

Opportunity is about to knock: are you prepared?

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Being a veteran of the UK steel industry this is not my first Recession (real or imagined) and I'm sure that it will not be my last. Economic environments of all colours and smells cause organisations big and small a great number of challenges: how to meet demand in times of growth, how to invest and innovate in times of stability, and how to sell your way out of a recession. Whether I've worked for a large multinational business or a small niche company I have taken comfort in remembering why it is that my clients buy from me. Rarely is it because my employers offer a cost advantage - labour laws, the need for excellent quality in a highly competitive market, and real estate greed thankfully restrain this folly of competitive advantage. Seldom are we faster at delivering a solution to a client – we take time to get the right people to deliver the right work because we want to maintain a long term relationship with a client not be tied up righting hasty mistakes. Instead we aim to deliver greater value than our competitors. Despite what you read in the sector press HE is not a unique business. We all deliver products and services to a wide range of clients in a way that meet their current and future needs. Debates of competitiveness and quality I will leave to other more informed writers.

However, the findings of a recent market study undertaken for a client brought a fascinating employer response that I think encapsulates our current and future challenges. After a 1-hour structured interview (with the appropriate number of qualitative and quantitative questions) I ended the meeting with the summative closing shot "What criteria would you use to decide which Higher Education institution to do business with?" Without hesitation, deviation and a high degree of repetition our audience responded that Relevance was the most important, closely followed by Flexibility. Consistently bottom of the list was Cost - unsurprising given the top two responses, but it still managed to ram home the point to my client.

So what does this pithy anecdote mean to all of us Knowledge Exchange professionals as we prepare ourselves for the announcement of the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review on 20th October? We have felt the winds of change long before Lord Mandelson's pre-election last hurrah all the way back to HEROBAC and HEIF, a period of almost 10 years now. The uncertain ones amongst you might have looked across the Atlantic for answers – don't bother, their KT model sorely misses out from the benefits we gained as a result of the Lambert, Sainsbury and Leitch Reviews that helped us to progress on a broader front, engaging with our client base on a wide range of levels.

The Recession and the CSR will not leave us completely unscathed. We must heed the lessons of the failure of Woolworths. They did not fail because the general public stopped buying Maltesers. They failed because their monumental business model could not adjust to the changing environment. Next time you visit your local High Street check who is now occupying the former Woolworths stores – I see thrift stores and specialist supermarkets spring up in their place which demonstrates the success to be had with a flexible business model that targets the needs of specific customer groups. For Higher Education this means that a wide range of outsourcing opportunities will occur. Universities will merge on whole or in part, we are even beginning to see a transfer market in academics. Non-core activities will be divested with the continuing needs being met by consultants and contractors who will bring a wealth of experience and perspective. Clever institutions will collaborate (as far as organisational politics allow) to provide comprehensive solutions to clients with needs and cash. Payment will also need to be rethought as there is more to life than cash, but we still need enough to keep the lights on and pay the staff. Collaborations will become true business partnerships that will nourish teaching and research for years to come as Universities take a more realistic approach to their yearning for independence and see that interdependence is the way forward.

So to you all my fellow KT professionals, demand for education and expertise will not go away. How Relevant and Flexible we choose to be will be rewarded by clients who will not see the Cost in what we do but will grasp the Value. You are ideally placed to lead this revolution. If you need help then please don't forget that you heard it from Blueberry Training. Happy innovating!

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