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Partnering for the Future: A Case Study in Building Long Term Academic Industry Relationships

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PARTNERING FOR THE FUTURE:

AN APPROACH TO DEVELOPING A LONG TERM ACADEMIC INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIP USING A RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

By David Kirk and Liam Nolan





GENERAL INFORMATION

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|------------------------------|---|
| TITLE OF THE CASE | Partnering for the Future: A Case Study in Building Long Term Academic Industry Relationships |
| SALES PITCH | An example of an approach to developing a long term academic industry partnership using a structured relationship management framework |
| ORGANISATION(S) | Dublin Institute of Technology Bord Gais Networks |
| COUNTRY | Ireland |
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| AUTHORS | David Kirk Liam Nolan |
| NATURE OF INTERACTION | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Collaboration in R&D <input type="checkbox"/> Academic mobility <input type="checkbox"/> Student mobility <input type="checkbox"/> Commercialisation of R&D results in science <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lifelong learning <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Curriculum development and delivery <input type="checkbox"/> Entrepreneurship <input type="checkbox"/> Governance <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Relationship Development |
| SUPPORTING MECHANISM | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Strategic instrument <input type="checkbox"/> Structural instrument or approach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Operational activity <input type="checkbox"/> Framework condition |



CASE STUDY PROFILE

1. SUMMARY

A proactive approach to engagement with industry is increasingly forming an integral part of Higher Education Institute strategy. At the heart of this engagement focus is the recognition of the need to transition from shorter term transactional relationships to longer term interactive relationships (Jeffrey, 2009)

Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), one of Ireland's largest and most innovative third level institutions with a strong tradition in industry engagement recognised this need and sought develop it's relationship management focus with a view to creating an informed, trusting and supportive environment within which mutually beneficial interaction could be progressed.

Accordingly, in 2010, DIT established a Corporate Partnership Network to provide a framework for supporting the development of academic industry relationships through a better understanding of each other's environments. By creating a structured management approach, the Network seeks to facilitate the establishment and fostering of long term industry partnerships and to assist industry achieve their organisational objectives in collaboration with DIT.

Following an accreditation request from Bord Gais Networks (BGN), a leading Irish State owned utility company which develops, operates and maintains the natural gas transmission and distribution networks in Ireland, DIT utilised the CPN as a framework within which to develop the relationship.

Underpinned by a strong commitment from both partners to establish a long term relationship, the Corporate Partnership Network guided the relationship development process resulting in a number of significant deliverables including a Memorandum of Understanding being signed, accreditation of the company's Technical Training Centre and Gas Distribution Supervisor Programme, research collaboration including joint sponsorship of a PhD student and active input into Institute development.

Bord Gais Networks has leveraged the relationship to support key stakeholder management, promote a learning culture within the organisation, grow its awareness of academic/industry engagement and input into strategy development.

The DIT/ BGN partnership continues to serve as a very useful roadmap for DIT as it seeks to develop other relationships with external organisations. It is also helping to inform the ongoing evolution of the Corporate Partnership Network approach itself and how best it might develop to effectively serve all stakeholders.

2. BACKGROUND

Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) has been an integral part of the Irish higher education system in Ireland for more than one hundred and thirty years and is one of the country's largest and most innovative institutions.

The Institute makes awards at Certificate, Diploma, Degree, Masters and Doctoral levels and has an enrolment of approximately 19,000 students across four Colleges: Arts & Tourism; Business; Engineering & Built Environment; Sciences & Health.

Engagement with industry and the professions is a central tenet of DIT strategy and is integral to its approach to responding to an ever changing economic and social environment.

However, while DIT has always enjoyed a strong reputation for engagement with business, its interaction has tended to be driven by transactional rather than relational considerations. Compounding this has been the fact that the Institute is spread over thirty eight different locations across the city making it difficult to coordinate and grow longer term relationships with external organisations. This has sometimes resulted in missed opportunities and a failure to optimise industry links for all stakeholders including the Institute, companies, students and the Dublin region.

