



Business Link National Overview

A review of the achievements of
Business Link in 2009

Foreword by Mike Carr

Executive Director of Business Services, East Midlands Development Agency



Running a business successfully is always a challenge, whatever the economic climate, and it is essential that businesses have access to the information, advice and guidance they need. In 2008/09, more people than ever before turned to Business Link for that help, both off and online.

This national overview of the Business Link service demonstrates how Business Link continues to offer a complete package of support through information and services tailored to the needs of businesses. This year it has been especially important to offer effective and timely support to businesses concerned about how the economic downturn might affect the way they operate.

Initiatives, such as the government's Real Help campaign, have reinforced Business Link as the primary gateway to impartial, authoritative business advice. Take up of the Real Help offer has been significant across the regions, with the Business Link Health Checks being particularly well received by established businesses.

Separately, this year saw much progress being made by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) on their business support simplification programme. Working closely with

the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), a streamlined portfolio of business support products and services, covering a range of specialist advice, loans and grants, has been developed. Central to this is the role of the Business Link service, positioned as the primary access route for business to the Solutions for Business products.

THIS YEAR BUSINESS LINK HAS:

- Supported more than **942,000** businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs
- Undertaken more than **95,000** Health Checks
- Seen more than **54,000** businesses start up with our help
- Achieved customer satisfaction levels of **89%**
- Taken **282,636** enquiries at the regional call centres
- Saved businesses 5.5 million hours with a value of £115m

These record figures show the significant impact that the Business Link service has contributed to helping businesses tackle the recession and position themselves for recovery. Going forward, further priority will be given to the work we do on understanding the needs of our customers, in order to help them continue to meet the challenges and opportunities of the coming year and continue to make a positive impact on the economy.

BUSINESSES REPORTED THAT THE BUSINESS LINK ADVISORY SERVICE SAVED THEM VALUABLE TIME IN GATHERING INFORMATION; AN AVERAGE OF 17 HOURS PER CUSTOMER

What is Business Link?

Business Link is the government-funded business advice and support service in England. It delivers business support through the Business Link network of advisers and its national helpline (0845 600 9 006), which are managed by the RDAs in the nine regions of England and via an online portal (www.businesslink.gov.uk).

At a local level, Business Link provides advice through face-to-face meetings with advisers, topical events and workshops appropriate to the life stages and different needs of businesses.

The RDAs have five priorities, which are essential to deliver substantiated economic growth in the regions:

- To further economic development and regeneration
- To promote business efficiency, investment and competitiveness
- To promote employment
- To enhance development and application of skills relevant to employment
- To contribute to sustainable development

Business Link aims to help new and existing businesses of all sizes, to grow and be sustainable, offering independent advice based on an assessment of what they need. Our business advisers provide support and guidance on all aspects of running a business including: managing finances, employing people, finding and keeping customers, accessing support and networks, paying tax, complying with legislation, and understanding sector-specific regulations.

The Business Link website helps people to succeed in business by providing access to clear, simple and authoritative information, transactions and support. As part of the Government's service transformation agenda, Business Link is currently bringing together the business content from over 95% of government websites onto businesslink.gov.uk. This will provide businesses and their advisers with one website that contains all relevant government information and services. In the devolved administrations, similar services are provided by Business Gateway (Scotland), Flexible Support for Business (Wales) and InvestNI (Northern Ireland).



Business Link performance: 2008 – 2009 **Highlights**

2008/09 was a challenging year for businesses and more of them than ever before turned to Business Link for help. The Business Link Health Check, promoted via the government’s Real Help Now campaign, saw an increase in businesses seeking advice on sourcing finance, improving cash flow and issues such as managing redundancy. Over 95,000 businesses have benefitted from the Health Check service since October 2008 – an average of over 1,800 per week.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDED:

- The completion of the ‘Solutions for Business’ programme in October, which streamlined hundreds of publicly funded business support products and services into a single-branded package of 30. Business Link is now the primary access point for all publicly funded business support products
- Business Link advisers worked closely with banks and local authorities to increase awareness and understanding of the government’s new finance measures
- RDAs worked with BIS, Department of Work and Pensions, and Job Centre Plus to develop a package of self-employment support for those who have been unemployed for six months
- The enhancement of the Business Link service to incorporate skills analysis and brokerage to Train to Gain and other skills provision
- Business Link continued to work closely with local authorities and partners to engage with and support government agencies
- Around 400 guides brought onto the Business Link website, helping businesses access the advice and guidance they needed on a wide range of subjects quickly and easily.



