

Final Report Training Networks Programme
1999-2002

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Acknowledgement

Throughout the text of this report extracts are taken from the report of the Evaluation of the Training Networks Programme undertaken by the CIRCA Group Europe Ltd on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and completed in November 2001. Skillnets Ltd is grateful to both the Department and the CIRCA Group for permission to use extracts from the report.

Companion Publications

This Final Report is one of three publications produced by Skillnets to give a comprehensive overview of the Training Networks Programme 1999-2002. The other two are:

- Case Studies of Skillnets Networks
- Directory of Skillnets Networks 1999-2002



The Skillnets concept was first announced in 1997 in the White Paper on Human Resource Development.¹ This document provided the rationale that would subsequently inform the evaluation of Skillnets and stated:

"Primary responsibility for human resource development at the level of enterprise rests with the private sector itself. Effective investment in human resource development will yield a good commercial return in the context of a sound business plan. However, because of market imperfections, there can be a strong tendency for enterprises to under-invest in training. In small-sized businesses, lack of scale accentuates the imperfections in the market for training.

Accepting the principle of enterprise-led training, the strategy outlined in the White Paper also sought to encourage the transfer of the training expertise possessed by many of the multinational companies operating in Ireland to indigenous enterprises.

The White Paper defined as its first policy objective, in the sphere of enterprise training, "promoting an increase in the level, the relevance and the quality of training undertaken by enterprise to achieve best international practice". The principal policy instrument it proposed to achieve this objective was the creation of training networks "in order to encourage Irish companies to develop their human resource potential and to adopt best practice standards the government proposes to introduce a new training networks programme on a pilot basis".

The body established to manage the Training Networks Programme was Skillnets, which has defined its function as: "A direct response by the business community to the poor level of investment in training by Irish companies, particularly small companies... it has a dual purpose – to improve the current level, effectiveness and quality of training among those firms that already invest in training, and also to improve the incidence and level of training among firms where little training has taken place to date."

These objectives clearly mirror the strategy outlined by Forfás in *Shaping our Future – A strategy for Enterprise in Ireland in the 21st Century*² as: "A tighter labour market and increasing international competition will force companies to generate higher output per worker, or force the demise of organisations that are unable to generate productivity improvements. Policy and relevant agencies must support and facilitate the market-led pressures for higher output per person employed. This requires support for capacity building – support for in-company training, innovation and market development – as well as the continued promotion of new high value added investment projects... Finally given that SMEs predominate in the population of indigenous Irish enterprises, efforts to raise productivity growth in domestic business necessarily implies a strong focus on SMEs."

The approach developed by Skillnets was a departure from previous support models in a number of ways. Central to the approach was that a group or network model became the basis for support. This immediately began to address the recognised imperfections in training markets.

Paul Tansey, in research conducted for the Small Firms Association in 2001,³ showed that the commercial logic that encourages firms to invest only or primarily in firm specific training results is an aggregate under-provision of general (transferable skills) training. He concluded "there is an inherent tendency for general training markets to exhibit market failure where training is left to enterprises acting in isolation..."

In the case of general training, leaving training provision to the decisions of individual enterprises is likely to result in the delivery of too little training, while imperfections in capital markets and uncertainty in labour markets will combine to prevent employees from financing their own training needs. Together these differing dimensions of market failure can cause markets to provide too little general training".

Therefore, the network model immediately addresses general training by definition as networks support training interventions that are shared by and common to groups of firms.

The second major departure adopted by Skillnets was to develop an enterprise-led approach. This concept, which was the key driver for the development of all aspects of the model and the implementation of that model, accepted that companies (rather than agencies or support bodies) were best placed to identify key needs and devise effective training responses to those needs. This meant that Skillnets opened the offer of support to all companies, sectors and regions to communicate their training needs and develop and deliver responses to them.

What has emerged from reviewing the groups that formed networks is that the training needs that were highlighted and the responses implemented reveal some key features, including:

1. A majority of networks (63pc) chose sector-based approaches as a primary basis for the network operation. This indicated a demand for sector-specific training and a view by enterprises that this was a gap within current provision.
2. Many networks were established on a regional basis especially in the West, Southwest, Northwest and Midlands. This highlighted the low level of locally available training in these areas and the limited range of training available generally in peripheral regions as key training providers were located mainly in large urban centres.

3. While a number of networks were formed with small or micro businesses most networks involved a mix of large, medium and small companies. This was an interesting departure from the usual practice of providing funding for small companies exclusively within the context of small business activity. Networks decided to involve a range of companies in order to establish a more comprehensive experience and practice base. It also highlighted the demand from small companies to tap into the more developed expertise and systems of the larger members. Therefore, the inclusion of large companies gave a wide range of advantages to small companies, with large companies often providing a proportionally higher level of management and administrative support to the network, which small companies, on their own, would have been unable to provide.

4. Many networks began the development of strategic certification systems at sectoral level. These systems often (a) were based on competence rather than instructional models, (b) included a high level of recognition of prior learning, (c) were either fully work-based or flexibly adopted a dual approach of on- and off-the-job learning, (d) generated enthusiasm by enterprises for progression opportunities for employees, and (e) increased the skills base across all firms in a sector.

5. The willingness of companies and trade bodies to take the lead in an area that has been traditionally delegated to education and state support bodies opens a new area of high potential for increasing industry and sector-wide participation in strategic upskilling and lifelong learning systems within the context of the framework for national qualifications.

6. The size and types of companies that flowed into networks highlighted the demand for training within sectors, which have been deprioritised by key state agencies. Equally those sectors, which do have access to support from other agencies, also found that the formation of training networks was a complementary activity to other types of support.

1. White Paper on Human Resource Development; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 1997

2. *Shaping our Future – A Strategy for Enterprise in Ireland in the 21st Century*, Forfás May 1996

3. *Small Firms: The Training Imperative – a report prepared for the Small Firms Association in conjunction with Skillnets by Tansey Webster Stewart & Company, Economic Consultants with assistance from MRBI & Paul Sweeney & Assocs. January 2002*

7. It has been shown that the provision of basic literacy and numeracy skills for adults provides an important gateway to future learning. Those employees with low basic skills, who are supported to address primary reading, writing and digital literacy deficits, have been shown subsequently to continue self-motivated learning. Similarly Skillnets has observed that firms, which are supported in meeting basic skills needs such as health and safety, hygiene and ICT skills, continue to move up the value chain of skills improvement within the enterprise. This is an important finding in the move to increase investment in higher skills training. Only after firms have met basic operational skills needs are they motivated to continue the training process in more added value areas. Therefore, the gateway to improving participation in added value skills is the initial support of basic operational skills. This is validated by the choice of activity and focus of networks over a period of a few years. While initially firms may only be aware of and/or interested in short-term skills gaps, they quickly develop a more long-term skills focus, become increasingly interested in sustainable training strategies and adopt more informed, confident, value added and strategic approaches.

8. Finally, the leadership processes that emerged were an exciting feature of many of the networks. Existing enterprise organisations and bodies at sectoral and regional level, from both the employer and employee perspective, showed that they have a unique capacity to stimulate participation and provide leadership of upskilling and training processes. In many cases, by supporting the existing bodies, industry federations, chambers of commerce and trades unions to lead the network processes, Skillnets tapped into existing structures and organisational systems that hold a high level of credibility with enterprises and could, thereby, effectively engage them in training processes. In other cases the experience was of a champion firm or group of firms emerging from within an industry group and investing significant time and enthusiasm in bringing other firms into the process. Again the potential to identify and support such role models and champions within industry support systems, as an effective way of encouraging participation by other firms, is apparent.

Therefore, by issuing an open call the nature and systems of participation that emerged have highlighted significant and important lessons for the way that public funding systems can effectively support firms.

In summary, Skillnets has shown that the enterprise-led approach to training:

- is valid (as shown by the results)
- is needed (as shown by the enthusiasm and demand from the companies)
- is working (as shown by the results of the networks)
- has a future whether or not it is used in a 'network' context and,
- has strong enterprise support among companies and employees – who like the enterprise focus, flexibility and the rapid response to identified needs.

Many other lessons, in both practice and process, are outlined in this report, which summarises the data and learning from the first Training Networks Programme 1999-2002. Innovation at all levels has highlighted best practice for everyone involved in the process. Not only have employees, managers, enterprises, support bodies, providers, certifiers, employer and employee bodies learnt significantly from involvement in the process, Skillnets as a facilitating body has learnt many lessons about how best to stimulate, manage and support such processes.

A special note of thanks is due to CIRCA consultants, the independent evaluator, appointed by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment. Their highly comprehensive report and extensive data has been incorporated throughout this report, and has greatly added to Skillnets' analysis of the networks process.

I commend our findings to anyone interested or involved in enterprise training and development in Ireland and hope that this group of publications will add to the national body of knowledge that we, as a country, are continuing to develop.

Domhnall MacDomhnaill
Chairman
Skillnets Ltd

Overview

1.1 Skillnets establishment

The establishment of Skillnets in 1999 marked a new departure within the state-funded support system for human resource development in industry.

The 1997 White Paper on Human Resource Development stated the government's view that "the primary responsibility for human resource development rests with the private sector itself. The first approach of the State must be to facilitate the actions of business enterprises and of individuals to engage in human resource processes. The State is prepared to back its support with adequate finance where the business sector takes a lead and responsibility".

In light of this, Skillnets Ltd, an independent private company, was established to develop and manage a human resource initiative. The company was charged with the development, management and administration of this pilot initiative (the Training Networks Programme) for the period 1999-2001. Company directors were and are primarily drawn from industry and represent employer interests from IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation) the CCI (Chambers of Commerce of Ireland), the CIF (Construction Industry Federation), the SFA (Small Firms Association) and employee/trade union representatives from the ICTU (Irish Congress of Trade Unions) along with a number of persons appointed by the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment from both the public and private sector.

Skillnets is funded under the National Training Fund through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The networks are financed through a co-investment, as opposed to grant aid, strategy. The public/private funding level is agreed for each individual network and significant funding support has been given at the early stages of the networks. In the first phase of the initiative, companies contributed an average of 32% of network costs.

1.2 How Skillnets functions

Skillnets facilitates an enterprise-led approach to training and aims to address the lack of investment in human resource development and training on the part of Irish business by tackling some of the real and perceived barriers to training.

Skillnets is seen as a departure from the traditional approach to government-funded support for re-skilling and up-skilling workers in industry in that it is based on an enterprise-led model supported by public funds. This enterprise-led philosophy operates at all levels of the initiative.

For example, the networks are led by companies themselves, trade associations, industry federations, chambers of commerce, trade unions, or enterprise bodies.

Furthermore, the governance of networks lies in the hands of the member companies that decide on management and decision-making processes, training needs, methodologies, training providers and delivery systems.

The role of Skillnets is to provide a framework, technical support, advisory services, linkages and guidance to networks wherever they are sought. Skillnets also facilitates transparency, accountability and the appropriate monitoring and control systems to ensure the proper management of public funds.

The approach is particularly relevant to small companies, which can often lack the expertise, time or money to deliver effective training policies. By establishing training networks, SMEs have buying power – often for the first time – which allows them to inform trainers of their exact needs rather than having to participate in training courses that are more relevant to large companies. The cost for each company in the network is greatly reduced and these companies are provided with expert staff and advisors to help them choose the training that is best suited to their business.

Therefore, we can say that Skillnets is:

- concerned with helping Irish industry remain competitive and adapt to change
- involved exclusively in the area of human resource development and training
- involved primarily through enterprises and is totally committed to empowering enterprises to take responsibility for identifying and meeting their training needs
- a facilitation and development agency with a specific goal to support enterprises to engage in training
- concerned solely with training of existing staff in established enterprise
- involved with assisting enterprises to pilot and test innovative and effective approaches to training by and for enterprises
- committed to giving real expression to the principle of partnership at all levels
- involved in sponsoring research into training and related areas
- supportive of the development and dissemination of training tools, materials and resources
- active in promoting examples of best-practice in relation to enterprise-led training initiatives
- active in disseminating information about its work and enterprise-led training initiatives.

Skillnets, however, is not:

- a training provider or training delivery agency
- a representative body for its networks or grant-supported enterprises
- engaged in policy development beyond providing information to its stakeholders and others on matters relating to training and human resource development based on its experience
- the only or exclusive vehicle through which its stakeholders develop or implement their training policies
- involved in the mainstream provision of industrial training, nor the mainstreaming of approaches that have been piloted under its aegis.

1.3 Outcomes 1999-2002

The outcomes and impact of the pilot Training Networks Programme (1999-2002) on training provision are now clear and are outlined in this report (see Section 4). Skillnets has demonstrated some of the principles and processes by which enterprises can, and will, (if given the opportunity) take the lead in the area of enterprise training and development.

Skillnets was set up in 1999 as a three-year pilot initiative to support and mobilise groups of enterprises to develop strategic approaches to their joint training needs by establishing training networks. Up to the end of 2001, 58 networks had been developed throughout Ireland, based on specific industry sectors, geographical regions or small business interests. As a result, 3,800 companies and 12,800 employees have adopted this new approach to addressing training and development to underpin competitive strategies.

