

Research into Business Support's Online and Offline Channels of Delivery

Report to the Department for Business,
Innovation & Skills and
Businesslink.gov.uk

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Executive Summary

1. Various options are currently being considered for enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of publicly funded business support in England, and in particular the role provided by the various channels of Business Link. This report informs this process by providing findings on: the use of different types of business support, customer journeys around the business support system, and what businesses are looking for and need from a re-designed service. The report draws on a survey of 1,100 businesses and series of eight focus groups with businesses carried out during September and October 2010. The businesses that took part included users of the businesslink.gov.uk website, users of Business Link's telephone and face to face channels, beneficiaries of Solutions for Business products as well as businesses that have not used any of these in the past two years.

Use of different types of business support

2. The research confirmed that **business owners and managers that use external sources call upon a 'rich diet' of interactions to inform the way they manage and develop their business.** The most frequently cited sources of information and advice in our survey were: the web; discussions with customers, suppliers and other business contacts; advice from professionals; and discussions with friends and family. Accountants were the most commonly used professional group.
3. In the survey sample that was most representative of the general SME population, about one-third of respondents had had discussions with someone from Business Link in the last two years.
4. The survey indicated that younger firms were more likely to have used discussions with friends and family and discussions with someone from Business Link than was the case for more established firms. Older firms were more likely than younger firms to have used business member organisations and trade bodies, and also advice from professionals. Businesses that had had face-to-face discussions with someone from Business Link were somewhat more established, on average, than those that had just used the telephone/email channel, and also more likely to have experienced turnover growth in the last two years.
5. The survey also found that there were particular issues for which businesses were using different Business Link channels of support. For example, 'employment/staff' issues and 'finance and grants' were commonly cited as issues for which the Business Link website was used, whereas 'growing the business' was an issue on which firms were more likely to be seeking one-to-one discussions - through face-to-face meetings.
6. The research confirms findings from other studies that those businesses that had experienced recent growth are more receptive to various sources of information and advice than those that had not grown.

7. The survey also found that businesses that drew on publicly funded business support were also more likely to engage with wider structures of information and advice available than the general business population.
8. **The research suggested a variable quality of Business Link support, but on the whole it was thought to provide a valuable service**, in particular in relation to information, basic advice, diagnostics and signposting. Focus group participants referred to some excellent examples of Business Link support, including some ranking its advice as the best they had ever received. However, some relayed poor experiences as well. The survey indicated that **those users who had had a face-to-face meeting were more positive (than those users who had just used the telephone/email channel) about the value of the contact they had had with Business Link**. This was confirmed in focus group discussions, with the quality of personal relationships being identified as important.
9. Whilst the focus groups identified the importance of the diagnostic services provided by Business Link, the survey suggested that **professional advisors were more effective in helping businesses analyse the issues facing their business than Business Link advisors**. However, it must be noted that the survey confirmed that larger companies were more likely to have used professional advisors, and could pay higher fee rates for this advice.
10. **Business Link advisors were more likely than private sector professionals to have referred firms to useful sources of information, and to other organisations and business support services**.

Customer journeys around the business support system

11. **The Business Link website is currently complementing, rather than substituting for, telephone and face-to-face support**. The survey suggested that the website is not currently a key route to Business Link face-to-face support, events or to the government-backed Solutions for Business products. Rather, survey respondents were often prompted to get in touch with Business Link directly through word of mouth recommendations (from business contacts, friends or other public sector organisations) and via direct contact from Business Link (especially for more established firms). The results from the survey suggest that search engines are the predominant way in which firms first find the Business Link website itself.
12. Findings from both the survey and the focus groups show that Business Link advisors are important signposts to other providers and support, including Solutions for Business products. This is particularly the case where businesses have had face-to-face meetings with advisors.
13. There is a high degree of overlap between those that use the Business Link website and those that use the telephone/email and face-to-face channels. The more in-depth the support a business receives from Business Link the greater their propensity to engage with a wider range of channels and the more likely they are to find the Business Link website useful. However, the extent to which the website users are really 'immersing' themselves in the site *before* seeking further support is variable: **many Business Link users had barely looked at the website before getting in touch for advice**. This suggests that there is currently a rather shallow level of engagement with the website amongst some users, though also that there is the potential to enhance the utility of the website.

14. A concern raised by the survey was the limited awareness amongst some businesses of alternatives to Business Link. One fifth of survey respondents did not know where they would go in the absence of Business Link, and a further one tenth said 'Nobody'. The most popular alternatives that were cited included business membership organisations and trade organisations and professionals (notably accountants), especially for established businesses. Younger firms were more likely than older firms to turn to family and friends in the absence of Business Link.

Business requirements from a re-designed service

15. **Differing views were expressed through the focus groups on the extent of government intervention to support businesses, ranging from a strong 'interventionist' perspective to a 'principled non-interventionist' one.** Interventionists were generally supportive of the type of support currently provided, and placed substantial weight on the value of publicly-funded face-to-face advice. Some also identified roles for government in terms of addressing fundamental objectives, supporting specific sectors and 'picking winners'. Principled non-interventionists held a view that government should not provide any more than a very minimal level of accurate and succinct information, and should seek to make regulation simpler, thereby getting out of businesses' way. This view was most frequently put forward by more established businesses and businesspeople who were not users of Business Link. Businesses with this perspective also suggested that there could be a role for government in providing some form of diagnostic tool and signposting to other business support providers.
16. **There were some significant concerns raised through the survey and the focus groups about the loss of Business Link's face-to-face role with businesses.** Most survey respondents who had had face-to-face meetings with Business Link were sceptical as to how well online and telephone channels could substitute for those face-to-face discussions. Focus group participants generally believed that personal relationships and one-to-one diagnostics were crucial to effective business advice, though some participants believed that the private sector might be able to substitute for Business Link, especially if there was effective signposting to the right providers. Those participants who had had good experiences of face-to-face meetings with Business Link were potentially willing to pay for face-to-face advice from the service.
17. A number of potential enhancements and functions to the online service were welcomed or at least considered to be worth further exploration. Of the enhancements tested, the most popular, especially amongst younger respondents, were the ability to personalise content and services, and the ability to complete and submit official forms and returns. User reviews and ratings of information and services, and online forums were also well received.
18. Exploring the desired characteristics of an online portal in the focus groups, unprompted responses emphasised the importance of getting the basics right: that it 'must work' – being navigable, clear, uncluttered, easy to use, secure, tested, accurate and with useful menus. Of the various prompted characteristics we tested, those that got most support from the participants were 'current' and 'knowledgeable', followed by 'comprehensive' and 'trustworthy'.

19. Three scenarios, developed by the Businesslink.gov.uk team, were tested in the focus groups. There was no clear 'winner' though **scenario 2 (with its intermediate level of interactivity) got the most support**. It offered increased opportunities for tailoring services to businesses' needs. Its positioning as fast, effective and comprehensive was welcomed by those that liked this scenario; it placed less emphasis on 'government' than scenario 1; and was less over-reaching than scenario 3..
20. Participant businesses generally argued that a redesigned online service needs to include some form of personalised **diagnostic tool**. There was a clear consensus that **online diagnostics need to be backed up with some access to a face-to-face support**, which could be paid for - though this may result in barriers of access for certain types of business, such as start-ups.

Issues and risks

21. The research findings raise a number of risks around the shift to a service delivered predominantly online and through a national telephone helpline.
22. The **key concern is associated with a loss of diagnostic and brokerage services** (in particular where these are currently delivered face-to-face) rather than the provision of advice and support *per se*.
23. Many businesses can and will use their networks, private providers and business representative or trade organisations instead of Business Link. However, a reduction in the availability of Business Link's face-to-face service could result in **a lower take-up of external advice**, and confusion remains around which sources of advice to trust.
24. The impacts of reducing the availability of face to face diagnostic and brokerage services will also be uneven. **Start-ups and new businesses will be particularly affected** as they are the least likely to know what support they need, the least able to find or trust appropriate support and the least able and willing to pay for this support. As **growing businesses and those intending to grow** are currently more likely than others to engage with Business Link, especially face-to-face support, there is also a risk that these businesses will be particularly affected.

1: Introduction and methodology

Background

- 1.1 Business Link is the Government's multi-channel business support service in England, providing customers with access to the help and support needed to start and/or develop a business. It is currently delivered through two main channels:
- a regional network of Business Link providers (contracted by Regional Development Agencies), which offer support through:
 - one-to-one discussions with business advisors (face-to-face and by phone)
 - a programme of topical events and workshops
 - contact centres which handle telephone and email enquiries
 - an online portal – Businesslink.gov.uk (currently managed by Serco on behalf of HM Revenue & Customs).
- 1.2 As part of its remit, Business Link (BL) brokers support to a range of appropriate private and public sector business support and is the primary access route to the range of government support included in the Solutions for Business (SfB) portfolio - the overarching framework for core publicly funded business support in England.
- 1.3 Various options for enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of publicly funded business support are currently being considered.
- 1.4 To inform this process, the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) and Businesslink.gov.uk commissioned SQW to undertake research into the online and offline channels of delivery for business support, in order to provide a fuller understanding of customer journeys around the business support system (both publicly and privately funded) and of what businesses are looking for and need from a re-designed service.
- 1.5 The objectives of the research, which commenced in August 2010, were to:
- explore entrepreneurs' and businesses' experiences and expectations of business support (public and private)
 - investigate the links and customer journeys between the BL online service and other channels of publicly funded business support (in particular, the BL telephone helpline, BL face-to-face service and Solutions for Business products)
 - explore ways in which the online channel can be enhanced to ensure that it meets the needs of a greater proportion of businesses at each stage of their development
 - identify any issues or problems likely to be associated with expanding the role of the online channel.

Research methodology

- 1.6 Our research has comprised two strands of fieldwork:
- quantitative research, through a survey of 1,100 businesses across England, with fieldwork and data capture sub-contracted to Ipsos MORI
 - qualitative research, through a series of eight focus groups with businesses in five English cities.
- 1.7 We are very grateful to the business owners and managers who kindly consented to participate in this research, in order to help inform policy development – especially those who took part in the focus groups, which involved two-hour face-to-face group discussions.
- 1.8 We are also very grateful to the many different business organisations and networks that kindly helped to promote the focus groups in the five cities.
- 1.9 Brief descriptions of the survey and focus groups are provided in the sub-sections below.

The survey¹

Sampling approach

- 1.10 The broad sampling approach for this survey was set out by BIS in the brief for the study, determined by the study's requirement to explore the experience of various channels of business support (including non-users). In order to ensure sufficient numbers of respondents using the various channels, four different sample groups were used:
- S1 – known users of businesslink.gov.uk, drawn from businesses that had taken part in the Businesslink.gov.uk Customer Impact Assessment surveys in 2009 and 2010 and had agreed to be re-contacted²
 - S2 – known Business Link users who had received help in response to a telephone or email enquiry and/or received 'intensive assistance' through discussions with a Business Link advisor within the previous 12 months; this sample of Business Link customers was provided by the Regional Development Agencies³
 - S3 – known users of Solutions for Business products in the last year, drawn from a sample of SfB customers provided by the Regional Development Agencies⁴
 - S4 – a more random sample of the SME business population, drawn from the Experian National Business Database, which was intended to ensure that the survey

¹ More detailed descriptions of the survey sampling approach, methodology and data processing are available in Ipsos MORI's separate technical report for the survey.

² Participants in these previous surveys had been drawn from a random stratified probability sample from Experian, defined by age and size of the business. Both users and non-users of businesslink.gov.uk were interviewed in those surveys, but only the details of known users (who had consented to being re-contacted) were then included in this S1 sample for our survey.

³ Note that no sample was available for London, within this sample group

⁴ Note that no sample was available for London or Yorkshire & Humber, within this sample group. Not all Solutions for Business products were included within the sample; see Figure A-29 in Annex A for information on the SfB products used by our respondents

captured the perspectives of sufficient numbers of businesses which are currently *not* using publicly-funded business support services (this group included both users and non-users of Business Link support).

- 1.11 It should be noted that these four sample groups are *not* mutually exclusive: individual firms in each sample group may have used more than one channel of business support (for example, firms in the S1 sample may have had discussions with Business Link as well as using the Business Link website).
- 1.12 The target number of completed interviews per sample group, and the approach to quotas and stratification within each sample group is summarised in the table below.

Table 1-1: Summary of sampling approach

Sample group	Sample size	Source	Criteria	Stratification	Quotas
S1	250	Businesslink.gov.uk survey re-contacts	N/A	N/A	N/A
S2	350	RDAs/Business Link (excl. London) sample of BL users	Intensive assists and Enquiry responses only (excl. SfB users)	By region and by Intensive Assist/Enquiry Response	N/A
S3	150	RDAs (excl. London and Y&H) sample of SfB users	N/A	By region and SfB/SfB+Offline users	N/A
S4	350	Experian's National Business Database	Excl. public sector, branches and companies with 250+ emps	By sector and size in line with SME population	100x 0-4 employees; 250x 5-249 employees (note that this under-represents the proportion of micro firms in the business population as a whole)

Source: SQW

Questionnaire and fieldwork

- 1.13 Having briefly reviewed recent relevant literature, SQW designed the survey questionnaire in discussion with BIS, Businesslink.gov.uk and other stakeholders on the study steering group. The questionnaire was structured as follows:

- Basic company information and screening
- The user experience
- Barriers to accessing and exploiting business information, advice and support
- Potential enhancements to the BL online channel
- Additional business information.

- 1.14 Fieldwork was conducted by Ipsos MORI between the 2nd and the 24th September 2010. In order to test the questionnaire, while ensuring that fieldwork was completed on time, a 'live pilot' was conducted. Following the first two days of fieldwork, the questionnaire was revised with BIS's agreement, to reduce its average length to one that was commensurate with the budget available for the research⁵. The average post-pilot interview length was approximately 17 minutes across the 1,100 respondents.

Profile of respondents

- 1.15 The profiles of respondents by business size, broad industry sector and length of time trading are summarised in Table 1-2, Table 1-3 and Table 1-4 below.

Table 1-2: Profile of respondents by business size (employees), per sample group

	S1		S2		S3		S4	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
0 to 4 employees	161	64%	239	68%	78	52%	100	29%
5 to 49 employees	78	31%	96	27%	58	39%	229	65%
50 to 249 employees	10	4%	12	3%	11	7%	21	6%
250+ employees	1	<1%	3	1%	3	2%	n/a	n/a
Total	250	100%	350	100%	150	100%	350	100%

Source: SQW

Table 1-3: Profile of respondents by broad industry sector, per sample group

	S1		S2		S3		S4	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Primary industries (agriculture, mining, industry)	9	4%	32	9%	5	3%	16	5%
Manufacturing	27	11%	40	11%	42	28%	42	12%
Construction	12	5%	36	10%	6	4%	32	9%
Retail, distribution	26	10%	36	10%	16	11%	78	22%
Hotels, catering	7	3%	15	4%	2	1%	33	9%
Transport, storage, communications	11	4%	17	5%	7	5%	31	9%
Financial and business services	127	51%	74	21%	34	23%	92	26%
Public and personal services	31	12%	79	23%	30	20%	26	7%
Don't know	0%	0%	21	6%	8	5%	0%	0%
Total	250	100%	350	100%	150	100%	350	100%

Source: SQW

⁵ Note that not all questions were asked of all four sample groups, in order to constrain the average interview length. In particular, S4 was the only group asked the section on barriers to accessing support, and this S4 group was excluded from many of the questions regarding users' experience of Business Link.

Table 1-4: Profile of respondents by length of time trading, per sample group

	S1		S2		S3		S4	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Pre-start/less than 3 years	90	36%	128	37%	53	35%	32	9%
3 to 10 years	63	25%	104	30%	40	27%	120	34%
11 years or more	97	39%	114	33%	55	37%	197	56%
Ceased trading, do not intend to start trading, don't know	0	0%	4	1%	2	1%	1	0%
Total	250	100%	350	100%	150	100%	350	100%

Source: SQW

- 1.16 Across the complete sample, the profile of respondents by their usage/non-usage of Business Link channels in the last two years is summarised in the table below (note that the total below comes to 1,018 rather than 1,100 due to various combinations of 'don't know/can't remember' responses).

Table 1-5: Profile of respondents by usage/non-usage of Business Link channels in the last two years

	No.	%
Used businesslink.gov.uk but not had discussions with someone from Business Link	136	13%
Used businesslink.gov.uk and had discussions with Business Link, including face-to-face meeting(s)	399	39%
Used businesslink.gov.uk and had discussions with Business Link (phone/email, but not face-to-face meeting(s))	150	15%
Not used businesslink.gov.uk and not had discussions with someone from Business Link	223	22%
Not used businesslink.gov.uk but had discussions with Business Link, including face-to-face meeting(s)	83	8%
Not used businesslink.gov.uk but had discussions with Business Link (phone/email, but not face-to-face meeting(s))	27	3%

Source: SQW analysis

- 1.17 Of the 1,100 respondents, 68% were male, 40% were aged under 45, and 58% said that their turnover had grown over the last two years.

Analysis

- 1.18 Unweighted tabulations for each of the four sample groups were provided to SQW by Ipsos MORI. SQW has also undertaken further bespoke analysis of responses using SPSS software.
- 1.19 It should be stressed that **the overall sample of 1,100 respondents was not intended to be – and should not be taken to be – representative of the business base as a whole**, nor indeed of any particular single sub-set of businesses. The results have had to be interpreted with care – especially when aggregating across sample groups – to ensure that the key messages emerging from the survey (e.g. regarding the use and perceptions of particular channels) are not being distorted by the specific sampling approach used. Similarly, in our analysis of the survey findings, we have avoided referring to 'significant' differences, as statistical

significance testing is only meaningful for a random, representative sample of a population. Note that the results by sample group are presented in Annex A for each survey question.

The focus groups

- 1.20 Focus groups provided an opportunity to interrogate businesses responses to potential changes to government provided business support in more depth – providing qualitative information to complement the quantitative findings of the survey.
- 1.21 Eight focus groups were held in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Cambridge between 17th September 2010 and 7th October 2010, with a total of 86 participants. Each group comprised between five and 14 participants, who were recruited as a result of interest expressed when completing the business survey or via local business representative organisations and networks. The profile of focus group participants is summarised in the table below.

Table 1-6: Profile of focus group participants

		Birmingham I	Birmingham II	Cambridge	Leeds I	Leeds II	London	Manchester I	Manchester II	Total
Sector in which your company operates?	Business services			7	5	3		1		16
	Manufacturing	2	2			1		3	4	12
	Education & training	2	4		1	2				9
	Retail, tourism & leisure	3					1	1		9
	Automotive, engineering & high tech	1	2			1	1		2	7
	Business & innovation support			1		1		2	1	5
	Creative, digital & media			2		2	2	1	2	5
	Architecture & construction	1			2				1	4
	ICT & telecoms			2	1		1			4
	Research					1				1
	Multi-sector, other, or not specified	3	1		2					6
Approx. no. of employees in your company?	0-4	2	1	7	2	5	2	4	4	27
	5-49	2	3	4	7	3	0	1	2	22
	50-249	6	1	1	0	1	2	1	3	15
	250+	2	4	0	1	2	1	2	1	13
Have you visited the BL website in the last couple of years?	Yes	4	5	10	9	11	3	7	7	56
	No	8	4	2	2	0	2	1	3	22
Have you used the BL	Yes	3	3	3	3	4	2	0	4	22

telephone helpline in the last couple of years?	No	9	6	9	8	7	3	8	6	56
Have you used BL face-to-face advice in the last couple of years?	Yes	4	1	5	5	6	3	8	6	38
	No	8	8	7	6	5	2	0	4	40
	Female	0	4	3	4	4	1	2	3	21
	Male	12	5	9	10	10	4	8	7	65
Total participants		12	9	12	14	14	5	10	10	86

Source: SQW

- 1.22 As demonstrated by the participant profiles in Table 1-6 the focus groups included businesses from a range of different sectors and of a variety of sizes, with varying experiences and exposure to current Business Link services. The focus groups could never fully *represent* the wider business population but each did include a sufficient range of businesses to give confidence that a full set of perspectives on business support were aired in the discussions.
- 1.23 Some cohorts of the business community did, however, feature more strongly in some groups than others, and that was sometimes reflected in the discussion that followed. It is worth highlighting the relatively strong presence of smaller businesses involved in business services (e.g. accountancy firms etc) in both in Cambridge and Leeds I, and of manufacturing businesses in both Manchester sessions. There were relatively more businesses with over 50 employees represented in the two Birmingham and London sessions than elsewhere.
- 1.24 All of the focus group sessions included a number of businesses that had made use of Business Link services – more than would be present in a completely random sample – which was important given the focus of discussion.
- 1.25 The discussion guide and materials for the focus groups were developed in discussion with BIS and Businesslink.gov.uk. In particular, descriptions, ‘mood boards’ and conceptual screenshots were provided by the Businesslink.gov.uk team for three distinct scenarios for an enhanced online portal, which were tested in the focus group discussions.

Structure of this report

- 1.26 The remainder of this report is structured as follows:
- Section 2 summarises the key findings from the survey
 - Section 3 presents the messages emerging from the eight focus groups
 - Section 4 sets out our conclusions, in the light of the combined findings of the survey and the focus groups, on each of the four research questions addressed by the study (as set out in paragraph 1.5 above).
- 1.27 There are two annexes:
- Annex A includes further detail on the survey findings, with the response to each survey question, by sample group

- Annex B presents materials which provide an indication of the scenarios tested in the focus groups.

2: Findings from the survey

2.1 In this section we summarise the key findings from the survey, regarding:

- the user experience
 - challenges
 - sources of business information and advice
 - experience of Business Link one-to-one support
 - experience of Business Link events
 - experience of the Business Link website and other websites
 - experience of private sector professional advice
 - issues on which businesses sought support
 - channels into Solutions for Business products
- the barriers to accessing and exploiting business information, advice and support
- potential enhancements to the Business Link website.

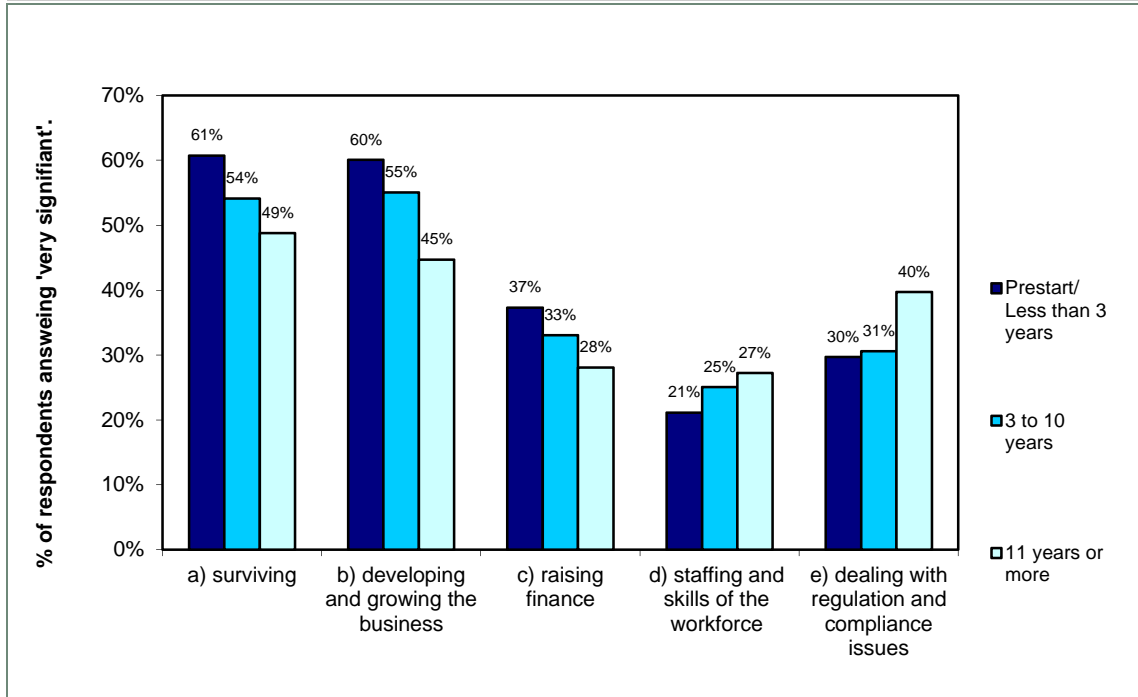
2.2 The focus of this section is on the analyses which we consider to provide the most interesting and useful findings for each of the areas covered by the survey, having examined the detailed tabulations. Further analysis of each of the survey questions is provided in Annex A, and the tabulations have also been provided to BIS on each of the sample groups.

2.3 Note that in some cases we present the results for each of the four sample groups separately, where we consider that there is a risk that a simple aggregation of responses across the sample groups could lead to distorted or misleading inferences being drawn, purely as a result of the specific sampling approach used for the research.

User experience

Challenges

Figure 2-1: To what extent, if at all, have the following been significant concerns for your business over the last two years – % saying very significant, by age of firm (S1-S4)

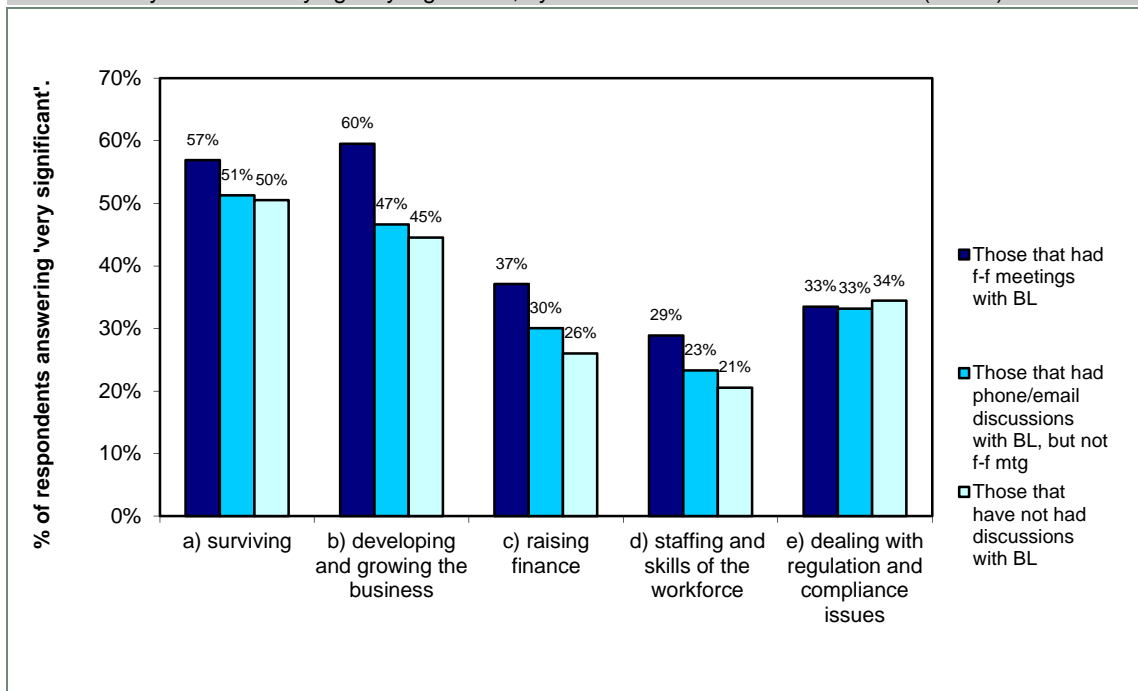


Base⁶: all 1100 - prestart/less than 3 years (303), 3 to 10 years (327), 11 years or more (463).

- 2.4 Towards the start of the survey questionnaire we asked business about their challenges over the last two years.
- 2.5 Examining the tabulations of the survey responses, it was clear (as shown in Figure 2-1) that **the age of the firm was a key determinant of the challenges experienced** – with younger firms being more likely than older firms to say that surviving, developing and growing the business, and raising finance were ‘very significant’ concerns.
- 2.6 In contrast, more established firms were more likely than younger firms to say that dealing with regulation and compliance issues, and staffing and skills of the workforce were very significant concerns.

⁶ Note that in this and other charts in our report, the bases for the various sub-groups shown may not sum to the total base quoted – typically due to some ‘don’t know’ responses (e.g. regarding the age of the firm)

Figure 2-2: To what extent, if at all, have the following been significant concerns for your business over the last two years? - % saying very significant, by whether have had BL discussions (S1-S4)

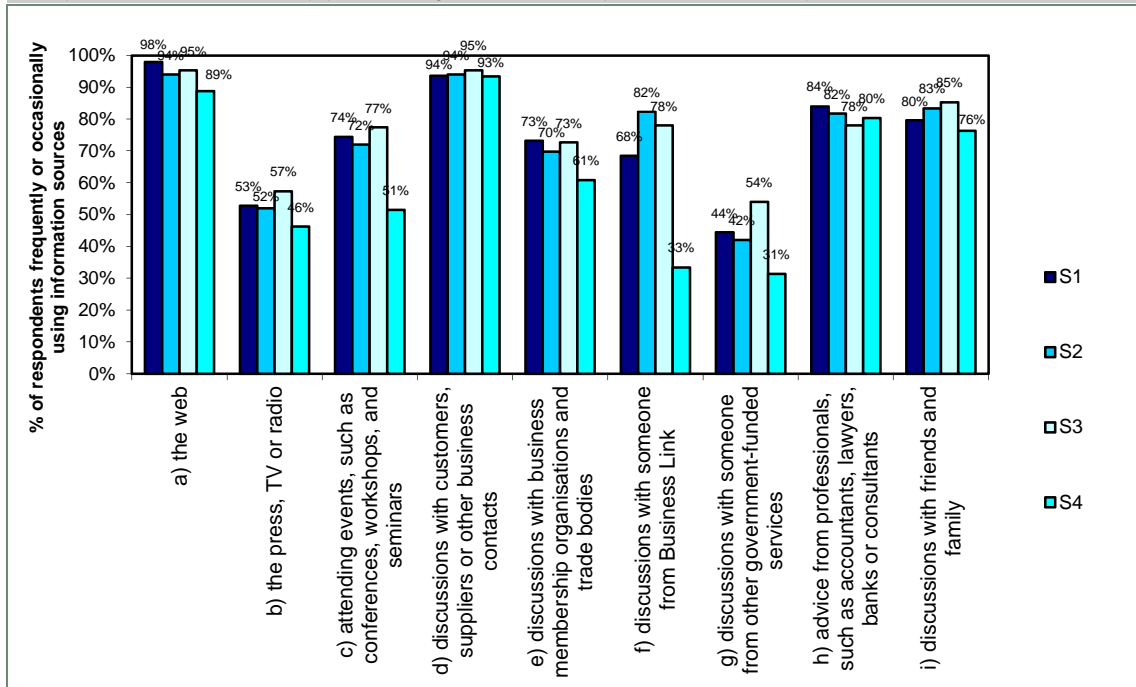


Base: all 1100 - those that had f-f meetings with BL (499), those that had phone/email discussions with BL but not f-f meetings (193), those that have not had discussions with someone from BL (404).

- 2.7 Analysing the responses to the same ‘challenge’ question by the extent to which the respondent had had contact with someone from Business Link in the last two years, we find (Figure 2-2) that those that had had face-to-face meetings with Business Link were more likely to have perceived each of the challenges as ‘very significant’ - except for one (dealing with regulation and compliance issues) where the responses were very similar.
- 2.8 We infer from this that **the more businesses perceived themselves to face pressing challenges/ issues, the more likely they were, on average, to avail themselves of support from Business Link**, and in particular face-to-face meetings. This would tend to support the view that Business Link’s resources are, in general, being directed to the businesses most in need of support. Specifically, there appears to be a higher prevalence of growth-oriented businesses amongst those that have had face-to-face meetings with Business Link than amongst those that have just used the phone/email channel, or amongst those that have not used Business Link at all (60% of that had had face-to-face meetings with Business Link said that developing or growing the business was a ‘very significant’ issue, versus 47% of those that had just had phone/email discussions with Business Link, and 45% of those that not had discussions with Business Link).
- 2.9 Looking at the responses to this question by whether or not the firm had used the Business Link *website*, we find that the site users were also consistently more likely than non-users to cite these as challenges – especially for staffing and skills of the workforce (55% of site users saying this was a very or fairly significant concern over the last two years, versus 26% of non-users).

Sources of business information and advice

Figure 2-3: How often, if at all, have you used the following sources of information or advice over the last two years, to inform the way you manage and develop your business? – by sample source



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

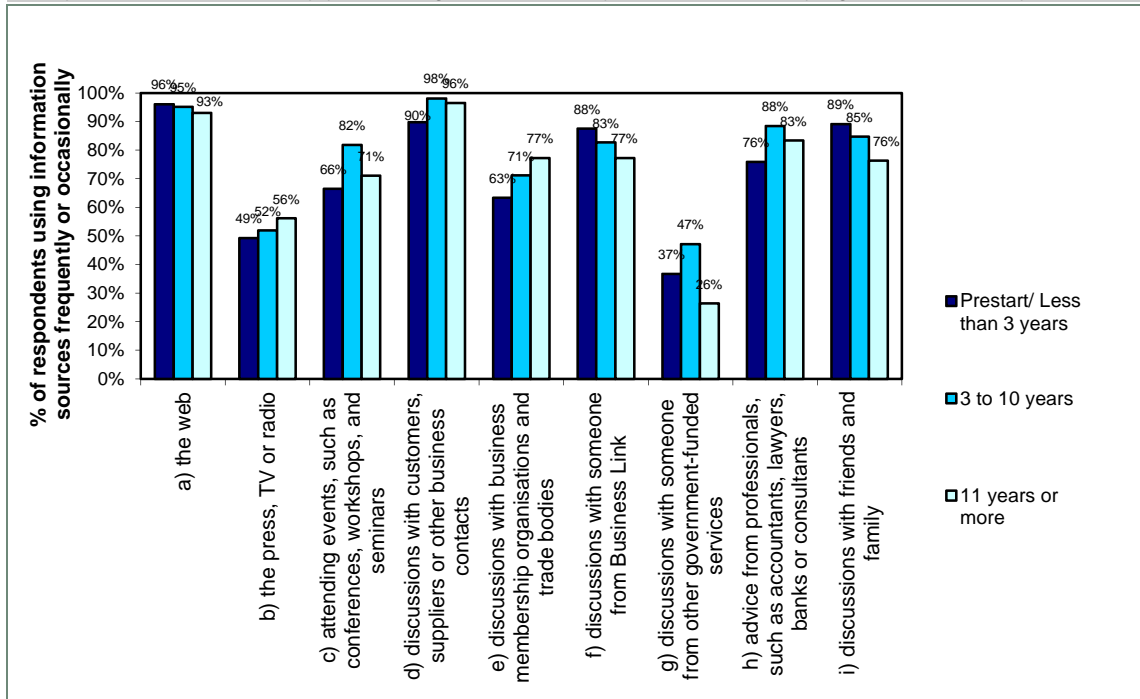
Base: all 1100 - S1 (250), S2 (350), S3 (150), S4 (350).

