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LEARNDIRECT CAREERS ADVICE PHONE & WEB SERVICE

UK: Extending Access through Marketing and Distance Guidance

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1. INTRODUCTION & POLICY CONTEXT

The learndirect careers advice service celebrated its 10th birthday in June 2008. In that time nearly 10 million calls and emails have been received with enquiries ranging from simple information requests to complex careers questions, with many more using the website. The original service started with 40 staff based in Manchester, all of whom took incoming calls, and were similarly qualified.¹

By January 2005 the service employed 170 advisers, taking calls from England and Northern Ireland. Calls from Wales were dealt with by Careers Wales and in Scotland by learndirect Scotland. The single adviser model had been replaced by three tiers of advisers:

Information Advisers: Qualified to NVQ level 2 in service support, Information Advisers take incoming calls and handle straightforward information requests. More complex advice calls are referred to either a Learning Adviser or a Lifelong Learning Adviser.

Learning Advisers: Qualified to NVQ level 3 in guidance, Learning Advisers explore more complex issues with clients. They will offer a referral to the local face to face services if the caller is eligible.

Careers Coaches (formerly known as Lifelong Learning Advisers): Qualified to NVQ level 4 in guidance, this group of advisers handle the most complex calls, often where the caller prefers to speak on the telephone rather than face to face, or where they are ineligible for nextstep services. In January

¹ The national phone service is open to all adults, on 0800 100 900 from 8am to 10pm seven days a week. Referrals into the telephone guidance service are available to all adults. The web service is available online 24 hours a day.

2005 there were only 14 of these advisers and the demand to speak to them exceeded capacity.

2. THE WORLDS FIRST EVER TELEPHONE GUIDANCE SERVICE

Through development of existing advisers and external recruitment, the government invited learndirect to trial the world's first ever pilot of telephone guidance in 2006. This was a major undertaking and required the development of a guidance model adapted to the telephone medium. This is a three stage model, with advisers moving callers through the stages as appropriate.

- 1. EXPLORATION/ACTION PLANNING**
- 2. SUPPORT AND REVIEW**
- 3. MOTIVATION AND EXIT**

Call lengths were assessed as part of the pilot. Although the expectation is that the average time with a caller will be about 60 minutes, spread over possibly three calls, there are no fixed time slots or call lengths. Action plans created with advisers are posted or emailed to the client and developed over the sequence of calls. Callers also devote time to personal work between calls.

To ensure that the caller understands the guidance offer and is ready to make this time commitment, advisers will undertake contract setting prior to transferring the call.

A critical part of getting the service right is setting client expectations. This is a particular challenge in the marketing context, as it relies on being able to convey accurate messages about the service in 30 second television advertisements.

Research conducted in London and Leeds during 2006 revealed that '*a better job*' was the best hook to attract possible users, and it was important to reflect what this meant. It was also shown that recognition and factors such as the working environment were at least as important to people as salary. This led to the creation of the 'jigsaw' approach which was used in the TV advertising campaign (see section 4) which stresses the role of guidance in identifying routes to personal advancement and a sense of completeness.

Since the trial began in 2006, telephone guidance has had a significant impact on people's lives; 220,000 sessions have been carried out since the beginning of the service, and nearly 69% of clients are currently reporting that they have entered employment, gained promotion at work or enrolled onto a course since phoning the service. This shows that there is a demand for guidance and it has a positive impact on individuals gaining employment and increasing personal income.

3. INFORMATION DATABASES AND RESOURCES

A vital part of the service is ensuring advisors are able to access high quality databases on course information. The challenge in 1999 was to create a single, national, database. Using a dedicated data collection team, course provision was collected from Further and Higher Education providers, including those in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, to launch the first ever UK-wide database called the National Learning Directory. The broad principle is *“collect once, used by all”*. It creates huge efficiencies for the sector and delivers high quality, consistent information for the learner.