Recognising this fact and the complex nature of industry/academic engagement, DIT, in 2010, sought to take a more proactive relationship approach in its management of engagement with industry by establishing the Corporate Partnership Network (CPN). The initiative has created a structured framework through which mutually beneficial relationships can be nurtured by facilitating a better understanding of each other's environments. It provides a mechanism through which opportunities both new and existing can be optimised to facilitate the growth of meaningful partnerships and thus contribute to assisting industry/professions achieve their organisational objectives in collaboration with DIT.

Shortly after the establishment of the Corporate Partnership Network, Bord Gais Networks (BGN), a leading Irish State owned utility company which develops, operates and maintains the natural gas transmission and distribution networks in Ireland, approached the Institute with a specific request for third party accreditation of their technical training facility based in Dublin and of their Gas Distribution Supervisory Programme. However, their interest in DIT stretched beyond accreditation. As a significant employer of DIT graduates, the company already had some awareness of DIT and in particular, its broad range of expertise and capability in engineering, energy and business. The potential leverage of this expertise to support the company's operation was of special interest and they were curious to determine if and how this might be best achieved. In considering this, the company expressed its preference for initiating a long term relationship with the Institute providing an excellent opportunity to road test the Corporate Partnership Network concept.

The BGN were invited to join the CPN and this case outlines how the approach was used to support the development of the relationship between the two organisations.

3. OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the Corporate Partnership Network is to

- ▶ Provide a structured approach to relationship development that is both sustainable and scalable
- ▶ Bridge the communication gap between industry and academia
- ▶ Build awareness of the Institute with external stakeholders

Guided by these intentions, the specific focus of the DIT/BGN engagement was

- ▶ To expand the relationship beyond transactional to a longer term partnership model
- ▶ To optimise the specific industry/academic collaborations
- ▶ To identify new and innovative opportunities for engagement
- ▶ To establish a coordinated, multi level network of linkages between the two organisations

4. RESPONSIBILITY

The management of the CPN is overseen by the Head of Corporate Partnerships in DIT. The specific projects that emerge from the relationship are transferred to and managed in the appropriate academic/research/functional units.

As part of the agreement between DIT and BGN, both have nominated senior representatives as engagement liaisons who act as the gateways into each organisation.



IMPLEMENTATION & FUNDING

5. STRATEGY & ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN

The key approach of the CPN is to enhance proactive dialogue between the Institute and the member company with a view to creating a trusting and supportive environment within which mutually beneficial interaction can be progressed. To support this, a number of key mechanisms are utilized.

A dedicated DIT /BGN Contact

A senior member of DIT has been assigned to the participating organisation as a single point of contact. This person acts as the organisation's 'trailfinder' using their extensive internal contacts and knowledge of the Institute to direct them to appropriate personnel, address general queries, facilitate meetings with staff and researchers, explore and develop ideas, and suggest where DIT can contribute to a business solution and offer exciting networking opportunities.

Similarly, BGN has nominated two representatives as dedicated Institute contacts. These representatives work with the DIT representative to identify areas of mutual interest and opportunities for collaboration.

Personable and structured communication

Regular onsite visits take place at BGN where updates are provided on any recent Institute developments, existing projects discussed and any potential opportunities for future interaction explored

Outside of these visits, the company is briefed on DIT activities through research and enterprise publications, email updates and phone communication.

Networking Opportunities

BGN receives regular invitations to specific CPN organised networking events throughout the year as well as to other relevant DIT events. The CPN events are specially designed to offer opportunities for the company to meet key DIT staff and also other CPN members from different industrial sectors.

Memorandum of Understanding

The establishment of a long term relationship with DIT was particularly important to BGN and they were especially committed to embedding this relationship in their organisation at the highest level. To reflect this, the company proposed a Memorandum of Understanding between the parties which would, in broad terms, establish the commitment of both organisations to explore opportunities together in certain areas. This Memorandum of Understanding, which provided additional impetus to the relationship, was signed by the President of DIT and the Managing Director of Bord Gais Networks in late 2010 and renewed again in 2013. It will run until 2016.

Celebration and promotion

Developing and maintaining momentum was identified early on as a vital component in helping to embed the relationship in both organisations. One approach to support this has been to ensure that key successes were actively celebrated and promoted including the celebration of key milestones such as the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding, award of research funding, appointment of a research student and a graduation ceremony for BGN employees which took place in the BGN Technical Training Centre. It was ensured that these events featured strongly in the BGN internal newsletter, on the DIT website and internal ezine and DIT research updates thus maintaining a high profile for the relationship as it developed.