The principles and features that have characterised the work of Skillnets to date have much to contribute to the overall approach to national training systems and processes, which are aimed at addressing the critical need to upgrade the incidence and quality of industry training.

As a result, the credibility of and potential for enterprise-led involvement in training structures and systems has been significantly increased. The case for enterprise-led training has been demonstrated.

1.4 The future

A complete analysis of the future options for Skillnets is contained in Section 5. A summary of these points include:

The need is still there

The need for a focused programme such as Skillnets still remains necessary since, despite the obvious progress that has been made, evidence continues to point to major gaps in Irish training provision.

Continuing barriers to training participation require ongoing responses:

A number of specific factors continue to militate against effective participation by Irish enterprises in training, including:

- gaps in provision of training provided, or grant-aided by the State, allied to a complexity of provision and information gaps
- a tendency among private sector trainers to focus products and services on larger companies
- a lack of state support for companies that fall outside the remit of key agencies such as Enterprise Ireland
- barriers experienced by small businesses, such as excessive disruption of operations caused by releasing staff for off-site training, the cost of training, lack of local access to training and relevance of training to the needs of firms ⁴.

4. Small Firms: The Training Imperative – a report prepared for the Small Firms Association in conjunction with Skillnets by Tansey Webster Stewart & Company, Economic Consultants with assistance from MRBI & Paul Sweeney & Assocs. January 2002

Sharing the cost of training investment is the way forward

It is now widely acknowledged that the costs and benefits of investment in skills should be shared between the government and enterprises. The experience of Skillnets is a prime example of this investment partnership in action.

Better and more comprehensive information is required to target State responses

While Skillnets has gathered significant experience and information through contact with networks and from network plans and activities, there is still a gap in our national pool of information on current training practice.

A profile of training needs, current training practice, providers, areas where training is currently provided or not provided, which employee categories are receiving training and of what type, the regional variations in training provision and gaps in the supply of training at sectoral, regional or national levels – all would provide essential information to allow national bodies, agencies and policy makers target training needs more effectively.

Decision-making structures that involve active participation by a range of stakeholders need to be further supported

The key requirement is for new mechanisms and structures for decision making that will allow multiple actors and stakeholders to come together quickly to co-ordinate and integrate efforts.

Partnerships between key stakeholders widen participation, increase the demand for learning and link together measures designed to strengthen local capacity and democracy, stimulate innovation, pool resources and develop more flexible and varied provision for learners. However, it is also recognised that partnerships take time and need to be resourced.

Incentives for co-ordinated action by governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in planning and monitoring activities are necessary so that a range of options is considered and all parties are committed to the same goals.

Increased involvement of industry is essential

Partnership between government and other stakeholders and decision-making structures that feature genuine sharing of responsibility and accountability are key features internationally.

In Ireland, Skillnets is the best example of such an approach and its success should lead policy more clearly in this direction in the future.

As we move forward, it is essential to find new ways of communicating and working together to confront the problems that challenge workers and the companies, which employ them. Some key features of the response to such challenges have been, and will remain, an integral part of the Skillnets approach, including:

- collaboration of employees and companies, and collaboration among companies and employees
- integration of ideas and information
- the capacity to deliver – move fast, take risks and make mistakes, unafraid of the concept of failure – ‘learning by doing’.

Increased recognition of the workplace as an important opportunity for the achievement of lifelong learning is required

Continued work on defining a comprehensive set of core skills (by the appropriate agencies) that will be applicable across industrial sectors and across business in general is vital. Lessons from the Skillnets’ experience indicate that it is inaccurate to consider that enterprises primarily require a narrow skills base from workers. While company-specific skills will remain important, most enterprises now require workers with a broad-based portfolio of skills and attitudes, which include flexibility, adaptability and a commitment to continuous personal development. Continued monitoring of emerging skills needs facing enterprises is essential. A core challenge is to build flexibility into education, training and support structures to allow them to adapt to changing skills needs.

The process of continuing effective approaches and integrating innovative pilot programmes into mainstream and sustainable systems needs to be addressed.

The process of ‘mainstreaming’ new approaches requires some attention. Over the past number of years (particularly under European-funded initiatives) a significant amount of innovation has been piloted.

There is now an imperative to pool these new approaches and experience, to provide ongoing support for those that work, to establish frameworks that will provide ongoing access to successful processes, to make the experience more widely available and to leverage further impact from this work.

There is also an associated need to co-ordinate the strategic and policy-related activity to allow pilot programmes to feed into future policy and mainstream practice.

Finally, new mainstreaming systems should be considered that incorporate not only state agencies and educational bodies but also use the established industry organisations and bodies to support the continuation of successful approaches on a longer term basis.

Long-term strategies need to be supported

Skillnets’ first programme took place over a three-year period. This timeframe encompassed initiation and establishment of the Skillnets company, development of the programme, calls for proposals, contracting with industry groups, development of network plans strategies, attraction of members, development and delivery of approaches and evaluation of the outcomes. Therefore the process was accelerated at all stages.

After 12-24 months (depending on the network) of operation and at a time when networks were ‘gelling’ and beginning to leverage significant added value, the programme period was concluded. This experience is not unique and is shared by many other programmes and initiatives, though it is possibly more pronounced in the case of networks, which take a significant time to develop effectively.

Therefore the adoption of longer term funding cycles and strategic long-term approaches by policy makers would support the key challenge of changing attitudes to training in industry for the longer term.

1.5 Skillnets mandate 2002-2005

The new Skillnets mandate for 2002-2005 has given further opportunities for new sectors and groups to form training networks, as well as a small number of networks to receive further support for innovative activity. The second round of the programme is much welcomed as it provides opportunities to ‘bed down’ developments to date as well as further improve Skillnets’ understanding of the network process.

As networks of the scale and type that have now developed nationwide are new organisational structures and processes, it is necessary to follow the network process through a complete lifecycle. It was proposed by Skillnets evaluators that this is likely to involve three to four years of supported activity. By allowing a number of networks to complete this cycle Skillnets and the networks will be able to ascertain the potential for continued operation of the networks either without any public support or significantly reduced levels of support.

Some important features characterise the new programme:

- increased financial input from companies will be encouraged in the new programme to encourage firms to start incorporating training budgets as a norm within firms' operational costs
- sustainable activities are a key focus with development of capacity building within the enterprise highlighted. For example, 'training of trainers' within the company, the development of national certification and standards, and benchmarking systems are all key features of the networks
- vulnerable sectors and groups will receive a special focus to introduce and test developmental approaches for employees with low basic skills and companies where survival is the primary challenge
- a particular focus will be placed on collecting information about current performance and investment across participating companies, as well as developing a system for benchmarking information on training investment
- the further development of partnership approaches to training at enterprise and sector level will be encouraged to underpin the mutuality of interest between employees and employers in the area of training and development
- further links with other stakeholders, agencies, education and certifying bodies will be established to highlight best practice among networks and highlight the types of intervention which work successfully with industry
- continued facilitation of the development of certification for work-based training, working within the National Framework of Qualifications to ensure that certification is available to the widest extent possible for training across the networks.

Skillnets will continue to identify and disseminate information and good practice across and beyond those companies and organisations directly participating in the network.

We will continue with our vision to establish innovative enterprise-led training for employers and employees and dedicate the combined support of IBEC, CIF, CCI, SFA, ICTU and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to the next few years of the Training Networks Programme.

The Training Networks Programme – an enterprise-led approach

2.1 Programme aims & objectives

The aim of the pilot Skillnets Training Networks Programme (1999-2002) was to

- demonstrate the effectiveness of an enterprise-led approach to training and development, and
- promote and support the development of training networks as a strategic response to existing and emerging competitive challenges facing Irish businesses – especially SMEs.

A dual perspective underpinned the Skillnets approach, both increasing the incidence and improving the effectiveness of training and development in enterprises, particularly SMEs. Therefore, the Training Networks Programme focused both on improving the level and quality of training and development activities in enterprises that already invest in training, as well as aiming to increase the level of training in enterprises and sectors where little training had previously taken place.

The objectives of the programme were to:

- mobilise groups of enterprises to develop strategic answers to their joint training needs through the establishment of training networks
- promote active participation in the programme by enterprises, especially SMEs and those that had been less active in the area of training
- facilitate an enterprise-led option to training and development at the level of the firm
- address the reluctance of individual enterprises to invest in human resource development and training
- encourage Irish enterprises to emulate the best training practice of our competitor countries and to draw on the experience of enterprises – both Irish and foreign owned – that already had such practices in place
- support the development of flexible and effective methods of delivering training to a recognised quality standard to enterprises that had not benefited from training in the past
- examine innovative methods of promoting work-based learning, training quality assurance, accreditation of prior learning and strategic approaches to training and development
- support value-added training initiatives that demonstrate a fresh approach to addressing skill needs, rather than merely a duplication of existing activity.

2.2 The Skillnets approach

The need to upgrade skills in all companies and sectors to expand the human resource capital in Irish industry in the face of labour shortages formed the basis for a broadly based approach to training on the part of Skillnets.

Skillnets has not restricted access to support by any sector, group, employee need or skills set. All established companies, large and small, from manufacturing services and distributive trades were considered eligible for participation in the programme. Therefore, the priority skills needs of industry in training people in work were defined by the enterprises themselves and communicated to Skillnets through the proposals submitted. This effectively gave enterprise an opportunity to respond to and address the gaps in existing provision.

Skillnets approach is cross-regional, cross-sectoral and cross-functional in relation to employee training priorities. Networks are self-selecting. The commonality of need is the guiding factor in all proposals, recognising that many skills and training issues are shared by a number of companies.

While a number of proposals were exclusively focused on training processes for small businesses, a significant feature in the majority of approved proposals was the involvement of varying sizes of company from large to small. This brought many additional benefits to small firms through the opportunity small companies had to work with and gain from inter-company relationships with better resourced and experienced enterprises.

Skillnets focused exclusively on providing support for industry in addressing its training needs. Key to this has been a solutions perspective whereby enterprises that get involved in a process of analysing needs see the rapid response of a delivered programme to meet those needs.

Therefore the motivation of industry to get involved in the design and development of non firm-specific training has been increased by ensuring that analysis is quickly translated into activity.

To implement this, Skillnets established a rapid response process whereby proposals were converted to training activity within a number of months. Therefore, Skillnets developed the programme, established operating procedures, completed an awareness-building campaign, instigated project groups, processed applications, fine-tuned proposals and established 40 active training networks within 12 months of the organisation being set up.

'Virtual organisation' principles have been adopted by networks, whereby trainers, advisors, industry representatives, certifiers and professional managers form project-based teams and temporary structures to deliver co-ordinating and support services for training programmes.

This ensures that administrative and co-ordinating mechanisms are designed to fit training objectives. Therefore 'form follows function' – the form of administrative frameworks is dictated by the function of the network. Administrative and co-ordinating structures are temporary, flexible and adaptable, being formed and disbanded in response to need. This maximises the efficient use of administrative costs and does not incur any long-term overhead or staff structures.

The sole focus on the critical issue of training for people in work enables Skillnets to develop a comprehensive understanding of the range of inter-related issues and challenges for enterprises. These include

- the quality of training provision
- access to certification processes and systems
- customised sectoral and sub-sectoral training responses
- regional training gaps
- the selection of appropriate learning environments both on and off the job, and
- training methodologies.

The independence and autonomy of the Skillnets structure, operating processes and board representation by employer and employee interests enabled the lead organisation to assume a high degree of credibility with enterprises in devising relevant responses to business needs.

2.3 What is enterprise-led training?

An enterprise-led approach to training describes a process whereby companies and their employees are directly and significantly involved in decision making on the identification, design, delivery and evaluation of state-supported training systems and processes, either as lead bodies or in partnership with other organisations. Such 'other organisations' may include state agencies, advisory groups, certifying bodies, educational establishments, training providers and so on.

By giving firms a real say in how to meet their training needs, Skillnets has proven that an enterprise-led approach is workable, practical and effective. It has also shown that companies are prepared to give the commitment (in time and money) and take the responsibility, which such an approach requires.

The main features of an enterprise-led approach can be summarised as:

Enterprise owned and led	Where the enterprises control and decide on all aspects of the training process - training needs analysis, training content, selection of trainers, advisors, etc.
Business ethos	Where the training is designed to meet business needs
Employee focused	Focused on training people in employment and building the capacity of those in the enterprise
Flexible	Minimise constraints on enterprises allowing firms to identify their own needs
Co-funded	Enterprise to contribute financially both in terms of cash and resources
Innovative	Trying new concepts and ideas, adding to the body of knowledge, bringing new ideas to existing enterprises
Wide range of potential partners	Owner/managers and staff coming together Large companies transferring knowledge to SMEs Professional inputs from trainers, academia and other advisors

2.4 Why enterprise-led training networks?

The main advantages of an enterprise-led approach to training are listed below:

- Relevance
- Responsiveness
- Participation
- Commitment
- Investment by industry
- Needs driven
- Linked to competitiveness
- Collaboration/group needs
- Immediate
- Transfer of knowledge
- Dissemination of information
- Innovation
- Range of learning environments

The fundamental rationale for the establishment of an enterprise-led programme is that of relevance. Training driven by the needs of enterprises and their employees has the potential to be most relevant to those needs. Moreover, firms that engage in networking actively use relationships with customers, suppliers, professional advisors and other firms to strengthen business capabilities. Throughout industry, there is also a huge untapped reservoir of exemplars with experience that can be shared with other companies.

