

How business
advisers learn

David Irwin
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HOW BUSINESS ADVISERS LEARN

INTRODUCTION

There are many exciting programmes all round the world designed to encourage, advise and support new and growing businesses. In the UK, the first enterprise agencies emerged in the late 1970s and, by the late 1980s, there were probably around 300. The early enterprise agencies felt that they were trail blazing and so regularly spoke to each other, visited each other and aimed to learn from each other. Many people too were able to travel and study internationally, thanks to initiatives such as the German Marshall Fund's Employment Fellowship programme. The Small Business Service continued these efforts and aimed to promote a learning culture amongst UK business support organisations with the launch of the BLU and its international study visit bursaries.

Every year, there are many conferences, all round the world, all intended to encourage transfer of knowledge about what works and what doesn't in business support and advice, though many of these appear to be targeted at academics rather than at practitioners.

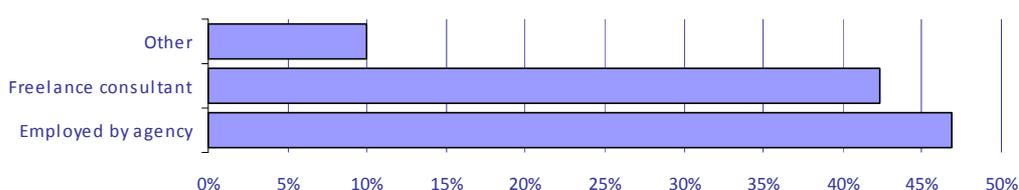
However, other than anecdotal evidence, there does not appear to be much understanding about the ways in which business advisers learn or develop programmes to support new and growing businesses. To fill this gap, Cobweb Information Ltd, together with the International Association for Enterprise Promotion, undertook a survey of business advisers.

The objective was to learn more about current attitudes and approaches to sharing and learning and, in particular, the ways in which advisers share lessons from their own work and learn lessons from the work of others. Questions touched on whether organisations undertook evaluations of their projects and programmes, whether they published the results, how they sought ideas for new programmes, whether they thought business support was innovative etc.

SAMPLE POPULATION

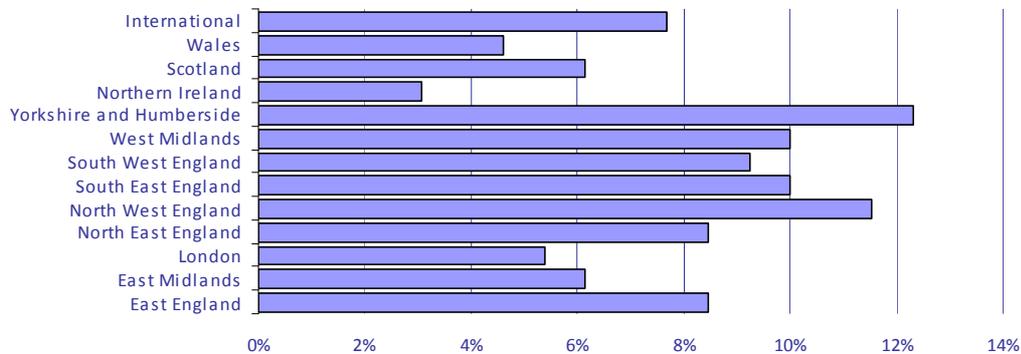
The survey was undertaken in early October 2009. Cobweb invited subscribers to its BAD News to participate in a survey. The invitation was additionally sent to all those people who had expressed interest in attending the first International Enterprise Promotion Convention. There were some 130 responses. Most were from advisers employed by a business support agency or were free lance advisers. A small number had other roles such as manager of advisers, or academics, or business information officer.

Figure 1: Employment of advisers



Responses were spread from all round the country with a small number of international responses, though the response rate does not reflect the relative populations – with a very high response from Yorkshire & Humberside and a low response from London.¹

Figure 2: Geographic location

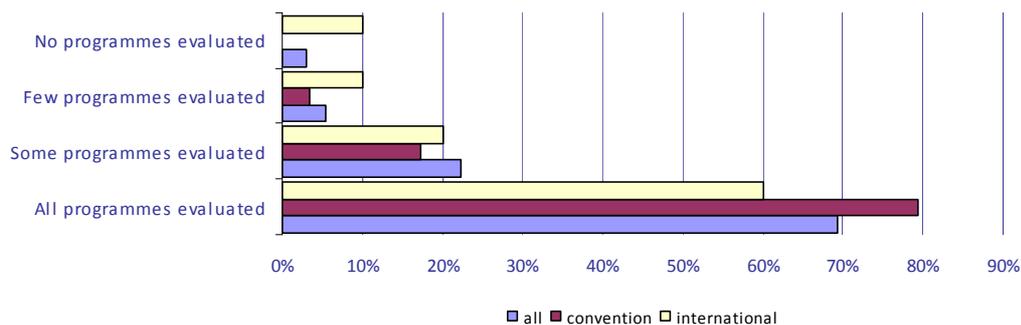


RESULTS

Do you or your organisation evaluate the projects and programmes in which you are involved?

