, offers a total manufacturing solution from concept design, rapid tooling and advanced injection moulding. Six months ago, a division of the company, **Hi-tech Mouldings Ltd**, installed enterprise resource planning (ERP) software to overhaul its entire supply chain. The software has revolutionised the way the business operates, saving time and money and improving customer service. Project manager **Chris Moore** explains what was done.

What I did

Select a solution provider

"There are several routes to automating your supply chain – research the options. Having mapped out our existing supply chain, consulted customers and identified areas for improvement, we attended an ERP vendor forum. It gave us the opportunity to explore different systems.

"We decided to go for an 'off the shelf' package rather than a bespoke system, but not necessarily because of the cost. We wanted to use the software to rethink our entire supply chain strategy so the plan was to buy the best software to meet our specific requirements and adapt our operation to fit.

"We set-up a project team and asked department heads for a wish list of what they would like to see the software achieve. The list was sent to the selected five ERP vendors and we short-listed three to give in-house demonstrations before making our final selection."

CHRIS' TOP TIPS

- "Select your software vendor to be an on-going business partner."
- "Gain support across the whole business, from the boardroom to the shop floor."

Plan the implementation

"Our chosen solution providers, Lilly Software Associates, were excellent throughout. Working with them, we planned a timetable to implement the software system. It involved integrating everything from customer quotations and ordering, through raw material procurement and workshop scheduling, to despatch and invoicing. The installation, data transfer and testing took several months, but it was worth taking the time to get it right.

"Part of the implementation plan involved staff training and demonstrations to ensure everyone knew exactly what to expect when the new system went live. Thorough planning meant that we didn't lose a single day of production."

Use it to the full

"One of our criteria in choosing supply chain software was that it had to have potential to develop with our business. We get regular updates from our supplier plus on-going technical support. We also include an in-house review of the system in our monthly management meeting to monitor performance and plan improvements.

"From the first monthly meeting after going live, it was clear the project had been a success.



“Paperwork is streamlined, because it’s all generated from the same system. Estimates are faster and more accurate. Raw materials arrive through the factory door just when we want them and order progress can be tracked at the touch of a button. Overall efficiency has improved because everyone in the business has instant access to the information they need.

“The system is also a decision-making tool. For example, the data it generates enabled us to spot a potential bottleneck in our forward order schedule. As a result, we have invested in two new machines within the last six months.”

What I’d do differently

Don’t underestimate the work

“To get the most out of supply chain software, you have to invest time as well as money. Even knowing that, we probably underestimated the amount of work involved.”

Investigate grants

“Supply chain software is a big investment. We funded it ourselves and expect to see a return on our investment within 18 months. But looking back, we may have been able to get financial support through our local Business Link to reduce some of the initial consultancy and set-up costs.”



Find out more:

Supply chain software

businesslink.gov.uk/supplychain

Here's how competitive analysis gives my business an edge

Instalec Ltd is an established electrical contracting business, based in Luton. Director **Lesley Jeffs** began using regular competitive analysis as a business development tool four years ago. Combining a number of methods, the analysis continues to drive improvements across many areas of the business.

What I did

Assess the competitive landscape

"Attending a seminar on business development was the starting point for our competitive analysis. The speaker, from a company called DSP Solutions, was inspirational. We signed up for bi-monthly coaching that included an assessment of our competitive landscape.

"There are literally hundreds of electrical contractors in our area, so we couldn't hope to analyse them all. DSP helped us to identify our key competitors and draw up a list of what we wanted to know about them. The list included customer service, pricing, employment practices and staff qualifications. These were all areas where we felt we had an advantage, but we needed to quantify it."

Gather information

"The first thing we did was a telephone survey. We called competitors to assess their response times and the overall impression given. We also requested copies of their company literature. You can assess

the quality of the literature, and it's a good test of efficiency to see how quickly it arrives.