The focus on industry networks derives from the fact that there are significant potential benefits to be found in groups of enterprises sharing knowledge and developing responses to common human resource needs. For example, the knowledge of best training practice that may exist within individual group members can potentially be exchanged or resources may be pooled.

It helps overcome the isolation amongst owner-managers through sharing of ideas and experiences, learning from one another and improving ways of managing the business and human resources.

By pooling resources and group purchasing solutions to common training needs, the costs of accessing training by individual enterprises may be reduced. Gaining the critical mass necessary for buying power allows groups of companies (particularly SMEs) to design training activities in a way that they could not on an individual basis.

An enterprise-led model increases ownership and commitment by enterprises and their employees. The self-directing nature of networks allows companies to determine the aims of the network, its purpose and the way it wants to operate. By establishing decision-making within the network of enterprises, the outputs and success of the network are clearly vested in each individual member, as well as in the collaborative group.

Ownership is vested at the level of the enterprise and the network and therefore is close to the customer, establishing a bottom-up approach to identifying and addressing training needs. Decision making devolved to the enterprise level maximises enterprise involvement in all aspects of analysis, design and delivery of training processes. The level and depth of participation, involvement and enthusiasm of firms to engage in the development and implementation of training is increased by this approach.

Mechanisms and structures for decision making have been developed by Skillnets that allow multiple actors and stakeholders to come together quickly to co-ordinate and integrate efforts. Partnerships between key stakeholders both widen participation and increase the demand for learning. New network relationships also can link together measures designed to strengthen local capacity and democracy, stimulate innovation, pool resources and develop more flexible and varied provision for learners.

The role of the Skillnets lead body has been to act as a facilitator and enabler for enterprise-led training processes.

2.5 What is different about the enterprise-led concept?

In traditional approaches, providers and agencies respond to enterprise training needs by designing solutions/programmes that are then offered to the companies with the identified need. Companies have limited involvement or participation in the design or management of many of these processes.

In an enterprise-led approach, companies themselves are involved to a much greater level. The high levels of participation build ownership and commitment to the processes and ensure that the response is more relevant and appropriate to enterprise needs. The enterprise-led approach therefore does not assume that state funding necessitates state control and decision making in relation to the delivery of the activity, which is supported by this funding.

An enterprise-led approach may primarily dictate the content of the course, the delivery mechanisms, the course location and/or any other aspect of the training response. This neither assumes that enterprises want to be involved in all aspects of programme design and delivery, nor that they are capable of doing so. In many cases, companies may only be interested in dictating one aspect of the approach (eg course content) whereas in other cases companies may want direct control over all aspects of the response. Companies also may not have the expertise that would allow them to direct all aspects of the process, eg in the case of small companies where there are no qualified or experienced human resource development specialists on staff.

Skillnets encourages companies to become involved in the widest range of activities in developing training solutions to suit their needs and engage appropriate professionals where and when they require additional expertise, e.g. in the management, design, needs analysis, or evaluation of the activity.

The enterprise-led approach is reflected at a number of strategic levels within the Skillnets structure, primarily at the network promoters' and network members' level, and also at the Skillnets board and Skillnets staff level.

The Skillnets board is comprised primarily of enterprise representatives from both employer and employee interests. Many of the board members are business people engaged day to day in human resource development and management in the private sector. Others represent organisations whose members are employers and employees.

All Skillnets staff are drawn from the private sector and all have direct experience of working for many years in enterprise. Some staff members have run their own businesses, while others have business management, consulting or training experience.

2.6 Evaluation of the enterprise-led approach

The Skillnets Evaluation assessed the networks and the overall programme to see was it in fact enterprise-led and concluded that “all the evidence collected by surveys, interviews and file analyses indicates that all of the training networks were enterprise-led”. The following tables illustrate this finding.

The evaluators found that the initial Skillnets proposal was developed by the promoter or by the promoter and member companies in over 58% of the networks. A further 17% were developed by the project manager or the project manager and member companies. Only in 5-6% of the cases was a professional advisor a key first mover.

	Number	
Promoter/promoter & network members	21	(58.3%)
Project manager/ project manager & network members	6	(16.6%)
Promoter and project manager	1	(2.8%)
Other network member	1	(2.8%)
Promoter & advisor	3	(8.3%)
Advisor	2	(5.6%)
All	2	(5.6%)
Total responses	36	(100%)

Table 2.1: Specification of the proposal

In looking at whether the member companies were involved in the management of the networks, 21 networks stated that the level of participation by their member companies was high; 15 reported medium participation; and eight networks reported low participation.

	Number of respondents		
	High	Medium	Low
Project managers	21 (48%)	15 (34%)	8 (18%)

Table 2.2: Level of active participation by member companies in network meetings (Base: 44 respondents)

Typically, the level of the individual participant in the network meetings was at manager or owner-manager – 31 networks reported a high involvement and a further 11 reported a medium involvement. There was a marked difference between levels of involvement across employee groups. There was only one instance of owner-managers not participating, while there are 20 instances of operatives not participating and only four networks had a high level of operative involvement. The high level of staff involvement was primarily a feature of partnership-based networks.

Category	No participation Number	High (over 75%) Number	Medium (40-75%) Number	Low (under 40%) Number
Owner/managers	1 (2.1%)	31 (66%)	11 (23.4%)	4 (8.5%)
Training staff	15 (31.9%)	7 (14.9%)	12 (25.5%)	13 (27.7%)
Supervisors	17 (36.2%)	7 (14.9%)	11 (23.4%)	12 (25.5%)
Operatives	20 (42.6%)	4 (8.5%)	8 (17%)	15 (31.9%)

Table 2.3: Categories of participants more usually involved in network meetings (Base: 47 respondents)

The evaluators showed that over 87% of networks (41 networks) had a high or medium frequency of management/planning meetings, while 84% had a high/medium frequency of development meetings. The frequency of information meetings and workshops was considerably lower at 74.5% and 63.9%, respectively. (High in this context was over 75% and usually meant a monthly management meeting, while medium, 40-75%, usually meant bi-monthly or quarterly meetings.) As many of the same people and companies attended all meetings and training courses, the evaluators concluded that this shows a high level of commitment both to managing the network and making it a success.

Types of meetings	No response Number	High (over 75%) Number	Medium (40-75%) Number	Low (under 40%) Number
Management/planning	2 (4.3%)	29 (61.7%)	12 (25.5%)	4 (8.5%)
Development	4 (8.5%)	21 (44.7%)	19 (40.4%)	3 (6.4%)
Information	3 (6.4%)	13 (27.7%)	22 (46.8%)	9 (19.1%)
Workshops	5 (10.6%)	13 (27.7%)	17 (36.2%)	12 (25.5%)

Table 2.4: The frequency of different types of meetings (Base: 47 respondents)

Respondents	No response Number	Not at all Number	To some extent Number	Very much the case Number
35 Project managers	1 (2.9%)	1 (2.9%)	16 (51.4%)	15 (42.9%)
12 Project mgr/promoters ¹	0 (0%)	1 (8.3%)	7 (58.3%)	4 (33.3%)
26 Project promoters	0 (0%)	1 (3.8%)	9 (34.6%)	16 (61.5%)

Table 2.5: The extent to which the enterprises have taken ownership of the networks by defining and directing the networks' activities

Note : 12 networks had the same person acting as project manager and promoter. In many cases this was a temporary situation while the project manager was being replaced

According to the project promoters, companies within the networks were willing to share network tasks. This happened either often or very often in 55.5% of cases and did not happen in only 8% of the responses.

Respondents	Very much the case Number	Happens often Number	Happens to some extent Number	Doesn't happen usually Number
36 Project promoters	8 (22.2%)	12 (33.3%)	13 (36.1%)	3 (8.4%)

Table 2.6: Task sharing within networks

The evaluators examined Skillnets files, interviewed Skillnets staff and interviewed the project managers carefully to explore this issue – the management and control aspects of the networks. Particularly those networks with a core management group were examined to determine where the direction was coming from and who was/were the dominant forces in the core group. This exploration was done knowing that some networks had project managers who were very experienced training specialists in their own right, and the evaluators set out with the hypothesis that they were really guiding a number of the networks.

However, the evaluation concluded “there were no instances where the evaluators found that the training networks were not enterprise-led”.

Section 3 - Skillnets Training Networks

3.1 The value of networks

Networks as a means of organising a state-funded response to the needs of enterprises is not a new development in Ireland, but the Skillnets Training Networks Programme is by far the largest, best resourced and best facilitated exercise of its kind. It therefore provides a valuable insight into how networks can function as a means of facilitating industrial development (in general) and human resources development (in particular).

The guiding principle behind networks is that collaborative responses to enterprise training needs have many advantages over individualised approaches. A joint approach can overcome many of the identified barriers that companies may face in engaging in training. This is particularly true in the case of small companies that lack the expertise, time and resources to deliver effective training policies.

Some of the barriers to training that can be overcome through collaborative responses include:

- accessibility, ie training taking place close to the location of the business
- cost reduction through group purchasing
- developing industry – or sector-specific content and methods
- flexibility and adaptability to meet business needs and priorities
- developing needs-based training customised to the needs of the group
- access to specialist expertise within the networks
- development of non-firm-specific training, as training is by definition shared by groups of firms.

Other advantages of collaborative responses involve learning and development processes that:

- are more likely to be strategically focused than short term
- develop inter-company relationships, communication systems and processes
- foster innovation
- facilitate information and learning transfer
- promote analysis and discussion between similar firms
- increase awareness of training issues
- allow the transfer of best practice between companies
- support the development of widely recognised programmes and standards (certification)
- broaden the range of learning opportunities and environments
- maximise the involvement of industry practitioners and company representatives.

The rationale for networks

In an Irish context, networks as a form of industrial organisation and their potential for companies in developing sustainable competitive advantage (especially SMEs) has to date received much comment but little response in policy or programmes. It is significant therefore that the Training Networks Programme is the first large-scale initiative across regions and sectors, which is providing an effective framework for the development of inter-company collaboration.

The Skillnets commissioned report – *Making Networks Work (2000)* – examines both the theory and practice of industrial networks and clusters nationally and internationally. It makes a compelling case, demonstrating that the framework for state support could, in many cases, be more effectively focused on groups of firms rather than individual companies.

On a more strategic level, networks are globally recognised as a new and effective form of industrial organisation.

The trend over the past two decades has been for companies to outsource, downsize, break large organisations into independent business units, operate globally, spread activity geographically, use new information and communications technologies and depend on key services that are no longer provided in-house. The report states “for large and small firms alike creating collaborative relationships with other firms has become an important strategic option for achieving growth and competitiveness. Increasingly, economic success is linked not only to how a company manages its own affairs and internal processes but how it relates with other companies and its environment”.

The report quotes a 1998 NESC report that stated “the nature of competition is changing. New competitive conditions are demanding new strategies. Global niche markets are replacing mass markets. To compete effectively, firms must specialise and combine their capabilities with those of other firms and organisations”.

The Networks report also notes that “Clancy et al (1998) found that Irish industrial policies since the mid-1980s have focused on the development of individual companies with a reasonable track record and good prospects for growth in international markets. The emphasis has been on building strong companies rather than clusters or sectors and has included an important component that focuses on attracting foreign-owned companies into the Irish economy”.

The 1997 Forbairt report, *Growing our Employment – Sharing our Growth*, stated that “it is essential that the focus of state assistance to indigenous enterprise should move away from individual projects and towards a longer term partnership aimed at the development of sustainable competitive advantage. However, within the context of this refocusing, enterprise strategy also has a role to play in the stimulation of networks between firms”.

Creating learning organisations and learning networks

The European Commission’s Green Paper *Partnership for a New Organisation of Work* (April 1997) points out that the informal and flexible structures of work organisation commonly used by SMEs have both advantages and disadvantages. Through them, SMEs can avoid many of the problems of rigidity experienced by large companies. On the other hand, small firms commonly lack the internal structures that would allow them to create a capacity for long-term personnel development. This prevents them both from adopting new forms of work organisation, which might improve their efficiency and from engaging in training interventions.

In designing the Training Networks Programme, Skillnets was conscious of this issue and decided to use the concept of structured networks to build on the flexible structures of SMEs in particular, which has allowed it to present an interesting model for workplace-based lifelong learning. In such a model more complex and enriching work encourages individuals to use and improve their skills, the company becomes a social entity and a place for personal development, as well as a place of production. Employees do not act alone, but in groups, promoting the exchange of knowledge.

This requires companies to shift from a culture of traditional training to one of learning. Both practical and theoretical learning must be available at all times to meet the demands of the unexpected, and to underpin the quality objectives that all companies now share, but which many cannot effectively deliver. Conventional approaches cannot fully equip workers for modern market conditions.