- 2.10 Having asked respondents about their challenges, we moved on to explore the sources of information and advice that they had used to help manage and develop their business (a key routing question for later parts of the questionnaire). For this particular question we have chosen **not** to aggregate responses across the sample groups, given the sources for each of the samples (e.g. clearly the S2 respondents are much more likely to have had discussions with someone from Business Link⁷ than S4 respondents, given that the former was drawn from a Regional Development Agency-provided sample of known Business Link users: simply adding or averaging those responses would not be meaningful).
- 2.11 **The web, discussions with customers, suppliers and other business contacts, advice from professionals, and discussions with friends and family** were the most popular sources across all four sample groups, (as shown in Figure 2-3 above). As would be expected, the S4 (Experian sample) respondents were markedly less likely than those in the client-supplied samples (S1 - S3) to have had discussions with Business Link, or other government funded services. But they were also less likely to have engaged with business membership organisations, and less likely to have attended events. This suggests that our ‘known users’

⁷ Note, however, that 18% of our S2 sample of ‘known users’ of Business Link enquiry response or intensive assist services claimed *not* to have had discussions with someone from Business Link in the last two years. This anomaly could potentially be down to errors in some of the RDA-provided sample data, lapses of recall for some respondents, and/or someone other than the respondent having had the contact with Business Link from that organisation (the percentage was higher in larger, more established firms).

(of businesslink.gov.uk, Business Link and SfB) in S1- S3 are more open to engaging with wider structured business support, than is the case for the average SME.

Figure 2-4: How often, if at all, have you used the following sources of information or advice over the last two years, to inform the way you manage and develop your business? – by age of firm (S2 only)



Base: S2 only (350) - prestart/less than 3 years (109), 3 to 10 years (104), 11 years or more (114).

2.12 Exploring this question further within one of the ‘known user’ sample groups (S2) we find that older firms are more likely than younger firms to have used (over the last two years):

- discussions with business member organisations and trade bodies
- events.

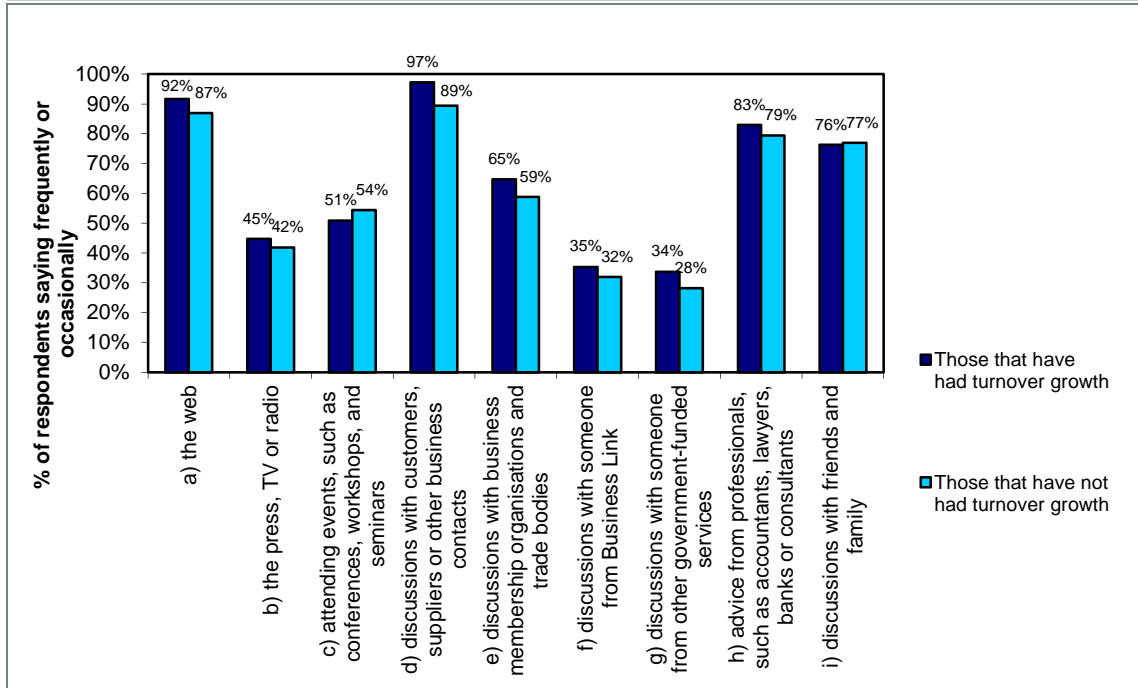
2.13 ...but **less** likely than younger firms to say that they have used:

- discussions with someone from Business Link⁸
- discussions with other government funded services
- discussions with friends and family.

2.14 The extent to which the *age of the respondent* was a factor on their propensity to use the web as a source for business-related information or advice varied by sample group: in the S2 sample of known Business Link users, younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to use the web (97% of those aged under 45, versus 87% of those aged 55+), but there were no material differences between the age groups in the other samples.

⁸ As per previous footnote, the anomaly of some of our S2 respondents saying that they have *not* had discussions with someone from Business Link in the last two years could partially be due to someone other than the respondent having had the contact with Business Link from that organisation

Figure 2-5: How often, if at all, have you used the following sources of information or advice over the last two years, to inform the way you manage and develop your business? – by whether turnover has grown in last two years (S4 only)



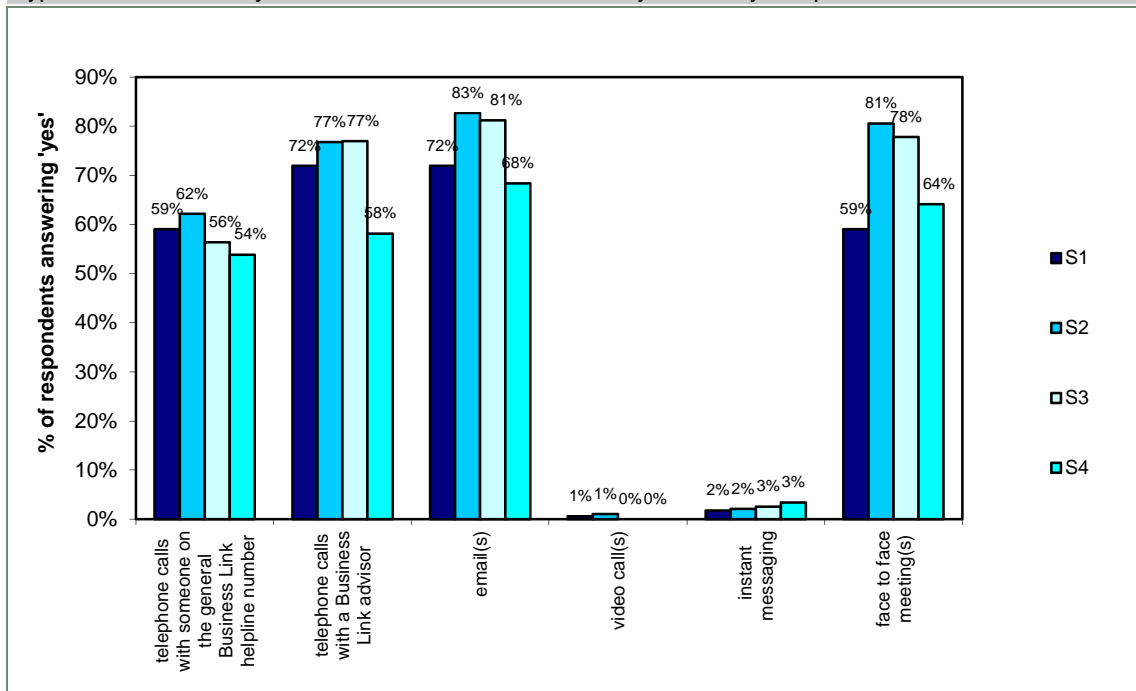
Base: S4 only (350) - those that have had turnover growth (181), those that have not had turnover growth (160).

- 2.15 Later in the questionnaire we asked respondents whether turnover has grown in the last two years. Using the responses to that question for the S4 (Experian) sample – which is somewhat more representative⁹ of the SME base as a whole than the other client-supplied samples – we find that, as shown in Figure 2-5, **those firms which have had recent turnover growth appear to have used the various sources of information and advice more than their counterparts which have not had turnover growth** - with two exceptions: events and discussions with friends and family.
- 2.16 This is particularly marked with respect to the ‘discussions with customers, suppliers and other business contacts’ for which 82% of those whose turnover had grown said that they used this ‘frequently’ (versus only 71% of those whose turnover has not grown). We suggest that openness to various forms of interaction – especially keeping very close to customers and suppliers – could well be a characteristic of more successful businesses.

⁹ Though note the previous point that 0-4 employee firms were deliberately under-sampled in S4 relative to their share of firms in the SME population as a whole, so S4 cannot said to be entirely representative of the SME population.

Experience of Business Link one-to-one support

Figure 2-6: You said that you'd had contact with someone from Business Link. Which of the following types of contact have you had with them over the last two years? – by sample source

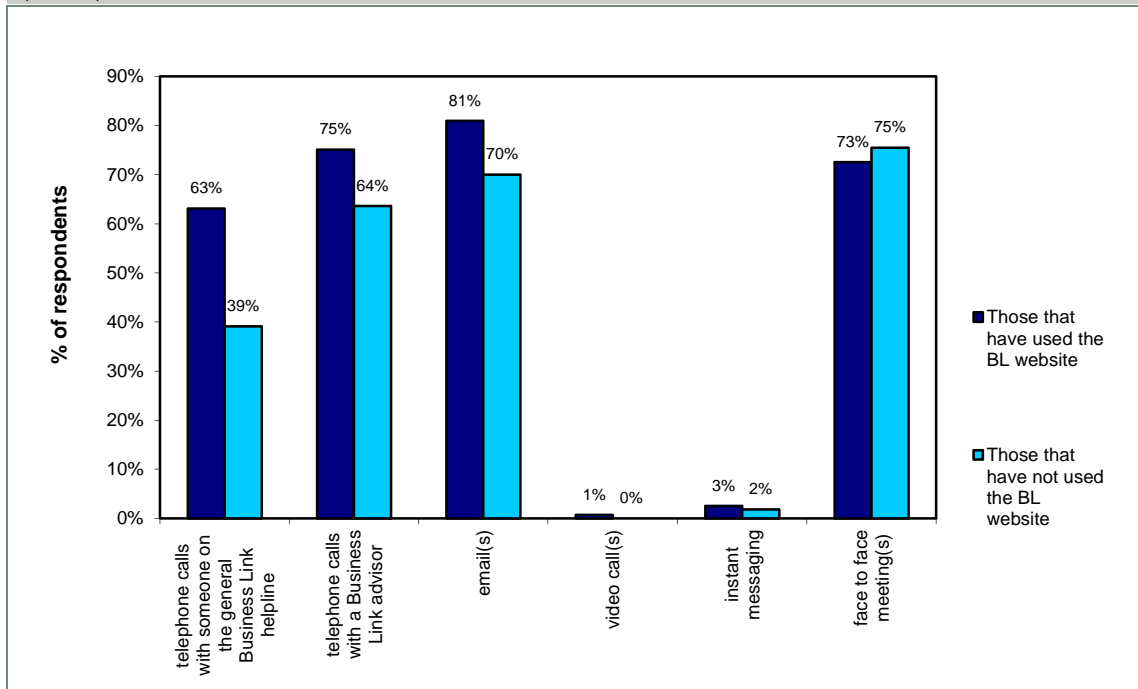


Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 693 that have had discussions with someone from BL - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117), S4 (117).

- 2.17 For those respondents who said that they had had discussions with someone from Business Link, we investigated the types of contact they had had (as a multi-coded question).
- 2.18 As illustrated in Figure 2-6, **email was the most frequently cited form of contact**, while usage of video calls and instant messaging was almost negligible (reflecting the fact that these are not services that Business Link yet offers consistently across the network – trials have recently been conducted to explore their feasibility).
- 2.19 The responses to this question varied by sample group - as might be expected (in particular, the proportions of these people in S2 and S3 who had had a face-to-face meeting were higher than was the case for those in S1 and S4). Nonetheless, we were struck by the relatively **high occurrence of face-to-face meetings amongst those people who had engaged with someone from Business Link**. Based on data previously provided to us on the usage of different Business Link channels, we had been expecting perhaps a third of these people to have had face-to-face meetings (we are advised that the usual pattern of one-to-one support is 30% face-to-face and 70% telephone), but we actually found that the majority (59% to 81%) had done so in the last two years - even in the S4 group (64%).
- 2.20 In the light of this survey's findings (including our later findings re the use of telephone and email channels by those who have had face-to-face meetings), it may be worth BIS undertaking further analysis of the Business Link monitoring data regarding the proportions of businesses that have had face-to-face meetings, amongst those that engage with Business Link's enquiry response and intensive assistance services.

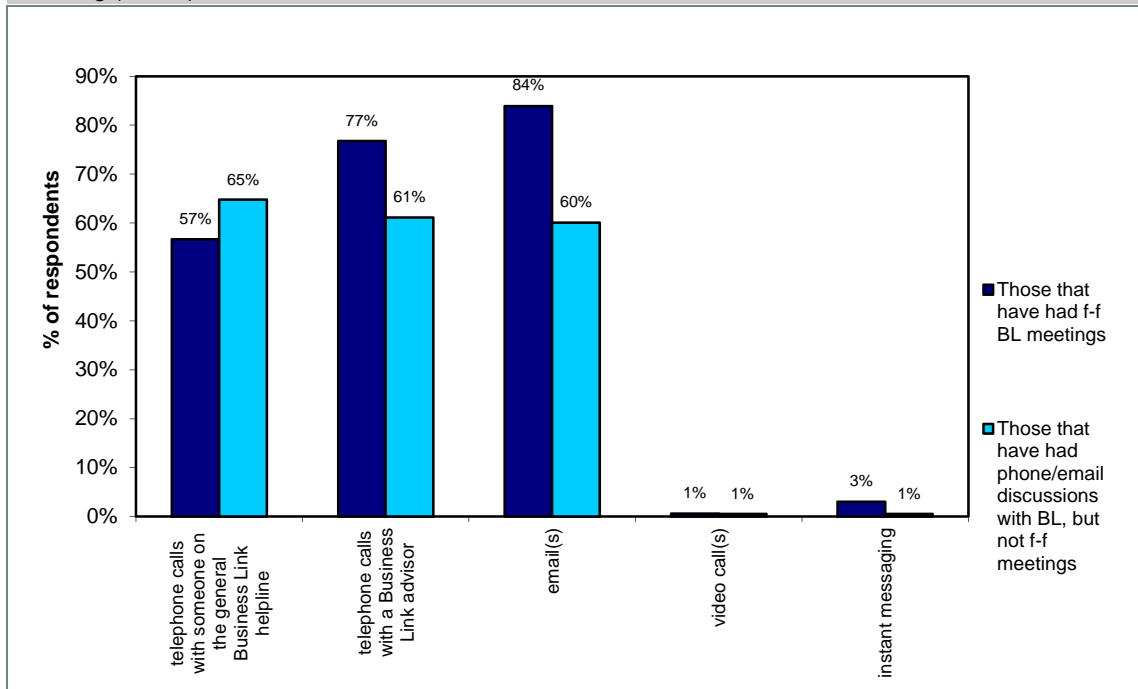
Figure 2-7: You said that you'd had contact with someone from Business Link. Which of the following types of contact have you had with them over the last two years? – by whether have used BL website (S1-S4)



Base: 693 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have used the BL website (550), those that have not used the BL website (110).

- 2.21 Analysing the channels into Business Link by whether or not the respondent had used the Business Link website (Figure 2-7), we found that **Business Link website users were more likely than non-users to have also used the telephone channels** (general helpline and call with a Business Link advisor) **and email contact**, and **slightly less likely to have had face-to-face meetings**.
- 2.22 Coupled with the finding that 78% of those in our S4 (Experian) sample that had used the Business Link website had also had discussions with someone from Business Link, this would appear to be consistent with the **Business Link website currently complementing, rather than substituting for, telephone/email support and face-to-face support**.

Figure 2-8: You said that you'd had contact with someone from Business Link. Which of the following types of contact have you had with them over the last two years? – by whether have had face-to-face meeting (S1-S4)

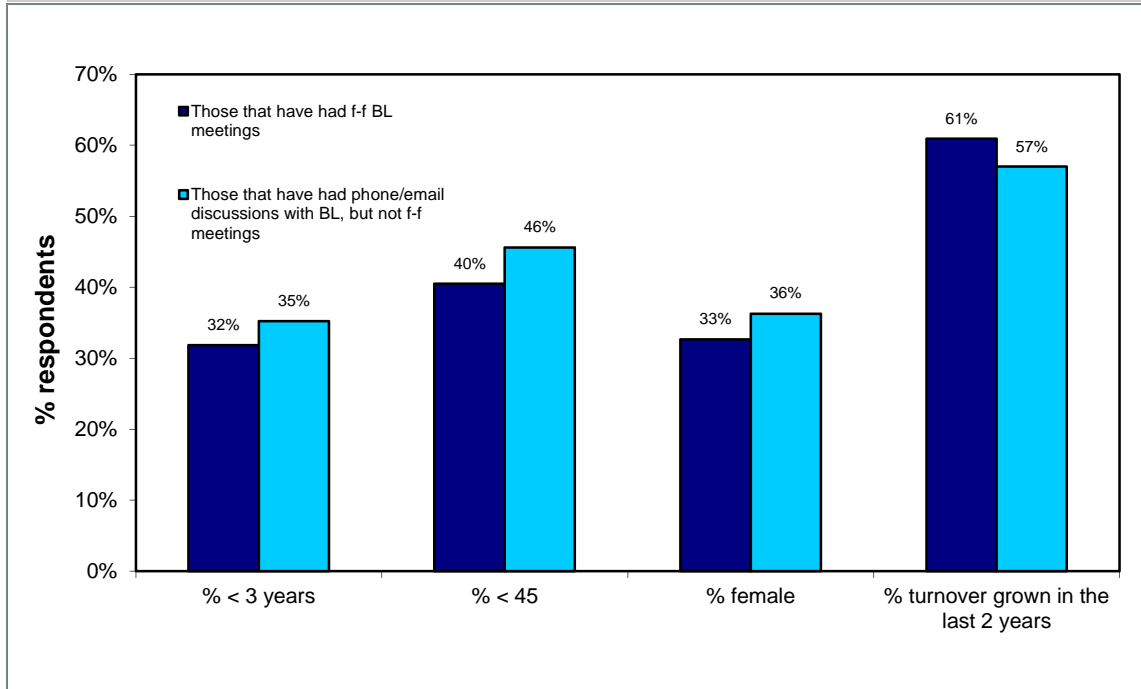


Base: 693 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have had f-f BL meetings (499), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL but not f-f BL meetings (193).

2.23 Comparing those that have had and those that have *not* had face-to-face meetings with Business Link (of those that have had discussions with someone from Business Link), we find that **those that have had face-to-face meetings are far more likely also to have had telephone and email contact with a Business Link advisor and less likely to have spoken to someone on the general Business Link helpline** (see Figure 2-8). In other words, businesses that receive more in-depth support from Business Link use a wider range of channels for communicating with the service.

2.24 This would be consistent with telephone and email contact with a Business Link advisor preceding face-to-face meetings, and also being used for follow up discussions. For example, of those that had had a face-to-face meeting with Business Link, 77% had also had phone discussions with a Business Link advisor, and 84% had had email contact.

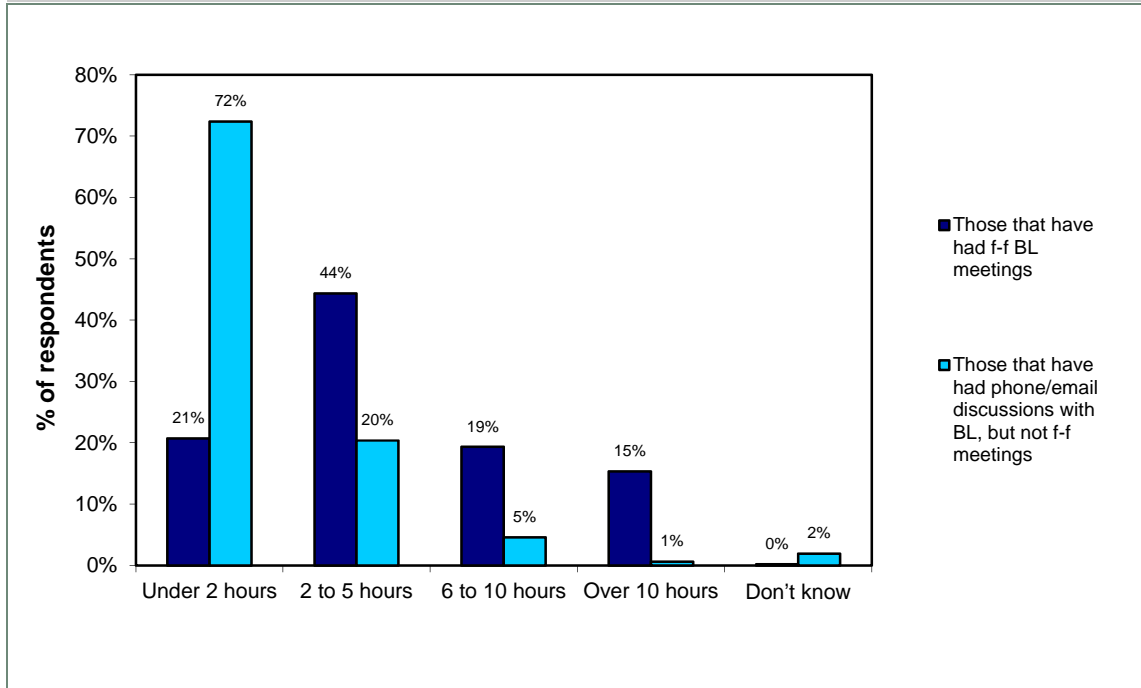
Figure 2-9: Profile of businesses that have had discussions with Business Link in the last two years – by whether have had face-to-face meetings: age of firm, age of respondent, gender of respondent, and whether turnover has grown in last two years



Base: 693 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have had f-f BL meetings (499), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL but not f-f BL meetings (193).

2.25 Looking at the profile of firms that had had face-to-face meetings versus those that had just used the telephone/email channels, we find (Figure 2-9) that the former group is somewhat *less* likely to be a young firm (under three years), less likely to be in the younger age group of respondents, and less likely to be female, but *more* likely to have experienced turnover growth in the last two years. This would be consistent with Business Link providers proactively targeting established growth-oriented firms for intensive assistance.

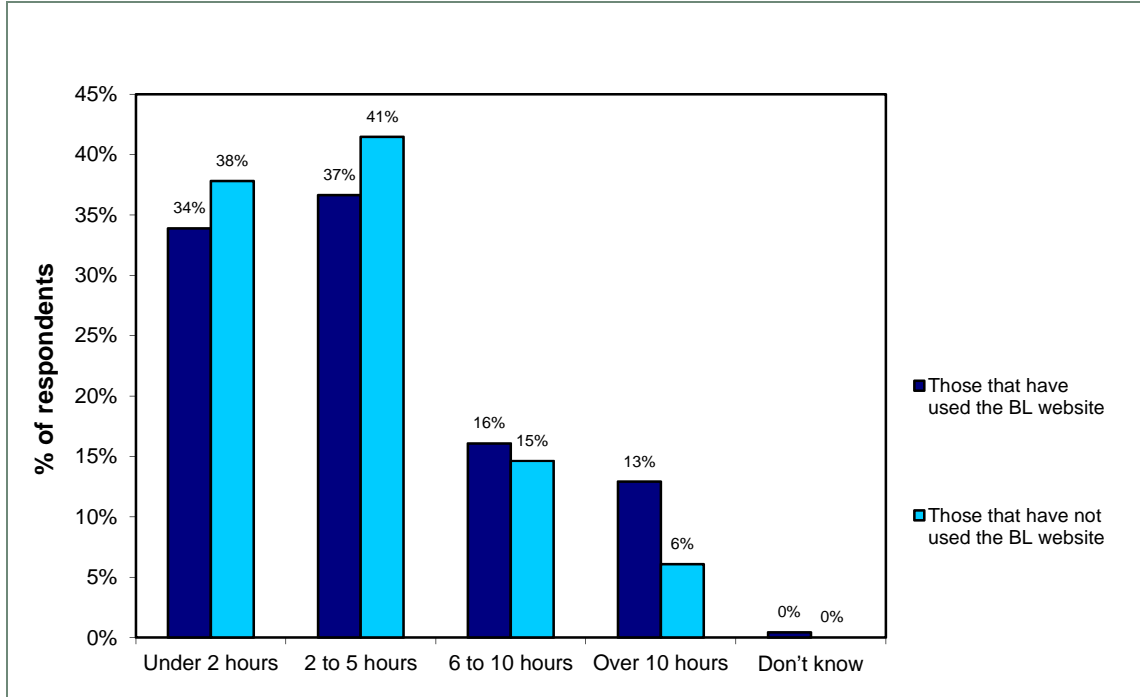
Figure 2-10: In total, roughly how many hours of discussions have you had with someone from Business Link in the last two years? - by whether have had face-to-face meeting (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have had f-f BL meetings (424), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL but not f-f meetings (152).

2.26 **Unsurprisingly, the overall extent of contact with Business Link is much higher for those that have had face-to-face meetings:** 79% of those that have had face-to-face meetings have had two or more hours of discussions with Business Link in the last two years, versus 26% of those that had not had face-to-face meetings.

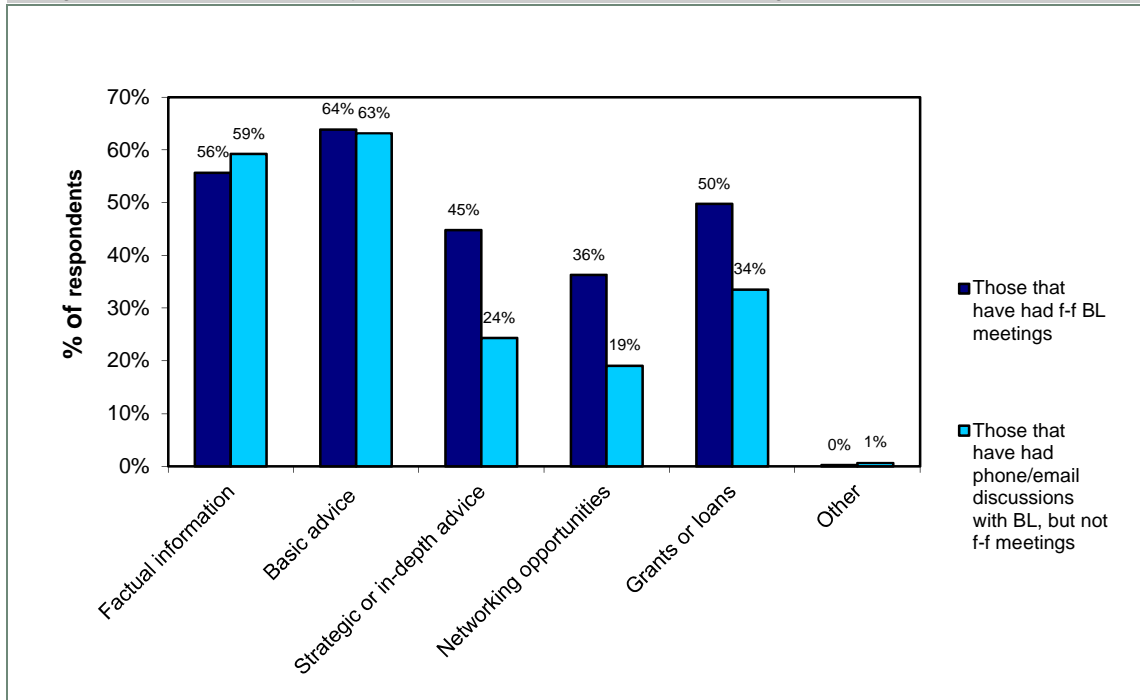
Figure 2-11: In total, roughly how many hours of discussions have you had with someone from Business Link in the last two years? - by whether have used the BL website (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have used the BL website (472), those that have not used the BL website (82).

2.27 Arguably more surprisingly, **the extent of contact with someone from Business Link was also somewhat higher for those that have used the Business Link website than for non-users**: 13% of those that have used the Business Link website said they have had over ten hours of discussions (versus 6% of people who had not used the Business Link website) – again suggesting that the website is currently complementing the telephone and face-to-face channels rather than substituting for them.

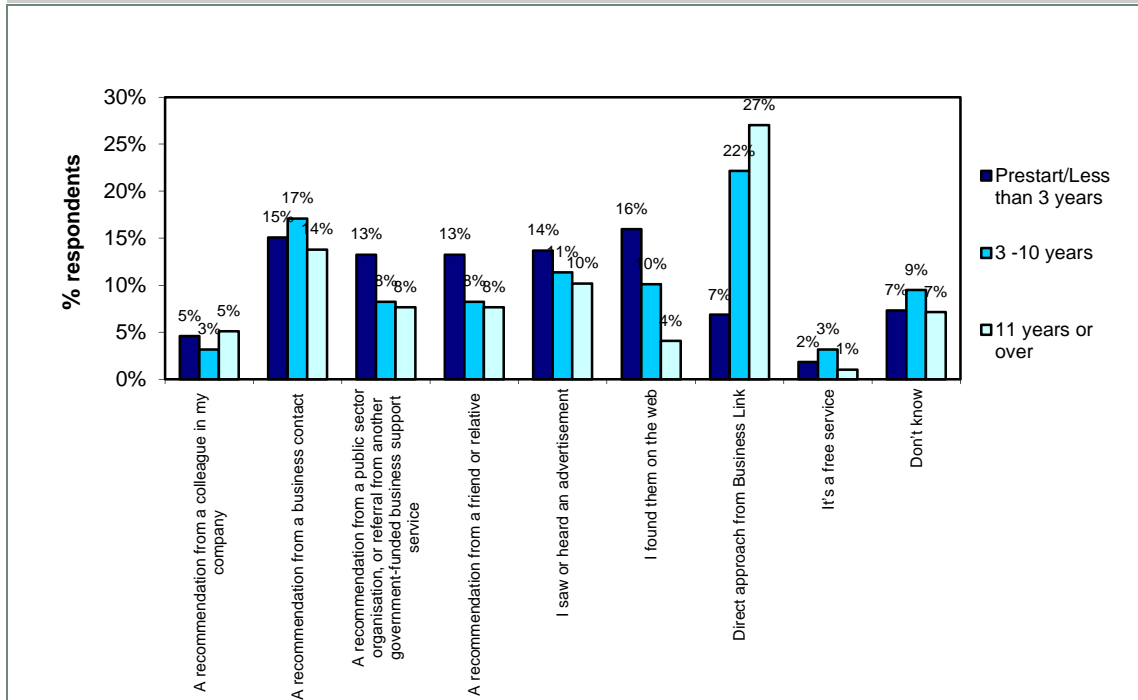
Figure 2-12: How would you characterise the nature of the information, advice, or support that you sought from Business Link? - by whether have had face-to-face meeting (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have had f-f BL meetings (424), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL but not f-f BL meetings (152).

- 2.28 Looking at the type of information, advice or support sought from Business Link, there were again some clear differences: **those that had had face-to-face meetings were more likely to have been seeking strategic or in depth advice, networking opportunities and grants or loans** (Figure 2-12).
- 2.29 Solutions for Business product users were more likely to have sought *grants or loans* (61% of the S3 sample group – see Figure A-6 in Annex A), while younger firms were more likely than more established firms to have sought *basic advice*: in the S2 group, for example, 77% of the <3 yr old firms were seeking basic advice as opposed to 55% of the 11 yr + firms.

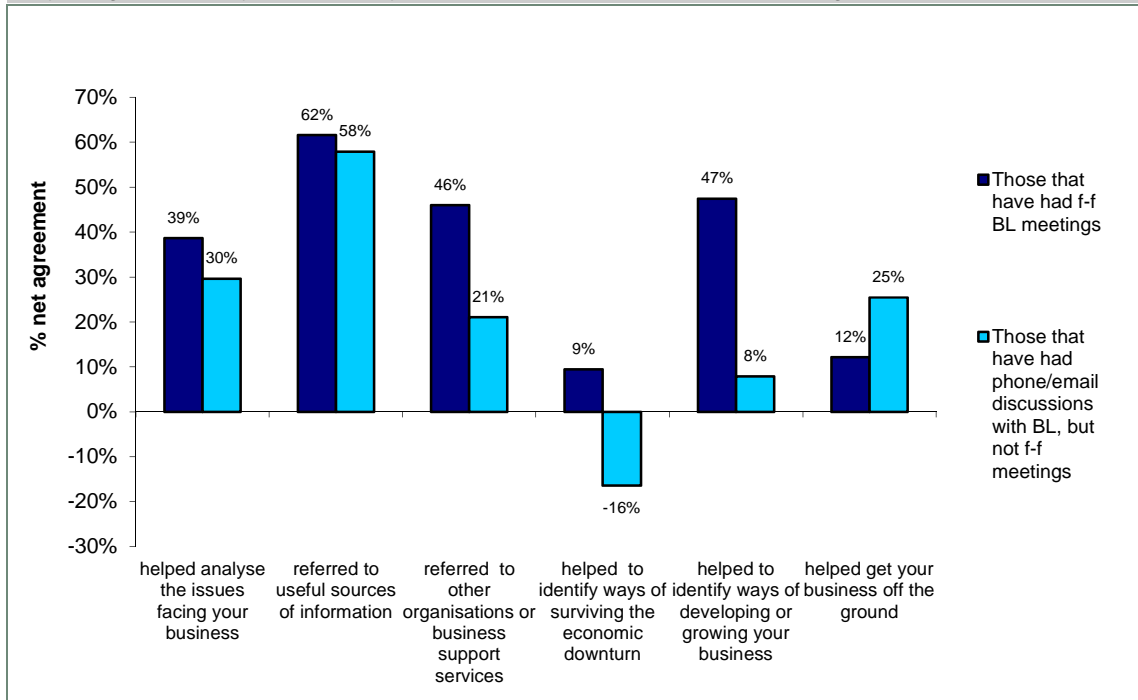
Figure 2-13: What prompted you to get in touch with Business Link, rather than anyone else? – by age of firm (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL - prestart/less than 3 years (219), 3 to 10 years (158), 11 years or more (196).

- 2.30 Asking respondents about what prompted them to get in touch with Business Link, **we found a wide variety of routes into the organisation** (Figure 2-13), with word of mouth recommendations - from other business contacts, friends or relatives and other public sector organisations - playing an important part.
- 2.31 This varied somewhat depending on the age of the firm. In particular, **more established firms were far more likely than younger firms to have had a direct approach from Business Link** (27% of 11 yr + firms versus 7% of <3 yr old firms) – reflecting the proactive targeting of intensive assistance and skills brokerage services by Business Link providers. Similarly, amongst users of Solutions for Business products, a direct approach from Business Link was the most frequently cited route into the organisation (cited by 22% of the S3 sample group).
- 2.32 In contrast, **younger firms were more likely than established firms to have found Business Link on the web** (16% of <3 yr old firms versus 4% of 11 yr + firms).