"Websites proved another simple way to gather information, as did trade journals, local newspapers and our local Chamber of Commerce. Customers and suppliers can also tell you a lot and talking to them doubles as a networking exercise that helps to build relationships."

Act on the analysis

"Our analysis has given us an edge in so many areas. For example, recruiting qualified staff is a big issue. Looking at competitors' recruitment ads and rates of pay has helped us refine our own procedures in order to attract the best people.

"We also found that many competitors performed poorly in answering phones and returning calls. In response, we've made sure that our own phones are always manned and that missed calls are returned promptly.

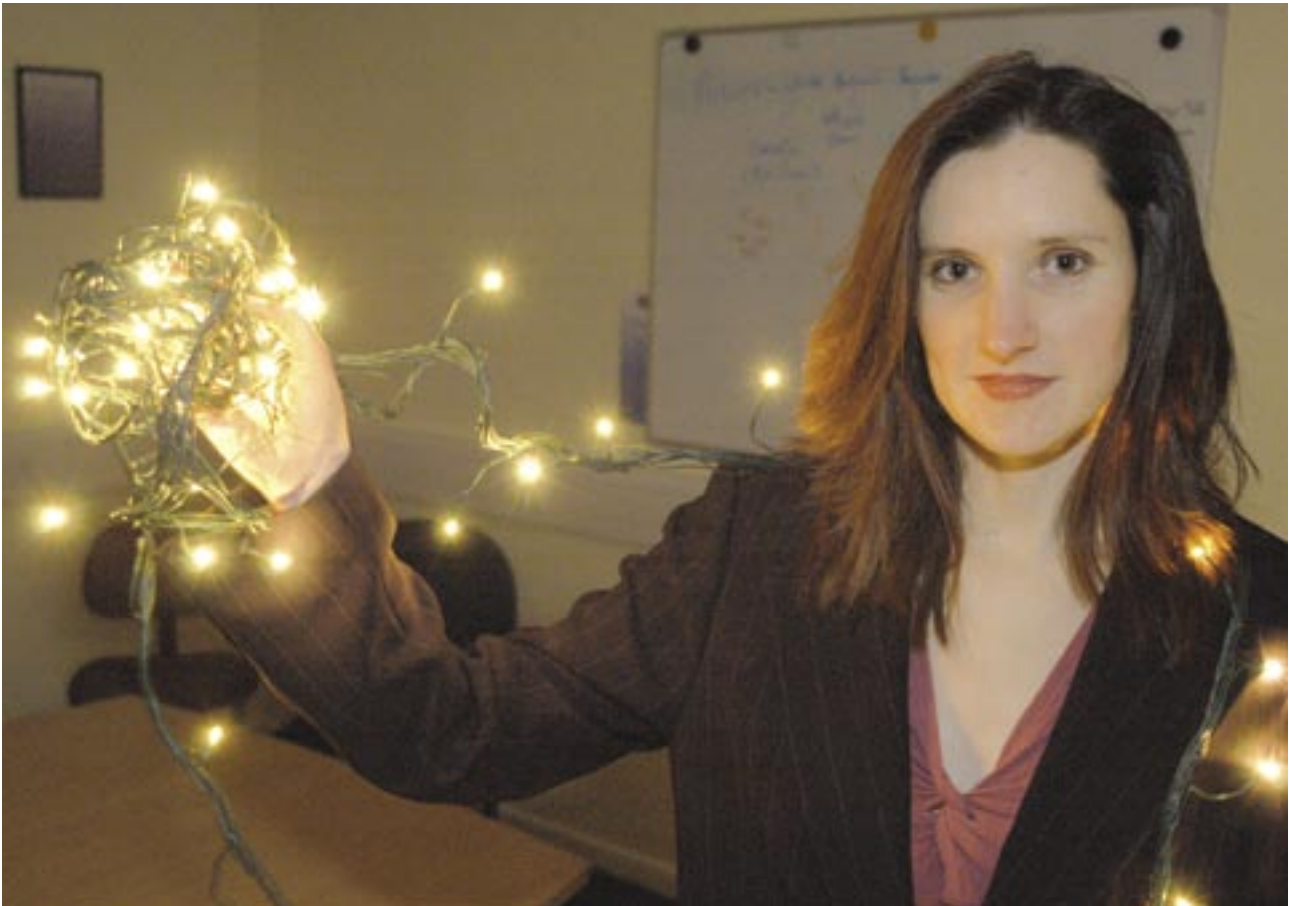
"We benchmark our performance and review our analysis at management level every six months.