RDA management of the Business Link service

ECONOMIC IMPACT:

Business Link helps businesses succeed. Research¹ has estimated that for every £1 spent on Business Link, it generates an additional value of £2.26 to the economy.

Businesses who have been intensively assisted by Business Link:

- Had higher employment growth than businesses that had not used Business Link
- Felt the support was critical in making a number of wider improvements in business performance – including improved export capacity, more training, a better business reputation and more strategic planning
- Increased sales. This amounted to an estimated £4,520 million a year for all users².

NUMBER OF BUSINESSES HELPED:

The popularity of the Business Link service continues to grow. Although many people believe the service is predominantly for start-ups, the majority of our customers are established businesses. Last year there was a 26% increase in the number of these businesses helped. The number of businesses assisted prior to starting up also rose, despite the recession.

MEASURE	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
Number of established businesses assisted	452,797	515, 315	564,241	537,901	678,916
Number of start-up businesses assisted	38,552	39,198	46,093	52,178	54,806
Number of pre-starts assisted	171,737	185,711	182,407	207,952	208,444
Number of intensively assisted customers	37,769	43,662	48,107	57,586	77,620

1. Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform sponsored study by academics from Aston, Warwick and Kingston University Business schools published in 2007.

2. Business Link Regional Network Impact Assessment, September 2009

3. Source: Businesslink.gov.uk Impact Assessment, November 2008, Databuild (figures based on grossed total responses from sample)

**OUR WEBSITE HELPED BUSINESSES
THROUGHOUT THE UK SAVE AN
ESTIMATED £317 MILLION IN
COSTS AND 5.4 MILLION HOURS.
INFORMATION AVAILABLE ON THE SITE
ALSO HELPED BUSINESSES INCREASE
PROFITS BY £113 MILLION.³**

Business Link performance

BUSINESS LINK SERVICE USAGE:

- Over 942,000 customers have used Business Link in the past 12 months, representing an impressive increase of 18% over the past year
- Around 679,000 customers were established businesses, representing 36% of the Interdepartmental Business Register (IDBR)
- The number of customers receiving Intensive Assistance increased by 35%, representing over 20,000 additional customers over the same period
- The Business Link website received more than 14 million visits in 2008/09.

BUSINESS LINK ENGAGEMENT WITH HARD TO REACH GROUPS:

- The Customer Satisfaction Survey demonstrates market penetration in priority groups. The survey suggests that 25% of customers are businesses majority managed by women
- In 2008/09, around 13% of customers ran businesses that are majority managed by people from BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) groups
- Around 4% of customers reported that they are majority owned or managed by someone with a disability. This equates to around 38,000 customers
- Around 6% of customers are social enterprises.

WORKING WITH SOCIAL ENTERPRISES:

Currently, around 6% of Business Link customers are social enterprises. Business Link helps social enterprises by referring them to sources of specialist business support which match their particular needs. The release of government funding to the RDAs for social enterprises has meant that support has increased dramatically this year. Business Link providers have improved their capacity to serve social enterprises by targeted marketing, training business advisers, building up networks of specialist providers and offering easily accessible financial support.

“After being injured in a car crash and undergoing two years of spinal surgery I knew that finding employment would be very difficult so I had to re-evaluate my plans – I couldn’t continue with my Masters degree in social science so I took the positive step to set up my own business. Our adviser provided excellent support and advice to help me raise the capital I needed to set up and run the business. Their input helped us to identify and secure a loan of £40,000, without which the business would never have got off the ground.”