Some of the characteristics set out in the 1997 paper¹ have become a reality in the experience of the Skillnets Training Networks Programme. In particular we have noted that:

- Training in small firms participating in the programme is now more of an ongoing and integral part of their operation rather than merely an option
- Training is based on real and clearly identified company needs and since it is led by the firms themselves, it is completely linked with work. It is triggered by the demands of work, and happens increasingly on the job.
- As a result of this close link with processes, training tends to become flexible, delivered as and when it is needed (many times at weekends) to achieve specific results
- Definitions of skills become less generalised and more focused and precise. Several networks have defined – in great detail – core competencies for skill and functional areas linked to a process of continuous training and certification
- Lifelong learning within learning organisations can only flourish if the firms can acquire the learning materials they need when they need them. Large companies can often create these for themselves. Small companies cannot. Working together in networks has allowed literally thousands of small firms in Ireland to jointly commission or develop new tools and methodologies, which they could never have done if they were relying on their own resources
- In both large and small firms, the transition to a learning organisation requires a transformation of the relationships between employers and their workers and their representatives. The Skillnets experience contains powerful examples of the growth of partnership at the level of the firm, “based on a mutual desire to improve company performance, individual skills and job satisfaction”.

Networks as a means of fostering organisational learning

To put the philosophy of the learning organisation into practice, SMEs invariably need intensive support. The support mechanism chosen by Skillnets was to facilitate SMEs to develop mutually supportive networks based exclusively on the provision of enterprise-led training. This was based on the belief that networks are an effective means of fostering organisational learning. The literature lends support to this view:

Richter (2000) and others have referred to the process of organisational (or inter-organisational) learning, which occurs in networks. Organisational learning has been described as the process whereby members of one organisation communicate among themselves and thereby change their own behaviour and that of the entire organisation. Because organisations are goal oriented, perceived discrepancies between expected and factual values trigger discrepancies that lead to learning processes.

Provan and Human (1999) found that in SME networks of firms in the US, both internal and external organisational learning occurs as a result of network participation. Conventional wisdom suggests that firms learn what they can and cannot do well through customer-competitor interactions in the marketplace. But these can be literally costly lessons. The US study found that SMEs appear to go through a process of enhanced learning about themselves relative to others through co-operative activities, rather than through being ‘beaten up’ by the competition. Network exchanges appear to provide a more advantageous context for learning about a firm’s own organisational capabilities than market exchanges.

The Provan and Human (1999) study also showed that both internal and external organisational learning took place in the SME networks they examined. Internal learning refers to the increased knowledge, insights, or understanding that firms gain of themselves through their network participation. In the study firms indicated that the ongoing exchanges among network members expanded members’ understanding of their own capabilities. External learning refers to the increased knowledge and insights firms gain of other member firms, even competitors, through network participation.

1. White Paper on Human Resource Development; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 1997

An important point made by Provan and Human (1999) is that learning can go well beyond the individual, such that knowledge learned by members of the organisation is retained by the organisation and passed on to future members, often through changes in organisational routines or beliefs. Thus it is the organisation that benefits from the learning of its individual members.

Just like individuals, companies must continuously face new aspects of their environment and react to them proactively by unlearning old practised behavioural models and acquiring new models. Organisational learning is, as Senge (1990) states, the necessary mechanism to secure the survival of companies in the long run (Richter, 2000).

The Skillnets experience of supporting enterprises to develop training networks is providing valuable pointers of the considerable potential for enabling broad-based enterprise development for both enterprise and worker within the context of networks that are primarily focused on training or 'learning' in the broad sense.

Networks and communication links within and between enterprises are what make learning possible, and facilitate them to become learning organisations, which is now essential to survival. Such relatively new ways of teaming, collaborating and sharing resources in training and needs-focused groups result in collective wisdom and group IQs that are higher than those of any individual firm within the group.

3.2 Networks within 1999-2002 Training Networks Programme

A typical Skillnets network

Skillnets Training Networks consist of groups of enterprises that come together to achieve a common purpose or address a shared issue of importance to the development of skills and their long-term competitiveness. Networks can involve entirely new structures and processes, or can build on existing networking approaches where these exist.

A 'Skillnet' is a training network, ie a group of companies that co-operatively addresses competitive skills needs by collaborating within a learning network. Each Skillnet chooses a name that reflects the basis of the network, eg *the Leisure and Amenity Skillnet, the Medical Devices Skillnet, the North Mayo Skillnet, the South East Micro Skillnet* and so on. This gives a focus and an identity to the nationwide web of networks, allowing members to promote the concept and be aware of other networks in operation.

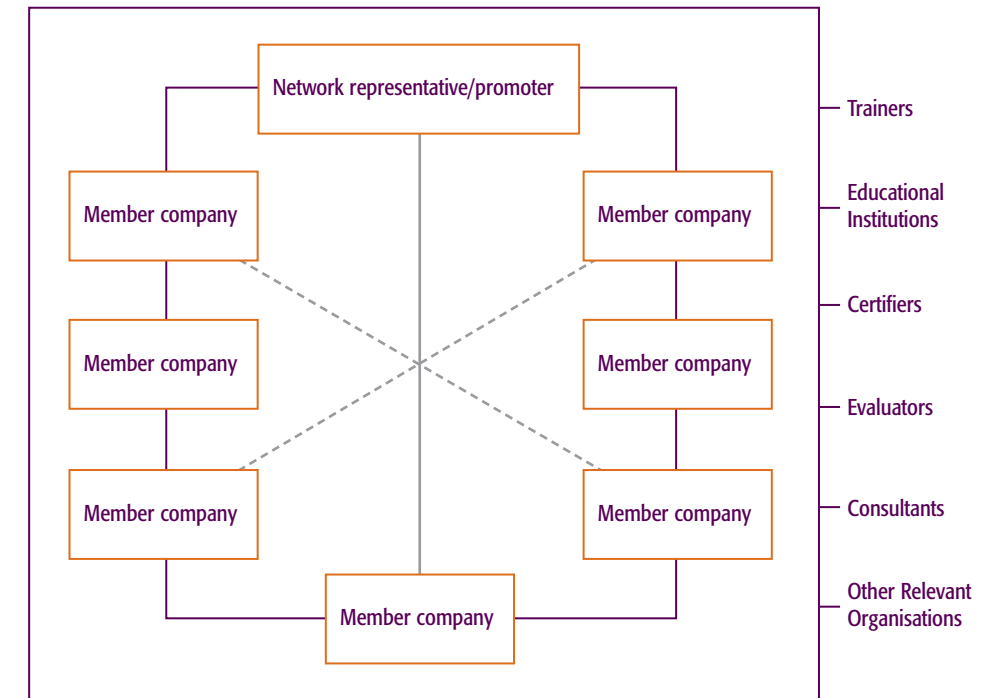


Figure A – A Skillnets Training Network

The core of the network is made up of the firms, which are the network members. Most networks employed a network co-ordinator who provided the professional, developmental and management input required for the effective operation of the integrated structure. Others who provided services to the network included trainers, business advisors and academics. The key driver of the network was the promoter, who signed the contract with Skillnets Ltd on behalf of the network. In some cases a separate company was formed that drafted a legal framework for network company members.

Most of the larger networks and many of the smaller ones (over 25 company members) had a core management group. In these cases the other members only took part in some areas of decision making, eg training-needs assessment and developing training material content. On the other hand, in the smaller networks, all the companies participated in the network management and co-ordination tasks as well as all participating in training.

The project promoters were typically enterprises themselves or representative bodies of enterprises/employees.

Who formed the networks?

Any group of enterprises or any enterprise-led association could form a training network, provided that they had a strategic and long-term common interest to pursue in relation to the development of human resources. Areas of common interest were frequently sectoral, geographic, supply chain-based or focused on specific training or development needs (eg management, technical level, operative, etc).

Where appropriate, links with other groups, committees or strategic processes that were relevant to the objectives of the network were encouraged.

The Skillnets evaluation found that 36% of the networks (17 networks) were built on earlier networks, usually an IBEC sector grouping, a trade association or chamber of commerce. Most of these associations would have had other priorities than training. Generally, the training network formed a new sub-group within the association with an interest in training.

Where the existing network was large, the training network was established as a new smaller network, usually with the 'parent' body being the promoter. Where the previous network was small, the network took on training objectives as well as its previous remit, eg a Leitrim network that previously worked with its cross-border colleagues formed a new training network under Skillnets with its members from the Republic of Ireland.

Thirty new networks were formed solely for the purpose of participating in the Skillnets Training Networks Programme.

Network promoters

The majority of network leaders and promoters were industry and enterprise organisations. In many cases, industry associations, federations and chambers of commerce (ie employer organisations) acted as network promoters on behalf of their member companies. However, in other cases trade unions (employee organisations) assumed the leadership role in the process.

Individual companies also acted as promoters on behalf of the network members. Alternatively, network members created new companies (of which the network members were subscribers) in order to assume joint responsibility for the process.

In a small number of cases, enterprise-support bodies or educational establishments (eg Údarás na Gaeltachta or DIT) were promoting networks. This tended to occur where support agencies had a history of working with a particular enterprise group, where enterprises were very small or where the focus of the network was a research process. In such cases, a management committee of enterprise members was established to ensure that the enterprises maintained control of the process.

In the case of many networks, support agencies, consultants or trainers initiated the process and drew companies together to submit an application to Skillnets. However, in the operational phase of the project, the direct legal and strategic ownership of the process was handed over to the enterprises themselves.

Network structure

In each Skillnet, enterprises formed steering and management groups to oversee and direct the process. These groups, which consisted of a representative group of enterprises in the network, met on a regular basis to make management decisions on behalf of the network.

This process operated in different ways depending on the nature, size, membership profile and location of the network, eg the training needs analysis phase was carried out either by questionnaire, by a consultant being employed to talk to individual members and draw together feedback, by groups of companies meeting to discuss and debate needs, or by semi-structured seminars to identify individual and group needs.

In general the evaluators found that, regardless of size or type, the majority of networks were very stable since their establishment. The evaluators noted that many networks had maintained their start-up numbers, while others had grown and they had attracted a further 36% of new members, while only losing less than 9%. Even after the programme, a number of networks appear to be still in existence in the absence of funding.

PROJECT MANAGERS	Number of respondents	No response	Number of companies
No. of company members in network at start	47	0	1,624
New members joining network	47	0	590
Companies leaving network	47	0	145

Table 3.1: Evolution and change in the Skillnets Training Networks, 1999-2002

Only three or four networks experienced serious loss of member companies; these were adversely affected by the IT recession or the impact of Foot and Mouth control regulations, at least in part.

Network activity

In general the networks carried out the following fundamental tasks:

- analysed the training and development needs of participants, identifying skills requirements and priorities for action
- assessed the strategic importance of long-term competitiveness of the skills identified
- identified solutions and delivery mechanisms to meet those needs
- developed network structures and processes to establish the operation of the network as a basis for specified training activity
- organised the delivery and implementation of training measures
- promoted collaboration and co-operative activity, sharing of knowledge and the exchange of best practice
- monitored and measuring results, providing performance indicators and quality standards for training activity engaged in by firms
- provided feedback to Skillnets on the progress, outcomes and impact of network training activities and processes.

The evaluators showed that, in some cases, the core group was the main activity performer, while in other cases all the network members were involved, eg the core group of 18 networks undertook the training needs analysis while in 27 networks all the member companies were involved.

In the majority of instances the core group selected the trainers. External assistance was most important in providing the actual training and in developing training materials. But it is of note that an important contribution by the core group was made to the development of training materials.

Activities	Responses			Undertaken by		
	Yes	No	No response	Core group	All of the network	External assistance ¹
Evaluated training needs	46 (98%)	1 (2%)	0	18	27	1
Developed training materials	37 (79%)	10 (21%)	0	23	8	10
Tested training materials	33 (70%)	14 (30%)	0	11	18	5
Tested new training methods	30 (64%)	17 (36%)	0	10	18	2
Selected trainers	45 (96%)	2 (4%)	0	31	11	3
Organised trainers	40 (85%)	7 (15%)	0	32	6	2
Ran train the trainer/tutor training	17 (36%)	28 (60%)	2 (4%)	5	11	2
Held training review meetings	38 (81%)	9 (19%)	0	21	15	–
Provided training courses	42 (89%)	5 (11%)	0	11	17	12
Provided workshops	42 (89%)	5 (11%)	0	9	13	4
Arranged certification	29 (62%)	17 (36%)	1 (2%)	14	10	4

Table 3.2: Range of training network activities and who was involved in them (Base: 47 respondents)

Note : Only some respondents answered this question

The evaluator's table below outlines the range of participation in the different activities.

At least 54% of companies were involved in network surveys and 56% in training needs analysis and the development of training materials; 49% participated in the training courses or in developing competency standards. The evaluators point out that percentages were probably higher in reality as it should be borne in mind that companies were joining the network throughout its life and the base is the end figure. The percentage of companies that played little or no role in the network was 10%. The supplementary interviews also indicated that this was in the order of 10-15% and it varied by the size of the network. It tended to be lower in smaller networks and higher in larger networks.

Company participation	Number of respondents	No response	Number	% of companies	BASE 2305
Number of companies that participated in network surveys	40	7	1,243	54%	
Number of companies that participated in TNA/development of training courses	43	4	1,296	56%	
Participated training courses/development of competency standards	44	3	1,127	49%	
Played little/no role in the network	44	3	226	10%	

Table 3.3: Activities of companies in the training networks

Internal network relationships

The evaluators also explored internal network relationships and found that over 80% of all respondents believed that their network relationships tended to be open and trusting, whereas another 20% were still at an earlier stage, ie cautious and testing. This answer was consistent with other answers on the sharing of information and how network members worked together and ran the network.