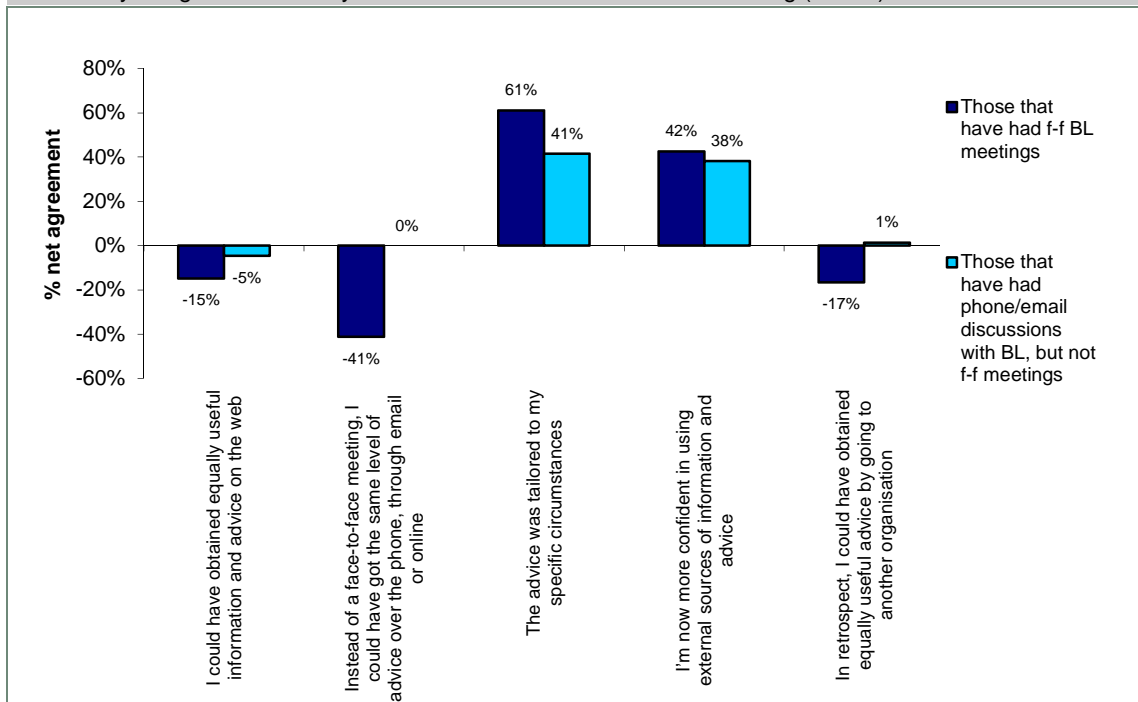
Figure 2-14: Thinking about the contact you have had with someone from Business Link, to what extent do you agree that they have...? – by whether have had a face-to-face meeting (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have had f-f BL meetings (424), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL but not f-f meetings (152). For 'helped get your business off the ground' the bases were 140 and 55 respectively, as this was only asked of businesses less than three years old.

- 2.33 Regarding the benefits of their discussions with Business Link, respondents were broadly positive – especially those that had had face-to-face meetings (Figure 2-14). **The suggestion that Business Link had referred them to useful sources of information received the highest level of agreement.** The least agreed-with statement was that Business Link had helped to identify ways of surviving the economic downturn.
- 2.34 There was a **particularly marked difference when asked whether Business Link had helped identify ways of developing or growing their business:** 47% net agreement amongst those that had had a face-to-face meeting versus 8% net agreement amongst those that had just used the telephone/email channel. With 68% of those that have had face-to-face meetings agreeing that Business Link has helped them identify ways of developing or growing their business (vs 43% of those that had just used the telephone/email channel), this suggests that face-to-face support is the more effective (albeit more expensive) channel for facilitating business development and growth.
- 2.35 The beneficiaries of face-to-face support were also more likely to agree that Business Link had referred them to other organisations or business support organisations (46% net agreement amongst those that had had a face-to-face meeting versus 21% net agreement amongst those that had just used the telephone/email channel).

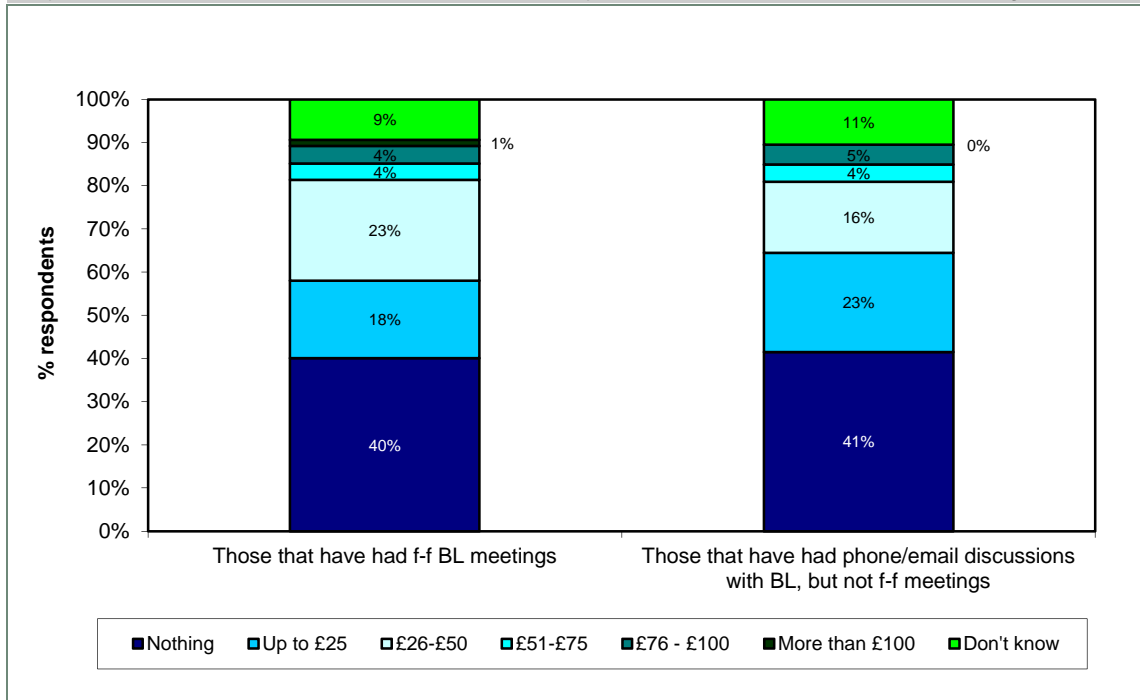
Figure 2-15: Thinking about the information and advice you've received from Business Link, to what extent to you agree with... - by whether have had a face-to-face meeting (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have had f-f BL meetings (424), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL but not f-f meetings (152).

- 2.36 We tested respondents' reactions to the proposition that the information and advice they had received from Business link could have been obtained through other means.
- 2.37 As Figure 2-15 shows, **there was a rather strong level of disagreement with proposed substitutes amongst those that had had face-to-face meetings.** In particular, there was 41% net *dis*-agreement amongst this group that 'instead of a face-to-face meeting, I could have got the same level of advice over the phone, through email or online' – reinforcing the earlier observation that the phone, email and online channels are acting as a complement to, rather than substitute for, face-to-face meetings.
- 2.38 The Business Link users who had **not** had face-to-face meetings were less averse to the prospect of substitutes – with fairly even numbers agreeing and disagreeing with the statements 'I could have obtained equally useful information and advice on the web' and 'in retrospect, I could have obtained equally useful advice by going to another organisation'.
- 2.39 Clear majorities of both groups of Business Link users agreed that the advice received was tailored to their specific circumstances and that they are now 'more confident in using external sources of information and advice'.

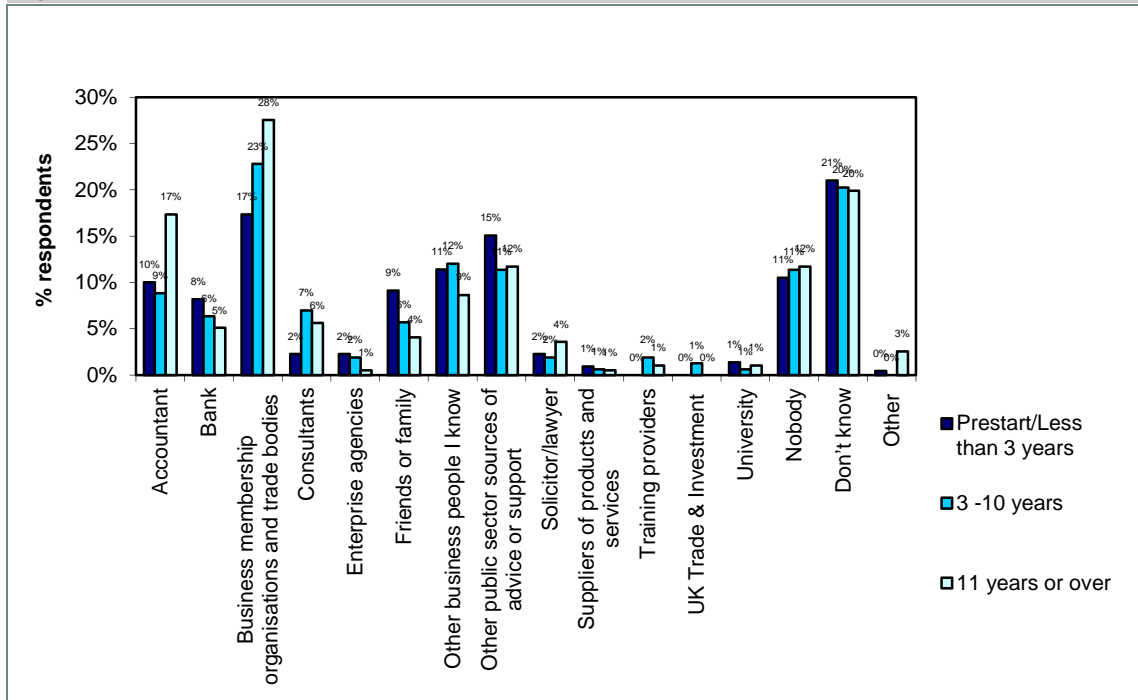
Figure 2-16: Given your experience of using Business Link, what is the maximum you would be willing to pay for an hour of a Business Link advisor's time? - by whether have had face-to-face meeting (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have had f-f BL meetings (424), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL but not f-f meetings (152).

- 2.40 Although respondents were positive regarding the perceived benefits of the support from Business Link, **this did not necessarily translate into a willingness to pay:** when asked ‘Given your experience of using Business Link, what is the maximum you would be willing to pay for an hour of a Business Links advisors time?’ 40% of those that had had a face-to-face meeting said ‘Nothing’ (similar to the 41% of those that had just used the telephone/email channel) – with little difference between smaller/younger firms and larger/more established firms.
- 2.41 However, about half of respondents did put a price on the support – and **those that had had a face-to-face meeting were willing to pay more per hour for an advisor’s time** than those that had not (23% versus 16% saying £26 - £50) – reflecting the more positive perceptions of the benefits of the service (or potentially the more pressing issues) amongst those that had had face-to-face support.

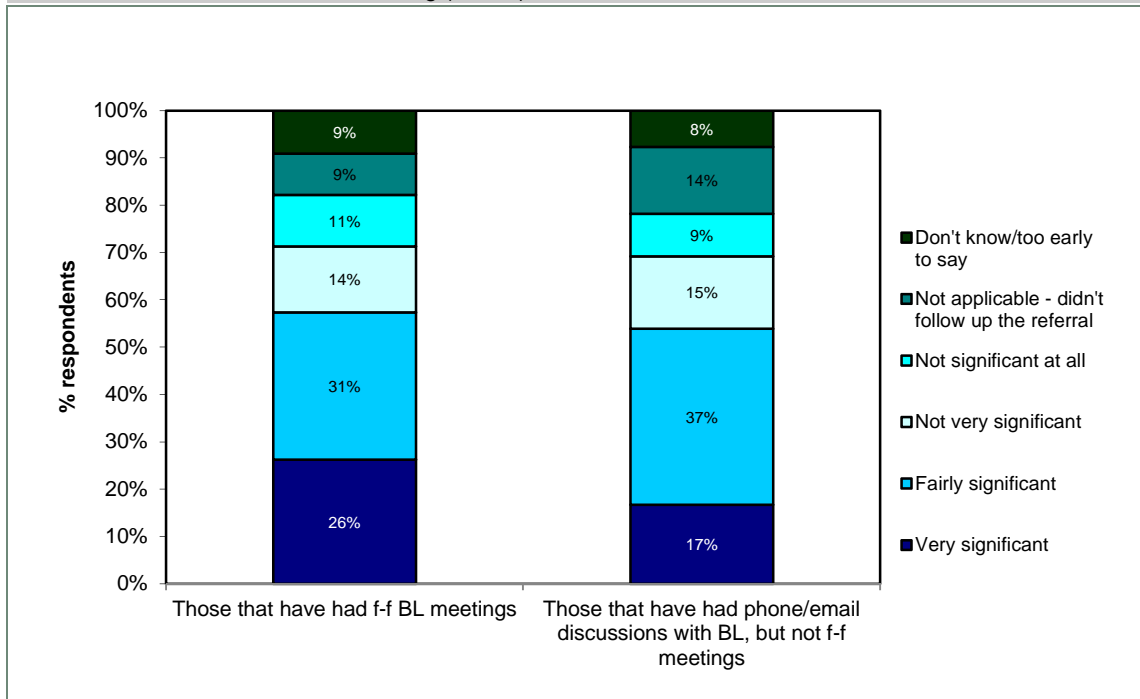
Figure 2-17: If Business Link hadn't existed, who, if anyone, would you have gone to for advice? – by age of firm (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL - prestart/less than 3 years (219), 3 to 10 years (158), 11 years or more (196).

- 2.42 When we asked where Business Link users would have gone for advice if Business Link had not existed, **business membership organisations and trade bodies were the most popular alternative** (see Figure 2-17).
- 2.43 Notably, however, 20% of respondents said ‘Don’t know’ to this question, and a further 11% said ‘Nobody’, suggesting that these businesses could struggle to obtain advice in the absence of Business Link.
- 2.44 Examining the detailed tabulations, we note that there were some differences by age of firm, with more established firms being more likely than younger ones to turn to business membership organisations and trade bodies, while younger firms were more likely than older firms to turn to friends or family.

Figure 2-18: How significant, if at all, were the benefits to your business resulting from the referral? - by whether have had face-to-face meeting (S1-S3)

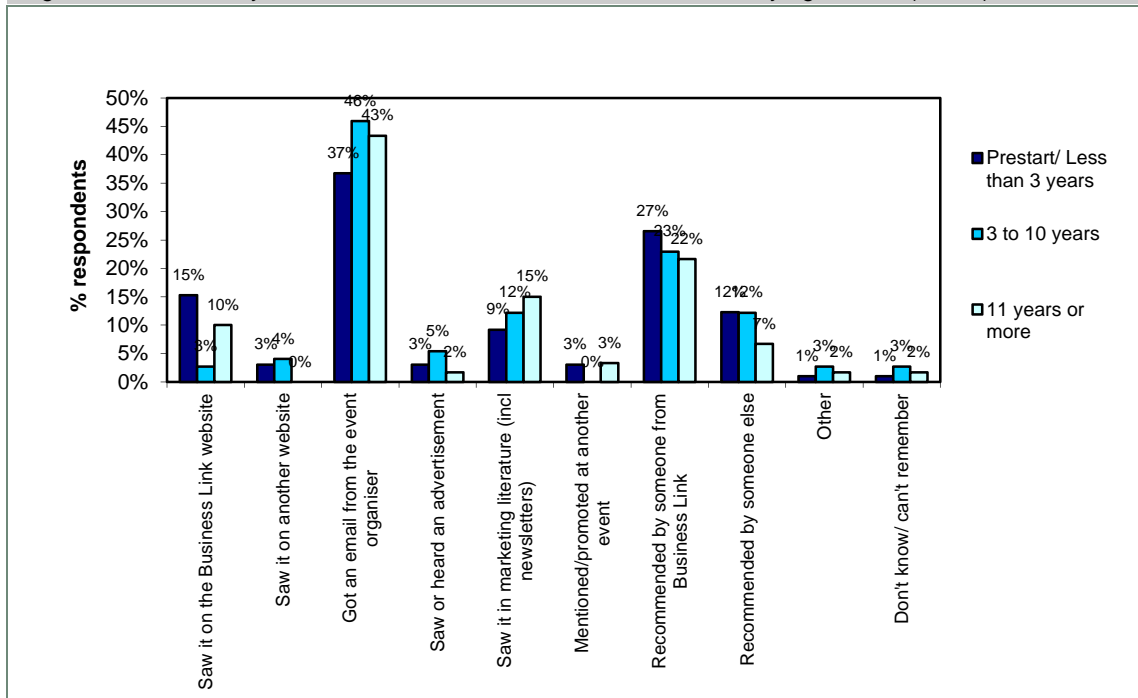


Base: 364 that have had discussions with someone from BL, and were referred on to others - those that have had f-f BL meetings (286), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL but not f-f meetings (78).

- 2.45 As noted earlier, many Business Link users had been referred to other organisations or business support services.
- 2.46 **More than half of these respondents were positive regarding the business benefits of that referral.**
- 2.47 In particular, 26% of those that had had a face-to-face meeting with Business Link considered that the benefits of this referral were 'very significant' (versus 17% of those that had just used the telephone/email channel) – possibly contributing to the findings above regarding the higher overall value placed on the Business Link service by those that had face-to-face meetings.

Experience of Business Link events

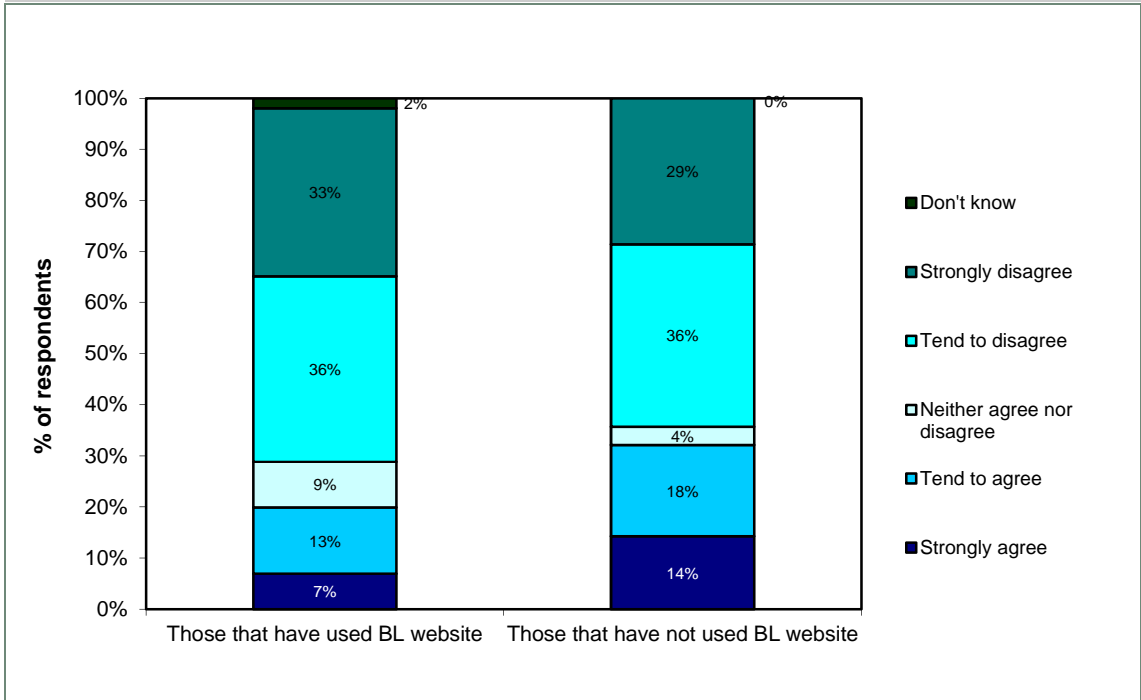
Figure 2-19: How did you first hear about the Business Link event? – by age of firm (S1-S3)



Base: 233 that had attended a BL event - prestart/less than 3 years (98), 3 to 10 years (74), 11 years or more (60).

- 2.48 For the 233 respondents who had attended an event organised by Business Link in the last two years, we found (Figure 2-19) that **proactive, direct promotion by Business Link was the primary means of hearing about the event** – either through an email from the event organiser, or through a recommendation by someone from Business Link.
- 2.49 Relatively few said that they had first heard about the event by seeing it on the Business Link website (15% of firms aged three years or less, 3% of firms aged three to ten years and 10% of firms aged eleven years plus) – notwithstanding the links to events directories on the home pages of the national and regional Business Link sites.

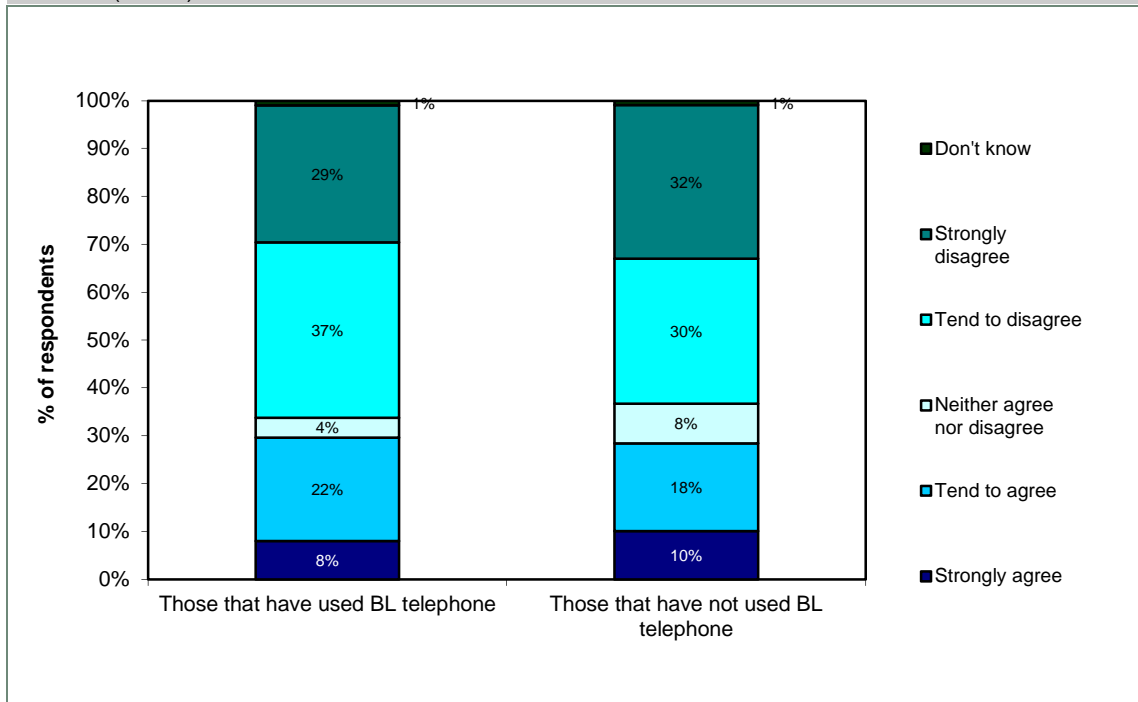
Figure 2-20: Thinking about the information and advice you got at the Business Link event, to what extent do you agree with the statement 'I could have obtained equally useful information and advice on the web'. – by whether used the BL website (S1-S3)



Base: 233 that had attended a BL event - those that have used the BL website (201), those that have not used the BL website (28).

- 2.50 When we asked whether attendees at Business Link events felt they could have obtained equally useful information and advice on the web, **a clear majority disagreed** (Figure 2-20), suggesting that the face-to-face nature of the event was valued.
- 2.51 Indeed those that had previously used the Business Link website were somewhat more likely to disagree with this suggestion than those that had not – though this finding should be treated with caution as the base size for the latter group (of those that had attended a Business Link event but not used the Business Link website) was small at just 28.

Figure 2-21: Thinking about the information and advice you got at the Business Link event, to what extent do you agree with the statement 'I could have obtained equally useful information and advice by speaking to someone from Business Link on the phone'. – by whether have used the BL telephone channel (S1-S3)

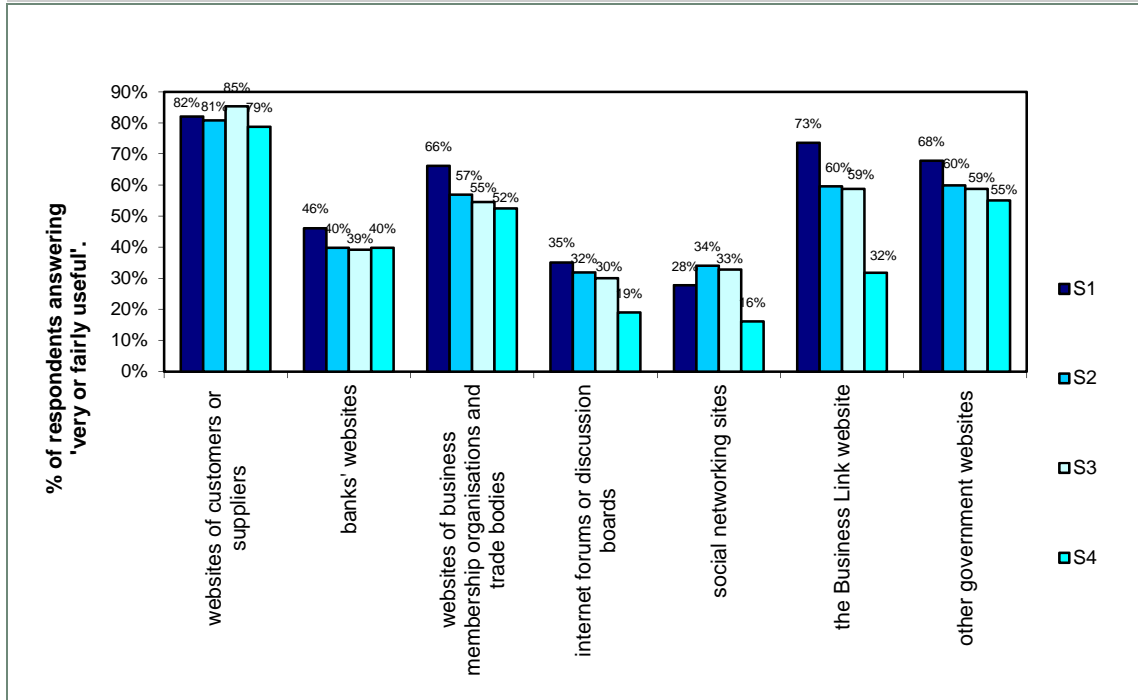


Base: 233 that had attended a BL event - those that have had discussions with BL over the phone (181), those that have not had discussions with BL over the phone (30).

- 2.52 We also asked whether attendees at the Business Link events felt they could have obtained equally useful information and advice by speaking to someone from Business Link over the phone. **Again, a clear majority disagreed** (Figure 2-21), although this was marginally more popular than the previous suggestion that they could have obtained equally useful information and advice over the web.
- 2.53 There appeared to be little difference in this response between those that had and those that had not previously had discussions with Business Link over the phone – though, again, this finding should be treated with caution as the base size for the latter group (of those that had attended a Business Link event but not had discussions with Business Link over the phone) was small at just 30.

Experience of Business Link website and other websites

Figure 2-22: Thinking about your use of the web for business-related information or advice, how useful, if at all, have you found the following over the last two years? (those responding very or fairly useful) – by sample source



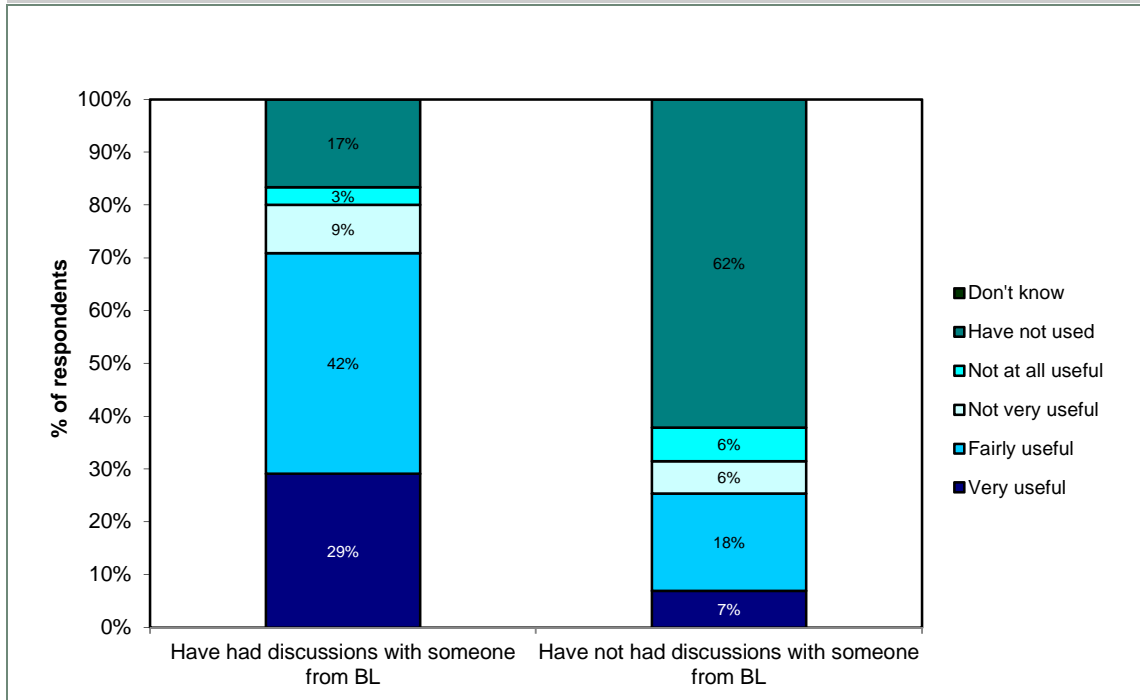
Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 1028 that have used the web for business-related information or advice - S1 (245), S2 (329), S3 (143), S4 (311).

- 2.54 For those respondents who said they used the web as a source of information and advice, we asked how useful they found various types of websites.¹⁰
- 2.55 Across all four samples, **websites of customers and suppliers were deemed to be the most useful** for business-related information or advice of those we tested, as shown in Figure 2-22. The sites of business membership organisations, trade bodies and 'other government websites' were also seen to be useful by a majority of respondents in each of the sample groups.
- 2.56 As might be expected, the respondents in the client-supplied samples (known users of Businesslink.gov.uk, Business Link or Solutions for Business) were more positive about the usefulness of the Business Link website than was the case for the S4 (Experian) sample group. The proportions considering it to be very or fairly useful ranged from 32% in the S4 sample to 73% in the S1 sample).

¹⁰ Again, we present the responses to this particular question by sample group rather than aggregating, given the nature of the sample sources.

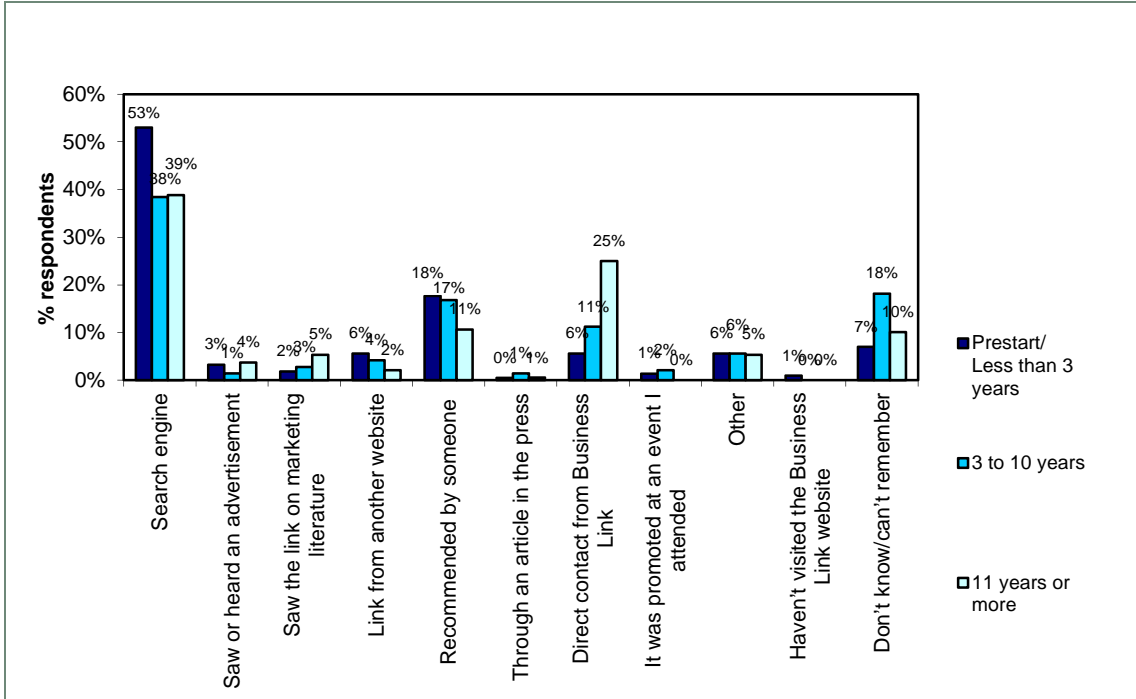
Figure 2-23: How useful have you found the Business Link website? – by whether have had discussions with someone from Business Link (S1-S4)



Base: 1028 that have used the web for business-related information or advice - those that have had discussions with someone from BL (660), those that have not had discussions with someone from BL (359).

- 2.57 Exploring the responses to the usefulness of the Business Link website further, we find that **respondents who have had discussions with someone from Business Link are more likely to have used the Business Link website, and more likely to have found it useful.**
- 2.58 As shown in Figure 2-23, 71% of those that have had discussions with Business Link found the website very or fairly useful, versus 25% of those that have not had discussions with Business Link.
- 2.59 Of those that had used the website (i.e. excluding the ‘don’t know’ and ‘have not used’ responses), 85% of the people who had had discussions with Business Link found the website very or fairly useful, compared with 67% of those that had not had discussions. This would tend to support the earlier finding that the Business Link website is complementing, rather than substituting for, the phone/email and face-to-face channels of support.
- 2.60 Within the S2 sample group, **younger firms were more likely than more established firms to have found the Business Link website useful** (with 71% of <3 yr old firms saying very or fairly useful, versus 48% of 11 yr + firms).

