

Peer Networks 2020-2021

The first round of the BEIS-sponsored Peer Networks is coming to an end. The GBSLEP Growth Hub is pleased to report a successful delivery of 16 cohorts assisting 134 companies with an overall 91% positive satisfaction rating, completed between December 2020 and March 2021.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Business challenges are universal

Our recruitment process and cohort allocation followed the industrial sectors supported by the Growth Hub advisor team. This worked particularly well for targeting sectors during recruitment and provided the cohort participants an underlying understanding of each other's business.

However, the overwhelming feedback from the peer sessions highlighted the topical discussions and action learning was the most important resource, and the industrial sector rarely factored into the conversation. So, while the industrial sector creates an underlying commonality, it is not a requirement to a cohesive and engaged peer group.

What appears to be more important to participants is the stage the business is at, their growth plans and their immediate and long-term challenges, identified or anticipated.

The most discussed topics in the peer sessions were: Sales and Marketing, Business Model Innovation, Change Management, HR and Digital adoption.

2. Cohort starting size matters

From the outset, BEIS prescribed a cohort size of 11 companies. This parameter presented challenges during the recruitment phase and again when there was a need to move participants from one cohort to another. It also put a lot of pressure on the delivery partners to actively manage participant engagement and retention.

There were also strict parameters on turnover, company age and the number of employees for the recruitment guidelines, which BEIS also relaxed slightly allowing 30% of the participating companies to be slightly outside these boundaries.

Luckily, with the third national lockdown, the extension of the furlough scheme, the rise in homeschooling and childcare issues and the UK's exit from the EU, BEIS adopted a more lenient approach to participant attendance and retention recognising some issues were beyond our control. This translated into a more open dialogue between us and BEIS with active, weekly reporting on cohort viability and reporting on the issues companies were facing.

We finished the programme with 16 cohorts: 3 with ten participants, 4 with nine participants, 5 with eight participants, and 4 with seven participants.

3. Growth Hub participation is valuable

The Growth Hub Account Managers have an extensive and up-to-date knowledge about the business support and sector-specific resources available for companies across the region. Each peer network cohort had a designated GH Account Manager who actively participated in the peer meetings to support the facilitator and contribute anecdotal experiences. They were also able to follow-up with relevant information to address a participant's needs highlighted during the peer session, and specific resources the facilitator could use to supplement their 1:1 mentoring session.

This approach was unique to our Peer Networks programme but with such a positive response we plan to implement it throughout other GBSLEP Growth Hub programmes.

4. Strong facilitators are vital

The measure of success for a peer network is the group's ability to gel together and share openly and honestly about their challenges and experiences so everyone can learn – and hopefully form those support bonds that go beyond the length of the funded Programme. By delivering 16 cohorts we had the opportunity to experience first-hand a wide range of facilitators and have learned that those with a lot of experience, in addition to their qualifications, are better able to handle the awkward moments that inevitably arise when running a peer network.

The strength of the facilitator was highlighted in their ability to make the conversations in the peer sessions relevant and to draw out the specific needs of individuals to address during their 1:1 mentoring session. This connection between concepts learned as a group and how they are applied individually requires an astute and practiced facilitator.

5. Reporting requirements can change

This Peer Networks programme was a pilot and there was a lot of learning taking place on everyone's part. The reporting requirements were outlined in the Playbook at the beginning of the Programme, but then as BEIS dealt with underperforming cohorts, underspend and dashboard issues, the goalposts seemed to change and multiple reporting methods were introduced.

The Peer Networks online dashboard was a bit cumbersome but once we got the hang of how to input the data, and save regularly, that simply became an admin task. There was also a need to maintain separate spreadsheets as we could not extract the data from the dashboard once added.

Working with multiple delivery partners, each with their own recording methods and shared areas created more administrative work than should have been necessary.

