

# Engaging Employers

## What is Equal?

The Equal Programme is a European Social Fund (ESF) initiative which operates across all of the European Union. The Programme aims to develop and test new ways of challenging discrimination and inequalities in the labour market, both for those in work and for those seeking work.

Equal has acted as a learning platform, developing innovative ways of tackling existing labour market problems. It has presented evidence based outcomes which could be adopted by policy makers and delivery agents at local, regional, national and European levels.

The partnership approach in Equal is based around a model of Development Partnerships (DPs), consisting of organisations with common interests and different expertise, working collaboratively to deliver shared aims and objectives.

[www.equal.ecotec.co.uk](http://www.equal.ecotec.co.uk)

[www.equal-works.com](http://www.equal-works.com)

[www.esf.gov.uk](http://www.esf.gov.uk)



Engaging with employers in order to change working practices and stimulate training and learning is crucial to tackling skills-gaps in Great Britain, but experience has shown how difficult this can be to sustain. Many Equal Development Partnerships (DPs) have worked effectively to test new ways of engaging with employers in order to change their working practices and provide more support and training to people at a disadvantage in the labour market.

The issues around engaging with employers have become higher on the policy agenda since the creation of the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the Leitch review commissioned by the Government to look at the UK's long-term skills needs.

In July 2007, the Government published its formal response to the Leitch report and set out how the recommendations in the report will be implemented. Both Leitch and the Government's implementation plan place employers and individuals at the centre of a demand-led system for learning and training. A new Commission for Employment and Skills will be created to strengthen the employer voice. As a result, engaging with employers to understand their needs and promote training will be even more crucial.

This summary sets out key messages from Equal on how to engage with employers, highlighting those relevant to the implementation of Leitch and the new ESF programme for 2007-13. It also provides short case studies of Equal DPs who have worked successfully in this area.

## Key Messages

**Selling the business benefits** - you need to clearly outline the business benefits to employers of participation in your programme, whatever the nature of the programme, the target groups involved or the size of the employers. Using incentives and corporate social responsibility can also help initial engagement with employers. At same time, you must clearly outline from the start the time and commitment required from the employers.

**Giving employers a real voice** - engagement works best when you give employers a real input into the programme to help meet their needs. Giving large employers access to senior policymakers in Government can also help to maintain engagement, as can developing quality marks/standards for the programme which recognise what employers have achieved.

**Employer Networks** - creating a employer network is a good method of engagement, particularly if you recruit a mix of public and private sector employers. Networks can attract other employers as they like to share experiences with each other. Existing networks should be engaged where possible and appropriate to save time.

**Long term engagement and support** is more effective. It takes time and resources to build a relationship with employers and change the culture of employment - putting together a comprehensive package of flexible support for employers (both large and small) to address their needs is crucial to success. Evidence from Equal shows that short term engagement is much less effective, particularly where you are supporting hard to reach target groups which employers are unwilling to recruit.

**Promotional materials** such as short DVDs are a simple, but effective way of disseminating work both to other employers and policymakers. If you use employers who have successfully taken part as Champions for your programme, then this can also have more impact.

## Case Studies

### Bridges Project- ATLAS DP

The Bridges Programme in Glasgow helps asylum seekers maintain skills and gain new experience by setting up and managing work shadow placements with a wide range of employers. The programme has successfully engaged with both public and private employers and a hard to reach target group who do not have the legal right to work and face a wide range of barriers to the labour market.

The initial approach to engaging employers was to target large public sector employers who were already partners in the DP. Private sector employers were recruited by targeting senior members of staff. Providing a full briefing to both employers and asylum seekers and matching them appropriately at the start has been identified as another key success factor.

The programme has worked with over 35 different employers who provide tailored work shadow placements. Its success can be evidenced by the fact that several employers have participated in a promotional DVD to explain the benefits of being involved.

For further information see [www.bridgesprogrammes.org.uk](http://www.bridgesprogrammes.org.uk)

### ACE National DP- Carers UK

Carers UK aims to provide equality of opportunity for carers throughout the UK. Their Equal DP sought to improve access to the labour market for carers and dispel the oft-held belief that carers should not work/should not have to work through changing the attitudes and working practices of employers.

A 'high profile' employer network was established enabling Carers UK to negotiate on how human resource policies could be adapted to be 'carer friendly'. Engaging high profile employers also proved to be more effective due to the influence and links with senior policymakers within Government. Once large employers were recruited, this in turn created wider interest in the programme as employers are now more aware of the business benefits of incorporating carer friendly policies into their workplace.

For further information see: [www.acecarers.org.uk/Home](http://www.acecarers.org.uk/Home)