Kez Tagg, Managing Director
Close Encounters Travel

BENEFITS TO BUSINESSES:

- On average, users of both the local or national website and the regional network saved more time and money than users of the regional network alone⁴
- Customers who had used the regional network said they felt Business Link had saved them an average of 17 hours with a financial saving of £319
- Customers who had used the regional network as well as the local or national website said they felt that Business Link had saved them an average of 23 hours with a financial saving of £370.

SATISFACTION & RECOMMENDATION:

- Customer satisfaction with Business Link remains exceptionally high at 89%, and these rates are consistent across all regions
- More than two-thirds (68%) of customers report that they would be very likely to re-use Business Link.

“Not only would I advise other social enterprises to contact Business Link for advice; I wouldn’t advise them to consider starting up without it. It’s a tough world out there and Business Link’s advisers have a great deal of expertise.”

Jackie Snape, Disability Action



Inform-Diagnose-Broker (IDB) model

With so much information, advice and support available to businesses, finding the right help can be difficult. New and growing businesses cannot afford to waste time and need help to stay focused on researching, understanding and choosing the solutions that will meet the present and future needs of their business. Business Link's IDB model is an internal framework that provides impartial information and access to a comprehensive range of resources for businesses, from the public, private and voluntary sectors. This support is tailored to the individual business by informing the customer, diagnosing the problem and brokering the appropriate services.

INFORM

The first step for most businesses is to find up-to-date, relevant information. Through its website, telephone helpline and advisers, Business Link helps businesses to assess their situation, see where opportunities lie and meet regulatory requirements. By enabling them to understand the potential opportunities and challenges they face, the service directs businesses to seek the most appropriate advice and support.

DIAGNOSE

Business Link is able to give an objective appraisal of business performance. This free, in-depth business review, carried out by a professional adviser, looks at key aspects such as strategy, finance, markets, people and processes, highlighting strengths and areas of weakness. The Business Link adviser will develop an action plan with the customer, mapping out how to achieve their business goals.

BROKER

If the action plan specifies that a business needs specialist advice or support, the Business Link adviser will research schemes and services available from all sectors to identify possible sources of support. Each business can choose whether or not to take up this support, and which provider to use. Once the review is complete, the Business Link adviser will keep in touch with the business to monitor its progress and give appropriate ongoing support.



**BUSINESS LINK
HAS HELPED
679,000
ESTABLISHED
BUSINESSES THIS YEAR**

How the IDB model works in practice

Business Link helped Newman Scott, a national shop-fitting business based in Thornaby in the North East, to retrain its staff and secure a major new contract. Director, David Graham, explains how the IDB model enabled his business to succeed.

Q: WHY DID YOU APPROACH BUSINESS LINK?

A: Like many others in our sector our business was badly hit by reduced orders and bad debts from long-term clients that had gone into liquidation. We had to make a number of redundancies just to keep the business going. That was when we went to Business Link to see if there was anything else we could do to help us get through this difficult period. We called the Business Link helpline, explained our situation and were introduced to our own adviser, Amanda Rowan.



Q: HOW DID BUSINESS LINK BROKER A SOLUTION?

A: Amanda worked closely with our team to explore ways in which we could safeguard the business. Together we decided that despite the business position, investment would be the best long term sustainable strategy for success.

We purchased new machinery and Amanda helped us to identify skills gaps and areas where we could benefit from training. Amanda guided us through a successful funding application that allowed us to train our staff to use our new equipment, which utilises computer-aided design to produce complex shop fitting items in a more rapid and cost-effective way.

Q: WHAT DIFFERENCE HAS BUSINESS LINK MADE TO YOUR BUSINESS?

A: Amanda worked really hard to get the job done and showed commitment to helping us succeed. Our new skills have enabled us to secure a major new contract that will in turn help to safeguard jobs. Skills training can be a cost-effective way of developing a workforce. For us, it made a really tangible difference. Because Business Link gave us help at this critical time, we are much better placed for an upturn in the economy.

Amanda still contacts us at regular intervals to ensure we have the right assistance. She continues to show a genuine interest in finding out how we're doing, which is great for us, and gives us that extra reassurance.