Respondents	Open/trusting Number	Cautious/testing Number	Complex/ problematic Number
35 Project managers	28 (80%)	5 (14.3%)	2 (5.7%)
12 Project managers/promoters	10 (8.3%)	2 (16.7%)	0 (0%)
26 Project promoters	22 (84.6%)	4 (15.4%)	0 (0%)

Table 3.4: The relationships between the network promoters, managers and participants in the networks

Network lifecycle

A well-known model of an idealised lifecycle for groups was used as the basis for a lifecycle model by the evaluators.

This included four stages of development as follows:

- Forming – the networks take time to form
- Storming – in some instances people and other differences emerge
- Norming – basic rules, both formal and informal and developed to help the network cope
- Performing – once established, the network gets down to the task of delivering on objectives.

Stage of development	From start date (range) months	Finish date (mean) months
Forming	1-11	4.3
Storming	1-9	3.7
Norming	2-11	4.7
Performing	3-18	6.8

Table 3.5: Stages of development of the networks - from interviews with project managers

The length of time for networks to form ranged between one and 11 months with the average time being four and a half months approximately. While it took up to nine months to resolve the difficulties that emerged within the network in one case, generally where this occurred they were resolved within a few months. All networks adopted formal or informal rules within their first five months and there was a slight preference for more formal rules. In general the evaluators found that generally the networks were effectively operating by the end of their sixth month. Interestingly, sectoral networks became operational much more quickly than multi-sectoral networks. Also, while the evaluators showed that networks go through the expected stages, they are not sequential and they overlap and repeat.

The evaluators concluded from the lifecycle analysis that after the network becomes operational two training seasons (two years) would then seem a reasonable timeframe to deliver training and allow enough time for the network to mature sufficiently to predict its potential future with a good level of probability.

Network funding and support

Skillnets funding was aimed at training people in employment, rather than training people for employment. Therefore, under the Training Networks Programme, funding could only be sought for the training and development of existing employees in established companies.

Skillnets grants were based on the totality of network costs, ie the cost of management and co-ordination, design and development of programme contents, training and networking activity, promotion and publications, evaluation and assessment. The maximum grant available was dependent on the size (in terms of employee numbers) of the companies in the network. Small company networks were therefore eligible for higher overall grant levels (up to 75% of total costs).

Budgets and the basis for individual cost centres were agreed through a process of consultation between Skillnets and the promoter. Therefore, applications were given conditional approval by the board of Skillnets but not all networks received the full amount or level of funding support submitted in the original proposal.

Network members provided matching primarily in cash and networks used various methods to collect the private sector contribution. Most popular were course fees levied per trainee, network member fees and sponsorship of activities. In addition to cash financing, network members contributed a range of resources to the network, which varied from the use of training facilities to mentoring services, use of cross-company trainers. In particular core groups of members contributed significant time to the development and management of the network and monitoring of activities and outcomes.

A range of additional supports was also provided to networks by Skillnets staff advisors. These were most intensive at the early stages in network development. The nature of the support activities reduced and changed across different stages in the network lifecycle.

A number of networks was given small development grants to carry out training needs analysis and develop network plans. This was typically the case where the network did not already exist in any format. Skillnets provided a high level of feedback and assistance to networks in the fledgling stages. A training programme for network co-ordinators, research on best practice in networks, a networks series of guidebooks and inter-networking across the groups, provided information and practice to support companies engaging for the first time in this approach.

Subsequently the support by Skillnets as a facilitating body was focused on facilitating the transfer of information and experience between the networks through frequent network seminars and conferences, the development of a searchable database on the Skillnets website and the management of a joint pilot certification project with FETAC (formerly NCVA).

3.3. What makes networks work

While previous sections describe how networks operated in the Skillnets Training Networks Programme, this section summarises the evaluators summary of key success factors identified by Skillnet network project and co-ordinators managers.

The number of responses is noted beside each of the key factors:

- developing trust, co-operation and sharing between member companies takes time (18)
- identify early/have common needs, goals and objectives (shared plan) (12)
- network development takes time (11)
- network ownership takes time (11)
- need for expert facilitators (5)
- there are difficulties in securing commitment of members to the network (5)
- developing trust in networks that are not in competition is easier (fewer problems of confidentiality) (5)
- need to set up and maintain good communication (4)
- has to be measurable benefits/need to demonstrate practical benefits of being part of a network to companies (4)
- realise time commitment needed, budget for it (2)

Other lessons mentioned included the need for senior management support, continual reinforcement of the idea that it needs to be enterprise-led, ongoing management and the easier formation of sectoral/thematic networks, the difficulties in getting SMEs to attend meetings and the vital role that large companies play in sustaining the network and providing help to smaller companies.

Therefore, from the experience of Skillnets, the networks and research carried out, primary success factors for establishing effective learning networks between organisations are emerging.

Key success factors for establishing effective learning networks

Facilitation:

Strong networks are those with strong facilitation. Invariably this means that a network co-ordinator actively facilitates the network. Typically this co-ordinator (or broker) is a specialist consultant, or a person employed by the network members for this purpose, or a company within the network itself, or a business association or chamber of commerce.

Openness and trust:

Networks that foster openness and trust gain the confidence and support of their members.

Clear goals and objectives:

Successful networks are focused networks – with goals that are understood, agreed and shared by all the members (which may take time).

Measurable benefits:

Firms stay in networks that have clear and measurable economic benefits for the participating firms.

Long term:

Good networks are long-term networks. A minimum of two years is considered essential to bed down a network and a three- to four-year timeframe is desirable for the network to gain real benefits for the members. Firms are more likely to join if they know the network is going to be there for the long haul.

Top management commitment:

The commitment of top management to the network concept is absolutely essential.

High levels of interaction:

Successful networks involve a high level of interaction between the member firms at all levels of the firm (not just the managerial level).

Formal structures and operating procedures:

Strong networks have agreed formal structures, established operating procedures and agreed norms of behaviour.

Overcoming resistance:

Networks provide great scope for organisational learning and the best learning comes from networks involving competitor firms. This requires top-class facilitation by the network co-ordinator to overcome the initial resistance of firms and help to build trust between them.

Similar stages of business development:

While networks can develop successfully with partners from different sectors, different geographic areas and different stages of development, it is helpful if firms are roughly at the same stage of business development.

The personal element:

The social element is as important as the business element.

Section 4 – Impact & outcomes

4.1 Overview

The outcomes of both Skillnets' internal review and the external Skillnets evaluation offer a number of powerful indicators of the impact of the Skillnets Training Networks Programme.

In general it was found that not only has the programme increased the actual take-up of training among companies, it has generated and fostered greater enthusiasm for training, particularly in small firms. The programme has enabled companies to undertake appropriate, high-quality, cost-effective and flexible training.

It has helped nurture a deeper awareness among firms of the critical importance of training and employee development in sustaining competitiveness and retaining staff. It has achieved this by giving firms a real say in how to meet their training needs. The experience indicates that an enterprise-led approach is workable, practical, effective and, more significantly, that companies have shown they are prepared to give the commitment (in time and money) such an approach requires.

Furthermore, the programme has been a fertile source of experimentation, introducing a range of new methodologies and training resources that have a strong focus on appropriate certification of training and the accreditation of prior learning.

New alliances between industry, trade unions and academia have been forged as a result of the programme. And, more importantly, training costs have been reduced through bulk buying and sharing resources – with additional investment for training coming from industry.

A special feature of the programme has been the practical expression of the partnership concept at company level. As the networks develop, so too has the realisation that their effectiveness depends not just on how well member firms relate to one another, but also on how well staff at all levels in participating firms are involved in designing and monitoring the training provided.

Skillnets has helped participant SMEs to address the perennial 'identification of training needs' challenge and some networks have progressed from meeting short-term training needs to developing career progression strategies and staff retention programmes and ultimately identifying standards-based training. Given that this progression has been from the bottom up – starting in most cases at the individual employee level – the resulting standards and training methodologies are likely to be highly effective and long lasting.

The programme has created a pool of companies with useful and successful experiences of training innovation that can act as role models and motivators for other companies. The Skillnets 'network of networks' is a nationwide web that is flexible, dynamic, enterprise-led and credible. It has helped to de-mystify the training process for companies by developing practical tools to analyse and meet training needs quickly, locally and effectively.

Skillnets has introduced new training methods and materials by a 'trial and test' process. By 'working with what works' it has helped to build the competence and capacity of enterprises, regions, sectors, industry federations and associations, trade unions and chambers of commerce to implement rapid solutions that are achieved by owning decisions at all stages of the training cycle. Skillnets has established credible, specialist, enterprise-focused enablers and facilitators at local, industry and national level who can serve as a unique resource for companies (especially SMEs) who are seeking to develop effective work-based learning systems.

A number of principles and practices has emerged from the development of the Training Networks Programme that can be identified as unique to the Skillnets approach. These give an indication of the added value of Skillnets within the national training system and provide the distinguishing features of an effective model of enterprise-led training.

4.2 Key data on outcomes and outputs

Calls for proposals

Skillnets issued two calls for the establishment of training networks – the first call was in June 1999 and the second one in February 2000. These garnered an unexpectedly large response with a total of 231 applications. In fact, the first call was oversubscribed by four times, while the second call was oversubscribed by 2.4 times.

Following an independent assessment process, a total of 59 networks were eventually approved for funding. Eight of these were research networks and the remaining 51 were training networks. Projects were initially funded for a development phase to enable them to complete the network preparation phase. They were then required to apply for full funding. Only one of these projects did not receive approval to proceed to full implementation (although it was successfully incorporated into another project), which means that a final total of 58 networks were funded under the programme.

The first group of networks was approved in September/October and began in November 1999. A second group, which required further development, began in February/March 2000. The second call was assessed during May and June 2000 and provisionally approved in August/September with projects commencing operations in November 2000-January 2001.

Funding provided

Skillnets approved grants of IRE8.4m (€10.7m) for 58 projects, which represented 66.1% of the total cost of IRE12.7m (€16.2m). Industry contributed the balance of IRE4.3m (€5.5m), or 33.9% of the total funding. Therefore the total direct investment in training and network activity by companies and Skillnets over the period amounted to IRE12.7m (€26.9). The programme was originally planned to finish in December 2001, but an extension of three months was granted to allow for the impact of the Foot and Mouth crisis.

The total Skillnets budget 1999-2002 was IRE10.707m (€13.593m). The average total expenditure per network in the first call was IRE240,418 (€305,293) and IRE155,570 (€197,549) in the second call. First call networks had a maximum duration of 24 months, while the second call networks were typically operational for 15 months.

Number of networks and size

The networks varied in size from eight to 500 companies. The average was 46 companies, but the majority of the networks were between 10 and 30 company members. Companies under 50 employees represented 73% of the total number of companies in the programme and 16% of the number of employees.

Companies with between 50 and 249 employees represented 22% of the companies and 28% of the employees involved in the programme, whereas companies with more than 250 employees represented 5% of the companies and 56% of the employees involved in the programme.

Network by company size (Base: All 50 training networks)							
	1-9	10-49	50-99	100-249	250-499	500+	Total
Number of companies	862 (38%)	809 (35%)	387 (17%)	123 (5%)	69 (3%)	55 (2%)	2,305 (100%)
Estimated number of employees	4,169 (3%)	20,318 (13%)	23,158 (15%)	20,606 (13%)	23,253 (14%)	67,976 (42%)	159,634 (100%)
Largest network	240	201	30	15	5	0	500
Smallest network	1	0	3	0	1	3	8

Table 4.1: Skillnets Training Networks Programme – shown by company size

Networks by region and sector

The spread of the network was extensive and included national networks and regional clusters, covering all of the key sectors of economic activity.

Geographical	Total	Sector	Total
National	33	Manufacturing	32
Regional	25	Construction	2
Total	58	Services	12
		Mixed	12
		Total	58

Table 4.2: Networks by region and sector

There were 12 networks made up predominantly of small businesses. Mixed sectors accounted for a further 12 networks, while the food and drink sector had 10 networks. The construction sector was served by two networks, as were the hotels and restaurants, publishing and printing, and textiles and clothing sectors. Three networks operated in the retail and wholesale trade. Another three in the post and communication, transport and storage sector and a further three in other manufacturing. Three networks each operated in the electrical and electronic components, medical precision and optical equipment sectors. Another three operated in the chemicals, ceramics, rubber and plastics sectors and a further three in the business, computer and related services sectors. One network operated in the recreational, cultural and sporting services sector.

Training provided

The evaluators recorded that the Skillnets Training Networks Programme provided 456 different courses during 2000 and 2001, of which 129 were totally new, 218 were significantly customised and 109 were off the shelf. They accounted for 9,225 hours of formal training (approximately 1,537 days of training) and 1,914 hours of informal training (approximately 319 days). The informal training was based on the time essential for certified courses and constituted 21% of the formal time. A total of 12,815 people were trained.