Multilayer Network of Contacts

The dialogue with BGN quickly identified four immediate areas of potential engagement which both parties committed to achieving.

1. Establish a formal long term relationship
2. Accreditation of BGN's technical facility
3. Joint sponsorship of PhD research
4. Joint programme development

To support these specific projects, appropriate contacts in relevant areas from across both organisations were quickly identified thereby initiating the formation of a coordinated multilayer network of contacts.

6. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Engagement progress is primarily reviewed at scheduled DIT/BGN meetings which take place as part of the Corporate Partnership Network agreement. These meetings also allow discussion on the operation of the Network itself and afford an opportunity for suggestions for improvement to be tabled.

7. SUSTAINABILITY MEASURES

The longer term sustainability of the relationship is supported through maintaining an ongoing dialogue between the organizations through the Corporate Partnership Network. This is further enhanced by the existence of the Memorandum of Understanding which acts as an important catalyst in supporting the sustainability of the relationship at the highest levels in the organizations.

8. COSTS

There are two main cost strands:

a) Managing and developing the Corporate Partnership Network

Personnel costs make up the largest portion of costs in managing the Corporate Partnership Network. However at present the CPN does not directly employ people but rather existing DIT staff time is assigned to its operation and support. Additional costs that arise include travel, overhead, event management and marketing.

b) Supporting Transactional Costs resulting from the Relationship

These relate to costs associated with the BGN Technical Training Centre and Programme accreditation, research collaboration and supporting Institutional development.

9. FUNDING

The establishment of the Corporate Partnership Network within DIT was initially funded under a multi institutional engagement project entitled 'Roadmap for Employment Academic Partnerships - REAP'. Currently, costs associated with managing the CPN are covered by the Institution.

The transactional costs associated with accrediting the BGN Technical Training Centre and the Gas Distribution Supervisory Programme were covered by the company while the collaborative research project was jointly funded by BGN and DIT under An Fiosraigh Research Scholarship Enterprise Partnership Programme which is a research funding initiative of DIT.



OUTCOMES & IMPACT

10. OUTCOMES

The key outcomes to date of the relationship between DIT and BGN are

- ▶ BGN have become active members of the DIT Corporate Partnership Network
- ▶ BGN's Technical Training Centre and their Gas Distribution Supervisor Programme have been accredited by DIT. Seventeen BGN employees have graduated to date
- ▶ A PhD student is being jointly sponsored by BGN and DIT. The focus of the research is aligned to an area of specific interest to company
- ▶ A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2011 and renewed in 2013 by both parties
- ▶ BGN have participated on and contributed to DIT quality assurance and operational reviews
- ▶ BGN personnel have attended various CPN and general DIT events over the period of the relationship which have alerted them to other collaborative opportunities and provided an opportunity to meet with relevant DIT academic and research staff
- ▶ The relationship between the parties has assisted BGN in making a successful application to Engineers Ireland, the professional body for engineers and engineering in Ireland, to become a CPD Accredited Employer. BGN were given a 3 year award in April 2013 and deemed to be operating to the highest category within the CPD standard, 'Transformational CPD'.

11. IMPACTS

The principle impacts to date on Bord Gais Networks as a result of the relationship have been

1. Assistance with key ongoing stakeholder management including the Irish gas regulator (Commission for Energy Regulation) and the government department to which they are accountable (Department of Communications, Energy & Natural Resources).
 - a. Providing independent assurance on the quality of the internal training provided by BGN
 - b. Demonstrating the proactivity of the company and its commitment to training and development of staff and contractors
 - c. Opportunities to invite stakeholders to share in the celebration of achievements
2. Promotion of a learning culture and environment within the company
 - a. Joint award ceremonies with the DIT raising the status of specific training within the business
 - b. Award of nationally recognised DIT training certificates to trainees has increased their enthusiasm and motivation
 - c. Recognition of staff achievements given greater publicity internally within the company because of DIT involvement
3. Support for the process of tackling of strategic issues within the business