A day in the life of a Business Link Adviser

Business Link advisers are often the front line of support for businesses, from the start-up phase and beyond. Many people recognise how invaluable they are when a business has just started, but advisers don't only offer initial advice; they are around for as long as the business needs them. 678,916 of those who used Business Link this year were well-established businesses.

A day in the life of a Business Link adviser is as varied as the businesses he or she sees. We followed Kath Wilkinson around on a 'typical' day in Nottingham.



1. HOLLIES DAY NURSERY:

Kath's first visit is to Hollies Day Nursery in Sherwood. Husband and wife team, Drew and Becky Pike, took over the family business in 2008 and immediately phoned Business Link for advice. However, as today proves, Kath continues to provide much needed help and support.

Kath is pencilled in for the next catch-up in a few months time to talk about progression of the training, staff development and the growth of the business.

Kath, Drew and Becky today discuss their staff development programme, put in place to ensure future growth was possible. Previously Kath had helped to identify their training needs and brokered bespoke in-house support and linked them into funding to support this new skills development programme. Drew and Becky were happy to commit to sign the 'Skills Pledge', a voluntary public declaration promising to encourage and support their staff to gain minimum Level 2 skills qualification.



Drew explains: "As a result of the development programme morale has increased and staff are staying longer with the business, which is extremely important in the Nursery sector." Becky agrees: "A high turnover of staff is unpopular with parents who, understandably, want consistency of care for their children."

"As a result of the development programme morale has increased and staff are staying longer with the business, which is extremely important in the Nursery sector."

Drew Pike, Hollies Day Nursery

A day in the life of a Business Link Adviser

2. ART SYSTEMS:

Next stop for Kath is Art Systems, one of the most successful specialist distributors in the country of wide format print, also based in Nottingham.

Art Systems are keen to be at the forefront of reducing their impact on the environment. Kath is here for an update on their progress at implementing an EMS (Environmental Management System), which will lead to ISO 14001 accreditation and FSC/PEFC Chain of Custody certification.

Kath and Simon Cooksey, the New Product Manager of Art Systems, discuss how the EMS can be used to give the business greater control of costs. Art Systems could influence a wide network of resellers if they are able to demonstrate clear business benefits of an effective EMS that reduces both their costs and the impact on the environment.

Following the review of the EMS system, Kath and Simon speak about funding. Kath provides information on funding and grants, including the 'Green Grants Machine'.

Art Systems have recently secured a new environmentally friendly large format digital printer, a unit which is 85% recyclable and uses water-based toner rather than traditional ink. Kath suggested using this USP in further marketing and sales initiatives and they agreed a date to talk about this in more detail.

3. CENTRAL SKILLS:

This last appointment is with Central Skills, which delivers a variety of warehousing and logistics training and qualifications. They have strong and sustainable links with communities throughout Nottingham and work closely with national organisations like the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the European Social Fund (ESF) and Jobcentre Plus with training and job finding opportunities.

Kath is here today to talk about a number of issues including a funding and training strategy. Central Skills recently secured funding to deliver apprenticeships in the Health & Social Care sector for 16-18 year olds. Nick Woodrow,

Head of Employer Engagement, talks to Kath about progress on the apprenticeships work, the impact on current work load and how the money will be distributed.

Kath and Nick reviewed their business strategy and the challenges caused by the economic climate. Central Skills are hoping to expand the range of training they offer to include the new driver CPC (Certificate of Professional Competence) that became compulsory on 1st September 09.

Kath agreed to set aside time for more intensive meetings with the team to help with the current changes happening in the business.

"Business Link have sourced a couple of courses that will help me understand how to fully embrace environmental standards and how to review these processes."

Simon Cooksey,
New Product Manager, Art Systems



Adding value by working in partnership

Business Link is the access channel for all government information, advice and guidance aimed at businesses. This makes it much easier for businesses to know where to go to interact with government services. However it also gives government departments and agencies access to existing marketing programmes without the need to create their own.