Project promoters	No response Number	Yes Number	No Number	Don't know Number
Overall would you consider the Training Networks Programme an effective model for the delivery of training in enterprises?	1 (2.8%)	34 (94.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.8%)
Overall, was the enterprise-led approach to training in enterprises more effective than alternative approaches?	1 (2.8%)	31 (86.1%)	0 (0%)	4 (11.1%)

Table 4.3: Effectiveness of the model and comparison with other approaches (Base: 36)

Certification

Some 111 of the courses were certified by a wide variety of certification authorities, including NCVA (now FETAC), FAS, City & Guilds, the universities, DIT and the Institutes of Technology, etc. (See also Section 4.3).

Level of satisfaction

In the Skillnets evaluation, 80% of networks stated that the programme assisted enterprises in identifying training needs that they had not previously recognised. There was a very high positive response to the question of the relevancy of the training undertaken. The average response was 81.5% and the median was 90%. A total of 94% believed that Skillnets was an effective model for the delivery of training in enterprises and 86% believed that the enterprise-led approach to training in enterprises was more effective than alternative approaches.

Training network operations

Skillnets originally envisaged that the networks would undertake a range of specific activities. They are listed in Table 4.4 with an assessment of their performance.

Original Skillnets expectations	Actual activities	Number of networks
Analyse the training and development needs of participants, identifying skills requirements and priorities for action.	Evaluated training needs ¹	46 (98%)
Assess the strategic importance in relation to long-term competitiveness of the skills identified.	Provided workshops ¹ they tended to be more strategic than the courses Network development meetings ³	42 (89%)
Identify solutions/delivery mechanisms to meet those needs.	Developed training materials ¹ Tested training materials ¹	37 (79%) 33 (70%)
Develop network structures and processes to establish the operation of the network as a basis for specified training activity.	Tested new methods for training ¹	30 (64%)
Organise the delivery and implementation of training measures.	Selected trainers ¹ Organised trainers ¹ Ran train the trainer/tutor training ¹ Provided training courses ¹	45 (96%) 40 (85%) 17 (36%) 42 (89%)
Promote collaboration and co-operative activity, sharing of knowledge and the exchange of best practice.	See next table	
Monitor and measure results, providing performance indicators and quality standards for training activity engaged in.	Held training review meetings ¹ Arranged certification ¹	38 (81%) 29 (63%)
Feedback to Skillnets on the progress, outcomes and impact of network training activities and processes.	Quarterly financial reports, half year and annual activities reports ²	All Networks

Notes: 1. Extract from CIRCA Report 2. Skillnets files 3. 85.1% stated these meetings were high/medium frequency

Table 4.4: Skillnets expectations of the networks and their response

The research demonstrated that, in general, the networks performed as expected and, while operating independently and with their own individual differences, they covered the ground anticipated. The following tables assess related operations.

Nearly 54% of the respondents said that their company network members shared information about training needs. A further 44% shared information to some extent. The evaluators observed a number of networks that moved from a position of non-sharing to one of openness and sharing, while others had not yet progressed to that stage. It was found that there was no discernible trend or common basis for either group's behaviour in that both sharers and non-sharers crossed the whole spectrum of network members.

Respondents	Not at all Number	To some extent Number	Very much the case Number
35 Project managers	1 (2.8%)	15 (42.9%)	19 (54.3%)
12 Project mgr/promoters	0 (0%)	6 (50%)	6 (50%)
26 Project promoters	1 (3.8%)	11 (42.3%)	14 (53.9%)
73 Total	2 (2.7%)	32 (43.8%)	39 (53.5%)

Table 4.5: The extent to which enterprises shared information in relation to their training needs

Given that the evaluation was completed before all of the networks had finished, the evaluators could not assess whether the networks did in fact achieve the objectives they had set out. However, their survey of network promoters indicated that 63% of the respondents expected to achieve their objectives with some difficulty, 30% expected to easily achieve or exceed their objectives and only 3% did not expect to achieve their objectives. The evaluators concluded that "even if these answers are more positive than the final results, they indicate a high level of success".

Respondents	No response	Easily	With some difficulty	Didn't succeed	Exceed objectives
35 Project managers	1 (315%)	5 (15%)	23 (2%)	2 (6%)	4 (12%)
12 Project mgr/promoters	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	9 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (18%)
26 Project promoters	1 (4%)	6 (20%)	14 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (20%)
73 Total	3 (4%)	11 (15%)	46 (63%)	2 (3%)	11 (15%)

Table 4.6: Networks' ability to achieve their objectives

As part of the project manager interviews, the evaluators sought additional insights into how the networks operated and these insights verified the survey findings. In this case, project managers were asked to score a five-point scale with opposing statements at either end. The following table shows the positive statements and the number of responses, average scores, median, mode and the range (max-min). The key important findings stated that:

- network company members seemed to learn a lot from each other informally
- there was consistent top management involvement
- the networks delivered on the expectations of respective members
- there was excellent contact among members throughout
- there was limited employee involvement.

Category	Number respondents	No response	Mean	Median	Min	Max
The network was high in energy	27	3	2.15	2	1	4
The network was effectively run by a small group	28	2	2.75	2	1	5
Excellent lines of communication in the network	28	2	2.11	2	1	4
It was a simple/or single issue network	27	3	3.07	3	1	5
The network delivered on members' expectations	27	3	2	2	1	4
There was consistent top management involvement	28	2	1.71	1	1	4
Members were widely spread geographically	28	2	2.29	2	1	5
Very good contact between members throughout	28	2	2.1	2	1	4
There was wide employee involvement	28	3	3.19	3	1	5
Members seem to learn a lot from each other informally	28	2	1.54	1	1	4
All members involved in decision making	28	2	2.64	2	1	5

Table 4.7: Series of statements by a sample of the project managers (Scale 1-5)

4.3 Other features

Partnership in practice

Training is a key element of the partnership between employers, employees and their trade unions within the workplace. The legacy of successive national agreements over 15 years is a strong tradition of partnership at national level and more recently at the level of the enterprise itself. Through its stakeholders, Skillnets has demonstrated the partnership principle in operation. It emphasised and actively facilitated that partnership at the network and enterprise levels throughout the programme.

More notably, the programme has demonstrated the practical expression of the partnership concept at company level. As the networks developed so had the realisation that their effectiveness depends not just on how well

member firms relate to one another, but how well staff at all levels in participating firms are involved in designing and monitoring the training provided. There were many examples of effective partnership between managers, staff, trade unions and employer bodies in the Skillnets networks that has improved morale in the companies concerned and will serve as blueprints for other companies in years to come.

Lower skilled workers who are particularly at risk of unemployment are typically under-represented in training support measures. Partnership models and the positive role that unions can play – particularly in the case of these employee groups – suggest some approaches to overcoming the threat of unemployment.

Under the Skillnets Programme a body of research was carried out that examined the experience of companies in applying the concept of a partnership approach to the delivery of training. The study was carried out by IBEC and ICTU. It indicated that:

- employers and employees/unions working together develop new approaches to training design and delivery
- partnership processes can positively influence the environment in organisations for training and development
- training and development in partnership skills impact beneficially on other organisational and business processes.

The Irish Trade Union movement has long made a valuable contribution to workplace education. Through this route, many employees are encouraged to become interested in learning, particularly when it can lead to further study in higher education as evidenced in the EB-ETI Skillnet.

A number of partnership-based networks has shown how companies and employees (across groups of companies) can also work together to further enhance the application of partnership approaches to training and development.

Many of these enterprise networks were championed and managed by trade unions (such as SIPTU or TEEU) working collaboratively with management across groups of companies. This has attracted increased participation by employees, and these processes have been very positively received across the enterprises.

Evolving new certification models

The demand for recognised learning continues to grow among enterprises and their employees, and the Skillnets experience is serving as an important incentive for workers to engage in training. The work of the NQAI and the NCVA (now FETAC) are important developments in the recognition of prior learning and the accreditation of workplace training.

The Skillnets experience indicates that the key aim must be to develop an easily understood, valued and relevant qualifications system. Serious consideration needs to be given to how such a system will operate in a seamless and effective nationwide (and even European-wide) context and function as a clear and universally accepted qualifications framework. Credit accumulation and transfer systems are important in this regard.

Skillnets has actively facilitated a range of creative and innovative responses to the demand from companies for certification and accreditation systems that are flexible, credible, recognised, easy to understand and implement, and deliver worthwhile benefits for employee and company alike.

Within Skillnets, there is a strong focus on appropriate certification of training and the accreditation of prior learning. New alliances between industry, trade unions and academia have been forged to this end.

Under the Training Networks Programme, a special joint project was carried out by FETAC and Skillnets that resulted in 23 networks registering with FETAC as approved centres within industry and over 1,500 learners receiving awards. The project also added to the body of industry-relevant standards through the development of 32 locally devised modules and three national certificates.

Skillnets groups have also developed new partnerships with third-level institutions and other bodies to develop certificate and degree programmes (eg Cork IT, DIT, NUI Galway, Waterford IT, Letterkenny IT) in sectors such as plastics, printing, medical devices, pharmaceuticals and refrigeration.

NCVA/Skillnets Certification Project 2000-2002

This certification project was initiated in January 2000. The project represented the work done by NCVA prior to the implementation of the Qualification Education and Training Act 1999. The broad aim of the project was to explore a partnership (industry and education) approach to the certification of learners in the workplace. The key objectives were to (a) influence future education and training policy in relation to the certification of workplace learning and (b) introduce certification as an integral part of the future enterprise training policy through the work of Skillnets Ltd.

As a result of the project, 23 of the total 58 networks (40%) registered with the NCVA as some of the first industry-based certifying centres in Ireland and now offer FETAC awards. The 23 networks represented approximately 1,200 companies. Eleven of the registered networks developed 32 locally devised modules. Two of these were at National Vocational Certificate Level 1, 19 at Level 2, and 11 at Level 3. Three networks used eight centrally devised modules and four networks have plans to develop full National Certificates – three at Level 2 and one at Level 3.

As part of the project, networks worked together to develop 'shared standards' and 4 centrally devised modules resulted: Level 2 – Team Working, Personal Effectiveness in the Workplace, Level 3 Supervisory Skills and Team Leadership. Other areas such as facilitation skills, presentation skills and negotiation skills were also identified for future development.

Approximately 1,500 awards were made to individuals involved in the Skillnets initiative. In the final project report a number of issues and barriers were outlined and discussed. Finally a set of recommendations were set out. These are summarised below:

- There is a need for information training and support for industry/employers that is tailored specific and relevant
- There is a need to promote the work of the certifying bodies
- Industry and FETAC must work in partnership to develop relevant standards that meet the needs of the employer and learner
- There must be recognition that different groups (education/training and industry) play different lead roles at different stages of the process
- A national system is required that enables providers to develop standards (have programmes validated) where no centrally agreed standards exist
- Agreed standards should be expressed in a simple and user-friendly way that is jargon free, clear and unambiguous
- A modular structure to awards is essential to enable learners in the workplace to engage with the qualifications framework at their own pace.

Key to these successful pilots was the existence use of an independent intermediary and the opportunity for groups of companies and their employees to develop processes that providers could respond to in a way that was not possible in the case of individual companies.

A number of industry skills analysis and sectoral certification models were developed. New certification processes have been already piloted and significant development has occurred in a number of sectors within Skillnets. The most developed models have been piloted in the pharmaceuticals, medical, retail and leisure sectors.

The certification processes that have been effective share some common characteristics:

- the involvement of companies, sector experts, education and training providers and certifying bodies working in partnerships
- competency standards and models that are developed by companies working together in strategic groups
- qualifications and training systems that recognise the needs of the industry as a whole rather than as individual companies
- qualifications that are overseen, monitored and updated by industry/education partnerships
- qualifications that follow competency identification and assume that, although workers may change company, location or function, the industry as a whole can capture the returns from training investment
- progression routes that span traditional separation of further and higher education allowing progression through awards from foundation certificate to masters degree levels
- training processes that are varied, incremental and multi-faceted so that each company and individual can access new learning when and how appropriate, ie all learners do not have to go through the same courses or learning methods
- systems that recognise and certify prior learning and experience developed during the working lives of individuals in the relevant industry.

Brokering and facilitating SME training

There is a need to provide specific support for sectors populated by small firms to enable them to work effectively with education and training providers. This need stems from the limited capacity of such firms to interact effectively.

Skillnets has proven the value of involving intermediary organisations to act as facilitators for networks or broker services between small companies and providers that act as catalysts for the development of new materials. This strong international trend continues to place emphasis on providing some form of financial support to assist small businesses with the cost of training.

SMEs in particular face a number of traditional barriers to training, including:

- lack of in-house specialist HR expertise and experience
- lack of knowledge in planning and managing the training function
- geographical isolation and unavailability of relevant training locally
- diseconomies of scale leading to high training costs
- low level of funds to invest in training and development
- lack of access to relevant, small business-focused training programmes and approaches
- difficulty with releasing staff to take part in training given its potential to disrupt business activity
- lack of awareness in the advantages of training and the impact on business performance.

One of the most effective ways of overcoming these traditional barriers has been the establishment of industry brokers and facilitators who support groups of companies and provide many of the training management and advisory functions for the companies.