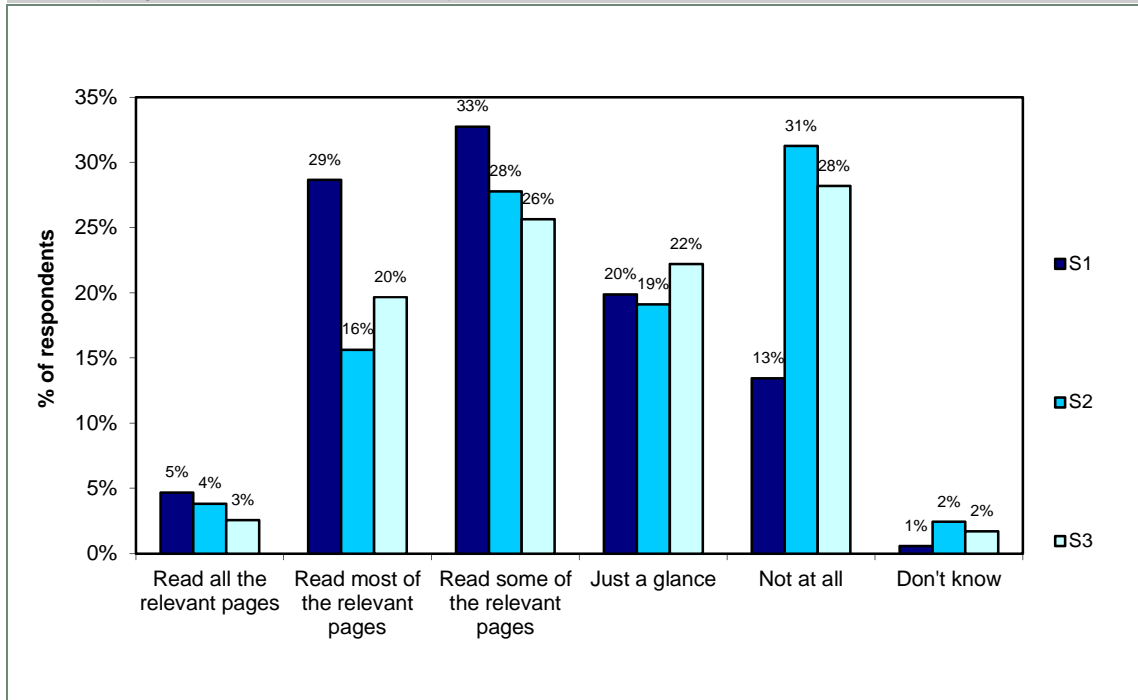
Figure 2-24: You indicated that you'd visited the Business Link website. How did you first hear about that website? – by age of firm (S1-S3)



Base: 548 that had visited the BL website - prestart/less than 3 years (215), 3 to 10 years (143), 11 years or more (188).

- 2.61 Regarding the means through which Business Link website users first heard about the website, **search engines were by far the most important channel to the site. This was especially the case for younger firms: 53% of <3 yr old firms cited search engines as their route to the site, versus 39% of 11 yr + firms.**
- 2.62 In contrast, **more established firms were more likely to have come across the website as a result of direct contact from Business Link (25% of 11 yr + firms versus 6% of <3 yr old firms).**

Figure 2-25: How much, if at all, had you looked through the Business Link website for information, before you got in contact with them? – by sample source



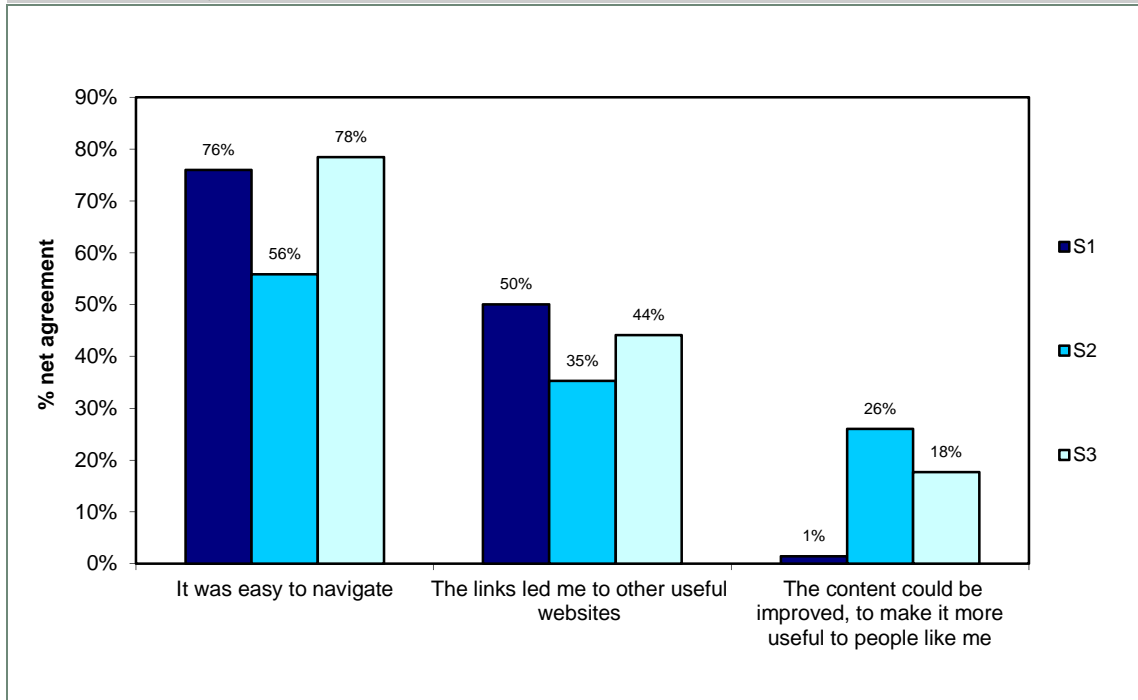
Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117)

- 2.63 We asked respondents who had had discussions with someone from Business Link how much they had looked through the Business Link website before getting in contact.
- 2.64 As previously noted, there is a high degree of overlap between those that use the Business Link website and those that use the telephone/email and face-to-face channels. However, the extent to which the website users are really ‘immersing’ themselves in the site *before* seeking further support is variable: as shown in Figure 2-25, **many of those Business Link users¹¹ had barely looked at the website before first getting in touch with Business Link.**
- 2.65 Fewer than 5% (in each of the three sample groups asked this question) had read all the relevant pages on the website. In the S2 and S3 sample groups, 50% had had ‘just a glance’ or not looked at the website at all before getting in contact (this proportion was lower, as might be expected, in the S1 sample group at 33%).

¹¹ Again, we present the responses to this particular question by sample group rather than aggregating, given the nature of the sample sources.

Figure 2-26: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Business Link website? – by sample source

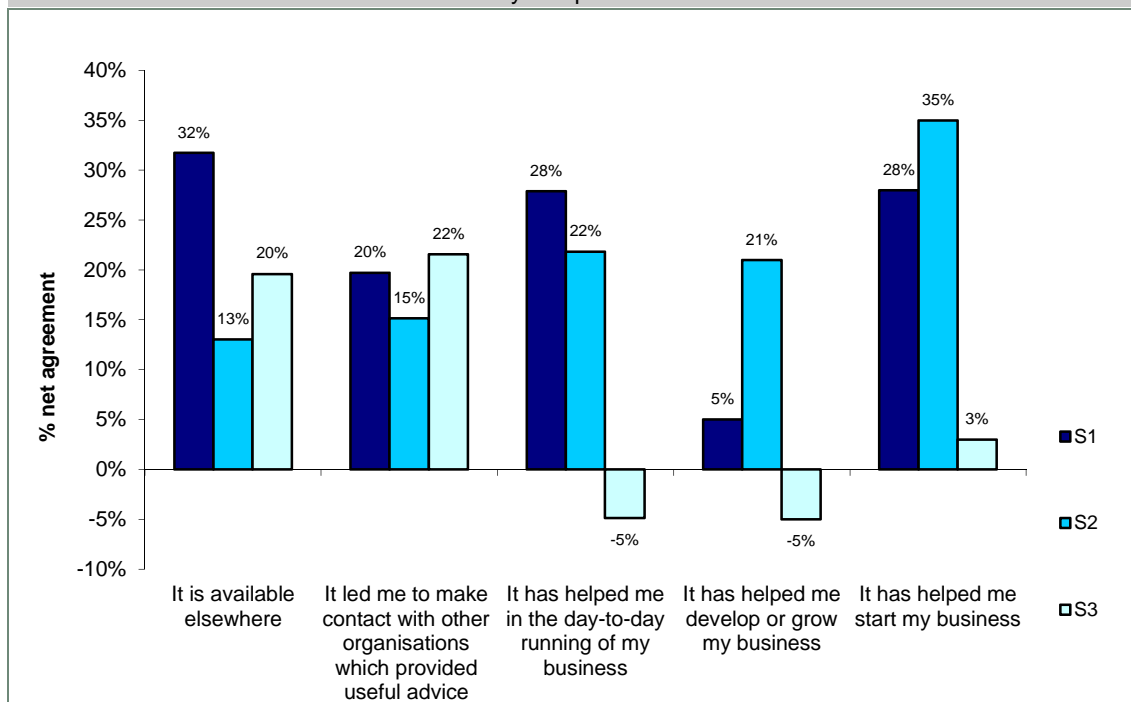


Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 548 that had used the BL website - S1 (208), S2 (238), S3 (102)

- 2.66 Users of the Business Link website were **very positive about the ease of the navigation and its links to other useful websites**. There was a net agreement of 56% to 78% (depending on the sample group) that ‘it was easy to navigate’, and a net agreement of 35% to 50% that ‘the links led me to other useful websites’.
- 2.67 However, **users also felt that there was scope for the content to be improved**. There was a net agreement of 1% to 26% that ‘the content could be improved, to make it more useful to people like me’.
- 2.68 Looking at the sample group S2 in which there was strongest agreement that the content could be improved, there was somewhat more agreement amongst smaller firms (net agreement of 30% for 0-4 employee firms versus 17% for 5-249 employee firms) and amongst older respondents (net agreement of 33% amongst those aged 55+ versus 14% of those aged under 45).

Figure 2-27: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the information on the Business Link website? – by sample source



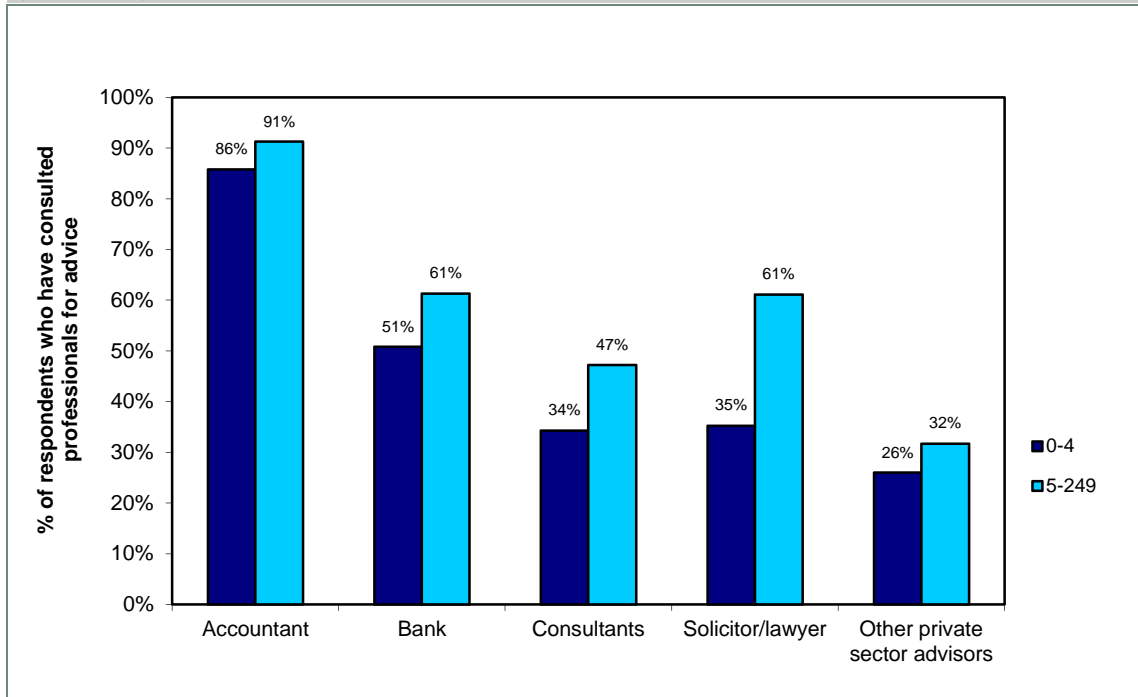
Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 548 that had used the BL website - S1 (208), S2 (238), S3 (102). For 'it has helped me start my business', base was 191 - S1 (75), S2 (84), S3 (32), as this question was only asked of businesses less than three years old

- 2.69 Regarding the value of the information on the Business Link website, there were quite varying responses across the site users in the three sample groups asked this question (Figure 2-27).
- 2.70 Notwithstanding a net agreement that the information 'is available elsewhere' respondents in the S1 and S2 groups agreed on balance that 'it led me to make contact with other organisations which provided useful advice', 'it helped me in the day to day running of my business', 'it has helped me develop or grow my business' and (where relevant) 'it has helped start my business'.
- 2.71 Respondents in the S3 group (known users of Solutions for Business products) appeared to be least positive about the value of the information on the Business Link website: with a net *dis*-agreement in this group that 'it has helped me in the day to day running of my business' and 'it has helped me develop or grow my business' (though note the low base of 32 for this latter question). This indicates an increased likelihood amongst these firms that more in-depth support is needed/expected than is provided by the Business Link website in its current form – though it should be noted that they *were* positive about the website leading them to other organisations which provided useful advice.
- 2.72 Looking at the pattern of responses within the largest sample group (S2) we find that more established businesses were more likely than younger business to agree that 'it has helped me in the day to day running of my business' (37% net agreement for 11 yr + firms, versus 14% for <3 yr old firms).

Experience of private sector professional advice

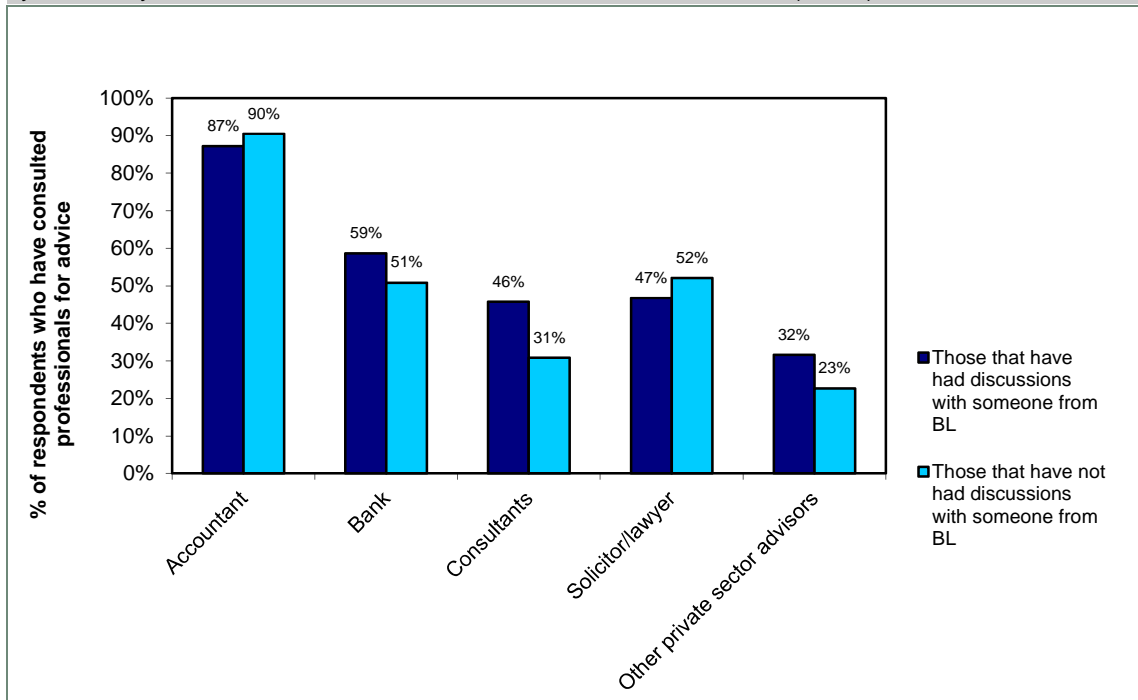
Figure 2-28: You mentioned that you'd consulted with professionals to inform the way you manage and develop your business. Which of the following have provided you with business advice in the last two years? – by size of business (S1-S4)



Base: 894 that have consulted professionals - 0-4 employees (443), 5-249 employees (445).

- 2.73 Amongst the respondents who had used advice from professionals (such as accountants, lawyers, banks or consultants) in the last two years, **accountants were by some margin the most frequently used professional advisors**, followed by banks and solicitors.
- 2.74 As shown in Figure 2-28, **larger companies were more likely than smaller firms to have sought advice from each source** – especially for consultants (used by 47% of firms with 5-249 employees, but only 34% of firms with 0-4 employees) and solicitors (used by 61% of firms with 5-249 employees, but only 35% of firms with 0-4 employees).

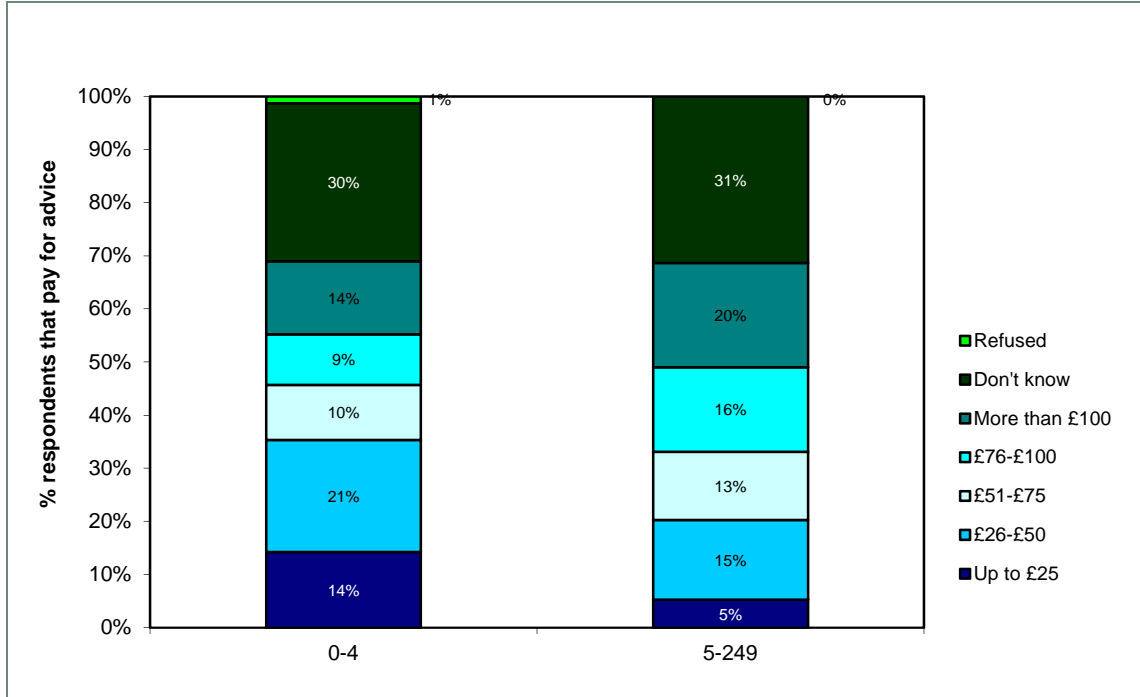
Figure 2-29: You mentioned that you'd consulted with professionals to inform the way you manage and develop your business. Which of the following have provided you with business advice in the last two years? – by whether had discussions with someone from Business Link (S1-S4)



Base: 894 that have consulted professionals - those that have had discussions with someone from BL (586), those that have not had discussions with someone from BL (305).

2.75 Analysing this question by whether the respondent had/hadn't had discussions with someone from Business Link, we find (Figure 2-29) that **Business Link users were more likely than non-users to have also approached consultants for advice** in the last two years – consistent with Business Link brokering access to specialist sources of support, as confirmed by the earlier finding regarding high level of agreement (Figure 2-14) that Business Link had referred firms onto other organisations or business support services (the third most frequently cited of which was consultants – after other public sector sources, and business membership organisations/trade bodies – see Figure A-15 in Annex A).

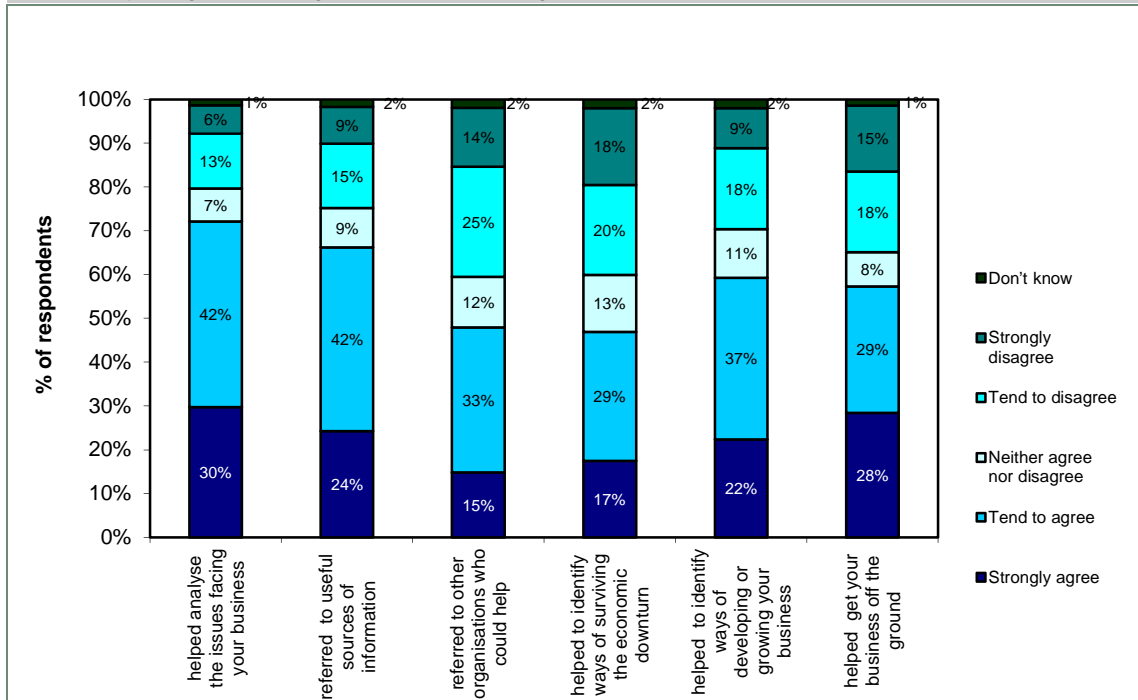
Figure 2-30: When you pay for advice, roughly how much per hour have you paid on average? – by size of business (S1-S4)



Base: 576 that have consulted professionals and sometimes/usually/always pay for that advice - 0-4 employees (232), 5-249 employees (341)

- 2.76 There was some variation between sample groups as to whether people who had consulted professionals *paid* for that advice (sometimes, usually or always) – ranging from 57% in the S2 group (known Business Link users) to 74% in the S4 group (Experian): see Figure A-25 in Annex A.
- 2.77 Of those that did typically pay, **larger companies paid higher fee rates than smaller companies on average** (48% of companies with 5-249 employees said they paid over £50 per hour on average, vs 34% of those with 0-4 employees) – which we would suggest reflects the greater financial capacity of larger firms.

Figure 2-31: Thinking about the contact you have had with professionals in the last two years, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: (S1-S4)



Base: 894 that have consulted professionals [except 'helped get your business off the ground' (218), as this was only asked of businesses less than three years old]

- 2.78 Considering the benefits of their contact with professionals in the last two years, **there was wide agreement that they had 'helped analyse the issues facing your business'** (72% agreeing), and least agreement that they had 'helped to identify ways of surviving the economic downturn' (46% agreeing).
- 2.79 Comparing these responses with those for the similar question put to Business Link users, we see that **users of professional advisors¹² were more likely than users of Business Link to consider that the advisor had helped analyse the issues facing the business.** This is perhaps a reflection of the relatively limited amount of time that the Business Link advisor is able to spend analysing the issues facing an individual customer, and/or the potential for the private sector advisor to have more sector-specific expertise than the (generalist) Business Link service.
- 2.80 As would be expected, **users of professional advisors were much less likely to say that the advisor had referred them to other organisations or business support services** (see Table 2-1 below). This is consistent with Business Link's brokerage role, but the lower levels of referrals to other organisations or services from private sector professionals (9% net agreement) may also reflect these suppliers' commercial incentives to retain and develop the client relationship themselves where possible.
- 2.81 Interestingly, though, **Business Link users who had had a face-to-face meeting were more likely to agree that the Business Link discussions had 'helped to identify ways of**

¹² Note that there is considerable overlap between users of Business Link and users of private sector professionals in our sample: 66% of respondents that have consulted professionals have also had discussions with Business Link.

developing or growing your business' than was the case for users of private sector professionals: 47% net agreement versus 32% net agreement. Although this was not investigated further in the survey, this finding would be consistent with the more general nature of face-to-face discussions with Business Link potentially covering a *wider range* of business issues (e.g. from marketing to financing to recruitment) than would typically be discussed with a more specialist private sector professional – thereby more likely to identify ways to develop/grow the business in at least one area.

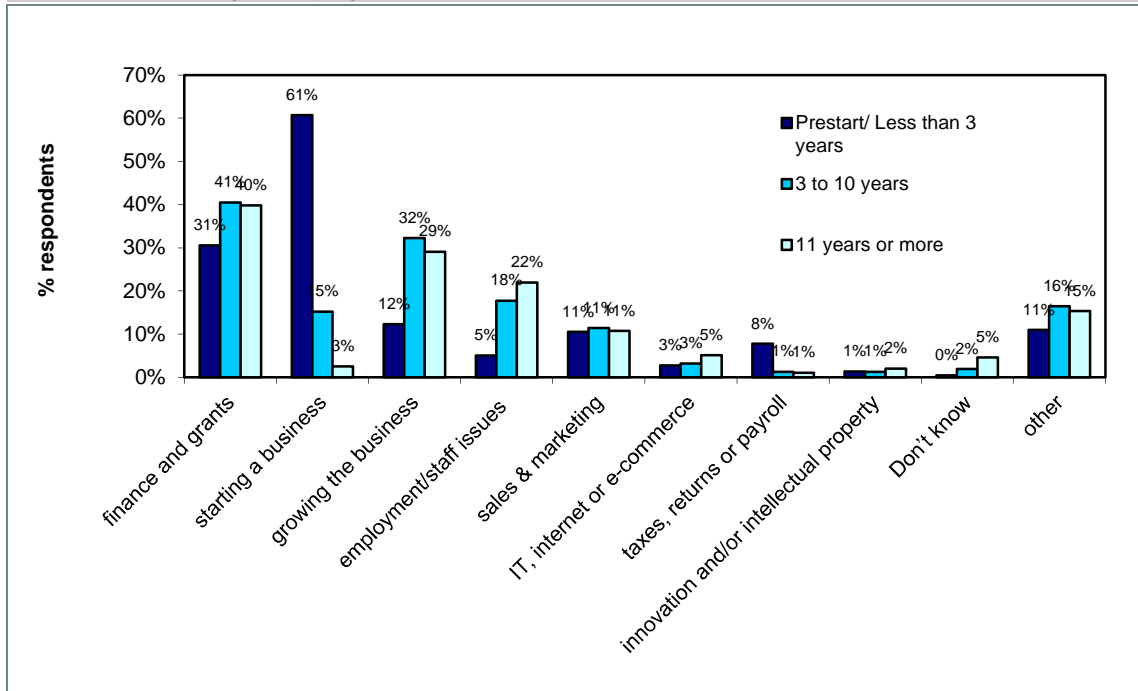
Table 2-1: Net agreement with perceived benefits of discussions with Business Link/private sector professionals

Business Link/professional has...	Business Link users that have had f-f BL meeting	Business Link users that have not had f-f BL meeting	Users of private sector professional advisors
helped analyse the issues facing your business	39%	30%	53%
referred to useful sources of information	62%	58%	43%
referred to other organisations or business support services	46%	21%	9%
helped to identify ways of surviving the economic downturn	9%	-16%	9%
helped to identify ways of developing or growing your business	47%	8%	32%
helped get your business off the ground	12%	25%	24%

Source: SQW analysis

Issues on which businesses sought support

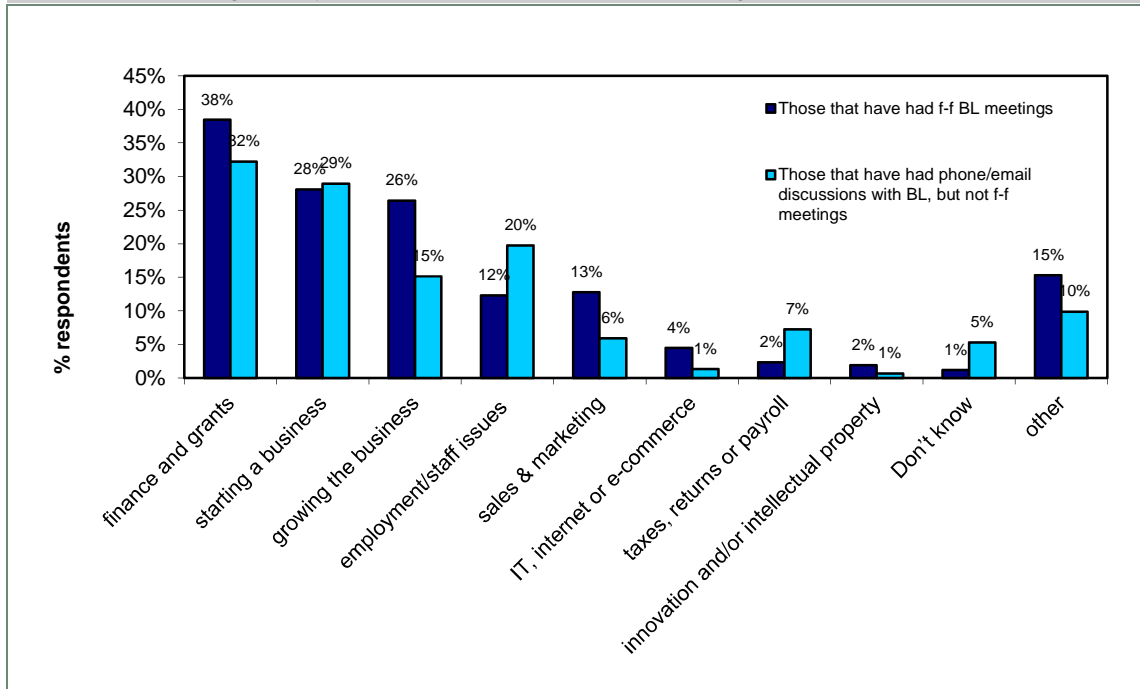
Figure 2-32: Thinking about when you first engaged with Business Link, what issues were you seeking help with at that stage ? – by age of firm (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL – pre-start/less than 3 years (219), 3 to 10 years (158), 11 years or more (196)

- 2.82 We asked respondents what issues they were seeking help with when they first engaged with Business Link. As shown in Figure 2-32 there were some marked differences by the age of firm here – with ‘starting a business’ dominating for firms less than three years old, while ‘finance and grants’ and ‘growing the business’ were more frequently cited by more established firms.
- 2.83 Employment/staff issues were also more frequently cited issues for more established firms (22% of firms aged 11 years or more, versus 5% of firms under three years old).

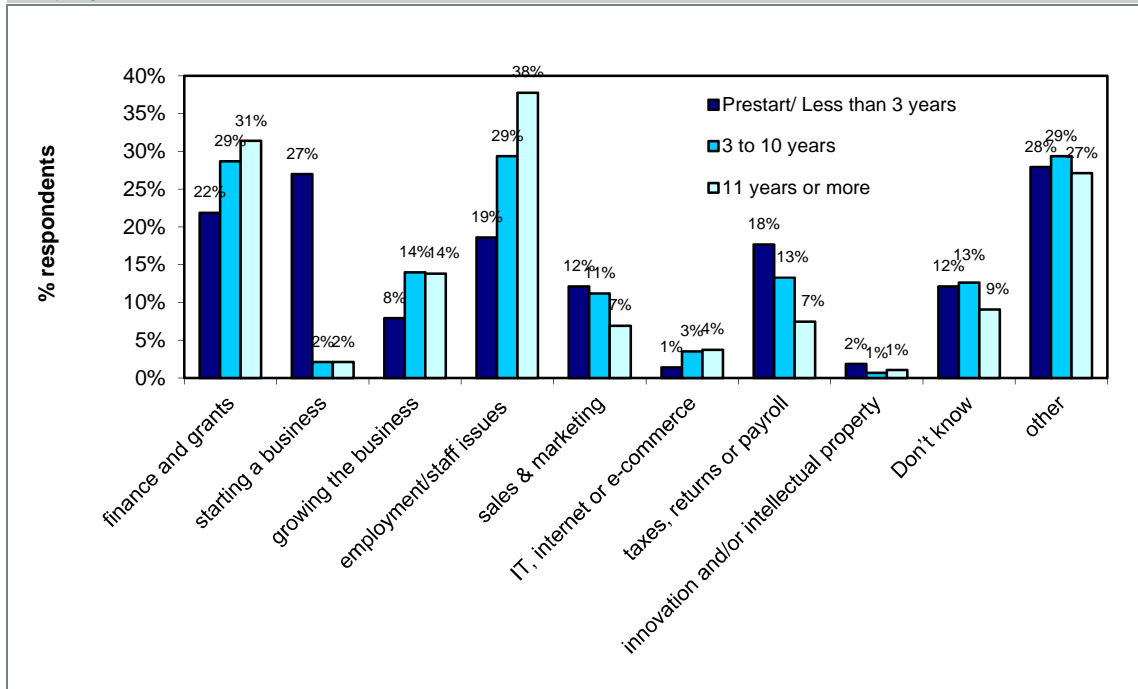
Figure 2-33: Thinking about when you first engaged with Business Link, what issues were you seeking help with at that stage? – by whether had a face-to-face BL meeting (S1-S3)



Base: 576 that have had discussions with someone from BL – those that have had f-f BL meeting (424), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL, but not f-f meetings (152)

- 2.84 Analysing the same question further (Figure 2-33), we find that **those that have had a face-to-face meeting with Business Link were more likely than those that had just used the telephone/email channel to have been seeking help with growing the business (26% versus 15%), sales & marketing (13% versus 6%), and with finance and grants (38% versus 32%)** – suggesting that these are issues for which face-to-face meetings are more likely to have been sought.
- 2.85 In contrast, **those firms that had just used the telephone/email channel were more likely to have cited employment/staff issues (20% versus 12%) and taxes, returns or payroll (7% versus 2%)** as issues they were seeking help with – suggesting that these are issues which lend themselves more readily to resolution through the telephone/email channel.