Our employees are kept up to date too. It's important that staff know why you're doing analysis and how they can help.

"The competitive landscape is always changing, so you have to keep your analysis up to date. We monitor new competitors via the local press and industry contacts, as well

LESLEY'S TOP TIPS

- "Get hold of as much marketing literature as you can."
- "Don't get complacent when things are going well."
- "Use the analysis to improve and develop your service."



“OUR ANALYSIS HAS GIVEN US AN EDGE IN SO MANY AREAS. FOR EXAMPLE, LOOKING AT COMPETITORS’ RECRUITMENT ADS AND RATES OF PAY HAS HELPED US REFINE OUR OWN PROCEDURES IN ORDER TO ATTRACT THE BEST PEOPLE.”

as keeping a close eye on established competitors.”

What I’d do differently

Do it sooner

“Now that we take competitive analysis seriously, it’s hard to imagine how we managed without it. I wish we’d done it sooner.”

Have more confidence

“In the early days, we often felt nervous about asking for information, particularly from customers. We’ve learnt that as long as you’re professional and use the information to improve your service, most people are happy to help.”



Find out more:

Understand your competitors

[businesslink.gov.uk/
understandcompetitors](https://businesslink.gov.uk/understandcompetitors)

Here's how I generated new business by attending trade shows and exhibitions

Preston-based precision engineering company **Engineering Technologies and Manufacturing Ltd** was established in 1998. The company regularly attends trade shows in the UK and overseas to promote its specialist range of tube manipulation tooling. Exhibiting at a US trade show in November last year helped the company to tap into the lucrative North American market and has already resulted in a large order. Company secretary **Elaine Stewart** explains how they went about it.

What I did

Choose the right trade show

"Before you start, you have to be sure about why you're exhibiting and who you're targeting. Things to ask the show organisers for before you commit include attendance statistics, delegate profiles and which other companies are exhibiting.

"We wanted to exhibit in North America primarily because it has a huge automotive industry. Our target customers are machine manufacturers and the companies that buy the machines, so we needed to be somewhere where we would reach both audiences.

"The exhibition we selected, FABTECH, ticked all the right boxes. We also approached our local Business Link for advice and it helped us to source a UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) Solo Show Support grant that covered 50 per cent of the set-up costs of exhibiting."

ELAINE'S TOP TIPS

- "Know in advance what you expect to gain and who your potential customers are."
- "Plan early, plan thoroughly."
- "Rigorously follow up all leads."

Plan ahead

"We set a budget and drew up a list of actions and deadlines from the outset, including technology requirements, display materials, promotional literature, stand furniture, advertising and so on. It helped that the FABTECH website had excellent online services, including detailed timelines and booking facilities for equipment.

"Even with financial support from UKTI, costs had to be controlled. Transport and accommodation are two of the biggest expenses and booking early can save you money. We also got written quotes for everything in advance to ensure we didn't get any nasty shocks when the bills came in."

Maximise opportunities

"We made sure that all staff on the stand were well briefed. Each visitor was asked pre-qualifying questions to determine whether they were genuine prospects. When a good prospect did turn up, we knew exactly which key strengths we wanted to emphasise, and whether we should focus on innovation and quality rather than price.