In the Training Networks Programme, the role of network facilitators/project managers included:

- facilitating companies in identifying training needs
- assessing different approaches to meeting the needs
- providing a sounding board for individuals within companies
- providing expert advice on training systems, qualifications and course content
- accessing appropriate providers
- negotiating on behalf of the companies
- motivating the companies through the process
- providing administrative support
- providing a single point of reference for companies
- allowing companies to build relationships with dedicated facilitators who know their businesses and employee needs
- providing feedback, monitoring and evaluation.

In the context of sectoral groupings, these facilitators enabled companies to work together to develop and deliver training, achieve economies of scale and interact effectively with other bodies (certifiers, colleges, trainers). In the case of small companies, these facilitators provided many of the functions of an internal training department, which would ordinarily be unsustainable within individual small companies. In the case of larger companies or large/small company collaborative groups, this facilitator aided the development of strategic systems and approaches that require multi-company participation and support.

Piloting new training materials and methodologies

One important feature of the Skillnets programme has been the development and testing of new training methods and materials. These have now been correlated into a directory that is available on the Skillnets website (www.skillnets.com) or directly from the Skillnets office. (Skillnets facilitated 58 networks and over 300 training programmes and courses, all of which are linked to an adaptable and flexible approach.)

Lifelong learning for employees

Lifelong learning has been a key strategy for improving training performance in enterprises supported by Skillnets. Ultimately, this type of learning strategy is a vital part of the workplace partnership between employers, employees and their trade unions.

There is a growing acknowledgement of the vital role of formal, informal and lifelong learning in the daily experiences of both enterprises and individual workers. For generations, enterprises have provided extensive non-formal learning in the workplace without formally recognising its impact on either the enterprise or the worker. The impetus created by the debate on lifelong learning therefore provides a special opportunity to introduce measures to accredit and validate such learning.

Such measures necessitate flexibility, the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn, and a willingness to experiment and take risks. Many of the increasingly complex problems that Irish companies face today have no complete solutions in textbooks, databases, or training courses – we therefore need to take a broader look at the concept of training.

This poses some serious issues for enterprises, whose responsibilities today are more than those that are simply reflected in profit and loss. There is a growing awareness of the need for lifelong learning at all levels of Irish industry – enterprises know they will benefit from supporting the kinds of ‘best educational practices’ in schools that prepare students to become productive adults. It is now more apparent than ever that traditional training institutions, training methods and ways of doing business must adapt to constant change in order to survive.

Helping firms move up the value chain of training support

The Training Networks Programme shows that companies will only engage in higher skills, adaptation and best practice training after they have met their basic training needs. These basic needs are those that are necessary for the basic functioning of business and are increasingly driven by regulatory requirements or core operating skills. Often these activities subsume all available training spend. Therefore, measures such as the percentage payroll expenditure on training can distort the potential impact of this training on the enterprise because it is focused on specific groups or basic skills.

The experience of enterprises in the Skillnets programme was that companies tended to engage in a two-stage process:

Stage 1

- Initial focus on immediate basic skills
- Lack of interest in engaging in more strategic discussions until core needs were met
- Initial focus on one-off courses to meet specific needs.

Stage 2

- Focus on more developed skills once basic skills needs were addressed
- More strategic focus on training needs in terms of progression issues, sustainable activity, certification and longer term outlooks.

Sector-specific approaches

Adopting sector-based structures for assessing skills needs, industry standards, gathering information and developing training products and services are key features of Skillnets’ approach. This strategy was not a requirement imposed by Skillnets but rather a trend that emerged from the companies themselves. Working together to meet common training needs with other firms from within the same sector makes good sense – unfortunately it has not always been

easy for Irish companies to collaborate within these auspices. Many firms are reluctant to work with their close competitors for fear of losing competitive advantage through shared information and knowledge, while some companies are also concerned about the prospect of staff poaching.

However, the positive experience of companies in the sector-based Skillnets so far augurs well for greater sector-based collaboration among firms across a wide range of functions in the future.

Capacity building and creating linkages

Skillnets has established a framework to enable enterprise to take the lead in training and development. This policy flows from an awareness that enterprise is best placed to identify its own training needs and delineate effective responses.

Traditionally, one of the barriers to business-led training processes has been the absence of an appropriate framework and infrastructure to facilitate this. Most of the Skillnets networks are led, co-ordinated and facilitated by individual enterprises, industry associations employer or employee representative groups. This has maximised the closeness to the customer and has allowed a high degree of understanding of the real needs of individual enterprises.

A further disincentive to adopt enterprise-led work-based training has been the lack of in-house staff members who are competent in developing and managing training processes. This is particularly apparent in small companies where the incidence of training is significantly lower than larger enterprises. Companies will not invest in human resources development unless they are confident that this investment will result in economic returns for the enterprise.

While the willingness by enterprise to lead training processes has been confirmed by the response to the Skillnets initiative, it is apparent that support, advice and training for key staff and suitable infrastructures are required to enable enterprises to proactively lead such processes – particularly on a group basis.

Skillnets has responded to the need for capacity building at the level of the enterprise. This has included upgrading the skills of managers and key staff in industry to analyse skills needs and devise appropriate responses. It has also involved providing support and guidance to industry groups in delineating needs and devising solutions.

Capacity building requires the development of a framework that:

- provides the necessary information, support and advice to enable enterprises to lead training processes
- facilitates a common response to shared needs (thereby giving SMEs access to training)
- builds the capacity of industry sectors and individual enterprises to develop, deliver and manage training processes
- is critical to enabling enterprise take the lead in providing training for staff.

Developing in-house capacity in enterprises

Enterprises of all sizes manage the training function better and are more committed to training activity when there is a clear understanding of how training needs can be met. The process of identifying needs can often be a barrier to companies engaging in training – as are issues such as selecting trainers and measuring return on investment for training.

As a result, there is a significant opportunity to develop the in-house capacity of companies to strategically manage their own training and development. This activity would leverage additional and more effective training activity and be sustainable and self-perpetuating in the long term.

The following elements are crucial to in-house capacity in successful Skillnets networks:

- in-company training of workers as trainers
- peer-learning models
- owner-manager training to identify and address training needs
- employee involvement in partnership approaches to training

Capacity-building results

Skillnets has helped build the competence and capacity of enterprises, regions, sectors, industry federations and associations, trade unions, chambers of commerce, among others, to implement rapid solutions through owning decisions at all stages of the training cycle. Skillnets has established credible, specialist, enterprise-focused enablers and facilitators at local, industry and national level who can serve as a unique resource for companies (especially SMEs) seeking to develop effective work-based learning systems.

Facilitating linkages

One of the most significant outcomes of the development of proposals has been the level of dialogue, linkages and partnerships between and across organisations that have taken place in the Training Networks Programme especially between organisations in business, training and education at the level of the enterprise or network.

Inter-company processes have involved hundreds of senior managers and decision makers, HR professionals and company representatives (both employees and management) in discussing, debating and analysing the training needs of their company, group or sector. The attention and time committed to these inter-company processes will inevitably raise awareness of training challenges and opportunities. It will also contribute towards innovation and best practice and instigate a flow of information and experience across industry in the area of training and development.

In addition, discussions between industry, training providers, colleges, certifying bodies, representative associations and experts have forged new relationships. These processes have, therefore, provided a new forum for devising effective working relationships across the range of stakeholders involved in the delivery of training for industry.

Skills

Enterprises have been enabled to meet new skills needs that require workers with a broad-based portfolio of skills and attitudes that include flexibility, adaptability and a commitment to continuous personal development. The growth of knowledge-based enterprises and the proliferation of knowledge-based processes (primarily in information and communications technologies) within enterprises requires major up-skilling of existing staff.

Agreed standards

Many of the Skillnets networks have focused on setting training standards. These in turn establish best practice and allow training providers to effectively identify the skills needs of industry and develop provision to meet these needs.

The enterprise-led process and structure adopted by Skillnets has proven highly effective in enabling whole industrial sectors to agree occupational and/or skill standards. This is seen as an essential guide to the learner, the enterprise and education and training providers. Standards set best practice and allow training providers to effectively identify the skills needs of industry and develop provision to meet these needs.

Take up of training

Skillnets has fostered an enthusiasm for training, especially among a large number of small firms. The programme has enabled companies to undertake appropriate, high-quality, cost-effective and flexible training. It has developed a deeper awareness among firms of the critical importance of training, lifelong learning and development of staff at all levels in order to sustain competitiveness and retain staff at a time of skills shortages in the labour force.

Experimentation

The programme has been a fertile source of experimentation, introducing a range of new methodologies and training resources. Skillnets has introduced new training methods and materials by a trial and test process and then 'working with what works'. Some networks have progressed from meeting short-term training needs to developing career progression strategies, staff retention programmes and ultimately identifying standards-based training. Because this progression has been from the bottom up, starting in most cases at the individual employee level, the resulting standards and training methodologies are likely to be highly effective and long lasting.

Training costs

Training costs have been reduced through bulk buying and sharing resources, while additional investment for training has been forthcoming from industry.

Adding value

All the promoters surveyed as part of the Skillnets evaluation stated that the Skillnets Training Networks Programme has added value to the area of enterprise training in Ireland.

Innovation in learning and development

In terms of how innovation can be fostered in learning and development within enterprises and between enterprises, the experience of Skillnets to date points to the following key characteristics of an effective learning and development intervention:

- it is enterprise-led
- it is focused on present and future needs
- it involves a range of stakeholders.

Section 5 - The Future

5.1 Lessons arising from the Skillnets experience

The emergence of training networks of SMEs (and SMEs with larger companies) that is taking place under the aegis of Skillnets is showing the way forward. A number of trends can be discerned in these networks:

- the desire to save costs by sharing resources and 'bulk buying' of training
- the identification of common training needs within the context of overall firm strategy
- developing tailor-made training programmes to meet common objectives
- establishing new training standards for industry-specific systems or processes
- exploring new methods of accrediting and certifying training
- experimenting with innovative training methodologies.

A highly important added-value impact is also emerging in those networks consisting mainly of owners or senior managers of SMEs. Experience shows clearly that managers will only be genuinely involved in training if the senior manager is supportive, if there is proper analysis of needs and if managers at every level are engaged in understanding and dealing with their problems. In this case it is the individual learning, which both leads, and leads to, the organisational learning, which is an important product of effective inter-firm networks.

To integrate and operate new organisational structures, managers need help to:

- decentralise decision making and place wider responsibilities on workers, specifically in relation to quality assurance
- integrate functions in the workplace, especially bringing together the functions of brain and hand in enlarged and enriched working fields
- flatten hierarchical structures, bringing in new moderating, coaching and guidance roles for management
- allow lateral networking, instead of centralised control.

The Skillnets training networks open the door for a partnership to emerge between training providers and companies in general, but SMEs in particular. They allow training providers to engage with SMEs in a more efficient (from the point of view of numbers) and effective (since all networks operate through quality management procedures) manner.

We can see from this that the business of developing learning in networks is not an easy one. But it is one that can reap huge benefits both for the companies themselves, their employees and customers, as well as the wider economy.

5.2. Current need

Some key points may be noted in looking to the next few years of the training networks experience:

The need is still there

The need for a focused programme such as Skillnets still remains necessary since, despite the obvious progress that has been made, evidence continues to point to major gaps in Irish training provision:

- While the amount that Irish enterprises spend on training has risen in recent years it still remains between 1.5% and 3% of total payroll costs
- More than half of all firms does not have a training budget
- Of 24 OECD countries Ireland was ranked 11th for job-related training participation during the 1990s and 10th out of the 15 EU countries for training volumes provided
- An international comparison of continuing education and training showed that Ireland's overall training performance was the second worst of all those surveyed, after Poland; that training participation is particularly poor among Irish SMEs (half the average level of the countries surveyed); and participation by SME employees in training in Ireland was very low at only 10.8%.

Continuing barriers to training participation require ongoing responses

A number of specific factors currently militate against effective participation by Irish enterprises in training, including:

- Gaps in provision of training provided, or grant-aided by the State, allied to a complexity of provision and information gaps
- A tendency among private sector trainers to focus products and services on larger companies
- A lack of State support for companies that can fall outside the remit of key agencies
- Barriers experienced by small businesses, such as excessive disruption of operations caused by releasing staff for off-site training, the cost of training, lack of local access to training and relevance of training to the needs of firms
- Under-utilisation of third-level facilities and potential services
- Limited range of sector-specific programmes
- Mismatch between existing services and training products that are not directly related to real business needs
- A lack of support for 'how to learn' as well as 'what to learn'
- A lack of awareness of the value of training, particularly among small firms, leading to low demand from business for training
- Rapidly changing skills sets cause a mismatch between supply and demand
- Companies' ability and willingness to pay for non firm-specific training
- Lack of time and resources within firms to focus on training or release people
- The need to overcome the historical approach of hiring new employees rather than retraining or upskilling current staff
- A sense among small firms that they are powerless to influence education and training providers.

Sharing the cost of training investment is the way forward

It is now widely acknowledged that the costs and benefits of investment in skills should be shared between the Government and enterprises. The experience of Skillnets is a prime example of this investment partnership in action.

Better and more comprehensive information is required to target State responses

While Skillnets has gathered significant experience and information through contact with networks and from network plans and activities, there is still a gap in our national pool of information on current training practice.