- a. Addressing specific research issues to support future policy making (e.g. consumption drivers in the SME sector)
 - b. Contributing to the company's overall 'Gas Technical Training & Development Strategy'.
 - c. The work completed with DIT assisted in making a successful application to Engineers Ireland for designation as a CPD Accredited Employer
4. Learning from other companies and DIT activities
 - a. Attendance at DIT forums along with other businesses to discuss topics of common interest and hear firsthand the experiences of other companies or from the DIT in relation to their community and industry initiatives
 - b. Linkages at different levels between DIT staff and BGN staff from Managing Director / President level, to business operations, HR and training staff

From DIT's perspective, the development of the relationship with BGN has increased

- a. awareness internally of the value of external engagement and raised the profile of the Institute amongst other companies as a leading academic partner.
- b. Support for applied research and development within the Institute
- c. A growing network of contacts with the company offering the potential for additional engagement in other areas.
- d. Promoting the value of a relationship development approach to Institute/industry engagement

12. INVOLVED STAKEHOLDERS AND BENEFICIARIES

DIT and its constituent stakeholders have benefited significantly from the relationship with BGN through support for research, better understanding of business challenges, support for and input into Institute development, student opportunities and improved profile within the business sphere.

BGN have benefitted from the development of their training function leading to improved workforce development, access to research expertise to support ongoing innovation, a greater awareness of how a third level Institutions can support the company's strategies and the opportunities to add value to its service offering.

In addition, this case provides a valuable template for both DIT and BGN as they seek to enrich their role as partners within the regional and national innovation ecosystem.

13. AWARDS / RECOGNITION

The success of the CPN and in particular the DIT/BGN relationship has been recognised at various external and internal Institute reviews and has been a significant contributory factor to BGN receiving the award of CPD Accredited Employer from Engineers Ireland.



LESSONS LEARNED

14. PRIMARY CHALLENGES

The continued development of the CPN faces three principle challenges.

a. Strategic Challenge

Ensuring long term relationship development remains a strategic priority within Institution

b. Resource Challenge

Given the current economic climate in Ireland, increasing constraints on resources both financial and human could significantly impact on the success of the CPN

c. Organisational Challenge

Given the dispersed nature of DIT, successfully integrating the centrally located strategic relationship management function with the School/Department based transactional operational function to ensure a coherent and coordinated approach remains an ongoing challenge.

With regard to the existing DIT/BGN relationship, a key challenge to its growth will be sustaining the high level of momentum that currently exists. Furthermore, there may be resource implications as the level and quantity of interactions increase.

15. SUCCESS FACTORS

Much of the success of the DIT/ BGN partnership can be attributed to

a. Partner Commitment

From the outset, BGN wanted more than a simple transactional relationship with DIT. It was committed to creating a long term association backed by the support of the company's senior management. Similarly, DIT, by establishing the CPN, signaled its commitment to creating longer term industry partnerships.

b. Mechanism for Long Term Relationship Development

The growth of the relationship was greatly enabled by the existence of the CPN which provided the structure within which the relationship could be built

c. Regular Promotion and Celebration

Both organisations actively promote and celebrate the development of the relationship and importantly, the various individual engagement successes. This promotion and ongoing celebration helps validate the relationships within both organisations and helps attribute a level of an importance to the partnership.

16. TRANSFERABILITY

The case should have transferability across the third level sector broadly. It has served as a very useful roadmap for DIT as a third level institution in developing relationships with other external organizations and may help inform similar approaches elsewhere.



FURTHER INFORMATION

17. PUBLICATIONS / ARTICLES

- ▶ Abreu, M., Grinevich, V., Hughes, A., Kitson, M. and Ternouth, P. (2008), *Universities Business Knowledge Exchange*, Council for Industry and Higher Education and Centre for Business Research, London and Cambridge.
- ▶ Jeffery N.,(2009). 'Stakeholder Engagement: A Road Map to Meaningful Engagement', Doughty Centre, Cranfield School of Management.
- ▶ M. Perkmann et al.,(2013). 'Academic engagement and commercialisation: A review of the literature on university–industry relations' *Research Policy* 42 423– 442

18. LINKS

- ▶ www.dit.ie
- ▶ www.bgn.ie
- ▶ www.reap.ie

19. KEYWORDS

Relationship development, academic industry partnership, networks, engagement, long term

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