"Samples of our tooling were on hand to illustrate the products' capabilities and that proved useful for engaging people's interest. We ensured that all



visitors went away with promotional materials and business cards and that we had a record of their details. The networking and fact-finding opportunities were great too and we took time out to visit other stands and talk to potential partners. When we returned to the UK, we followed up each lead by email or letter. We already have a substantial order from one company we met and several others in the pipeline.”

What I'd do differently

Take a laptop

“We didn't think we'd need a computer on the stand, but with hindsight it would have been a good idea. Some potential customers just wanted an informal chat, but there were occasions when a more formal

presentation would have been appropriate.”

Attract attention

“We got lots of ideas from other exhibitors about ways to attract visitors to the stand. Next time around we'll develop a mechanical device to display, or use a projector with moving images in order to draw more attention to ourselves.”



Find out more:

Trade shows and exhibitions

businesslink.gov.uk/tradeshows

Here's how an export agent helped me sell my products abroad

Managing director **Martin Statter** wanted to develop overseas markets for **Graphskill Limited**'s specialist pipework components, but did not have the time or resources to risk on setting up offices overseas. Engaging an agent has helped develop overseas trade at the right pace for the business. Here Martin explains how he did it.

What we did

Use a trade visit

"We had been thinking about export markets for some time. While we had sold overseas as subcontractors on large orders, we thought there would be some benefit in establishing a local presence in key markets. We went on a trade mission to Germany organised by UK Trade & Investment and met with a number of potential agents."

Find an agent we could trust

"We found an agent who was looking to add a company like ours to his portfolio. During the meeting, we didn't overplay our mutual expectations

and we felt we could trust each other. As soon as we got home, he had confirmed in writing the framework that we had tentatively agreed on and we converted that into a co-operation agreement. There were clearly defined timescales and responsibilities in the co-operation agreement and it suited both parties."

Manage the relationship

"We keep in touch regularly with our agent. If there hasn't been any activity for a while, we check in just to see what's happening in the market. Email is very useful, but we usually speak on the phone if we need to be absolutely clear about the detail of an order.

"Differences in language can play a big part,

especially when you're involved in a business that uses lots of terminology like ours. We realised this when we translated some promotional material into German for our agent. He picked out a couple of phrases that could have been easily misunderstood. It's regular contact that helps minimise the risk of any confusion like that."

MARTIN'S TOP TIPS

- "Make sure you are comfortable with your agent on a personal level – they will represent your business overseas, so you will need to have a personal empathy with them."
- "Check the agent's portfolio and follow up references – you need to be sure they are capable of doing what they say they are and that they will be comfortable selling your product alongside others they represent."
- "Formalise the agreement – at the very least you need to have agreed commission rates, length of agreement and mutual responsibilities set down in writing. It's also a good idea for the first agreement to cover a relatively short time period in case it doesn't work out for either party."



“WE FOUND AN AGENT WHO WAS LOOKING TO ADD A COMPANY LIKE OURS TO HIS PORTFOLIO. DURING THE MEETING, WE DIDN'T OVERPLAY OUR MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS AND WE FELT THAT WE COULD TRUST EACH OTHER.”

What I'd do differently

Develop our website before looking at overseas markets

“We've revamped our website using specialist designers and it has made a huge difference. Potential overseas customers will often want to

check your company out before even talking to an agent about your products, so it's an essential shop window.”



Find out more:

Exporting – an overview
[businesslink.gov.uk/
exportingoverview](https://businesslink.gov.uk/exportingoverview)

If you're wondering how you can make your business smarter, happier or more profitable, this book is for you. It brings together 21 of the best case studies on the Business Link website. Each one features a real business owner or manager, speaking in their own words, about how they've explored best practice and made it a reality in their business.

There are 100 more case studies at businesslink.gov.uk/casestudies, and the website contains a wealth of other guidance: punchy, practical advice about how to follow best practice in your business, especially at businesslink.gov.uk/grow.



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