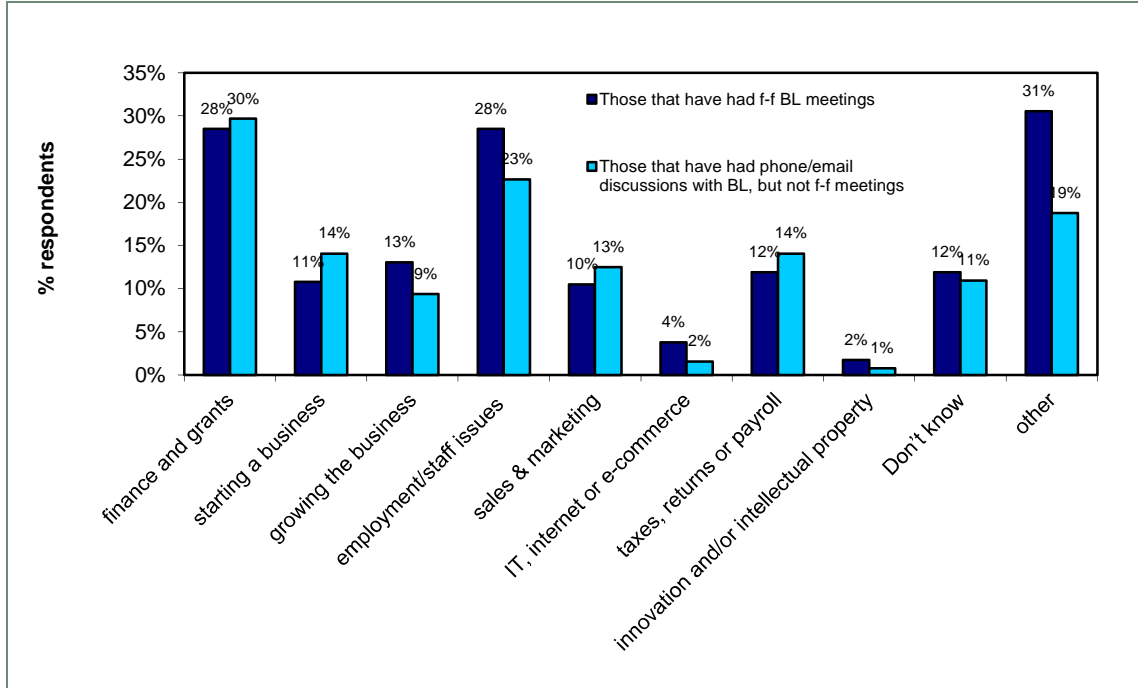
Figure 2-34: What business issues have you used the Business Link website for, in the last two years ? – by age of firm (S1-S3)



Base: 548 that have used the Business Link website - pre-start/less than 3 years (215), 3 to 10 years (143), 11 years or more (188)

- 2.86 Looking at the issues which firms have used the Business Link *website* for over the last two years (Figure 2-34), we see that ‘employment/staff issues’ and ‘finance and grants’ are the predominant issues cited by more established firms, while ‘starting a business’ was the most frequently cited issue for firms under three years old.
- 2.87 ‘Taxes, returns or payroll’ also features as an issue on which users were seeking help from the Business Link website – particularly for younger firms (18% of firms under three years old, versus 7% of those aged 11 years or more).
- 2.88 While ‘growing the business’ was an issue cited by some Business Link website users, it was markedly less frequently mentioned here than in the equivalent question asked (Figure 2-32) regarding reasons for having *discussions* with someone from Business Link – suggesting that **‘growing the business’ was an issue on which firms were looking for one-to-one discussions rather than information and advice from the Business Link website.**

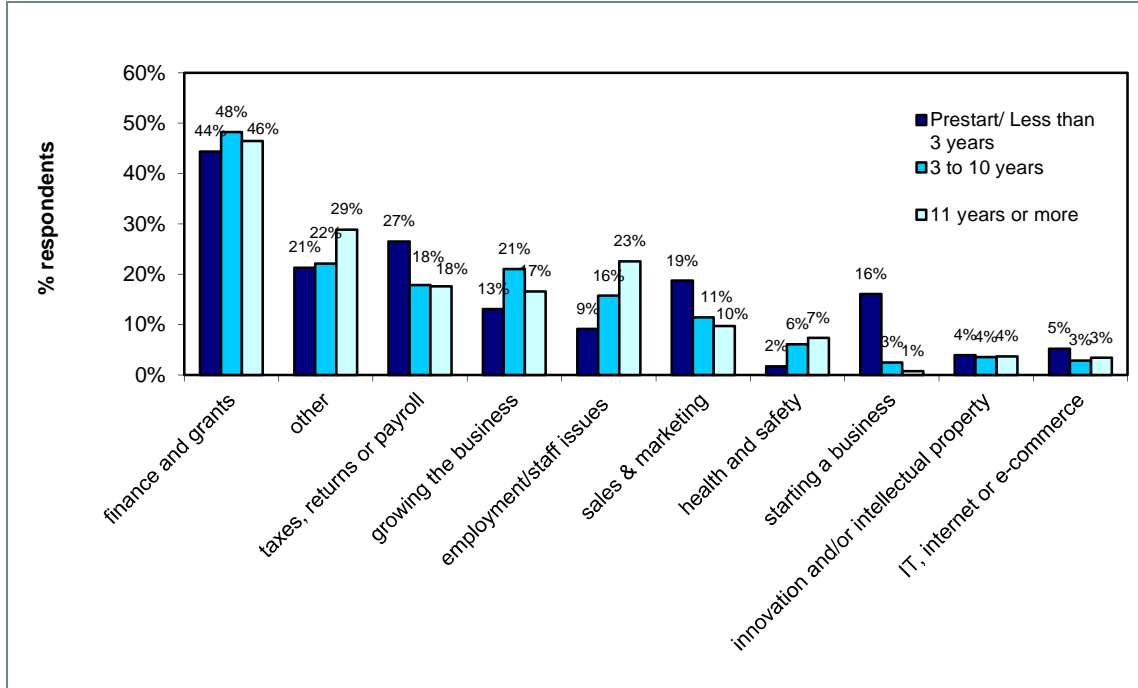
Figure 2-35: What business issues have you used the Business Link website for, in the last two years ?
 – by whether had a face-to-face BL meeting (S1-S3)



Base: 548 that have used the BL website - those that have had f-f BL meeting (344), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL, but not f-f meetings (128)

2.89 Exploring the same question further amongst those firms that have *also* had discussions with someone from Business Link (i.e. as well as using the Business Link website), we note that there is a rather similar pattern for those that have had face-to-face meetings and those that have just used the telephone/email channel (Figure 2-35), with relatively small differences between these groups in the issues they have used the Business Link website for.

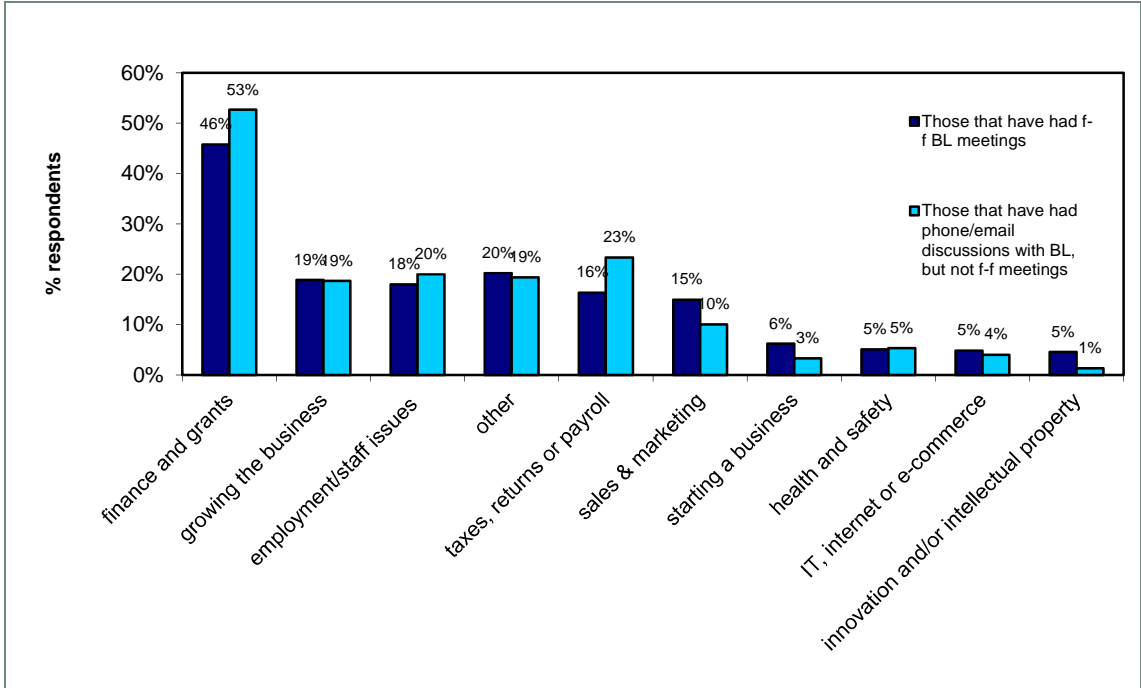
Figure 2-36: You said that you'd had advice from professionals in the last two years. What area of your business were they providing advice on? – by age of firm (S1-S4)



Base: 894 that have consulted professionals - pre-start/less than 3 years (230), 3 to 10 years (280), 11 years or more (381)

- 2.90 **For those that had consulted private sector professionals over the last two years, we note that ‘finance and grants’ was by far the most frequently cited issue, and ‘taxes, returns or payroll’ was also relatively frequently mentioned (Figure 2-36) – aligning with the earlier finding regarding accountants being the most frequently consulted of the private sector professional advisors.**
- 2.91 **Of those that had consulted professionals, only 16% of firms under three years old had sought advice from these sources regarding ‘starting a business’ - remembering also that these younger firms were also the least likely to have consulted professionals at all (see Figure 2-4). The proportion of those seeking advice from professionals about ‘growing the business’ rose from 13% of firms less than three years old to 21% of those aged three to ten years.**

Figure 2 -37: You said that you'd had advice from professionals in the last two years. What area of your business were they providing advice on ? – by whether had face-to-face BL meeting (S1-S4)

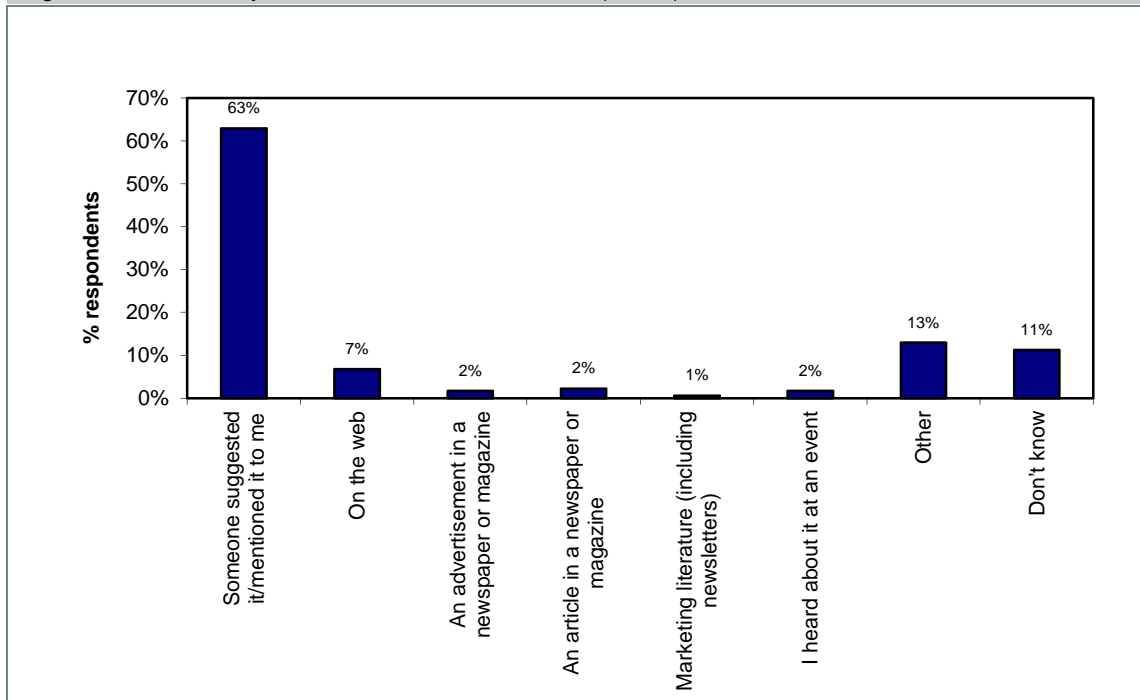


Base: 894 that have consulted professionals – those that have had f-f BL meeting (435), those that have had phone/email discussions with BL, but not f-f meetings (150)

2.92 Exploring the same question further amongst those firms that have *also* had discussions with someone from Business Link (i.e. as well as using professional advisors), we note again that there is a rather similar pattern for those that have had face-to-face meetings and those that have just used the telephone/email channel (Figure 2 -37), with relatively small differences between these groups in the issues they have used professional advisors for.

Channels into Solutions for Business products

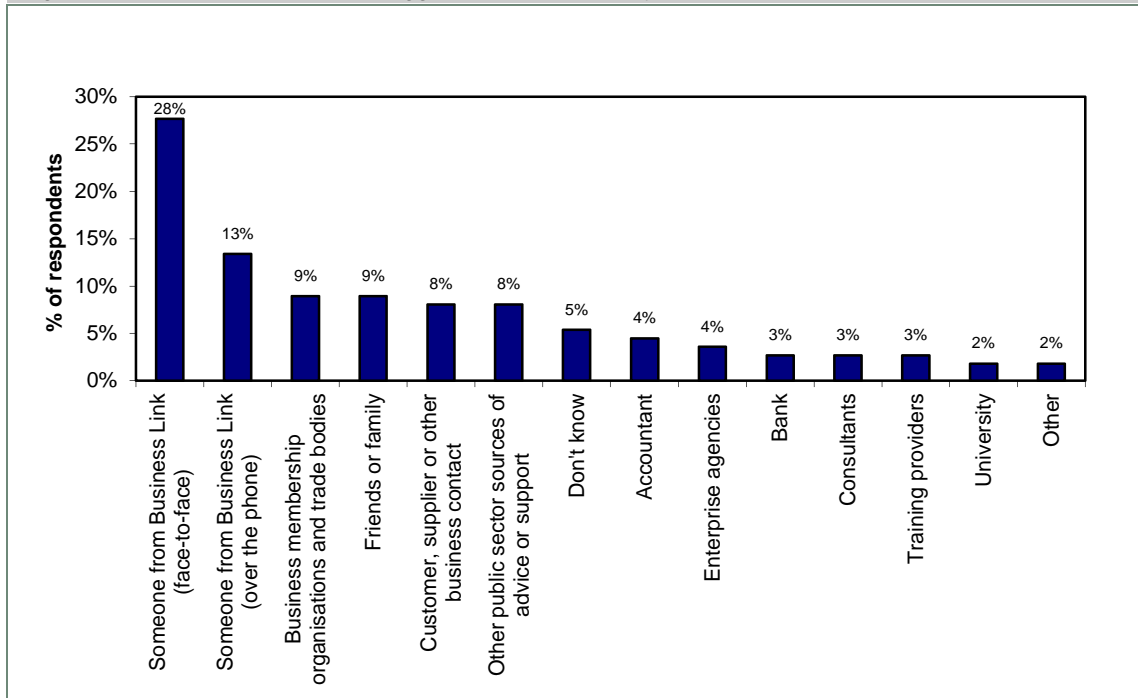
Figure 2-38: How did you first hear about the service? (S1-S4)



Base: 178 SfB users

- 2.93 Looking at the users of Solutions for Business products, we find (Figure 2-38) that **a word of mouth recommendation was the dominant route into the SfB portfolio: 63% said 'someone suggested it/mentioned it to me'.**
- 2.94 Although it was the next most frequently cited route, **only 7% of SfB users first heard about their SfB product through the web.**

Figure 2-39: Who was it who first suggested the service to you? (S1-S4)



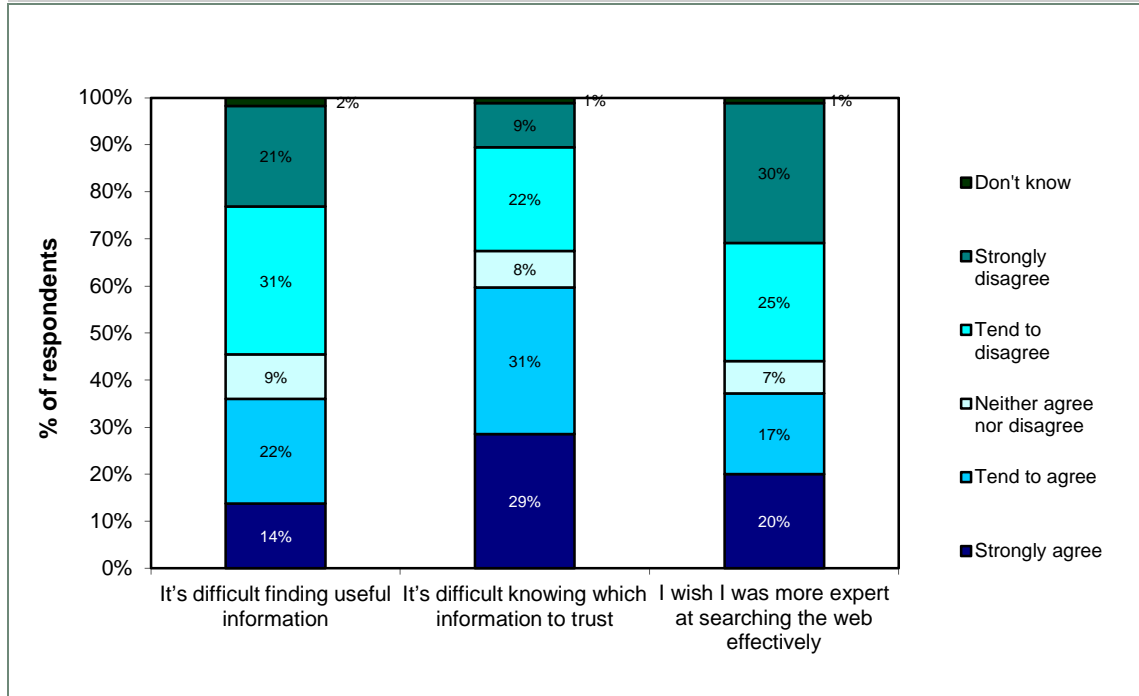
Base: 112 Sfb users who first heard about the service by someone suggesting it/mentioning it to them

- 2.95 Drilling into the word of mouth recommendation regarding Solutions for Business, it is apparent (Figure 2-39) that **Business Link is the dominant channel**¹³: 41% of these respondents found out about the service through someone from Business Link (most frequently through face-to-face discussions).
- 2.96 The remainder heard through a variety of organisations/people – each accounting for fewer than 10% of referrals.

¹³ It should be remembered, however, that the bulk of the Sfb users in this survey came from the S3 sample, which was provided by RDAs – this may be more skewed towards those that have been referred to Sfb by Business Link than is the case for the population of Sfb users.

Barriers to accessing and exploiting business information, advice and support

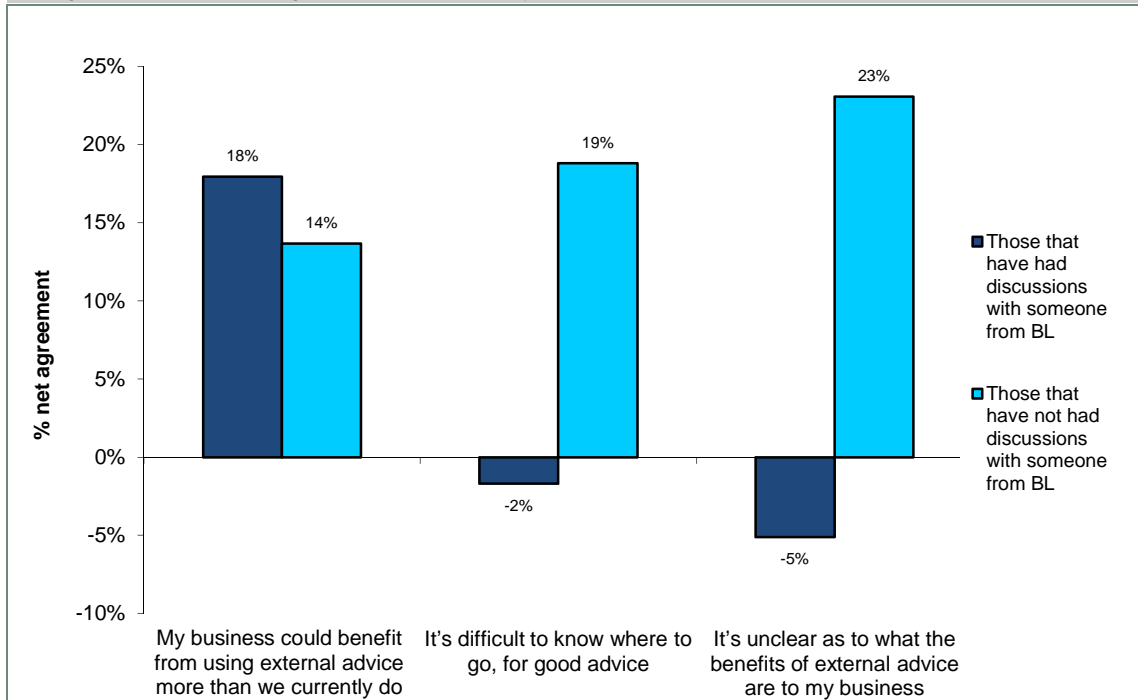
Figure 2-40: Thinking about the times when you have looked for information to help manage or develop your business, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (S4 only)



Base: S4 only (350)

- 2.97 The survey explored various barriers to accessing and exploiting business information, advice and support. In order to constrain average interview length, these questions were only asked of the S4 (Experian) sample group.
- 2.98 **In terms of accessing information, the main issue that emerged was the difficulty of knowing which information to trust** (cited by 60% of respondents) – far exceeding the difficulty of finding useful information (36%) and a wish to be more expert at searching the web effectively (37%).
- 2.99 **This issue is particularly important for younger companies.** The proportion *strongly* agreeing with the statement ‘it’s difficult knowing which information to trust’ was 53% for <3 yr old firms – markedly higher than the 33% for 3-10 yr old firms, which in turn was higher than the 22% for 11 yr + firms.
- 2.100 Respondents’ views on their own web search skills were quite polarised – with 30% strongly agreeing and 20% strongly agreeing with the statement ‘I wish I was more expert at searching the web effectively’. Those at smaller, younger companies were more likely to see this as an issue (44% of <3 yr old firms agreeing, vs 38% of 11 yr + firms) – possibly reflecting the few internal resources that these companies’ managers can call on for web search.

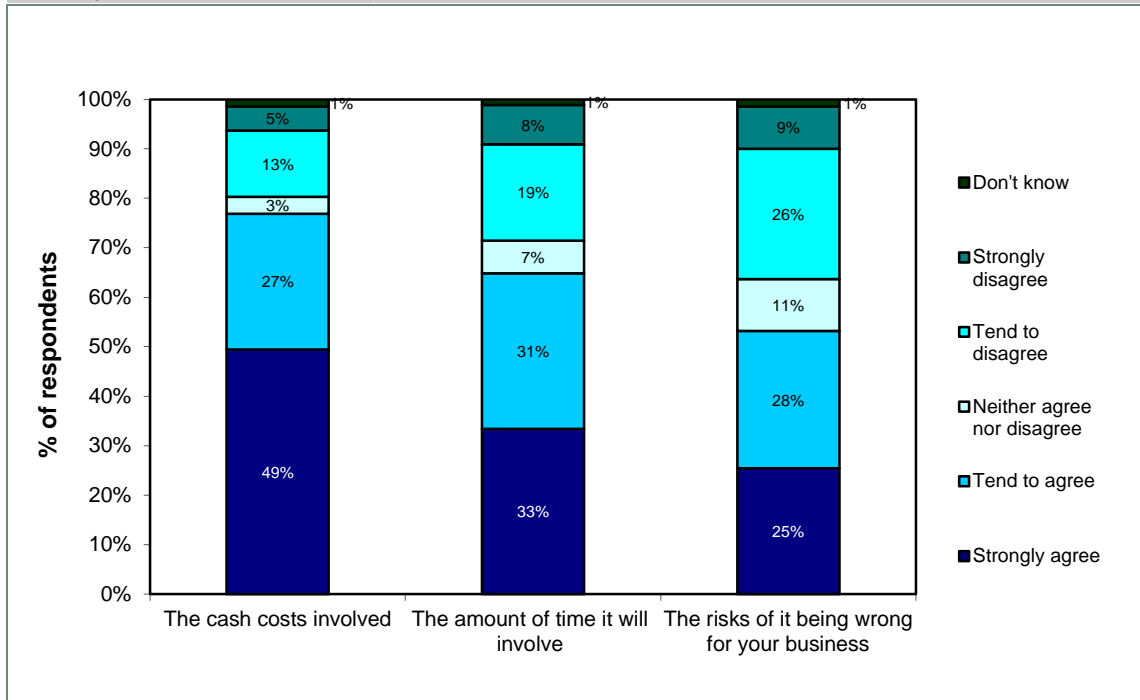
Figure 2-41: And thinking about potential sources of external advice, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (S4 only)



Base: S4 only (350) - those that have had discussions with someone from BL (117), those that have not had discussions with someone from BL (230)

- 2.101 Exploring business perceptions of accessing external advice, we found clear difference between those that had and hadn't had discussions with someone from Business Link. The **Business Link users were more positive about the benefits of external advice**, and clearer on where this could be obtained, as illustrated in Figure 2-41.
- 2.102 **Younger companies and younger respondents were particularly positive towards the potential benefits**; 39% of <3 yr old firms strongly agreed that 'My business could benefit from using external advice more than we currently do' (vs 15% of 11 yr + firms), and 30% of respondents aged under 45 strongly agreed (vs 12% of those aged 55+).
- 2.103 However, this was also the group that was least clear on where to go to for advice: 44% of <3 yr old firms strongly agreed that 'It's difficult to know where to go for good advice' (vs 24% of 11 yr + firms), and 35% of respondents aged under 45 strongly agreed with this (vs 24% of those aged 55+).

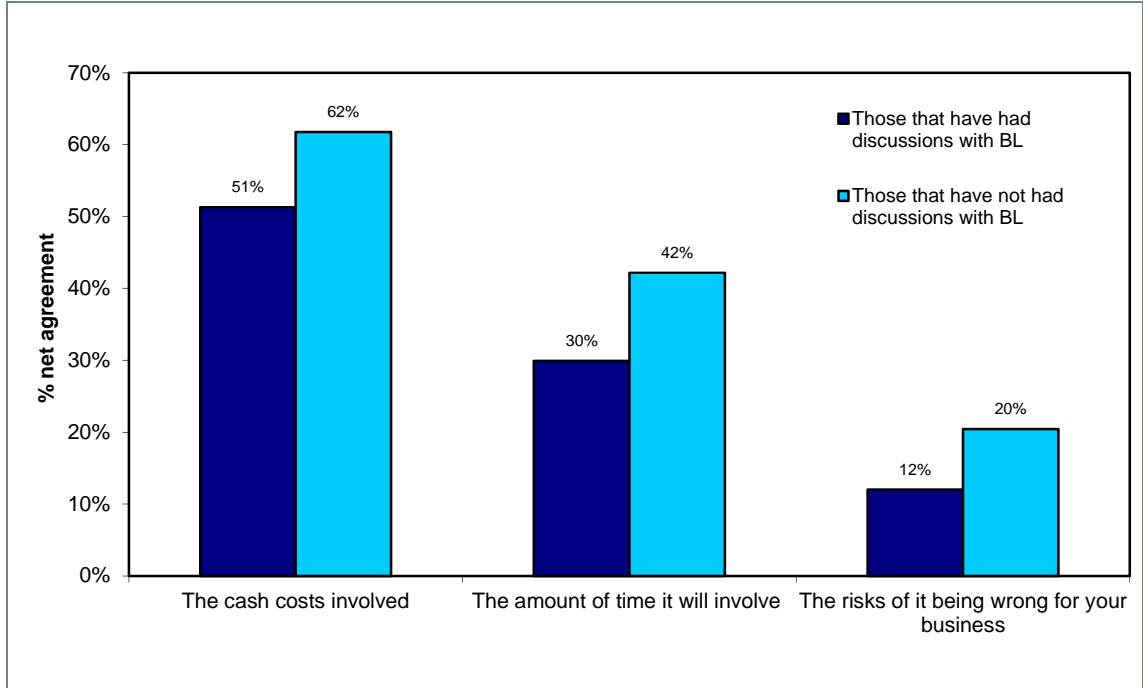
Figure 2-42: And to what extent do you agree or disagree that the following considerations *put you off* seeking external advice? (S4 only)



Base: S4 only (350)

- 2.104 With regard to the considerations that put business off seeking external advice, the **cash cost involved was the most important barrier**; 77% agreed that cash costs put them off seeking external advice.
- 2.105 Again younger companies were more likely to be put off by the cash costs; 84% of <3yr old firms agreeing that this was a barrier, vs 72% of 11 yr + firms.
- 2.106 Another area of difference was that **higher growth firms saw cost as less of a barrier**: 72% of those whose turnover *had* grown in the last two years agreed that cash costs were a barrier - lower than the 82% of those whose turnover had *not* grown. It is not possible to determine the direction of causality here though (i.e. whether turnover growth enables them to seek advice or whether seeking advice leads to turnover growth).

Figure 2-43: And to what extent do you agree or disagree that the following considerations *put you off* seeking external advice? – by whether had discussions with someone from Business Link (S4 only)



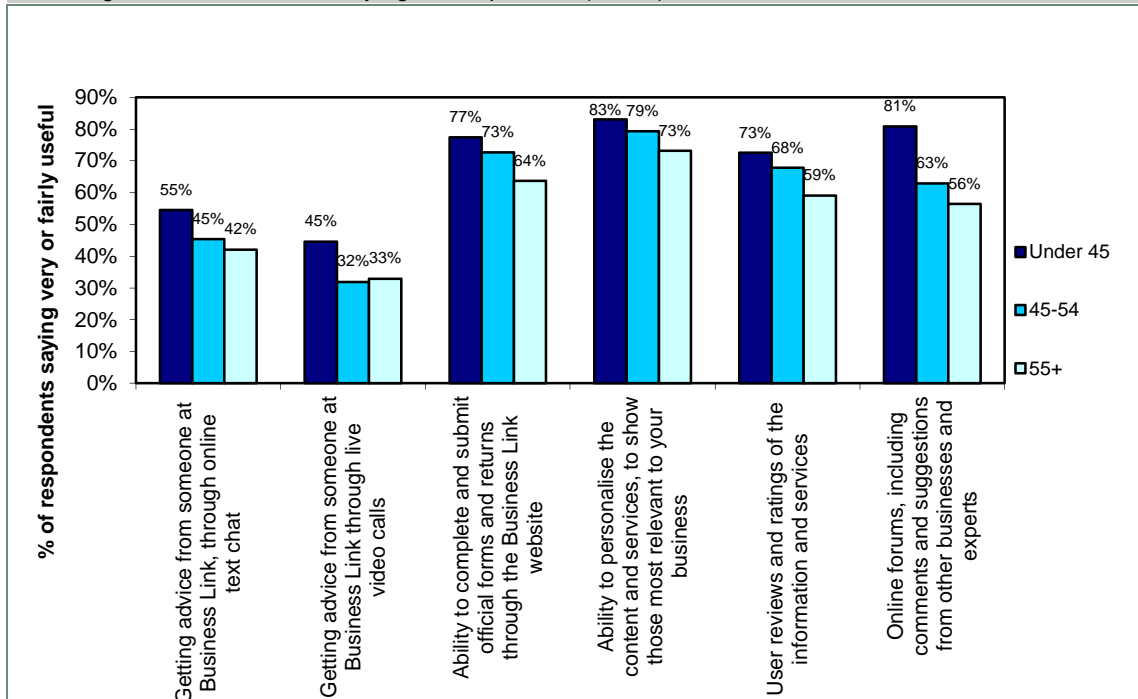
Base: S4 only (350) – those that have had discussions with BL (117), those that have not had discussions with BL (230)

2.107 For each of these three barriers to seeking external advice, we found that (as shown in the chart above), **non-users of Business Link were somewhat more likely than Business Link users to agree that they are barriers** – though it should be noted that, even amongst Business Link users, more firms agreed than disagreed that they were barriers (i.e. positive net agreement).

Potential enhancements to the Business Link website

Perceived usefulness of enhancements

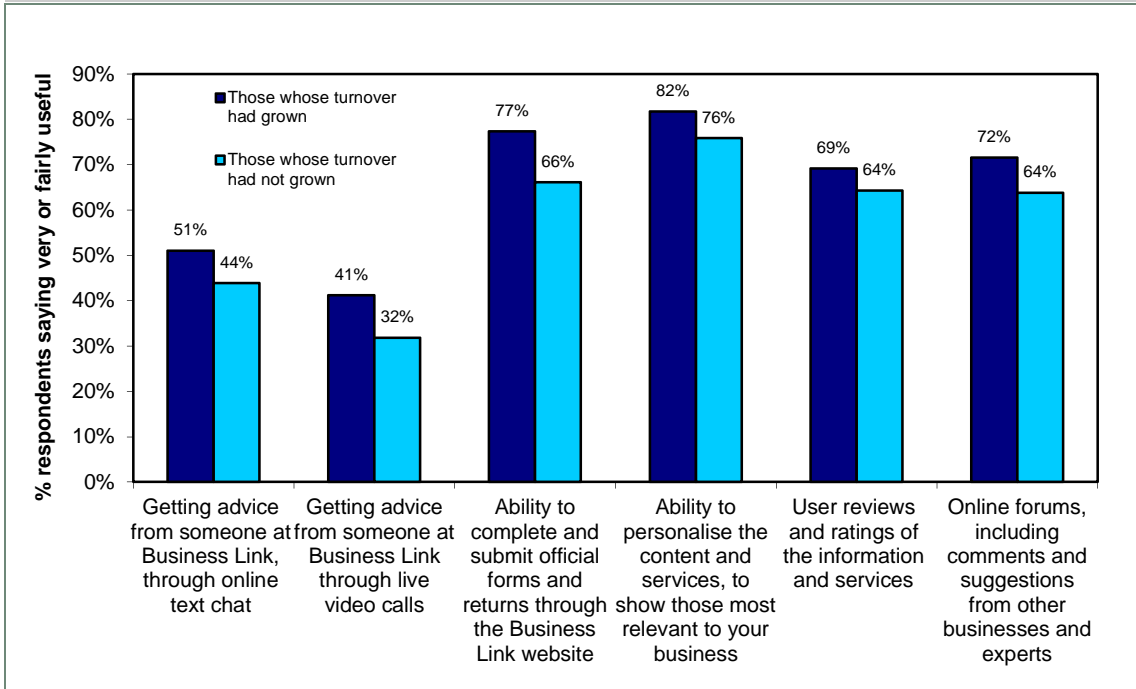
Figure 2-44: The Government is looking to enhance its Business Link website, to make it as useful as possible to businesses looking for information, advice and support. How useful, if at all, do you think the following features would be? – by age of respondent (S1-S4)



Base: all 1100 - age under 45 (433), age 45-54 (388), age 55 + (264)

- 2.108 Finally, we tested respondents' reactions to potential enhancements to the Business Link website, and the potential for the online channel to substitute for one-to-one Business Link support.
- 2.109 **The most popular potential enhancements were the ability to personalise the content and services (79% saying very or fairly useful), and the ability to complete and submit official forms and returns (72%).**
- 2.110 **The least popular potential enhancement was getting advice from someone at Business Link through live video calls**, for which the proportion thinking this would *not* be useful (61%) outweighed the proportion thinking this *would* be useful (37%).
- 2.111 As the chart above illustrates, **younger respondents were consistently more positive than older respondents to each of the online enhancements tested** – especially so with respect to the potential use of online forums.