- Business Link worked with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus (JCP) to help unemployed people, including those recently made redundant, explore the route of self-employment and starting their own businesses. Business Link worked with DWP to develop a package of support explained through a bespoke leaflet – 70,000 copies have been distributed to JCP offices
- Business Link is working with government departments to combine the business-related content from over 95% of government websites onto the businesslink.gov.uk website by 2011. WebFiling, VAT, Corporation Tax, Self Assessment and PAYE are all being brought onto our website and put alongside relevant help and advice
- Business Link and the Manufacturing Advisory Service (MAS) have always worked closely together to support businesses. Their priorities are similar: to support business development and growth by identifying the most appropriate information and resources. Business Link and MAS are working together to help companies ride out the recession and be better placed to take advantage of economic recovery in the future
- Train to Gain is the national skills service that supports employers of all sizes and in all sectors to improve employees' skills and improve business performance. In 2009 Train to Gain was integrated fully with the Business Link service, enabling Business Link to broker training solutions to businesses more directly and simply
- Business Link liaises closely with banks and local authorities to increase awareness and understanding among businesses of programmes that could help them. Together with the provision of financial guides through the website (www.businesslink.gov.uk/finance), Business Link has created a more joined-up approach for businesses seeking financial guidance to increase their success in accessing finance
- RDAs are working with the Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative (SFEDI), the UK standard-setting body for business support and enterprise, to ensure the National Occupational Standard for Business Link advisers meets the future needs of its customers
- Business Link works with specialist advisers and service providers to present information and opportunities to customers, in addition to brokering customers to their services. These partners often also benefit from Business Link support, as well as being able to recommend their clients to us.

**BUSINESS LINK ENJOYS
EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER
SATISFACTION RATES
OF 89% FOR THE
REGIONAL SERVICES**



CASE STUDY ACUMEN BUSINESS LAW

In 2008, lawyer Penina Shepherd took advantage of a Business Link Health Check to develop a financial strategy for her new company, Acumen Business Law. "At first, I was a little sceptical," she explains. "But then I thought, they will come to my office, it's free, so what have I got to lose? In fact, they were great. As a result, I made several significant changes, and put systems in place to measure financial success. We recommend that all our clients use Business Link. It can save a lot of time and money, and provides a trustworthy service completely free of charge."

"Meeting my adviser was absolutely great. The first hour of the meeting was helpful and my adviser gave me lots of tips with my financial strategy."

Penina Shepherd, Acumen Law



CASE STUDY MARBLE 4 LIFE

Through a referral made by Business Link, MAS specialist Mike Brook visited the firm's new 14,000 sq ft factory and carried out a manufacturing review which highlighted the future requirements of the business and identified potential areas of improvement to its manufacturing operation.

Amjad from Marble 4 Life explains: "My brother and I are passionate about our business, but sometimes you can get too close. Having an organisation like MAS to guide us has been a terrific help. We decided to follow our adviser Mike's advice and invested a six figure sum to purchase a machine. Mike also helped us to source an appropriate manufacturer."

Facing the future and changing market conditions

The recession made 2008/09 a difficult year for many UK businesses. Business Link continues to work closely with its national, regional and local partners to meet the challenges of the coming year.

RELEVANCE

Business Link will continue to provide advice and support that is relevant to the changing needs of business. We will talk directly to businesses to gauge their needs and concerns, and adapt accordingly.

INSIGHT

Business Link's support and services have to meet the needs of customers. We will continue to harness market intelligence and customer feedback via the regions and then use that customer insight to shape improvements to the service. We believe that the high levels of customer satisfaction being achieved are a direct result of the effectiveness of our customer insight work so far.

SUSTAINABILITY

Resource efficiency is recognised as an easy way for businesses to cut unnecessary costs and so help improve cashflow. Our advisers work with thousands of businesses to develop sustainable measures including workshops on Environmental Management Systems, help with identifying how to change their practices to become more environmentally friendly, and how to apply for energy-related grants.

