

## Our matrix Story – Careers Inc Ltd

“Onwards and Upwards” – embedding quality and growing the company through the **matrix** Standard

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### Author(s)

Jacqui Jameson and Debra Norton – co-owners and directors of CareersInc Ltd.

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### Why The matrix Standard

- The **matrix** Standard is recognised within the sector as sign of a quality assured organisation. It is a respected and exacting standard – which, if successful in achieving, we knew would give us a sign of quality.
  - Matrix gave the focus to build on the best practice developed in a relatively short timescale and move forward as a company.
  - It helped to focus direction as well as bring our self-employed advisers onto the “same page” in terms of quality/ vision/ direction/ evaluation and customer focus.
  - The process provided us with challenge and made us question our approach and identify gaps in our provision.
  - Made us review our overall objectives to ensure they were still fit for purpose and linked directly in to our evaluation methodology and procedures.
  - It allowed us to benchmark exercise against exacting standards.
  - Our partner schools and academies were able to understand the value of accreditation of quality and this has supported the achievement of their own Quality in Careers Standards (QiCS). The majority of schools working with us are now undertaking careers quality standards.
  - Overall, it made us realise that our evaluation methodology and strategy was not as “tied in” with our objectives and goals as they should have been. Subsequently, and in consultation with our advisers, we have been able bring them together and develop a shared commitment.
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### Context

The national picture for the IAG sector is fragmented as a result of government policy and legislation. There have been significant differences in interpretation of the legislation across the country, within local authorities and at an individual institution level, which has changed how IAG is delivered in secondary schools. Whilst it could be argued that the changes have resulted in a dilution of services to young people and variation in quality, it did represent an opportunity for a new way of delivery, free of the constraints of government policy and directives and developed around evidence based practice of “what works” for young people and key stakeholders.

It was with this opportunity in mind that CareersInc Ltd was formed. Whilst it is a relatively new company the founder Directors hold many years of experience of working in the sector. Our is mission to build a company based on the highest quality delivery - in terms of the qualifications and expertise of the sub-contracted staff, the operational delivery and the leadership and management of the business.

CareersInc has expanded rapidly and we needed to ensure that we were embedding and maintaining quality during the expansion. We knew the risks to quality of expanding too quickly and felt the **matrix** standards would give us the right approach to quality development - rather than bolt on approach to quality.

Moreover, we wanted to be challenged and tested ourselves for confirmation that our approach to quality could be validated by the accepted industry standards. Our future growth might depend on it!

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## The Purpose

- To support business growth and development / give competitive edge.
- The need to demonstrate we were a quality assured organisation and therefore supporting the legislative requirements.
- To demonstrate to potential and existing customers that we were worthy of “investment” with an intention of doing things properly for the benefit of their students – rather than simply work to minimum standards.
- We saw this as an opportunity to really energise an approach to IAG and introduce some innovative and creative practice rather than deliver “ same old”. This would be a more evaluative approach with customer focus – rather than delivering a service to them... in response to their needs.
- It follows that a commitment to **matrix** also led to opportunity for discussion with our advisers about raising professional standards and working “smartly” with a clear customer focus, measurable goals and evaluative / reflective practice.
- We needed them to adopt a more commercial approach, taking responsibility and accountability to deliver to exacting standards. Our “customers” were buying the service and therefore could be more demanding than past in terms of evidence of return on investment.
- More importantly though, because the young people we seek to work with deserve the best we can give.

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## The Approach

- We adopted a classic planning-evaluation cycle model to undertake a self-evaluation against standards and gathered evidence accordingly.
- We identified gaps and created a list of actions to plug gaps and identify areas requiring improvement/ would benefit from more robust approach
- Our strategy for approaching the assessment emerged as we went through the process of self evaluation
- Staff were involved from the start with briefing and training – empowering and creating common understanding and contributing to the development of new quality systems.
- Our stakeholders in the main are our key partners of schools, colleges, universities and other guidance providers. We had already established review and evaluation systems but used the matrix evaluation process to revise and amend with their involvement.
- From our initial consideration undertaking the standard it took approximately a year from commitment to achievement

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## The Result

- Confirmation that we were on the right tracks in relation to the standards – with a clear focus on areas we could continue to strengthen in order to grow and develop our business.
- Sense of achievement to be recognised as holders of **matrix** standard.
- A clear focus for some areas we need to continue to develop and grow.
- It gave us a common language for “quality”, which is recognised by all our associates who bought into the process, and we continue to use this approach to work on areas for development.

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## The impact

- Recognition.
- Sense of pride in the organisation by us and our customers – they were genuinely delighted that we had achieved the standard.
- Evidence for our existing customers that we were a quality assured organisation that could be relied on.
- The ability for them to use to demonstrate to Ofsted etc. that they were meeting the legislative requirements and supporting advice in using a quality assured organisation.
- The opportunity to grow our company in other areas as the **matrix** Standard is very often an essential criteria in potential bidding specifications.
- The evidence is that CareersInc continues to grow and is recognised as a high quality provider of IAG services.

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## Lessons learnt

- That this was a journey and we had come a long way but needed to continue to embed practice rather than see this as a process that stops with assessment.
- There are challenges as a relatively small company. There was a lot to do in the timescales with relatively few staff and so it was a heavy investment of time – but worth it for the end result and the procedures and processes we now have in place as a result.
- Make more of the “marketing opportunity” once successful – we are working on this now but did not do a lot at the time because of the need to focus back on some operational issues which we had not dealt with during the final few weeks leading up to the assessment. A hazard of being a small company, perhaps.

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## In Brief

Companies and organisations will be at different stages of their quality journeys but the **matrix** Standards provide an impetus and drive towards quality by benchmarking against standards. It provides an evolving process that doesn't end with the assessment but establishes a framework for ongoing continuous improvement.

The external assessment by a well-trained and informed assessor, who could interpret and apply the standards appropriately to our operation, gave us constructive feedback, challenge and direction for areas of improvement. We benefitted from their experience of best practice in this area and have adopted some of their suggestions and advice. Even if you don't go for an award, it is well worth talking to an assessor/adviser.

The standards **are** a challenge for a small company working with a different delivery model to a “typical” IAG provider but the outcomes are well worth the investment of time. You do get a certificate and a plaque if you want one but it was never just about a “badge” for us but about genuine attempt to raise standards and benefit from external assessment with objective feedback.

Our customers demand it. Our clients deserve it.

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