Figure 2-45: The Government is looking to enhance its Business Link website, to make it as useful as possible to businesses looking for information, advice and support. How useful, if at all, do you think the following features would be? – by whether turnover has grown in the last two years (S1-S4)

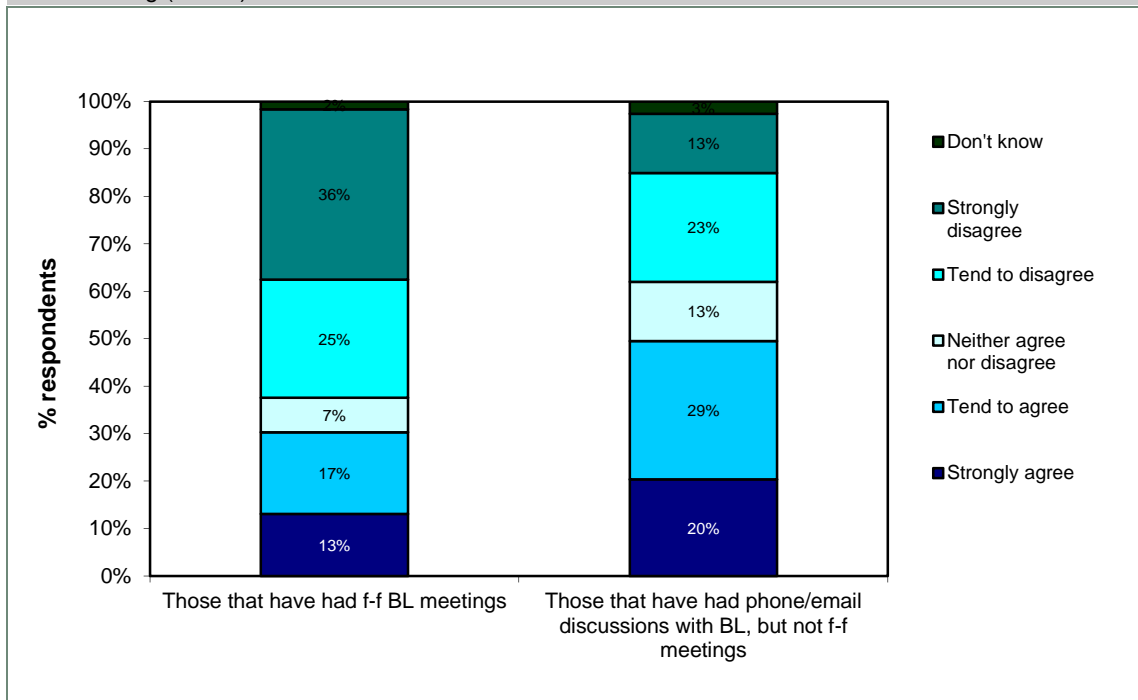


Base: all 1100 – those whose turnover has grown (639), those whose turnover has not grown (431)

2.112 Similarly, firms whose turnover has grown in the last two years were consistently more positive (than those whose turnover had not grown) about each of the potential enhancements. Note, though, that this is linked to the previous finding regarding perceptions by age of the respondent, since the younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to have experienced turnover growth in the last two years in each of the four sample groups (e.g. 70% of those aged under 45, versus 47% of those aged 55+ in the S2 sample).

Whether Business Link advice could be delivered online

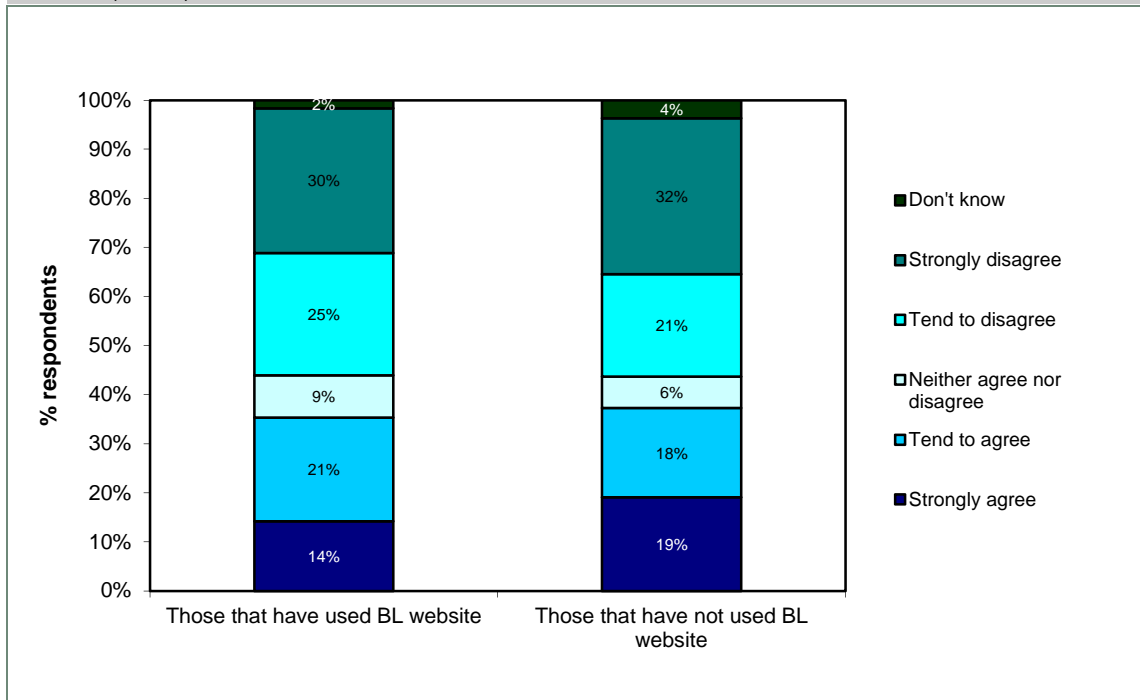
Figure 2-46: To what extent to you agree/disagree with the statement 'most of the advice I've had from Business Link could be delivered through their website in the future' – by whether have had a face-to-face meeting (S1-S4)



Base: 691 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have had BL f-f meeting (498), those that have not had BL f-f meeting (192)

- 2.113 Having taken the respondents through the thought process of how the Business Link online portal could potentially be enhanced in the future, we then asked those that had had discussions with Business Link in the last two years whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'most of the advice I've had from Business Link could be delivered through their website in the future'.
- 2.114 On balance, **there was a fairly strong level of scepticism that the online channel could substitute for one-to-one support**: 54% of the 691 respondents disagreed, while 36% agreed.
- 2.115 Examining the tabulations of the survey responses, it was clear that, as illustrated in Figure 2-46, **the key influencing factor in these responses was whether the business had had a face-to-face meeting with a Business Link advisor**: 61% of those that had had a face-to-face meeting disagreed, vs 35% of those that had had discussions with Business Link but not a face-to-face meeting.
- 2.116 For this question, the patterns of differences by age of respondent vary across the four sample groups, so it is difficult to provide a definitive aggregated view on the influence of this factor. However, within the largest sample group asked this question (S2), we note that younger respondents were somewhat more likely to agree that most of the support they'd received could be delivered online in the future (33% of those aged under 45 versus 24% of those aged 55+).

Figure 2-47: To what extent do you agree/disagree with the statement 'most of the advice I've had from Business Link could be delivered through their website in the future' –by whether have used the BL website (S1-S4)



Base: 691 that have had discussions with someone from BL - those that have used BL website (549), those that have not used BL website (110).

- 2.117 For this question we also compared the responses of those that had and hadn't used the Business Link website.
- 2.118 As shown in Figure 2-47 there was **no difference between the responses of Businesslink.gov.uk users and non-users**; 54% of those that had used the Business Link website disagreed that 'most of the advice I've had from Business Link could be delivered through their website in the future', vs 54% of those that had not used the Business Link website.
- 2.119 It would appear therefore that **Business Link website users are just as sceptical as non-users (on balance) that the online portal could substitute for one-to-one support.**

3: Findings from the focus groups

3.1 In this section we summarise the findings from the focus groups held for this study, covering:

- sources of business advice and support
- difficulties in accessing advice
- perspectives on the role of Government
- response to reductions or withdrawal of face-to-face support
- characteristics of an online portal
- feedback on the three scenarios provided by the businesslink.gov.uk team
- participants' key messages.

Sources of business advice and support

3.2 Table 3-1 provides a summary of the business support used by participants over the last year or two. Private sector sources were first and most frequently cited but some public sector sources were mentioned unprompted in most groups, particularly UKTI, HMRC and Business Link.

Table 3-1: Source of business advice and guidance

Private Sector	Public sector funded business support
<p>Business representatives and trade associations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Institute of Directors, Confederation of British Industry, Federation of Small Business, Chambers of Commerce, Engineering Employers Federation, Manufacturing Institute, Midlands Aerospace Alliance, Charter Management Institute, Institute of Business Consulting, Recruitment and Employment Confederation <p>Business contacts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Mentors, peers and business associates, internal experts, non-executives, suppliers, social media i.e. LinkedIn <p>Investors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Business angels, investors and venture capitalists <p>Professional service providers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Banks, lawyers, accountants, business consultants, financial advisors, tax consultants <p>Specialist service providers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Marketing, human resources and public relations firms <p>Literature and training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Books, articles, internet, courses, seminars 	<p>Specialist support organisations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ UKTI, Carbon Trust, West Midlands Centre for Constructing Excellence <p>Innovation support organisations and networks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Technology Strategy Board, Knowledge Transfer Networks, NESTA <p>Local, regional or national support programmes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Manufacturing Advisory Service, High Growth Programme, Innovation Voucher Scheme, National Industrial Symbiosis Programme (NISP) <p>Local and regional enterprise or incubation centres and network organisations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Manchester Knowledge Capital, St Johns Innovation Centre, Bio Now <p>Websites</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Businesslink.gov.uk, HMRC, Scottish Enterprise, Direct.gov <p>Business Link</p> <p>RDAs</p> <p>Universities</p> <p>ACAS</p>

Source: SQW

- 3.3 Discussion of the business issue or challenge that had prompted the need for support revealed a **distinction between which sources were used for operational, factual or housekeeping issues and those used for strategic support and advice**. This distinction was not as simple as public vs private, but businesses did tend to draw on public sources more for information, signposting, and regulatory advice - although accountants also fulfilled that function for many businesses. Strategic advice seemed to require an existing relationship, experience, knowledge (particularly of the business or sector), and assurance of confidentiality. These were qualities considered to be possessed by accountants and lawyers but also by some business contacts and investors, although there were some concerns about self interest and impartiality.
- 3.4 It is worth noting that a small number of participants had sought *strategic* advice from Business Link advisors, but the vast majority of participants could not conceive how a publicly funded Business Link advisor could provide strategic advice of this type. In relation to strategic business issues – organisational direction, strategic finance etc – businesses wanted a trusted sounding board. With or without evidence, **it was generally the view of participants that Business Link was not a credible source for strategic advice**, and banks also scored very poorly in this area for some participants.
- 3.5 All focus groups commented on the extremely variable quality of Business Link advisors for all types of advice. Some excellent experiences were shared, including some participants ranking the advice they had received from Business Link amongst the best they had ever received. There were also a number of examples of very poor experiences and **overall there was agreement that quality of advice from Business Link was inconsistent**.
- 3.6 Many participants felt adept and experienced at in-house research and capacity building within their own organisations via books, web sources, and professional training courses. The web particularly had the advantage of being immediately and readily available. **Participants using web sources did not report any significant issues with identifying trustworthy sites and highlighted the importance of using the web information appropriately** i.e. for initial information gathering. Business Link's diagnostic process was highlighted by one participant as helpfully "*identifying an issue we didn't know we had*" in the course of responding to an initial query. It was generally agreed that a diagnostic service was a valuable facet of business support, as **businesses did not always know what they need to know**. There was a detailed discussion on diagnostics in Leeds II, which identified that effective diagnostics require the use of skilled, talented people, not just a piece of paper and an unskilled person. It was commented that diagnostics is crucial as businesspeople all have "*our own blinkers on when it comes to our own businesses*". There was a view that businesses have been "*diagnosed to death*" with often poor results, though it was felt this was the result of ineffective diagnostics.
- 3.7 Signposting to other support and services was considered valuable by participants, and as a result well-networked sources of information and advice were highly rated; these were considered to be available in both the private and public sectors. Some participants thought that banks should be better at signposting start-ups to other sources of support, as a business account is the first requirement of a new business. For established businesses, links into sector specific support and advice was important. The Leeds II group particularly reported the

strength of the network as a positive aspect of the current Business Link service. The continuity of support and local provision was considered to have been important in allowing relationships to develop between businesses and the advisors as well as between advisors and other support services in the local area and region.

Difficulties in accessing advice

- 3.8 The majority of the focus groups – except Birmingham I and Cambridge – generally considered **the business support landscape too hard to navigate**. This view was particularly expressed by businesses that had experience of accessing publicly funded support, as they found too many places to go to and a labyrinth of organisations and levels to negotiate. These businesses also considered the administration cost to the business of time spent filling in forms off-putting.
- 3.9 A secondary issue raised by a small number of participants was the **difficulty in getting tailored advice**. Support services were considered too quick to offer ready-prescribed solutions that fit their own agenda and targets. In some cases the ultimate advice was considered to be too abstract to be useful, or it was impossible to find someone who understood your business sufficiently to provide the assistance required. This view often stemmed from requiring sector-specific support.
- 3.10 The two focus groups that didn't consider navigating support structures to be their main concern – Birmingham I and Cambridge – took the view that **established business generally knew where to access good information** and they therefore didn't consider information failures to be an issue. The Cambridge focus group agreed they could access all the good information and advice they needed but **the chief barrier was the uncertainty over the cost of information and advice**.
- 3.11 Some very specific gaps were identified in London around legal advice on import and export issues. It was considered **unacceptable to have gaps relating to advice necessary to comply with government regulation** and particularly frustrating because contact with the relevant public sector organisations delivered very little help. There was disagreement in Cambridge about where the balance of business support was delivered currently: some participants felt there was insufficient support for micro businesses, whilst others considered micro and start-ups to be well provided for and that gaps existed in services for established businesses seeking to grow further.

Perspectives on the role of Government

- 3.12 Two divergent views emerged to some extent across all the groups and can be characterised as **an interventionist and a non-interventionist view of government's role** in business support and advice.
- 3.13 The interventionist argument – expressed strongly by some participants in Birmingham II, Manchester I, and Cambridge – was that **government should take a strategic view of what is “good for UK plc” and provide support to achieve its economic objectives**. Examples of cited rationales for intervention included boosting manufacturing, exports, reducing reliance on imports, enabling innovation and achieving the potential growth in strategic

sectors. In Cambridge it was acknowledged that these objectives should only be achieved by addressing market failures. This interventionist argument came from a variety of types of business, including both Business Link users and non-users and more established and younger businesses. Some sectoral proponents of the interventionist argument came from construction, manufacturing and business services.

- 3.14 Within the interventionists there were differing views as to whether this type of support should be focused on particular sectors or not and some concern that certain *'fashionable'* sectors were more supported than other *'traditional'* sectors which could equally contribute to growth and job creation. Those that wanted a sector focus thought it was appropriate for government to provide access to high quality specialists who could support businesses on a one-to-one basis.
- 3.15 The non-interventionist argument – expressed strongly by some participants in all focus groups – was that **government's role was to "just provide the infrastructure and make sure the markets work effectively"**. This was more strongly expressed by some who considered government attempts at support to be actually damaging to business, and was keenly put forward by more established businesses and businesspeople, and non-users of Business Link. However, most participants with a non-interventionist perspective considered government was best positioned to play the role of "a referee not a coach". Again this camp encompassed some divergent views. Some non-interventionist arguments were motivated by the fact they did not consider the government capable of providing good quality advice, but were amenable to government providing funding for business representatives, trade associations or local enterprise agencies to provide support instead. This view was expressed by those from financial and business service firms (i.e. providers or potential providers) as well as current users of Business Link. Some start-ups also expressed a non-interventionist view, indicating that they simply wanted the right information for their business from government. Others considered government would be more effective if it created an enabling environment for business through lower business rates and incentives for employment, rather than through funding business support and advice.
- 3.16 There was, however, general agreement across all the focus groups on a number of core roles for government. Those core government roles were:
- to **make regulation simpler**
 - to **provide simple, accurate, and succinct information** for businesses particularly guidance on the interpretation of its own rules and requirements
 - to **signpost links to business support providers**
 - to **provide diagnostic services**.
- 3.17 Amongst those who thought government should provide some level and support and advice there was concern that Business Link should not become the only source of advice but rather be part of a 'rich diet' of different sources of information and advice. Similarly some participants cautioned against businesses developing an expectation that government business support could do everything for every industry. It was considered better that **government should do a few things well and set out its offer clearly so businesses know what to**

expect. This view came from all types of user of Business Link, from non-users through to frequent clients.

- 3.18 There was general agreement **that government funded business support and advice should be provided free for start-ups.** A small number of participants also highlighted other trigger points for advice and support in established businesses that were equally legitimate rationales for support, such as raising finance for growth etc. For other categories of support and advice there were a number of participants who said they would be willing to pay – if the quality was good – and generally agreed that paying for advice was reasonable if it adds value. Some participants considered that a financial contribution would make businesses more discerning customers and support a move towards consistently high standards. A willingness to pay was most strongly viewed by more established businesses, though these also agreed that start-ups could not necessarily be expected to pay for support and advice.
- 3.19 Finally, participants in Leeds I and London made an interesting point about the importance of **responsive services.** They considered businesses would be more willing to engage with government funded business support if they could be assured that government were responding to their issues as a result. As well as advice being provided on regulation and taxation issues there should be a *feedback loop* that ensures that particularly complex government requirements are simplified, and that programmes of support are designed to support the needs of businesses.

Response to reductions or withdrawal of face-to-face support

- 3.20 In the Cambridge session and in both the Birmingham sessions **some participants considered the reduction or withdrawal of face-to-face intensive support would not have a significant effect on their businesses.** Amongst those holding this view were a number of experienced and established businesses that no longer required the services of Business Link, and others - established and start-up - who had not made use of the services so far and therefore could not consider their withdrawal to be a loss. There were also those that expressed the view that businesses that needed intensive Business Link help were probably not destined to do very well anyway, because to be successful you had to be equipped to open doors for yourself.
- 3.21 However, on the whole there was a **stronger body of opinion which regarded the reduction or withdrawal of intensive business support services to be detrimental to their businesses and other start-ups in the future.** So, despite reservations expressed about the service as previously discussed, when faced with a prospect of reduction or withdrawal of face-to-face intensive support there was a rallying of support for Business Link's more intensive services.
- 3.22 A view expressed in all focus groups was that **face-to-face support was essential as a sounding board for ideas, which could not be replaced by online or telephone contact.** Great emphasis was put on the quality of the *relationship* that can be developed through face-to-face interaction – if the advisor is good – and how that is essential to diagnostic services, and to a free and open discussion which allows you to bounce ideas around. Small businesses were considered to be particularly isolated as a result of this change and less likely to benefit

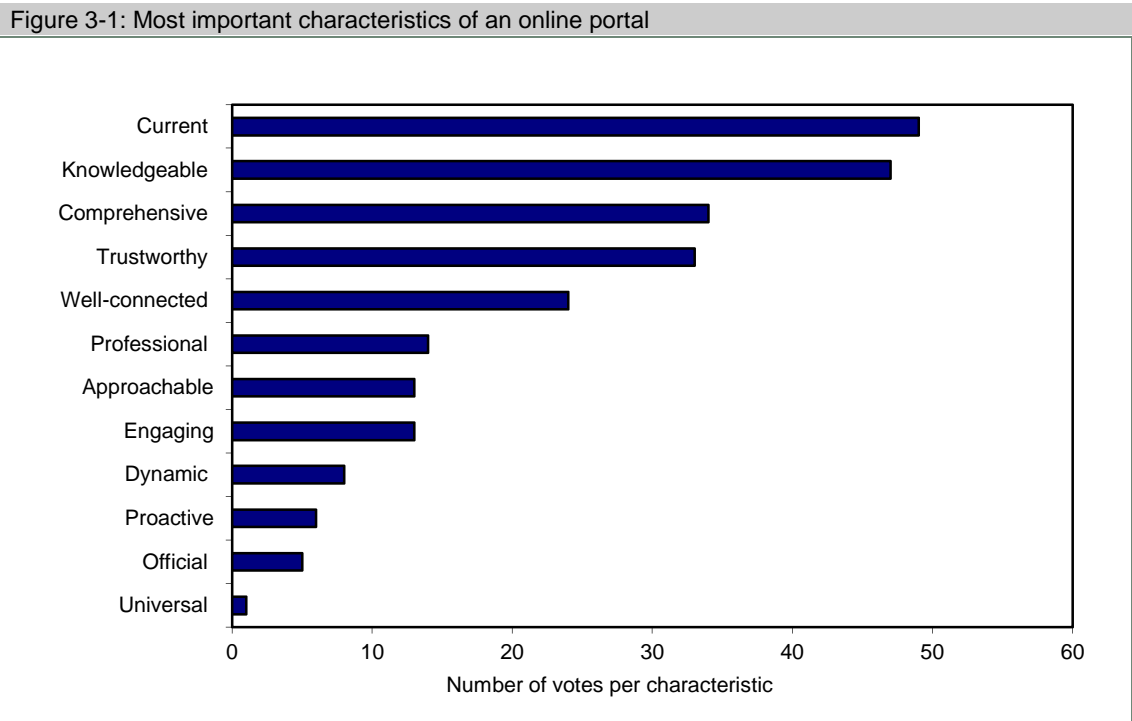
fully from support. This was the majority view in all focus groups, but was particularly strongly held by those businesses that had actually used face-to-face support in the past.

- 3.23 There was an interesting discussion on online diagnostics in Leeds II, following one suggestion that diagnostic software could be used online. Some businesses, especially more established ones and/or Business Link users, were sceptical of how effective and feasible this would be. Some participants thought that a straightforward diagnostic tool would be needed for those that were not willing to spend lots of time running the required software. This could be backed up by a more sophisticated tool for those that want it. Some thought that businesses could then be pushed into the marketplace to pay for advice.
- 3.24 Telephone or video conferencing was considered by some to be a reasonable delivery mechanism for support and advice by some, but there were worries about a call centre model and the increased risk of being dealt with by poor quality advisors.
- 3.25 **Alternatives** to the current service amongst those who wanted to retain it in some form included a **very focused and limited face-to-face service** for a particular range of issues. It was suggested that efficiencies could also be achieved by **greater use of networks, events or clinics** like those run by HMRC, with one-to-one replaced by one-to-many.
- 3.26 Although they were happy with the government having a role in providing business support, the Leeds II and Cambridge groups suggested that in these straitened times it was maybe appropriate for government to focus on **ensuring businesses are informed customers** for the services they require, so they can purchase them effectively from the private sector. In this model participants considered it acceptable to have telephone and online support as long as it directed business towards face-to-face solutions ultimately. This approach of **facilitating better access to private sector support** links to the suggestion from the London focus group to have some type of accreditation or business ranking of support providers that increased business confidence in the quality of support.

Characteristics for an online portal

- 3.27 In early discussion about the online portal, participants were invited to suggest the characteristics they considered most important. These unprompted characteristics overlapped with some they were asked to consider later but it is useful to highlight some that are not covered in the later discussion.
- 3.28 They particularly include a number to do with the functionality of the portal and the presentation of content i.e. it should be **navigable, clear, uncluttered, easy to use, secure, tested, accurate, with useful menus**. This seems to be the least businesses should expect from an online portal for business – *it must work*. The fact that this was highlighted by every focus group suggests rather low general expectations amongst businesses of the functionality of government online services.
- 3.29 Figure 3-1 shows the combined votes of all the focus groups in relation to the pre-specified characteristics. The most important characteristics were for the online portal to be **current** and **knowledgeable** - both characteristics that had a strong link to the previous discussion on the role of government as a provider of legislative and regulatory information and advice. It

was also considered important by over 30 participants that the online portal be both **comprehensive** and **trustworthy**. Although in subsequent discussion some participants did not consider it possible for one site to provide for the needs of all businesses and still be clear, easy to use etc.; aiming to be comprehensive was too ambitious.



Source: SQW

3.30 These aggregated votes were reflective of the votes in most of the focus groups. The exceptions being:

- **well connected**, which was marked more highly in one Birmingham session and one Leeds session; this seemed to be motivated by the desire for the portal to be linked to some regional or local support services
- **engaging**, where half the votes were scored in the other Leeds session, in which there was discussion around the portal being tested in the real world.

Feedback on scenario 1

3.31 Each of the focus groups was presented with the key characteristics of scenario 1: *For you and your business*, invited to reflect on the descriptions of the scenario and shown a 'mood board' and conceptual screenshots of the portal (see Annex B). The focus of the scenario is the text description set out below.

Scenario 1

For you and your business

This is government's service for businesses, giving you guidance and support for your business needs and your dealings with government.

Developed by government, this service provides expert knowledge and practical solutions, giving you up to date information for your particular business needs - as well as access to all your interactions with government.

Providing easy access to a comprehensive resource centre, it allows you to find valuable information, advice and support to help you make your business more effective.

Featuring useful and practical material – such as best practice case studies, support tools and calculators, regulation guidance and advice on accessing grants and support schemes. The breadth and depth of these resources will be invaluable, whether you are looking to start-up; in a small, local business; or a major PLC.

Helping you conduct your business with confidence.

- 3.32 The majority of participants did not like this scenario or consider it would be one they could engage with. Most unimpressed were the Manchester, Leeds and Cambridge focus groups - although some positive views were reported in each group. The majority found the scenario description patronising with far **too much emphasis on government**; the content was impersonal, un-engaging and the information was directed one way, *at* business rather than *responding to* them. The look of the site and the concept of a library were considered by some to be cluttered and likely to place a high requirement on businesses to search for information.
- 3.33 There was also an impression that the scenario description over-sold what could actually be achieved in a portal of this type. In particular the ambition to be **comprehensive resource centre for all businesses was not credible to a number of participants**. For those participants who wanted a greater level of intervention and support provision from government this scenario under-delivered in having no access to any individuals with wisdom or knowledge or any mechanisms to help you grow your business.
- 3.34 The London focus group was, however, positive about this scenario as were some of the participants in the two Birmingham focus groups. In general those who liked this scenario liked the description and the mood board which gave them confidence they could use the site for accessing reference information they needed. For those that did like it the scenario was **consistent with their earlier views on a minimal role for government**. For others it was **consistent with their view of what government was capable of doing well**.
- 3.35 But even amongst those who generally liked it the overall impression was that the scenario and the portal site was *middle class* and implied an advanced level of education and knowledge is required to run a business. One of the new start-ups at the Cambridge focus group made the general point that most business support, and this scenario particularly, gives

the impression setting up and running a business is very difficult and is off-putting rather than engaging.

Feedback on scenario 2

- 3.36 Again the focus groups were presented with the key characteristics of scenario 2: *Working for businesses*, invited to reflect on the descriptions of the scenario and shown a mood board and conceptual screenshots of the portal (see Annex B). The focus of the scenario is the text description set out below.

Scenario 2

Working for businesses

Connect to us and gain the confidence you need to make better decisions. We are a powerful source of information, support and services from government that helps you to be more effective in your business.

Whether you work in a large organisation or are a small start-up, we can help you find what you need to conduct your business more effectively.

Fast, efficient and comprehensive, this is a powerful tool that can adapt to the specific needs of your business – providing the help you need, when you need it. Whether it's keeping up to date with the regulatory aspects of your business, conducting your dealings with government or searching for practical help with your business planning, we will be there to guide you to where you need to be.

Working for you in your business.

- 3.37 Given the criticisms levelled at the last scenario it is unsurprising the **increased opportunity for tailoring the online portal to particular types of business and query was strongly supported by the majority of participants**. This scenario was considered to be much more engaging by the Cambridge focus group and both focus groups in Birmingham and Leeds. It was also considered an improvement in the Manchester groups, but it still was not considered to have gone far enough in addressing the fundamental concern in Manchester that good quality support – face-to-face – could be accessed via a portal.
- 3.38 Those that liked the scenario particularly highlighted the words in the description - **fast, efficient and comprehensive** - which is what government support should be. The overall impression was of a service that was more engaging and task orientated, with potential to be tailored to your businesses. For some this scenario showed **a better understanding of businesses' motivation for engaging with support**. Businesses want practical advice to help them develop and grow. As one participant in Leeds put it – *“I want to wake up thinking ‘I want to sort this business out’ not ‘I want to deal with government’”*.
- 3.39 There was a higher degree of confidence amongst participants that this scenario would deliver what they needed but still a degree of scepticism that this would be appropriate or useful for very large corporations. Amongst those who considered this scenario their favourite it was still considered to **over-promise in its ability to be tailored to specific needs** and a couple

of participants commented that being invited to ask a question of young 'Alex' did not give the impression that advisors were experienced and knowledgeable.

- 3.40 The London focus group was the only group to strongly reject this scenario. Participants considered **the site too gimmicky** and were concerned that in **trying so hard to do so much quality would be compromised**. However, the London focus group did see potential in creating a network of business consultants that could be accessed via this portal and the Leeds focus group similarly thought this scenario would be a useful platform for a regional database of business support providers.

Feedback on scenario 3

- 3.41 Finally the focus groups were presented with the key characteristics of scenario 3: *A smarter way of working*, invited to reflect on the descriptions of the scenario and shown a mood board and conceptual screenshots of the portal (see Annex B). The focus of the scenario is the text description set out below.

Scenario 3

A smarter way of working

Welcome to our service - an open access, business resource channel that works interactively so that you can tailor our resources to suit your needs. We provide clear, well presented, essential services and information that will enable you to manage your work and business more efficiently.

To be successful you have to have the right information, at the right time. This has been specifically developed to give you direct access to the resources and guidance you need, whenever you need it.

Our interactive resource channel will provide you with the level of support you want to help manage any aspects of your work or business more effectively. Join a community of professionals relevant to your business world and access the type of business service you want us to provide; through our intelligent and individualised delivery.

Connected. Smart. Successful.

- 3.42 The third and final scenario provoked a **strongly negative response from the majority of participants**. A number considered the scenario 'ridiculous' and 'a joke' and further could not see how it was in anyway responding to a real business need. The objections to the scenario included:

- a concern over **sharing company data with government** on a remote site
- a reluctance to being **locked into a business support destination** for everyday company operations

- the **duplication of existing services/applications** such as Outlook, LinkedIn etc which it is not the place of government to provide
- the **grandiose claims** of what the site could achieve were not considered credible and again the description was thought to over-promise
- it is **too lightweight**, it is more important for business support to be good than be fun
- it looks **expensive** and businesses were not convinced the functions it aspired to deliver would yield a return on the investment.

3.43 The only element of the scenario that received any support in was the access to the **community of professionals**. If that could be delivered and create access to credible experts it was considered to be of some value.

Participants' key messages

3.44 After a full and wide-ranging discussion participants were invited, finally, to identify one key message they would like to be taken into consideration in the review of Business Link services. A representative sample of those key messages is set out in Table 3 -2.

Table 3 -2: Examples of participants' key messages

"We don't want to lose face-to-face support"
"Websites can't give advice"
"Provide information, not advice"
"Calibre of advice"
"Business support must be local"
"Better quality and less quantify from this service"
"Glad to hear business link is being rethought"
"Be quick in rolling out a solution – hiatus will stifle growth"
"Less regulation and lower corporation tax"
"Government needs to reduce the regulatory burden and make running a business simpler which would reduce the need to advice and support"
"Don't let government try to do what commercial business do better"
"Bring back enterprise agencies (cheap, locally sponsored and utilise expert volunteer) rather than putting too much reliance on website"

Source: SQW

3.45 Overall the key messages underline the concern amongst many about losing face-to-face support and their scepticism that this loss could be mitigated by enhanced website provision. The view held by many was that business support should be high calibre and local and the proposals looked to undermine those principles. There is also a body of opinion that supports a review of government business support, with some suggesting that the best result for business would be changes in regulation and taxation, rather than provision of business support. Others think government does have a role but it should ensure it is complementing private sector provision and thinking about very different delivery models.

Conclusions

3.46 It is not possible to faithfully summarise *all* the perspectives that emerged from the focus groups, as there was often no overall consensus; but we can characterise some of the key arguments that were made with the aim of understanding what is driving those views and what they might mean for business support:

- The **principled non-interventionist** view is that government should not provide any more than a very minimal level of information and facilitate mechanisms for businesses to find good quality business support services in the private sector. It should instead focus on “*getting out of businesses’ way*”, by removing and simplifying company legislation and regulation and incentivising growth by reducing the burden of taxation. This position supports a minimal scenario 1 type portal provision with an associated ranked business support database. Appropriate online diagnostic tools would also be consistent with this perspective, but very little else. This type of non-interventionist perspective was particularly expressed by more established businesses and businesspeople, and non-users of Business Link, including some from financial and business service firms.
- The **pragmatic non-interventionist** view is that government should only do what it is good at, so it should not directly be involved in delivering business support but it could fund quasi private sector organisations to do so on its behalf. The government may have a role in supporting businesses if it can help existing business networks and local providers function better. This position does not necessarily support any particular scenario but the perspective of businesses with this view was that the government should do less but do it well, and it was particularly scornful of the idea of a comprehensive service. A range of businesses were associated with this view, including from financial and business service firms, a range of business life-stages and different types of Business Link user.
- The **interventionist** perspective was generally supportive of the type of support currently provided but agreed it could be done better and more efficiently. There were differences of opinion as to whether that required sector targeting and local provision but general agreement that some expert face-to-face advice should be available via an online portal. Those participants with this view generally favoured scenario 2 but the main concern was that the support that could be accessed via the portal rather than the functionality of the portal itself. Those with an interventionist view were often users of Business Link, though some were also non-users. The interventionist view was also expressed on behalf of particular sectors, where sector-specific support was identified, e.g. construction and manufacturing firms as well as *fashionable* sectors like the low carbon economy.