CAPACITY

There was a sharp increase in the number of businesses in need of advice and support from Business Link to help them survive and thrive through the tougher economic conditions. A huge amount of extra traffic was also driven to the website as a result of the convergence programme and the increasing recognition of businesslink.gov.uk as the place to go to for authoritative business information, including topical issues this year such as Swine Flu.

ACCESS TO FINANCE

As economic conditions begin to improve, Business Link has a key role to play in helping businesses to connect with appropriate sources of finance to enable them to grow.

ENHANCED IDB OFFER

We will continue to enhance the Business Link offer by integrating other brokerage services in 2009/10. Further to this year's integration of Train to Gain and Skills brokerage, Business Link will continue to integrate with other services such as UKTI and the national resource efficiency programmes managed by WRAP, in order to make it much easier for businesses to know what support and help is available and how to access it.

PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

RDAs and Business Link Providers will continue to support businesslink.gov.uk to position them as a single gateway for businesses into government by 2011.

Businesses can always call on us

Along with our website, the first port of call for businesses accessing Business Link is often through our helpline: **0845 600 9 006**. Rhiannon Blow, who is a Business Link call centre adviser based in Woking, explains her role.

Q: WHAT WOULD A TYPICAL DAY FOR YOU ENTAIL?

A: It depends on the rota and plans for the week, but our work is very varied and not all phone based. We also respond to email queries that are sent to info@businesslink.gov.uk, which we then pass onto the relevant regions to follow up.

I'm usually on the phone in the morning and pick up admin, such as sending out start-up packs, Business Information Factsheets and Business Opportunity Profiles in the afternoon. We make sure our information is dispatched no more than 48 hours after the request. We also call businesses who have not spoken to Business Link for three to four months to check on how things are progressing and to see if their business would benefit from further help.

Q: WHEN YOU TAKE A CALL WHAT PROCESS WOULD YOU USE TO MAKE THE INITIAL DIAGNOSIS?

A: We have a great training manual so we are all fully trained from the outset to identify problems and offer solutions. Some calls are very easy to deal with and entail a simple answer to satisfy our customer, for instance "what's the minimum wage at the moment?" Then, there are the slightly more complex calls where the caller might need to be directed to the website to access a tool. Last week, for example, a customer called who was having trouble using the website because English was not their first language. Step-by-step I took them through the 'How to recover an unpaid debt' guidance tool.

If we are talking with a customer and realise they need professional advice for example, we take their information and call them back with the details of relevant providers. If we find there is a specific problem that would benefit from a face-to-face meeting, and the business is trading, we pass the details on to another department who will set up a meeting with a Business Link adviser. We use a system that shows which events and workshops are available, and we can book customers onto those straight away.

Q: IN THE LAST YEAR, DO YOU FEEL THERE HAS BEEN A CHANGE IN INFORMATION REQUESTS AND, IF SO, HOW HAVE YOU COPED WITH THE CHANGE IN DEMAND?

A: I would have to say yes, there has definitely been a higher volume of calls, particularly on issues such as redundancy, flexible working, dealing with bad debts, and finance based queries. For redundancy issues we may need to refer the caller to ACAS, (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) who specialise on the subject of redundancy.

Our top target is ensuring that we give out the right information and leave the customer satisfied with the knowledge they have gained. We follow up at specific life stages of the business, and ensure we provide everything we can, or broker out what we can't, and hope that the customer is going away more confident with the tools to overcome their original problem.

Working with Business Link

The RDAs and Business Link work closely with government, businesses, regional and local partners in a number of ways:

- Informing businesses about new or changing legislation
- Giving pre-start advice to new entrepreneurs
- Organising joint events with other organisations
- Listing business events and support programmes on the website
- Providing insight into the needs of small businesses.

As the access channel for all business support across England, Business Link seeks, and can offer benefits to, committed partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors and from academic establishments. It works with its partners to offer a better quality service, brokering appropriate business solutions onto its customers.

To discuss potential partnerships and working with Business Link, please get in touch using the contact details below.

Contact us

Tel: 0845 600 9 006

Email: info@businesslink.gov.uk

Web: www.businesslink.gov.uk