Most respondents said that they evaluated every programme. Very few respondents said that they evaluated none. Anecdotally, it seems unlikely that agencies are genuinely evaluating all programmes, though it is highly likely that they are monitoring all projects and programmes, not least because of requirements by funders. Furthermore, people who are more likely to evaluate programmes are more likely to respond to a survey such as this. This question may need to be a little clearer in the future.

Figure 3: Do you evaluate projects & programmes?



Amongst those intending to participate in the convention, there is a higher proportion of respondents who say that they evaluate every programme, and none say that no programmes are evaluated. Again, this is perhaps to be expected since it is likely to be the more active people who will want to come to the convention.

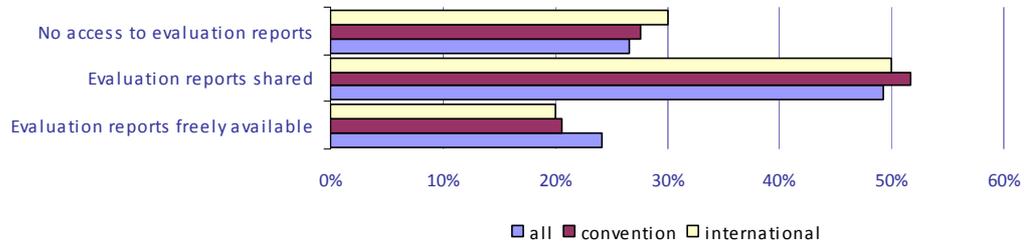
International respondents mainly say that that evaluate all or some programmes.

¹ The UK Business Adviser Barometer included our first four questions in their October survey. Their results are very similar to the ones reported here and their results can be viewed at www.ukbab.ac.

Do you or the organisation responsible for managing those projects and programmes publish evaluation reports?

It seems that most organisations either make their evaluation reports available to third parties on request or else publish them so that anyone can read them. About a quarter of respondents say that they do not allow third parties to read their evaluations.

Figure 4: Do you share the results of your evaluations?



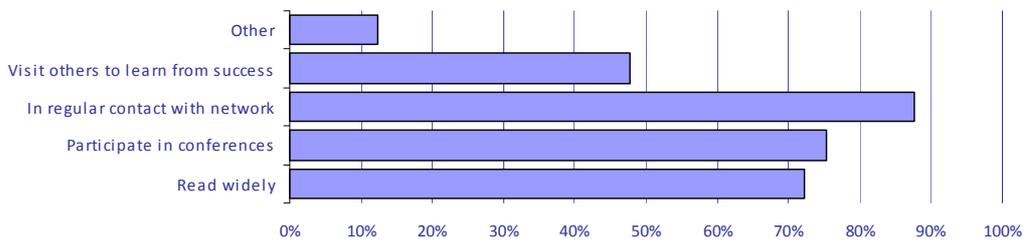
There is no significant difference between groups in the likelihood of sharing evaluation results

How do you or your organisation seek new ideas for projects and programmes?

This question is important – because it is intended to assess how extensively organisations are seeking to learn from the ideas and approaches of others, irrespective of whether successful organisations are willing to share their lessons. Respondents were able to respond positively to more than one answer.

Most respondents say that they are in regular contact with their network. For some people, this could be a proactive activity whereas others might simply regard it as what happens when they attend conferences etc. More interestingly, some three quarters of respondents say that they participate in conferences and almost a half say that they proactively visit other initiatives to learn from success. One respondent noted the importance of talking to clients; another explained that they involved stakeholders to develop new ideas. Every respondent used at least one technique to seek new ideas.

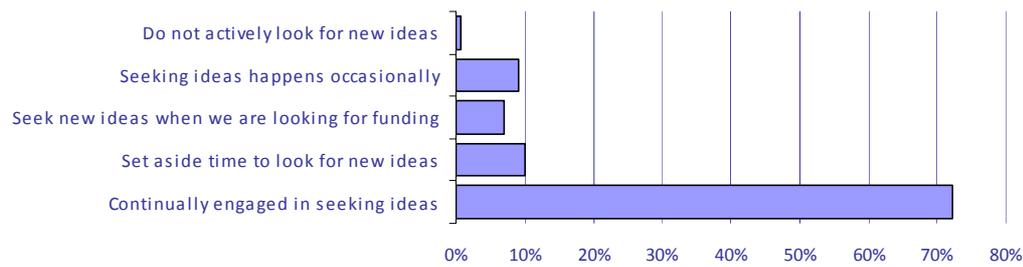
Figure 5: How do you seek new ideas for projects & programmes?



Is seeking new ideas a regular activity?

Most respondents say that they are continually engaged on seeking new ideas. This could be, at least to some extent, reactive, but some 10 per cent say that they specifically set aside time to look for new ideas. Only one respondent said that they do not do anything to look for new ideas.

Figure 6: Is seeking ideas a regular activity?