4: Conclusions

4.1 In this final section we draw together and summarise the findings from the survey and focus group research, with regard to each of the four study objectives:

- explore entrepreneurs' and businesses' experiences and expectations of business support (public and private)
- investigate the links and customer journeys between the BL online service and other channels of publicly funded business support (in particular, the BL telephone helpline, BL face-to-face service and Solutions for Business products)
- explore ways in which the online channel can be enhanced to ensure that it meets the needs of a greater proportion of businesses at each stage of their development
- identify any issues or problems likely to be associated with expanding the role of the online channel.

4.2 Where appropriate, we make reference to the findings from other studies included in our literature review (including selected statistics from other studies in footnotes, in order to minimise any confusion).

Explore entrepreneurs' and businesses' experiences and expectations of business support (public and private)

4.3 Our research confirmed that **firms' owners and managers draw on a wide variety of interactions, which influence the way they manage and develop their businesses**. The most frequently cited sources of information and advice in our survey were: the web; discussions with customers, suppliers and other business contacts; advice from professionals, and discussions with friends and family. In the sample drawn from the Experian business database (somewhat more representative of the general SME population than our client-supplied samples), about a third of respondents had had discussions with someone from Business Link in the last two years. It can be difficult to compare different research studies on the use of business advice and support, because of the various ways in which questions are asked and 'advice' and 'support' are defined. Nevertheless the evidence of our survey does seem to be corroborated by recent research by the Federation of Small Businesses and the Business Link Regional Performance Report for 2009/10¹⁴.

4.4 The focus group discussions also emphasised the rich variety of influences on businesses. Private sector sources were those most frequently cited (including business representatives and trade bodies; various business contacts such as mentors, and peer networks; investors; professional service providers; business literature and training courses), but various public

¹⁴ FSB Annual Survey 2009 indicated that its members had used a range of sources of support, with 77% using the internet for finding advice, guidance and information (p28) and 31% having used government-funded support (p53). The Business Link Regional Performance Report identified penetration rates of between 24% and 52% across the nine English regions (the nine-region average was 36%).

sector sources were also mentioned unprompted in the groups, particularly UKTI, HMRC and Business Link.

- 4.5 In general, the firms that had experienced turnover growth in the last two years were more likely (than those who had *not* grown turnover in the last two years) to have used the various sources of information and advice tested in the survey, suggesting that those most receptive to such influences were the firms that experienced the highest growth. This is consistent with other research commissioned by Government, which has found that growing businesses have been more likely to seek advice than those that had neither grown nor planned to grow¹⁵.
- 4.6 Our focus groups revealed rather **polarised views amongst businesses on the appropriate role of government in business support**: ranging from a ‘principled non-interventionist’ view that government should not provide any more than a very minimal level of information, while facilitating mechanisms for businesses to find good quality business support services in the private sector, to an ‘interventionist’ perspective that was generally supportive of the type of support currently provided, and placed substantial weight on the value of publicly-funded face-to-face advice. There was a general consensus, however, over a set of core government roles: making regulation simpler; providing simple, accurate and succinct information, particularly guidance on the interpretation of the government’s own rules and requirements of businesses; signposting links to business support providers; and providing some form of diagnostic services. It was also suggested that **the flow of information should not just be one-way: there should be some feedback loop** to ensure that particularly complex government requirements are simplified, and to help improve the design of business support.
- 4.7 The **quality of Business Link advisors was deemed to be somewhat variable, but on the whole the service was considered to provide valuable support**. The focus group discussions included some excellent examples of Business Link support, including some participants ranking the advice from Business Link to be amongst the best they had ever had, but also included a number of poor experiences. The majority of focus group participants saw Business Link as a source of information, basic advice and diagnostic services, but not as a credible source for strategic advice.
- 4.8 We found that **the majority of respondents who had had discussions with someone from Business Link had had a face-to-face meeting**, this normally being in addition to email and telephone contact. Based on data previously provided to us on the usage of different Business Link channels, we had been expecting perhaps a third of these people to have had face-to-face meetings but we actually found that the majority had done so in the last two years – in each of the four sample groups. In the light of this survey’s findings, it may be worth BIS undertaking further analysis of the Business Link monitoring data regarding the proportions of businesses that have had face-to-face meetings, amongst those that engage with Business Link.
- 4.9 Regarding the benefits of their discussions with Business Link, the survey respondents were broadly positive. The suggestion that Business Link had referred them to useful sources of information received the highest level of agreement. **Those users who had had a face-to-face meeting were more positive (than those users who had just used the telephone/email channel) about the value of the contact they’d had with Business Link**. In particular, there

¹⁵ See Institute of Employment Studies (2008), *Annual Small Business Survey 2007/08*, Report to BERR, p22.

was 47% net agreement that Business Link had helped to identify ways of developing or growing their business amongst those that had had a face-to-face meeting, versus 8% net agreement amongst those users who had just used the telephone/email channel. Of those that had been referred to other organisations or business support services by Business Link, 26% of those that had had a face-to-face meeting considered that the benefits were 'very significant', versus 17% of those users who had just used the telephone/email channel. There is evidence from the recent study by Databuild that Business Link is a key source of referrals to support that would not be taken up otherwise¹⁶.

- 4.10 More than 80% of the businesses in the survey had had advice from professionals in the last two years, and **accountants were the most frequently cited professional advisors**. The FSB Annual Survey 2009¹⁷ and the Annual Small Business Survey 2007/08¹⁸ both identified accountants as the top source of advice. The focus groups discussions emphasised the value of an *ongoing relationship* with someone who *knew the specific business and/or sector*, with an assurance of *confidentiality* – factors in which accountants were seen to be well-placed. The survey confirmed that larger companies were more likely to have used professional advisors, and typically paid higher fee rates. **Business Link users were more likely (than those that had not used Business Link) to have also sought advice from consultants** – reflecting the service's role in signposting customers towards sources of specialist advice, and helping to stimulate demand for private sector support.
- 4.11 **Those that had used professional advisors reported broadly positive experiences of the benefits of that advice:** in particular, in helping them to analyse the issues facing their business (a benefit more frequently cited by users of private sector professional advisors than by users of Business Link advisors). As would be expected, being referred to useful sources of information, and to other organisation and business support services, were benefits more frequently cited for Business Link than for professional advisors.
- 4.12 **Concerns over the cash costs involved emerged as the most important barrier to seeking external advice, in particular for younger firms** - for whom the challenges faced in the last two years were most pressing (in terms of surviving, developing and growing the business, and raising finance), and for whom knowing which information to trust was most difficult. This would seem to confirm the continued existence of the market failures which Business Link and Solutions for Business were designed to address, such as: asymmetric information between buyers and sellers meaning that buyers do not appreciate the quality of different suppliers, and therefore may be unwilling to pay a price commensurate with the benefits of the advice; and information failures preventing some people from knowing how to start an enterprise and where to go to find that information¹⁹.
- 4.13 There is some interesting evidence on the take-up of support elsewhere. Han and Benson (2010) find that sole proprietors and start-ups are less likely to use support (defined as support

¹⁶ Databuild (2010) *Impact Assessment of the Business Link Regional Network*, Final Report, pp24-25: 31% of BL users have been recommended to use third party support, and 67% of these did approach this support. 44% of those that did approach the support would not have done otherwise, and for the other 56% there was a time saving.

¹⁷ FSB Annual Survey 2009 identified that 72% of its members have sought advice from accountants, p53.

¹⁸ See Institute of Employment Studies (2008), *Annual Small Business Survey 2007/08*, Report to BERR, p22: this identifies that 16% of respondents had used accountants for advice on regulations; trade associations were the next most popular with 11% of respondents using them.

¹⁹ See, for example, BERR (2008), *Supporting Analysis for 'Solutions for Business: Supporting Success'*

to inform financial decisions), though start-up firms are more likely than established firms to appreciate the usefulness of support when they are financially constrained during the creation phase. The authors suggest that the lower demand for assistance amongst sole proprietors could reflect the 'control-averse' attitude towards outsiders and the reluctance to disclose information on their business²⁰. The Annual Small Business Survey 2007/08 indicated that start-ups were more likely to seek 'advice and information about running their business' than more established firms²¹.

- 4.14 **Business Link users were more positive (than non-users) regarding the benefits of seeking external advice** and they were clearer where to go for that advice (suggesting that the service is indeed helping to address these market failures). However, many of the participants in the focus group discussions put forward the view that the business support landscape was still too hard to navigate, with too many places to go to, and a labyrinth of organisations and levels to negotiate. Time spent filling in forms was seen to be a significant disincentive to seeking publicly funded support.

Investigate the links and customer journeys between the BL online service and other channels of publicly funded business support

- 4.15 In this report we have used the phrase 'user experience' rather than 'customer journey', as we feel this is a more appropriate description of what is happening: most businesses are not *customers* of Business Link; and the experience of business information, advice and support in its various guises is not so much a journey from A to B as an ongoing exposure to a wide variety of interactions, some of which are more important than others. In practice, the timing of these interactions depends to some extent on chance as well as other factors.
- 4.16 Looking at the **issues** for which firms have used the Business Link website over the last two years, we found that 'employment/staff issues' and 'finance and grants' were the predominant issues cited by more established firms, while 'starting a business' was the most frequently cited issue for firms under three years old. 'Taxes, returns or payroll' also features as an issue on which users were seeking help from the Business Link website – particularly for younger firms (18% of firms under three years old, versus 7% of those aged 11 years or more).
- 4.17 'Growing the business' was markedly less frequently mentioned as an issue with which firms were looking to the Business Link *website* for help, than in the equivalent question asked regarding reasons for having *discussions* with someone from Business Link – suggesting that **'growing the business' was an issue on which firms were looking for one-to-one discussions (most frequently face-to-face) rather than information and advice from the Business Link website.**
- 4.18 In contrast, 'employment/staff issues' and 'taxes, returns or payroll' were more frequently cited as issues on which firms were looking to the Business Link website for help (than in the equivalent question asked regarding reasons for having *discussions* with someone from

²⁰ Han, L. and Benson, A. (2010) *The use and usefulness of financial assistance to UK SMEs*, in Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy, Vol. 28, No 3, Jun 2010

²¹ See Institute of Employment Studies (2008), *Annual Small Business Survey 2007/08*, Report to BERR, p22

Business Link) – suggesting that these are issues that lend themselves particularly well to online delivery of information and advice.

- 4.19 Analysing the channels into Business Link by whether or not the respondent had used the Business Link website, we found that **Business Link website users were more likely than non-users to have also used the telephone channels** (general helpline and call with a Business Link advisor) **and email contact**, and *slightly less likely to have had face-to-face meetings*. Coupled with the finding that 78% of those in our S4 (Experian) sample that had used the Business Link website had also had discussions with someone from Business Link, this would appear to be consistent with the **Business Link website currently complementing, rather than substituting for, telephone/email support and face-to-face support**.
- 4.20 For the people who had had discussions with someone from Business Link, **only a minority were prompted to get in touch with Business Link as a result of finding them on the web** (15% of firms less than three years old, reducing to 4% of firms aged 11 years or more). Word-of-mouth recommendations were far more important as a route into Business Link, and the most frequently cited amongst firms aged three years or more was a direct approach from Business Link.
- 4.21 There is a high degree of overlap between those that use the Business Link website and those that use the telephone/email and face-to-face channels. However, the extent to which the website users are really ‘immersing’ themselves in the site *before* seeking further support is variable: **many Business Link users had barely looked at the website before getting in touch**. This suggests that there is currently a rather shallow level of engagement with the website amongst some users, though also that there is the potential to enhance the utility of the website.
- 4.22 Similarly, **the current website appears to play only a relatively minor role as an initial channel into Solutions for Business**; only 7% of Solutions for Business users in this survey had first heard about their SfB product on the web – the dominant channel being word-of-mouth recommendations, most frequently from someone at Business Link in a face-to-face meeting. This seems to be slightly inconsistent with a recent cross-product monitoring survey on six of the Solutions for Business products. This survey identified that business contacts were the most common channel to Solutions for Business, followed by the Business Link website, external advisors and then Business Link contact (excluding the website and direct mail)²². This may partly reflect the source of our survey sample, which was RDA Solutions for Business and Business Link clients, though could also reflect that our survey asked for the *first* means through which businesses had heard about products.
- 4.23 Again, **amongst those that had attended a Business Link event, only a relatively small minority had first heard about the event on the Business Link website** (16% of firms aged less than three years, reducing to just 3% of firms aged 3-10 years). Proactive direct promotion by Business Link was the primary means of hearing about the event – either

²² See Braidford, P. and Stone, I. (2010), *Solutions for Business Cross-Product Monitoring Survey*, Report to BIS. Respondents were able to identify more than one possible channel to Solutions for Business products. The top answers were business contacts (29% of respondents), the Business Link website (23%), external advisors (17%) and Business Link contact (excluding the website and direct mail) (16%).

through an email from the event organiser or through a recommendation by someone at Business Link.

- 4.24 Amongst the people who had used the Business Link website, the **dominant way of first hearing about the site was through a search engine** – especially so amongst younger firms. For more established firms, a direct contact from Business Link became a significant channel to the website (albeit still much less common than finding it through a search engine). Web stats made available to us by Businesslink.gov.uk indicate that search engines accounted for over one-half of the means by which businesses reach the Business Link website in both June and July 2010.
- 4.25 In general, there was a **high level of agreement amongst its users that the Business Link website had provided useful referrals**: that the links led them to other useful websites, and that it led them to make contact with other organisations which provided useful advice.
- 4.26 The **perceived usefulness of the Business Link website was greatest amongst those firms that had also had discussions with someone from Business Link** (85% of those that had used the website and also had discussions with Business Link users rated it as very or fairly useful, versus 67% of people who had used the Business Link website, but not also had discussions).

Explore ways in which the online channel can be enhanced to ensure that it meets the needs of a greater proportion of businesses at each stage of their development

- 4.27 Whilst Business Link website users (especially those that had also had discussions with Business Link) were positive about the usefulness of the current site, and its ease of navigation, there was also **agreement that the content could be improved**.
- 4.28 Of the potential enhancements we tested in the survey, **the most popular potential enhancements were the ability to personalise content and services, and the ability to complete and submit official forms and returns**. User reviews and ratings of information and services, and online forums were also well received. The least popular potential enhancement was getting advice from someone at Business Link through live video calls – though a significant minority (34%) of survey respondents still thought this would be useful, as did some of the focus group participants, and we note that this could potentially be a more popular option if face-to-face meetings with an advisor were not available. Younger respondents were consistently more positive than older respondents about each of the potential enhancements we tested.
- 4.29 Exploring the desired characteristics of an online portal in the focus groups, unprompted responses emphasised the **importance of getting the basics right**: that it ‘must work’ – being navigable, clear, uncluttered, easy to use, secure, tested, accurate and with useful menus. Of the various prompted characteristics we tested (as requested by the Businesslink.gov.uk team), the words that got most support from the participants were ‘**current**’ and ‘**knowledgeable**’, followed by ‘**comprehensive**’ and ‘**trustworthy**’.

- 4.30 Of the three scenarios developed by the Businesslink.gov.uk team, there was no clear 'winner' in the focus groups: each scenario had its plus points and drawbacks for various participants. However, **scenario 2 (with its intermediate level of interactivity) got more support than the other two in most of the groups**. It offered increased opportunities for tailoring to businesses' needs; its positioning as fast, effective and comprehensive was welcomed by those that liked this scenario; it placed less emphasis on 'government' than scenario 1; and was less over-reaching than scenario 3 (this latter scenario provoked a strongly negative response from the majority of participants).

Identify any issues or problems likely to be associated with expanding the role of the online channel

- 4.31 In both the survey and the focus groups we tested reactions to the potential for the online and phone channels to substitute for face-to-face support from Business Link.
- 4.32 It was clear from the survey that **those Business Link users who had had a face-to-face meeting are getting the most value from the Business Link service**. This group had had the most intensive support (in terms of hours of discussions with Business Link), and were more positive about the benefits of that support – reflected in a somewhat higher (hypothetical) willingness to pay. Evaluation evidence corroborates this finding. A recent evaluation for SWRDA of the regional Business Link service indicates that intensively assisted firms are more likely to report turnover benefits than non-intensively assisted firms, with quantified GVA benefits more than twice as high per intensively assisted firm²³. The Databuild (2010) report also identified higher proportions of respondents identifying benefits amongst event attendees and intensively assisted firms (than non-intensively assisted firms) and higher cash and time savings for intensively assisted firms²⁴. However, this does not mean that value for money is necessarily better for intensively assisted firms – neither the SQW report nor the Databuild report distinguish between the value for money for intensive vs non-intensive assistance (though the SQW report did identify that returns to the public purse were significant across the regional service as a whole).
- 4.33 There was a rather **strong level of disagreement in both the survey and the focus groups that an expanded online channel, complementing the phone channel, could satisfactorily substitute for face-to-face one-to-one support**. There was 41% net disagreement (i.e. 41% more disagreement than agreement) amongst those that had had a face-to-face meeting with the statement 'instead of a face-to-face meeting I could have got the same level of advice over the phone, through email or online'. Those that had not had a face-to-face meeting (i.e. users that had only used the phone channel and/or email) were more equivocal, reflecting the lower value they placed on the advice provided through those channels. Other recent research backs up this finding²⁵.

²³ SQW (2009) *Interim evaluation of Business Link services in the South West*, Final Report to SWRDA, pp55-56, 75 and 79

²⁴ Databuild (2010) *Impact Assessment of the Business Link Regional Network*, Final Report, pp 15-16, 18-19, 22-23

²⁵ See Step Ahead Research (2010) *Business Link Customer Insight Report*, Report to England's RDAs. The report indicated that online services can be cost effective with evidence of high levels of usage of the Business Link website, but customers feel that they benefit from the "personal touch".

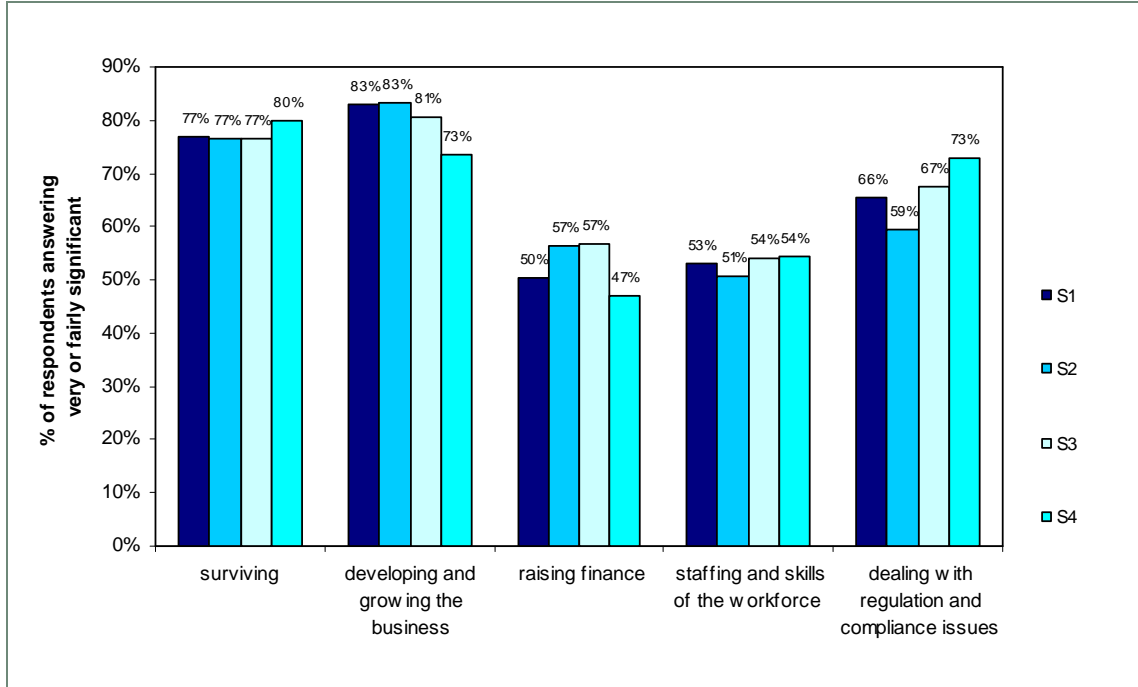
- 4.34 Even having talked respondents through various potential enhancements to the Business Link website, 54% disagreed (vs 36% agreeing) with the statement ‘most of the advice I’ve had from Business Link could be delivered through their website in the future’ – rising to 61% disagreeing amongst those that had had a face-to-face meeting. Business Link website users were just as sceptical as non-users that an enhanced online portal could substitute for the advice they’d previously had from Business Link.
- 4.35 In the focus group discussions, notwithstanding previous comments regarding some shortcomings in the current service, there was a relatively strong body of opinion that the reduction or withdrawal of intensive business support services would be detrimental to their businesses and other start-ups in the future (though it should be noted that the focus groups included a higher proportion of Business Link customers than is the case in the general SME population).
- 4.36 Across all the focus groups, face-to-face support was seen as being essential as a sounding board for ideas, and great emphasis was put on the quality of the *relationship* that could be developed through face-to-face interaction (if the advisor is good), which is vital for effective diagnosis and for allowing free and open discussions to bounce ideas around. This was seen as being particularly important for younger businesses, for which it was noted that they ‘don’t necessarily know what they need to know’.

Issues and risks

- 4.37 The research findings raise a number of risks around the shift to a service delivered predominantly online and through a national telephone helpline.
- 4.38 The research findings suggest that the **key concern is associated with a loss of diagnostic and brokerage services** (in particular where these are currently delivered face-to-face) rather than the provision of advice and support *per se*.
- 4.39 Many businesses can and will use their networks, private providers and business representative or trade organisations instead of Business Link. However, a reduction in the availability of Business Link’s face-to-face service could result in **a lower take-up of external advice** and confusion remains around which sources of advice to trust.
- 4.40 The impacts of reducing the availability of face to face diagnostic and brokerage services will also be uneven. **Start-ups and new businesses will be particularly affected** as they are the least likely to know what support they need, the least able to find or trust appropriate support and the least able and willing to pay for this support. As **growing businesses and those intending to grow** are currently more likely than others to engage with Business Link, especially face-to-face support, there is also a risk that these businesses will be particularly affected.

Annex A: Further detail on survey findings

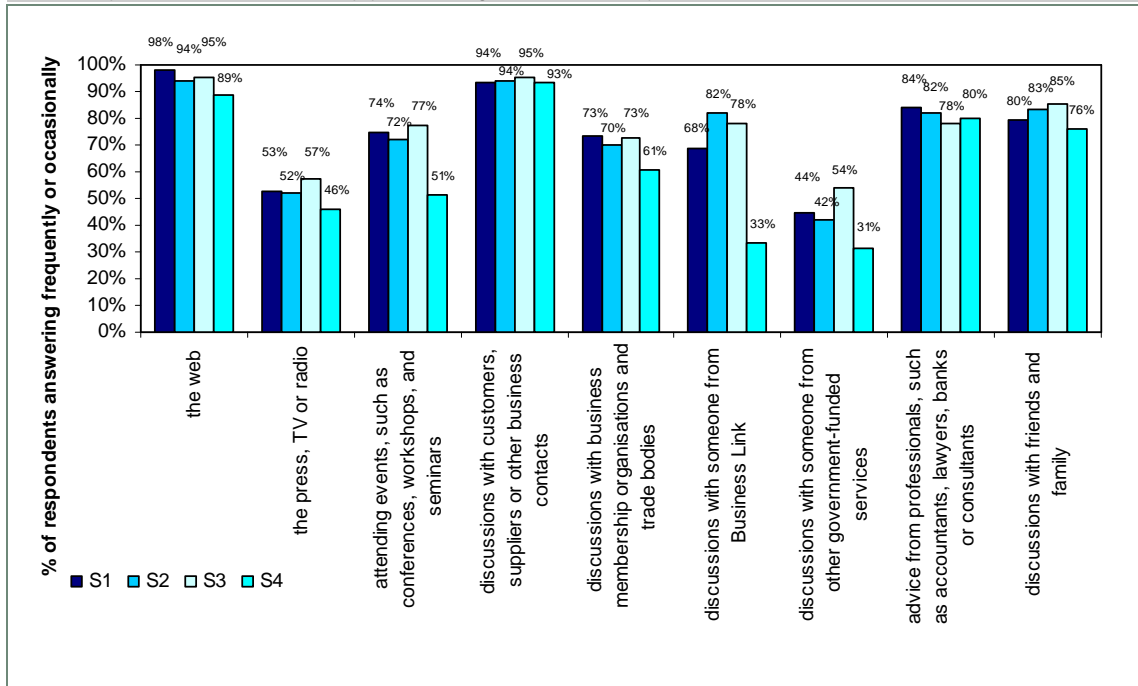
Figure A-1 : To what extent, if at all, have the following been significant concerns for your business over the last two years?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 1100 - S1 (250), S2 (350), S3 (150), S4 (350).

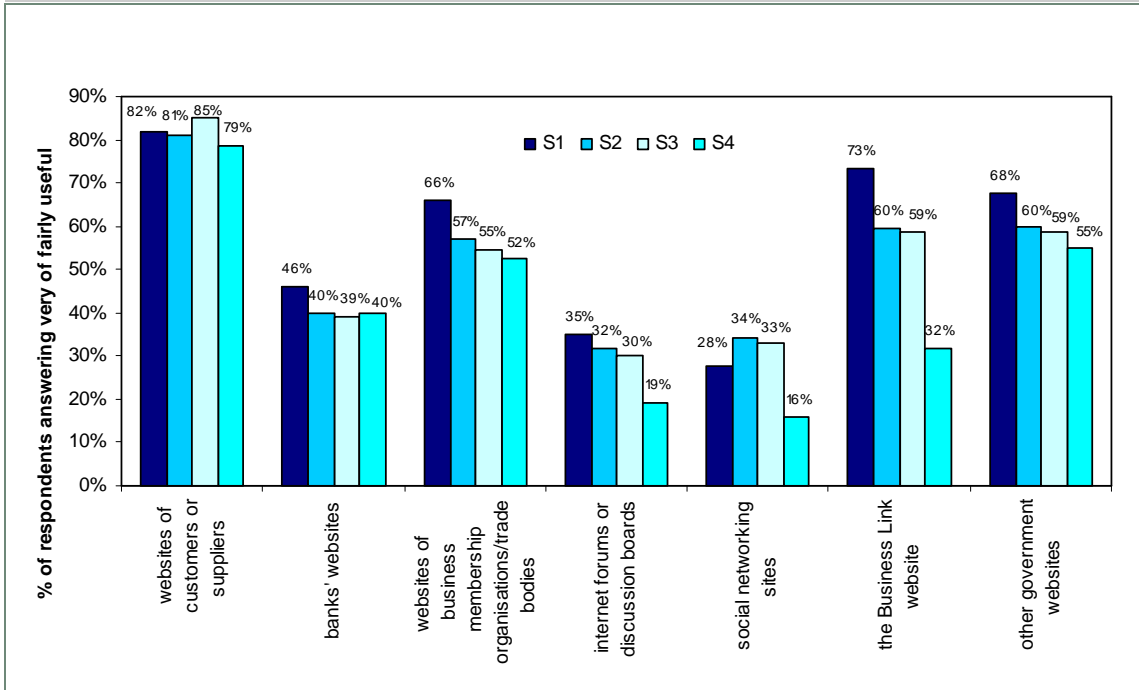
Figure A-2 : How often, if at all, have you used the following sources of information or advice over the last two years, to inform the way you manage and develop your business?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 1100 - S1 (250), S2 (350), S3 (150), S4 (350).

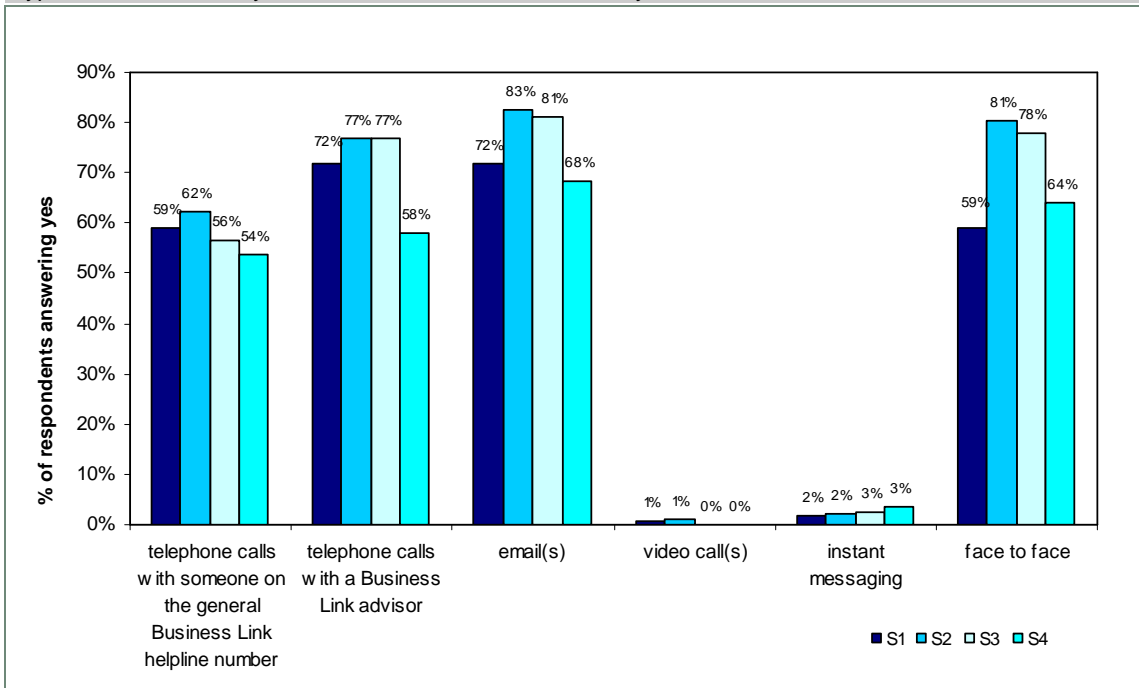
Figure A-3 : Thinking about your use of the web for business-related information or advice, how useful, if at all, have you found the following over the last two years?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 1028 - S1 (245), S2 (329), S3 (143), S4 (311).

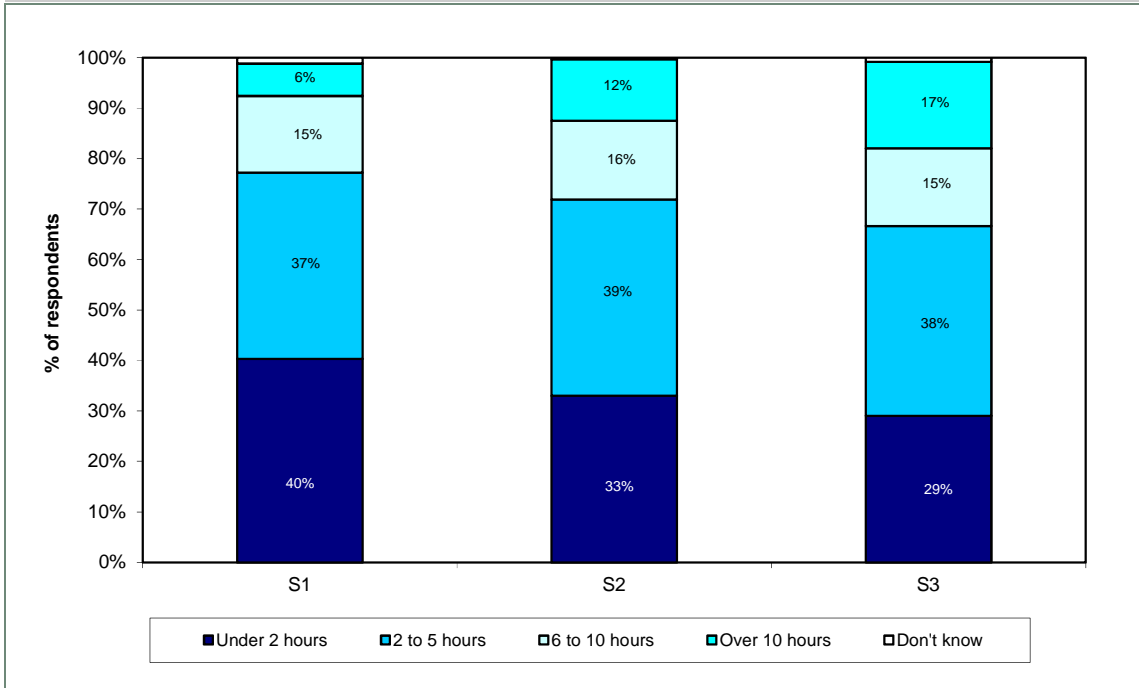
Figure A-4 : You said that you'd had contact with someone from Business Link. Which of the following types of contact have you had with them over the last two years?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 693 - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117), S4 (117).

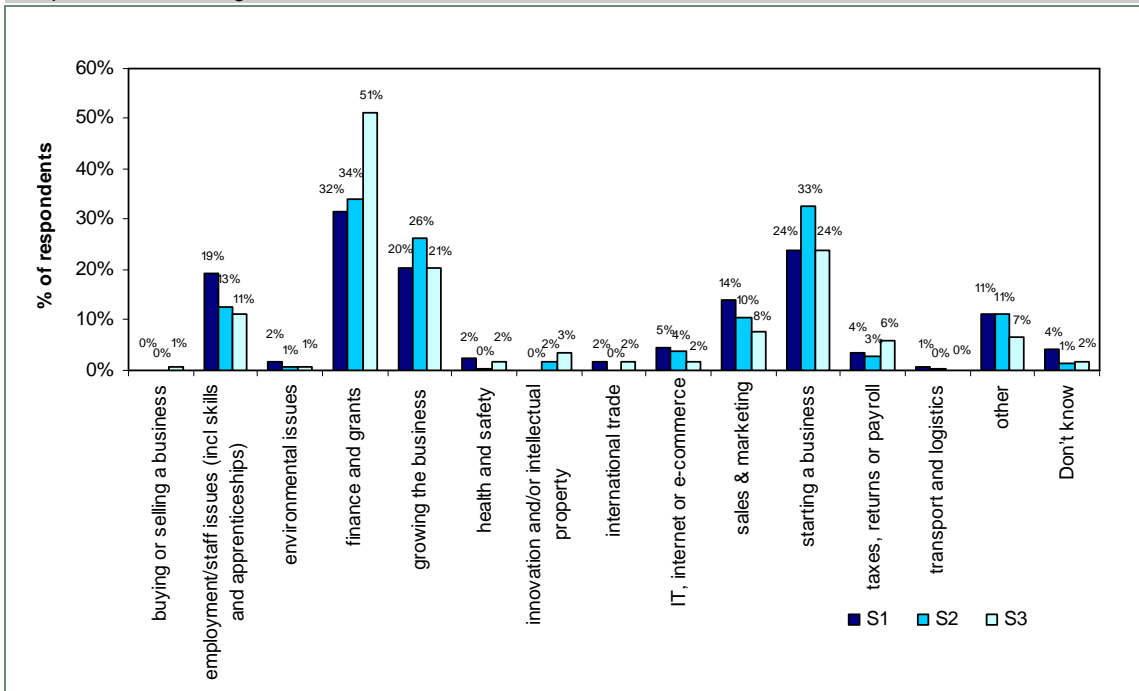
Figure A-5 : In total, roughly how many hours of discussion have you had with someone from Business Link in the last two years?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117).