Today, The National Learning Directory is a free-to-all, government-funded national database of learning opportunities and holds information on most kinds of learning from short, community-based activities through to degrees and distance learning. It contains records on around 950,000 courses from over 10,000 providers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. As well as being a central component of the learndirect Careers Advice Service, it feeds 70 other websites, including DirectGov, BBC, Sector Skills Councils, nextstep and many more, In the future, it is hoped that the directory will closely support developments in the sector, for example the Adult Advancement Careers Service.

Advisors also use a database of 700 careers profiles. This is an essential resource when dealing with careers enquires as they contain information on salary levels and qualifications requirements. Each profile is verified by industry professionals to ensure accuracy of information for clients seeking to enter or progress into specific jobs.

Advisors also work with a range of tools and guides, including a CV Builder, a tool to help identify clients' skills and interest, and guides to support specific client groups including over-50's, minority ethnic groups, refugees and migrants and ex-offenders.

4. NATIONAL MARKETING AND PROMOTION

Creating demand for careers advice among adults is largely down to the success of the marketing and promotional activity; the strategy was to create an awareness and understanding of the learndirect Careers Advice offer, with a strong focus on increasing inspiration and confidence amongst the most disadvantaged client groups.

The campaign balanced out having TV as a mass media vehicle (reaching a broad audience), with reaching the specific target audiences, by using a mixed set of campaign activity, particularly focusing on online media.

Econometric modelling has demonstrated the impact of TV advertising in providing a cost efficient response to both the phone and the web services. It

also has the dual benefit of maintaining brand awareness and increasing understanding of the service. TV sponsorship has also been used, with continued sponsorship of a mid-morning chat show with high audience viewers, particularly from the target group. nb Have I changed the meaning of this sentence?

The service also offers language services (9 languages are offered - Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati, Polish, French, Farsi, Somali, Syhethi, Welsh). A key part of the campaign is promotion of the eight different language lines that we run, through a comprehensive mix of media and outreach activity unique to each community.

nb There is a mixture of 8 and 9 languages here. I am not sure where the Welsh fits in

In 2007/8 the service handled 12 million enquires over the phone, email and web with over a third with low/no qualifications.. The majority of clients using the service are from the age of 25 – 45, with lower numbers from older and younger age groups. PR (marketing?) activities focusing on priority groups (such as young males and the over 50s) were launched during the period to increase demand from these client groups.

5. CHALLENGES FOR THE NEW SERVICE

In World Class Skills (June 2008) and The Leitch Report on Skills (December 2006?) recommendations were made for a new careers service for adults to be established. The key principle of the service is to be ‘universal’ and individuals at all skill levels will be encouraged to raise their aspirations and invest in their skills development.

The Government has accepted the recommendation and the policy framework for the new service is currently being developed. This is now a big political agenda, receiving increasing attention on two fronts

- a need to increase the links between jobs/careers and skills/learning, whilst ensuring the service is designed to support clients on social benefits **and equally** those in work seeking to fulfil their full earning potential..
- the role of “advancement networks” – a personal commitment from the government minister to target not just the low skilled and low paid, but also to break down personal barriers that limit clients from moving forward, for example providing access to networks providing information such as legal rights, debt management and childcare.

The core of the Leitch vision was to bring together two current services: learndirect Careers Advice and nextstep. Learndirect Careers Advice operates at a distance, through telephone and web-based services. It offers not only information and advice, but also career guidance. It is heavily publicised, well known, and widely used, receiving nearly a million calls and emails a year, and around 11 million web sessions. Of its kind, it is a world leader.

Nextstep, is a complex network of face-to-face services, targeted at the low-skilled. It is poorly marketed, and is not widely known even among its target group.

Leitch recommended that the two services be integrated, under one brand. The vision is that telephone, web and face-to-face channels will be alternative ways of using an integrated service; giving a wide range of options for the individual.

In response to the policy changes, the service is now in the process of neutralising the branding. It will operate as the National Careers Advice phone & web service until a new brand is created for the new adult advancement careers service in 2010.

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