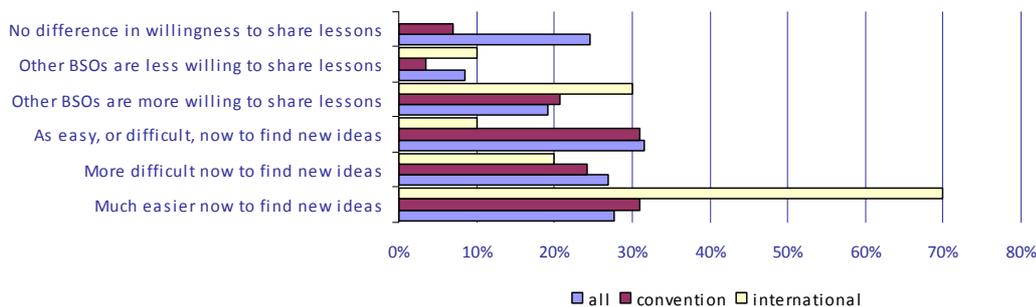
Has it become easier or more difficult to find new ideas to support entrepreneurs compared to, say, five years ago

As an external observer of business support both in the UK and internationally, it seems to the author that there are fewer innovations in business support though it also seems that many old ideas are regularly recycled. The aim of this question was to assess whether advisers felt that it was easier or more difficult now to spot new ideas. Respondents could tick more than one response.

Almost equal numbers plumped for ‘easier now’ and ‘more difficult now’. More than either said that there was no real difference now, compared to five years ago, in the ease of finding new ideas. I think that we can safely deduce therefore that there is no real difference in the ease or difficulty of finding new ideas, though that does not answer the real question of whether there are new and innovative ideas to be found.

Nearly a third of respondents said that they perceived no difference in the willingness of business support organisations to share lessons. Almost a quarter said that they thought BSOs were now more willing to share lessons. Barely 10 per cent thought that BSOs were less willing to share lessons. Respondents planning to come to the convention said almost the same. For this question, however, there was a difference from the international respondents. Overall, they think that it is much easier now to find new ideas and they thought that other BSOs were more willing to share lessons.

Figure 7: Is it easier or more difficult to gather new ideas?

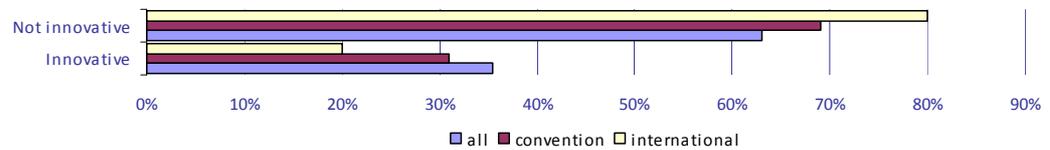


Do you perceive that business support in your region is sufficiently innovative to provide effective support to entrepreneurs?

Given that respondents, on the whole, say that they are continually engaged in seeking new ideas, one might have expected that they would think that business support was sufficiently innovative.

It is particularly revealing therefore that a high proportion of respondents think that their region is not sufficiently innovative when it comes to providing effective support for entrepreneurs. The international respondents are particularly negative.

Figure 8: Is business support sufficiently innovative?



Newsletters & websites as sources of ideas

Nor surprisingly, advisers access a wide variety of websites, magazines and newsletters when looking for ideas. We were flattered that a number said COBRA, BAD News and Scavenger. Though by no means comprehensive, resources recommended by respondents included:

- Biz Launch: www.bizlaunch.ca
- Business Link
- Cardell Media: www.cardellmedia.co.uk
- Don't start without me: www.dontstartwithoutme.com
- Growing Business Online: www.growingbusiness.co.uk
- IFC's SME toolkit: www.smetoolkit.org
- Livewire: www.shell-livewire.com and www.shell-livewire.org
- My own business: www.myownbusiness.org
- National consortium of university entrepreneurs: www.nacue.com
- Small Business Success: www.smallbusinesssuccess.biz
- Success Track: www.successtrackonline.com
- The law donut: www.lawdonut.co.uk
- The marketing donut: www.marketingdonut.co.uk
- The start-up donut: www.startupdonut.co.uk
- UK Business Advisers: ukba.co.uk

CONCLUSIONS

Most respondents say that they are being proactive about learning lessons from others and most respondents also say that they are actively looking for new ideas. Most respondents also report that they perceive no change in the ease of finding ideas and, indeed, that most other business support organisations are willing to share ideas. Yet, most respondents then say that their region is not sufficiently innovative when it comes to providing support.

Perhaps this all points to the need for more effective ways of linking business advisers – so that they can tap into enterprise support networks more effectively, establish what is working and then explore how those approaches can be adopted and adapted to suit the local circumstances.

Indeed that is the role that the International Association of Enterprise Promoters has set for itself – to encourage those working in this field to review and evaluate what they are doing and then to share the lessons widely. IAEP itself hopes to provide a forum so that practitioners can learn from others and, in the words of Tom Peters, engage in 'creative swiping' so that support for enterprise can become more innovative.