A profile of training needs, current training practice, providers, areas where training is currently provided or not provided, which employee categories are receiving training and of what type, the regional variations in training provision and gaps in the supply of training at sectoral, regional or national levels – all would provide essential information to allow national bodies, agencies and policy makers target training needs more effectively.

Within the context of the Training Networks Programme, Skillnets will continue to gather and assess information across this group (circa 2,500 companies). However, a broader analysis – representative of the total population of over 180,000 businesses in Ireland – would significantly add to our national understanding and response in this area.

Decision-making structures that involve active participation by a range of stakeholders need to be further supported

The key requirement is for new mechanisms and structures for decision making that will allow multiple actors and stakeholders to come together quickly to co-ordinate and integrate efforts.

International experience demonstrates a history of many bodies developing their own individual strategies rather than acting in concert. It is now accepted that single actors on their own cannot successfully address the issues. All countries are now recognising the need for new partnerships.

Partnerships between key stakeholders widen participation, increase the demand for learning and link together measures designed to strengthen local capacity and democracy, stimulate innovation, pool resources and develop more flexible and varied provision for learners. However, it is also recognised that partnerships take time and need to be resourced.

International experience also shows a move towards integrating the traditional administrative separation between learning and enterprise systems, recognising the inseparability of learning skills and enterprise development issues. Structures for action, which cross over traditional division and roles in governmental and administrative structures, are also recommended.

Incentives for co-ordinated action by governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in planning and monitoring activities are necessary so that a range of options is considered and all parties are committed to the same goals.

Increased involvement of industry is essential

Partnership between government and other stakeholders and decision-making structures that feature genuine sharing of responsibility and accountability, are key features internationally.

In the US, the UK and Canada, lead bodies involved in assessing, advising and prioritising national policies and programmes are 'government funded rather than government led'. The new Sector Skills Councils in the UK, Canadian sector councils and the US NSSB are all resourced by government but also generate funding through the development and dissemination of products, services and materials. In the Canadian example, a model is recommended in which government sets out broad strategic goals and purposes and provides an agreed sum of money with an industry council, which determines how to meet those goals and set specific programme targets.

In Ireland, Skillnets is the best example of such an approach and its success should lead policy more clearly in this direction in the future.

As we move forward, it is essential to find new ways of communicating and working together to confront the problems that challenge workers and the companies that employ them. Some key features of the response to such challenges have been, and will remain, an integral part of the Skillnets approach, including:

- collaboration of employees and companies, and collaboration among companies and employees
- integration of ideas and information
- the capacity to deliver – move fast, take risks and make mistakes, unafraid of the concept of failure – 'learning by doing'.

Increased recognition of the workplace as an important opportunity for the achievement of lifelong learning is required

Continued work on defining a comprehensive set of core skills (by the appropriate agencies) that will be applicable across industrial sectors and across business in general is vital. Lessons from the Skillnets experience indicate that it is inaccurate to consider that enterprises primarily require a narrow skills base from workers. While company-specific skills will remain important, most enterprises now require workers with a broad-based portfolio of skills and attitudes, which include flexibility, adaptability and a commitment to continuous personal development. Continued monitoring of emerging skills needs facing enterprises is essential. A core challenge is to build flexibility into education, training and support structures to allow them to adapt to changing skills needs.

The growth of knowledge-based enterprises and the proliferation of knowledge-based processes (primarily in information and communications technologies) within enterprises means that there is now a greater uniformity of basic skills across sectors than ever before. In principle this should enable the education system and training providers to provide valuable work-related skills for every worker as an integral part of their basic education and training. This heightens the necessity for closer co-operation between enterprises and educational establishments as evidenced throughout the Skillnets already established.

The process of continuing effective approaches and integrating innovative pilot programmes into mainstream and sustainable systems needs to be addressed

The process of 'mainstreaming' new approaches requires some attention. Over the past number of years (particularly under European-funded initiatives) a significant amount of innovation has been piloted.

There is now an imperative to pool these new approaches and experience, to provide ongoing support for those that work, to establish frameworks that will provide ongoing access to successful processes, to make the experience more widely available and to leverage further impact from this work.

There is also an associated need to co-ordinate the strategic and policy-related activity to allow pilot programmes to feed into future policy and mainstream practice.

Finally, new mainstreaming systems should be considered that incorporate not only state agencies and educational bodies but also use the established industry organisations and bodies to support the continuation of successful approaches on a longer term basis.

Long-term strategies need to be supported

Skillnets' first programme took place over a three-year period. This timeframe encompassed initiation and establishment of the Skillnets company, development of the programme, calls for proposals, contracting with industry groups, development of network plans strategies, attraction of members, development and delivery of approaches and evaluation of the outcomes. Therefore the process was accelerated at all stages.

After 12-24 months (depending on the network) of operation and at a time when networks were 'gelling' and beginning to leverage significant added value, the programme period was concluded. This experience is not unique and is shared by many other programmes and initiatives, though it is possibly more pronounced in the case of networks, which take a significant time to develop effectively.

At the heart of the challenge in the area of in-company training are issues around awareness and understanding by decision makers, providers and trainees. While one useful experience can begin to change attitudes, this process of change requires ongoing encouragement if it is to become embedded in company culture and operational systems. Therefore the adoption of longer term funding cycles and strategic long-term approaches by policy makers would support the objective of influencing attitudes to training in industry for the longer term.

5.3 Skillnets mandate 2002-2005

The new Skillnets mandate for 2002-2005 has given further opportunities for new sectors and groups to form training networks, as well as a small number of networks to receive further support for innovative activity. The second round of the programme is much welcomed as it provides opportunities to bed down developments to date as well as further improve Skillnets' understanding of the network process.

As networks of the scale and type that have now developed nationwide are new organisational structures and processes, it is necessary to follow the network process through a complete lifecycle. It was proposed by Skillnets evaluators that this is likely to be three to four years of supported activity. By allowing a number of networks to complete this cycle Skillnets and the networks will be able to ascertain the potential for continued operation of the networks either without any public support or significantly reduced levels of support.

Features that characterise the new Training Networks Programme 2002-2005:

- Increased financial input from companies will be encouraged in the new programme to encourage firms to start incorporating training budgets as a norm within operational costs.
- Sustainable activities are a key focus with development of capacity building within the enterprise highlighted. For example, 'training of trainers' within the company, the development of national certification and standards, and benchmarking systems are all key features of the networks.
- Vulnerable sectors and groups will receive a special focus to develop and test development approaches for employees with low basic skills and companies where survival is the primary challenge.
- A particular focus will be placed on collecting information about current performance and investment across participating companies, as well as developing a system for benchmarking information on training investment.
- The further development of partnership approaches to training at enterprise and sector level will be encouraged to underpin the mutuality of interest between employees and employers in the area of training and development.
- Further links with other stakeholders, agencies, education and certifying bodies will be established to highlight best practice among networks and highlight the types of intervention that work successfully with industry.
- Continued facilitation of the development of certification for work-based training working within the National Framework of Qualifications to ensure that certification is available to the widest extent possible for training across the networks.

Skillnets will continue to identify and disseminate information and good practice across and beyond those companies and organisations directly participating in the network.

We will continue with our vision to establish innovative enterprise-led training for employers and employees and dedicate the combined support of IBEC, CIF, CCI, SFA, ICTU and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to the next few years of the Training Networks Programme.

Chronology of key events

December 1998	Board established & company incorporated
April 1999	CEO hired
May 1999	Programme launched
June 1999	Closing date for first call applications
July 1999	180 proposals assessed
August 1999	Provisional approvals
October 1999	Staff appointed
November 1999	Approvals of development (Strand B) networks
December 1999	Final approvals of (Strand A) networks & contracts issued
January 2000	17 networks launched
February 2000	Second call for proposals announced
March 2000	Development projects completed
April 2000	Approvals for development (Strand B-A) networks
April 2000	Closing date for second call applications
May 2000	Final approvals of (Strand B-A) networks & contracts issued
May 2000	21 networks launched
June 2000	Provisional approvals for second call networks
June 2000	Publication of research and conference on 'Making Networks Work'
July 2000	Skillnets 'Network Series' published
August 2000	Skillnets website launched
September 2000	Final approvals of second call networks & contracts issued
October 2000	Publication of research and conference on 'Partnership in Training'
October 2000	22 networks launched
December 2000	58 networks in operation
October 2001	Second Skillnets national conference
December 2001	Extension granted for three-month continuation
March 2001	Completion of 'first round' network plans

Skillnets Stakeholders

(Note: A complete list of Skillnets funded networks is contained in the Skillnets Directory 1999-2002)

Board of Directors**The Irish Business and Employers Confederation**

Domhnall MacDomhnaill (Chairman)

Sexton Cahill

Aileen O'Donoghue (1999-2001)

Jackie Harrison (2001-)

Niall Saul

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions

Peter Rigney

Sean Heading

Nuala Keher

The Chambers of Commerce of Ireland

Simon Nugent (1999-2001)

John Dunne (2001-)

The Small Firms Association

Mairead Divilly

The Construction Industry Federation

Peter McCabe

The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment**Appointees:**

Henry Murdoch

Terry Hobdell

William Parnell (1999-2001)

Pat Holohan (2001-2002)

Denis Colfer (2002-)

Skillnets Staff 1999-2002**Chief Executive**

Máire Hunt

Financial Controller

Patrick Crowe

Accountant

Dianne Watson (2000-02)

Programme Advisors

Wendy Ryan (1999-2001)

Alan Nuzum (2002-)

Terry O'Neill

Information Executive

Maria Fitzgibbon

Communications Executive

Brenda Devereux (2000-01)

Julia Brent (2001-02)

Administrators

Lorraine O'Toole

Niamh Jones (2001-02)

Research and publications

During the first round of Skillnets several pieces of research were either commissioned by Skillnets directly or completed and disseminated by Skillnets networks:

Raising Skills in Small Business

The Small Firms Association developed a major research and development project aimed at developing an analytic model applicable to training within Irish SMEs together with a review of recent research on the extent of SME training in Ireland and a benchmarking of Irish SME training performance relative to competitors. The project involved a survey of the training behaviour of 500 SMEs conducted by the MRBI, followed up by in-depth interviews with 50 SMEs conducted by Tansey, Webster Stewart & Co. The results have influenced policy within the SFA, within Skillnets and at national level.

Making Networks Work

This major study commissioned and published by Skillnets examines best practice both in Ireland and overseas in business-led networks and points to the lessons for Ireland from this experience. It examines international experience of networks, their benefits, types and forms, their formation and development and potential for utilisation in an Irish context. The report was augmented by eight workbooks of practical use to emerging Skillnets Networks entitled the Skillnets Networks Series. The results were published at the first Skillnets Conference in June 2000.

Partnership in Training and Lifelong Learning

Skillnets supported IBEC and ICTU to carry out a study to examine the effects of partnership on lifelong learning through the eyes of 10 companies and organisations in Ireland. By 'telling the story' through case studies, a wealth of experience and knowledge has been gathered and presented in a report along with a case study pack that gives valuable information on how partnership arrangements have contributed to the ongoing development of the workforce. The results were published at a major conference in Dublin Castle in February 2001.

Selecting the Right Trainer

This workbook is a resource for small companies developed by Skillnets as a result of its experience during the first round of the Training Networks Programme. It helps SMEs to focus on what training is about, how to define training objectives, conduct a training needs analysis and understand the learning process that adult trainees go through. It provides a series of steps as well as a range of practical tools to help in finding and selecting the right

trainer linked directly to the needs of the SME. Two further sections deal with evaluation of training and resources to help implement the suggestions contained in the booklet. The booklet is set out in easy-to-follow sections and at the back there are 21 sample sheets that are referred to in the appropriate sections. A companion CD-Rom is included containing all of the sections and the sample sheets and presented in a hyperlinked format, so users can quickly and easily jump from one item to the next.

Research Based Skillnets Networks

- Research on the skills and training needs of SMEs in the information technology sector was conducted by the Chamber Skillnets leading to proposals for establishment of a best practice benchmarking database for the industry.
- Research on current HR and training practices and processes within a group of 30 small, medium and large companies was conducted in the South East by the South East region of IBEC. This has led to a comprehensive report and the development of a training programme based on themes emerging from the original research.
- The Human Resource Management and Organisational Learning Skillnet examined how HR managers in the Irish high-tech sector source and develop new organisational ideas and practices within their firms and assessed to what extent these result in organisational learning. The final report makes recommendations on policies that would support the further development of learning organisations with the goal of developing self-sustaining or 'learning regions'.
- Other research networks are outlined in the Skillnets Directory 1999-2002.

Skillnets Directory 1999-2002

This publication includes comprehensive details on all 58 networks funded under the first round of Skillnets including a description of the network, programmes carried out, certification obtained, key products completed or published and full contact details.

Skillnets Case Studies

This is a fascinating first-hand account of the personal, business and organisational impact of the Skillnets networks. The booklet 'tells the story' of 11 of the networks funded under the first round of Skillnets. Not only does it provide a thorough description of what led to the establishment of each network, how it functioned and what it achieved, it also looks at individual company and employee experiences of participating in the network and the training carried out.

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