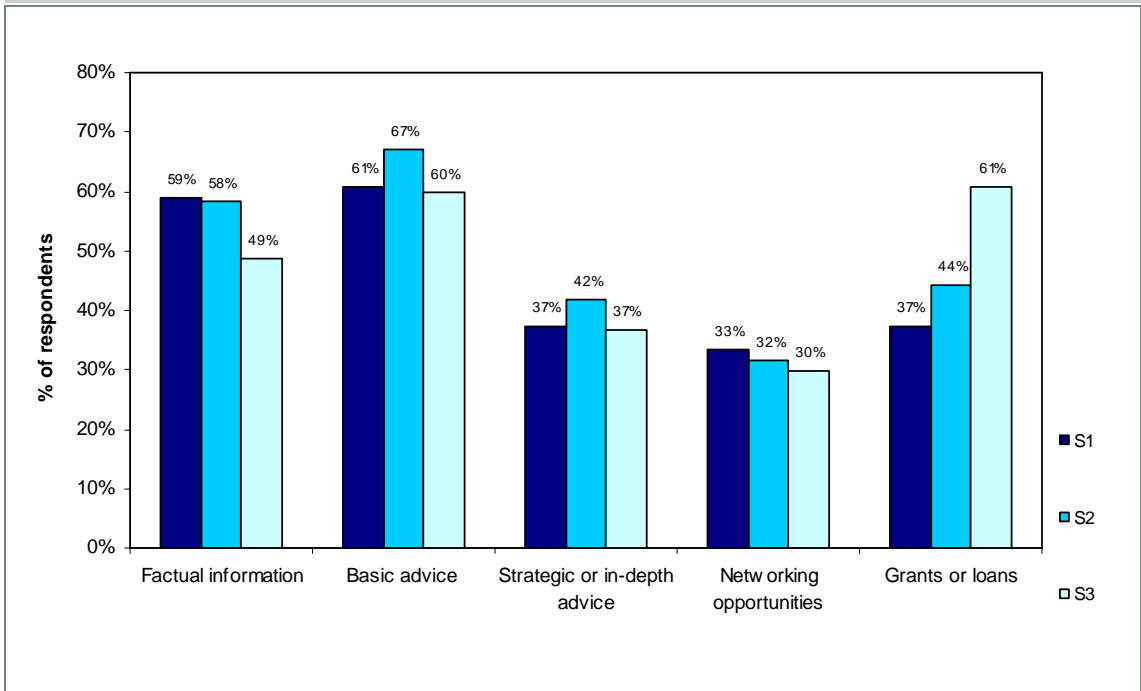
Figure A-6 : Thinking about when you first engaged with Business Link, what issues were you seeking help with, at that stage?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117).

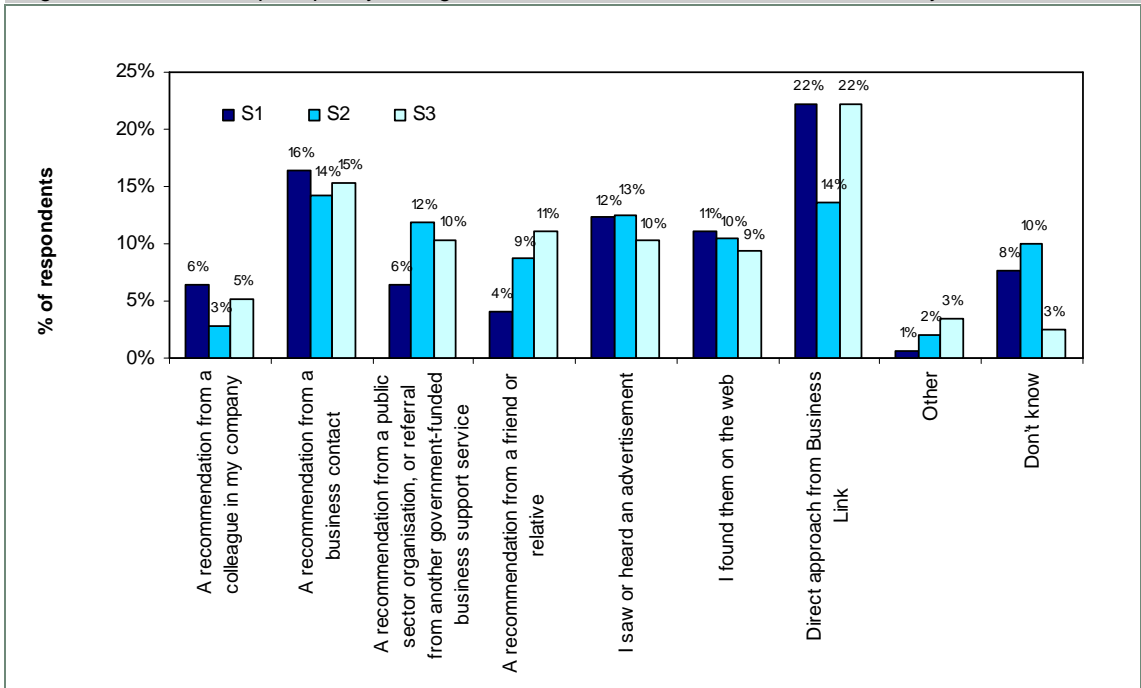
Figure A-7 : How would you characterise the nature of information, advice or support that you sought from Business Link?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117).

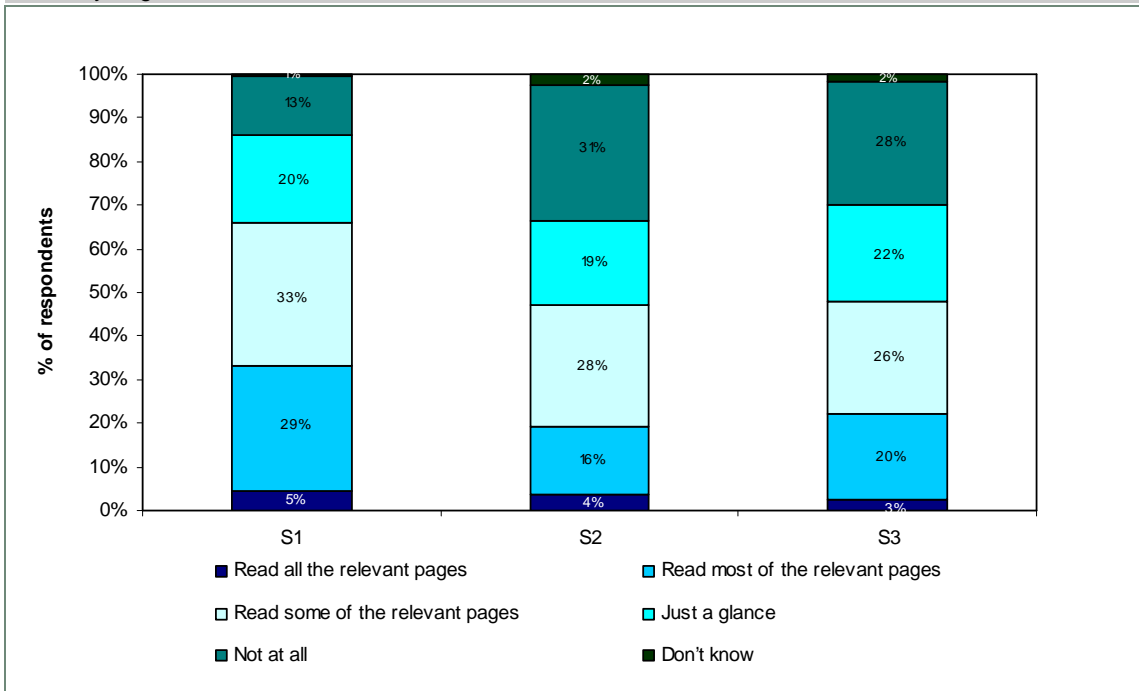
Figure A-8 : And what prompted you to get in touch with Business Link, rather than anyone else?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117).

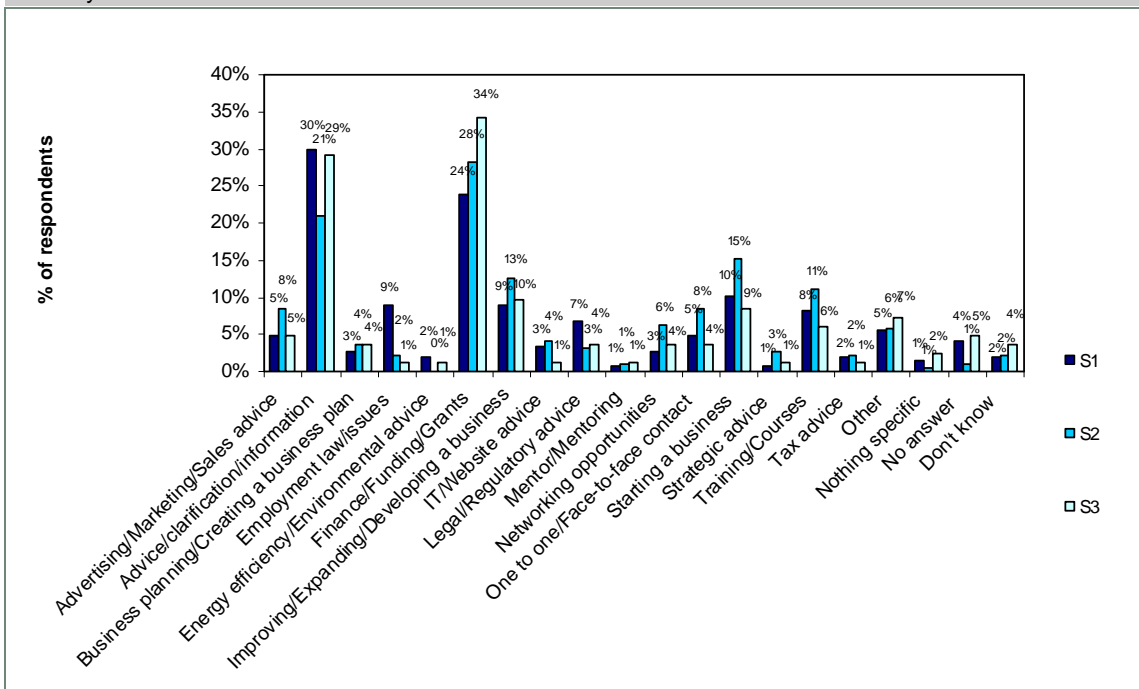
Figure A-9 : How much, if at all, had you looked through the Business Link website for information, before you got in contact with them?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117).

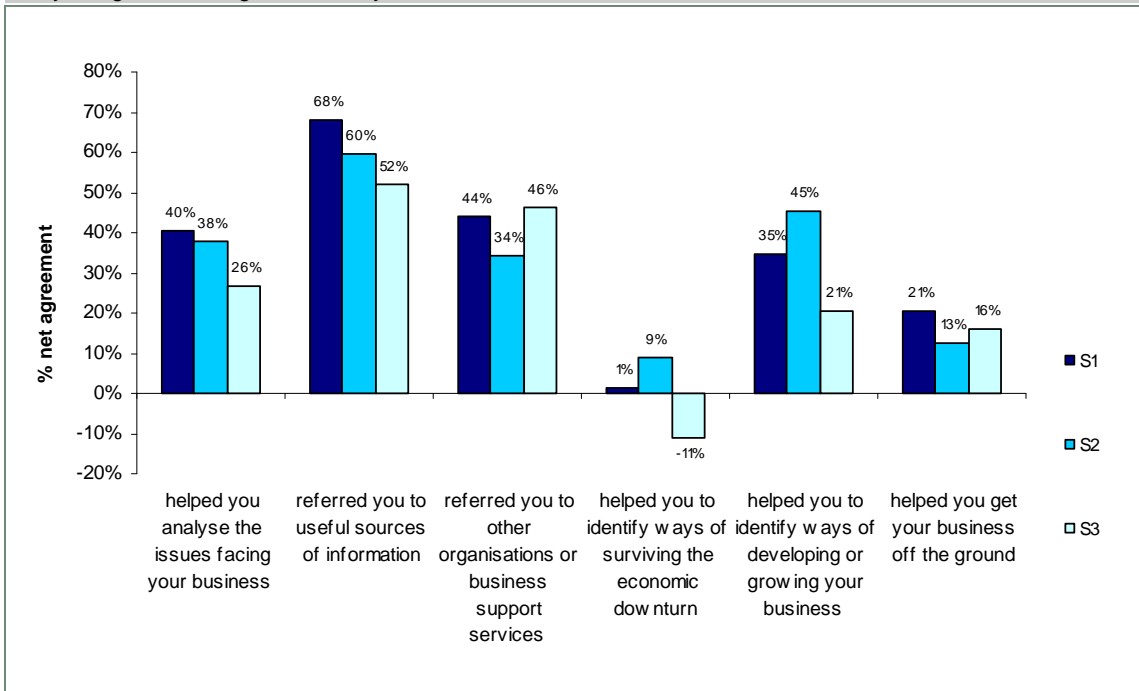
Figure A-10 : When you contacted Business Link, what help were you looking for, beyond what you'd already seen on their website?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 420 - S1 (147), S2 (191), S3 (82).

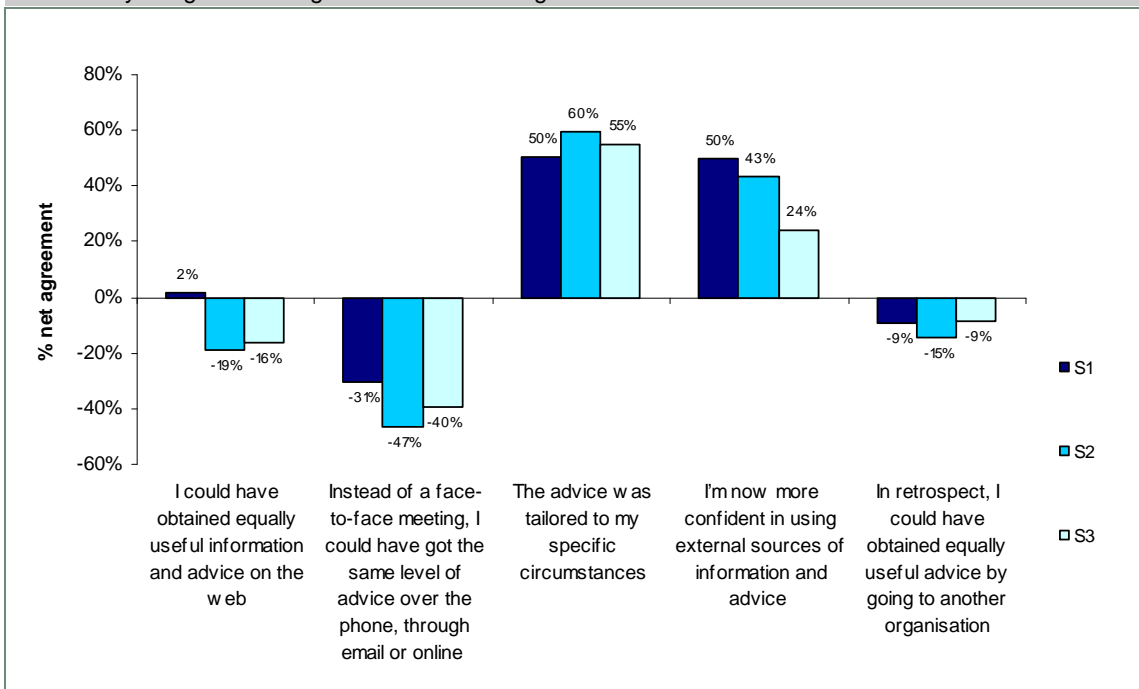
Figure A-11 : Thinking about the contact you have had with someone from Business Link, to what extent do you agree or disagree that they have...



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 -S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117).

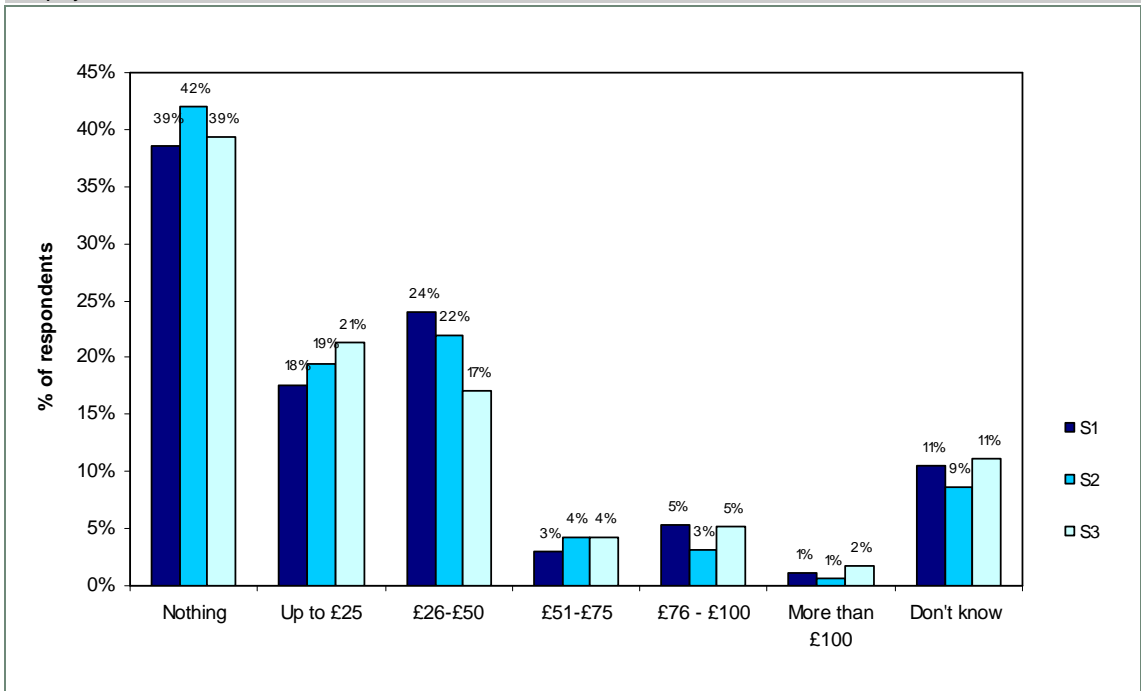
Figure A-12 : Thinking about the information and advice you've received from Business Link, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117).

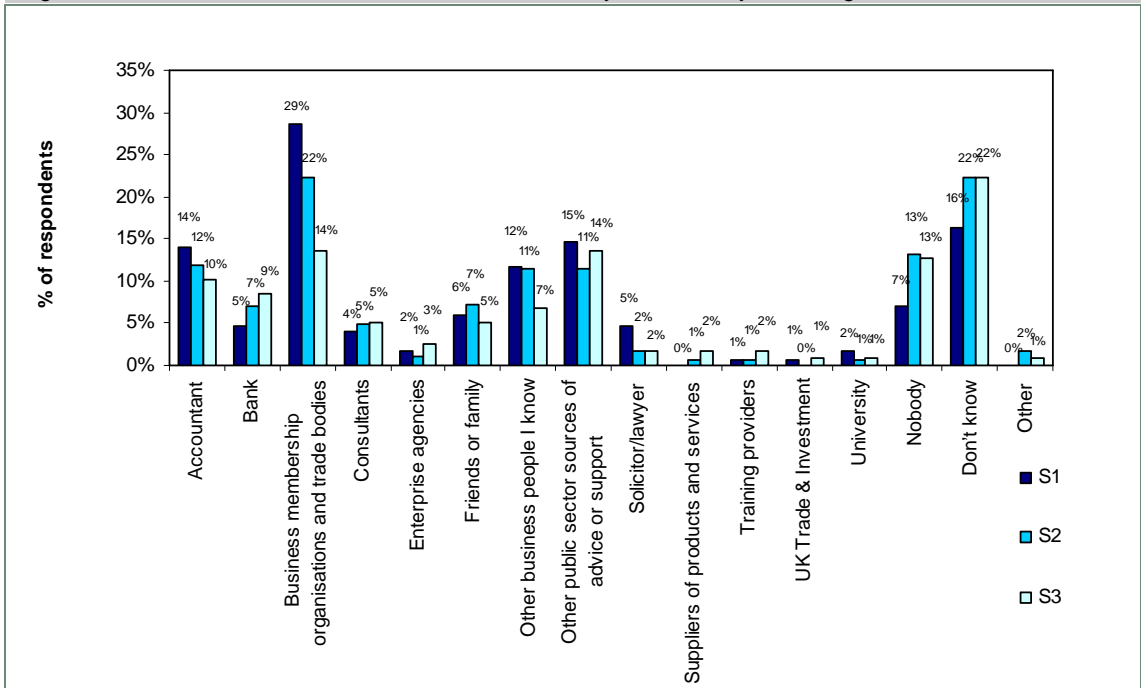
Figure A-13 : Given your experience of using Business Link, what is the maximum you would be willing to pay for an hour of a Business Link advisor's time?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117).

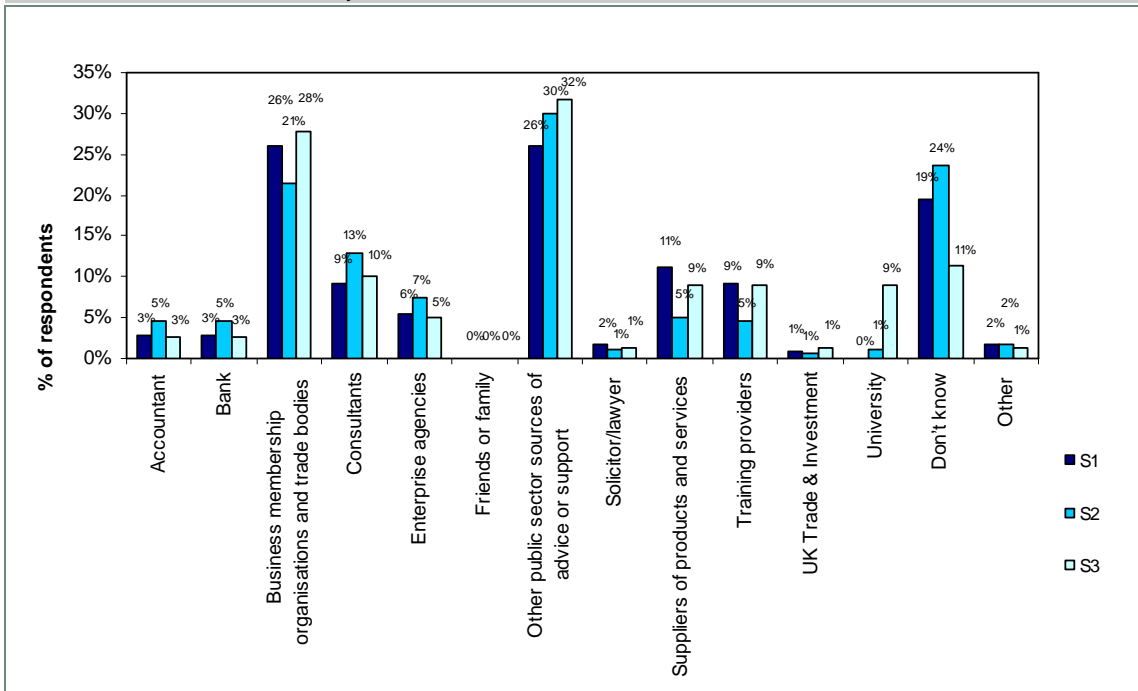
Figure A-14 : If Business Link hadn't existed, who, if anyone, would you have gone to for advice?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 576 - S1 (171), S2 (288), S3 (117).

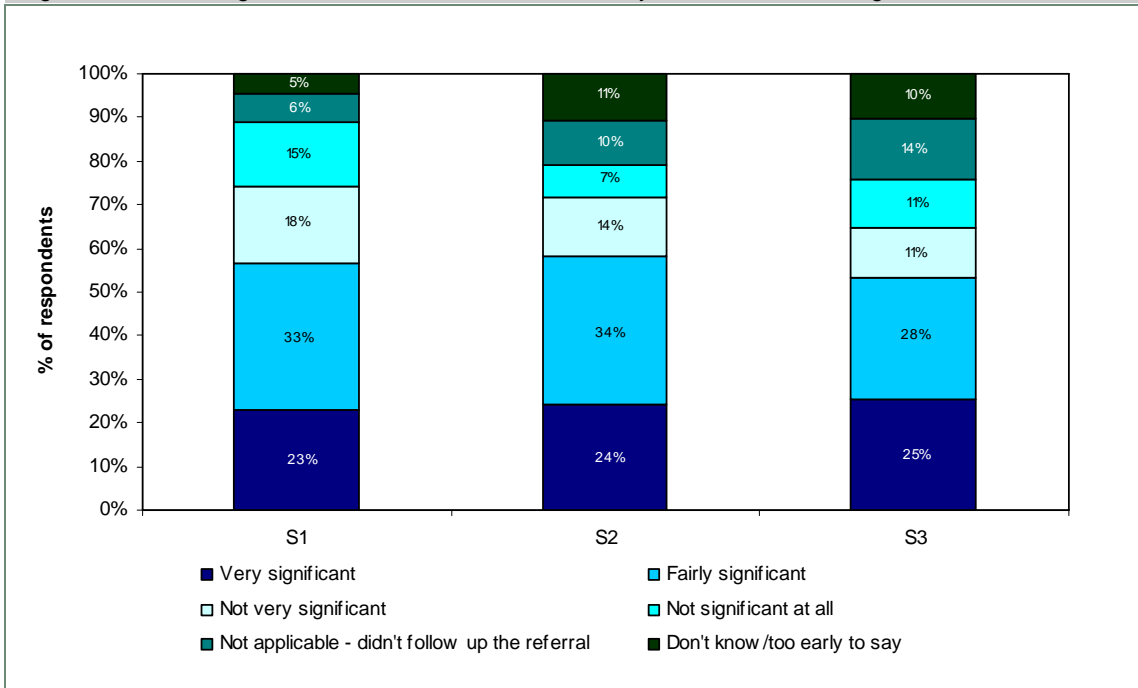
Figure A-15 : You said that you were referred to other organisations or business support services by Business Link. Which were they?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 364 - S1 (108), S2 (177), S3 (79).

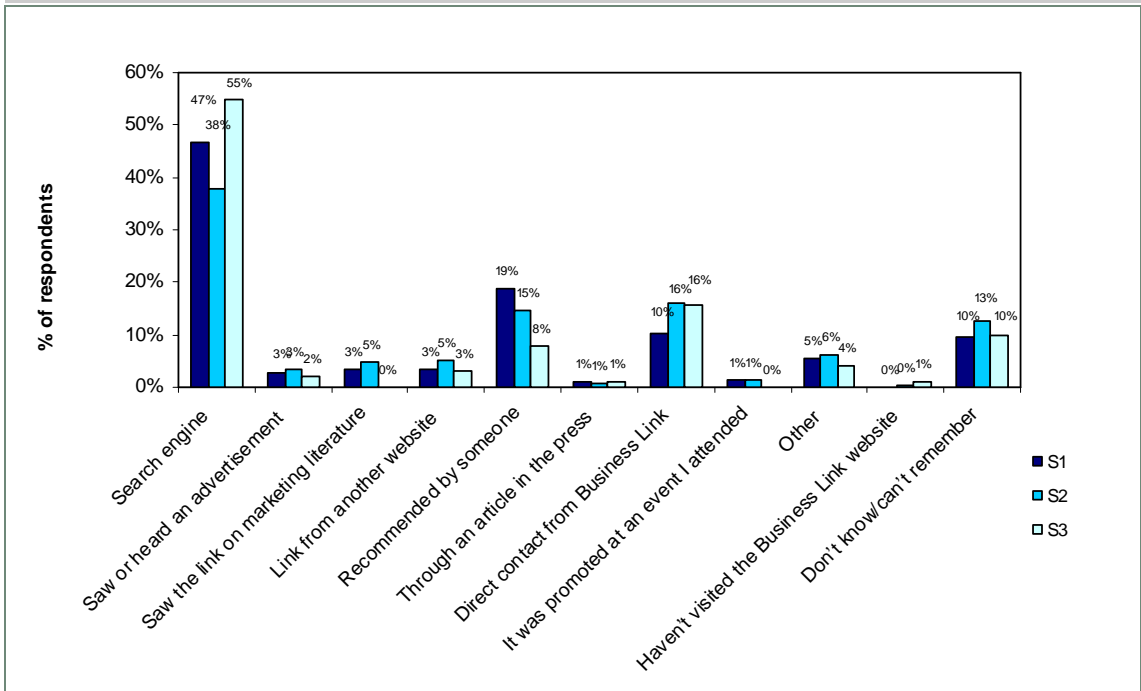
Figure A-16 : How significant, if at all, were the benefits to your business resulting from that referral?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 364 - S1 (108), S2 (177), S3 (79).

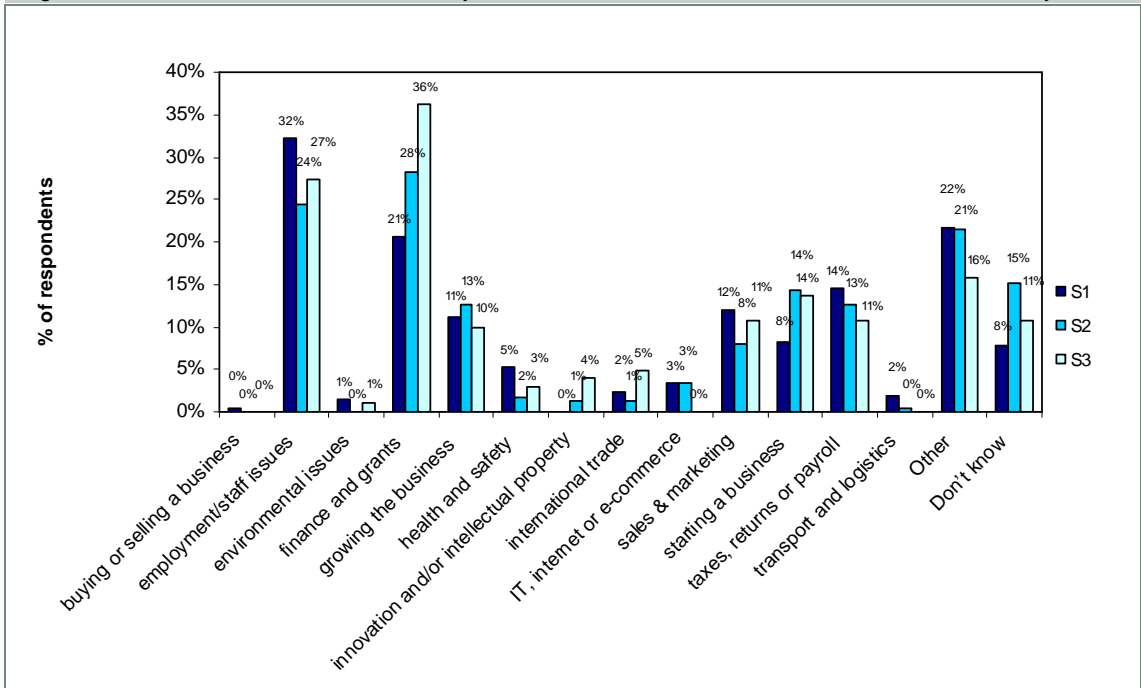
Figure A-17 : You indicated that you'd visited the Business Link website. How did you first find that website?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 548 - S1 (208), S2 (238), S3 (102).

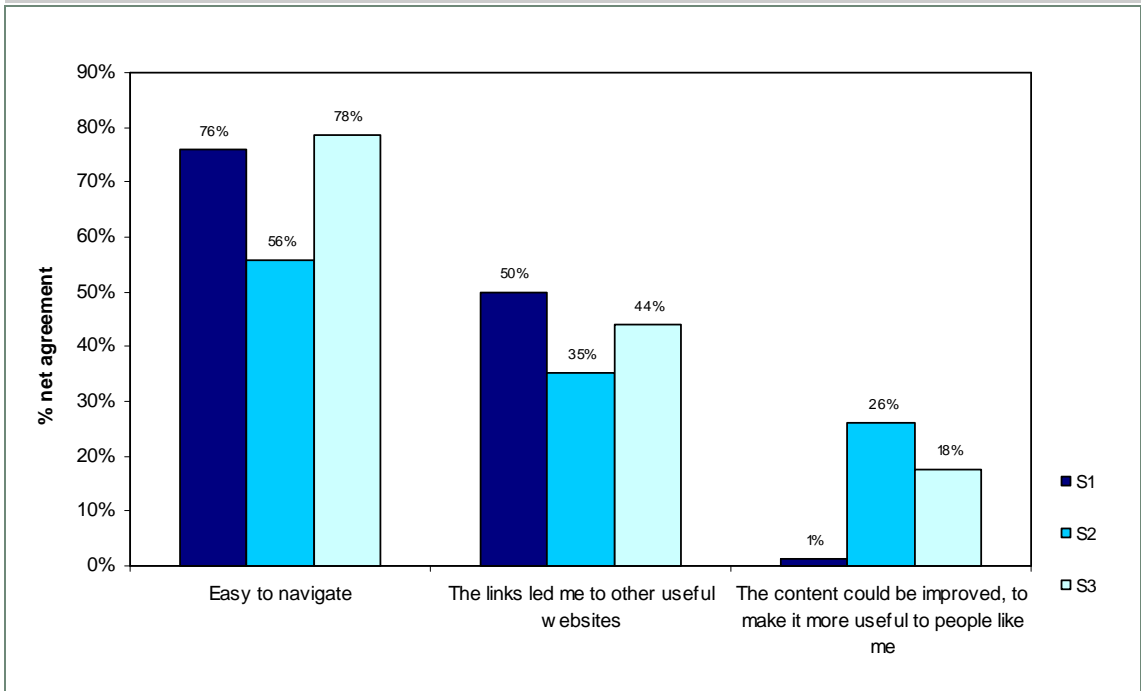
Figure A-18 : What business issues have you used the Business Link website for, in the last two years?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 548 - S1 (208), S2 (238), S3 (102).

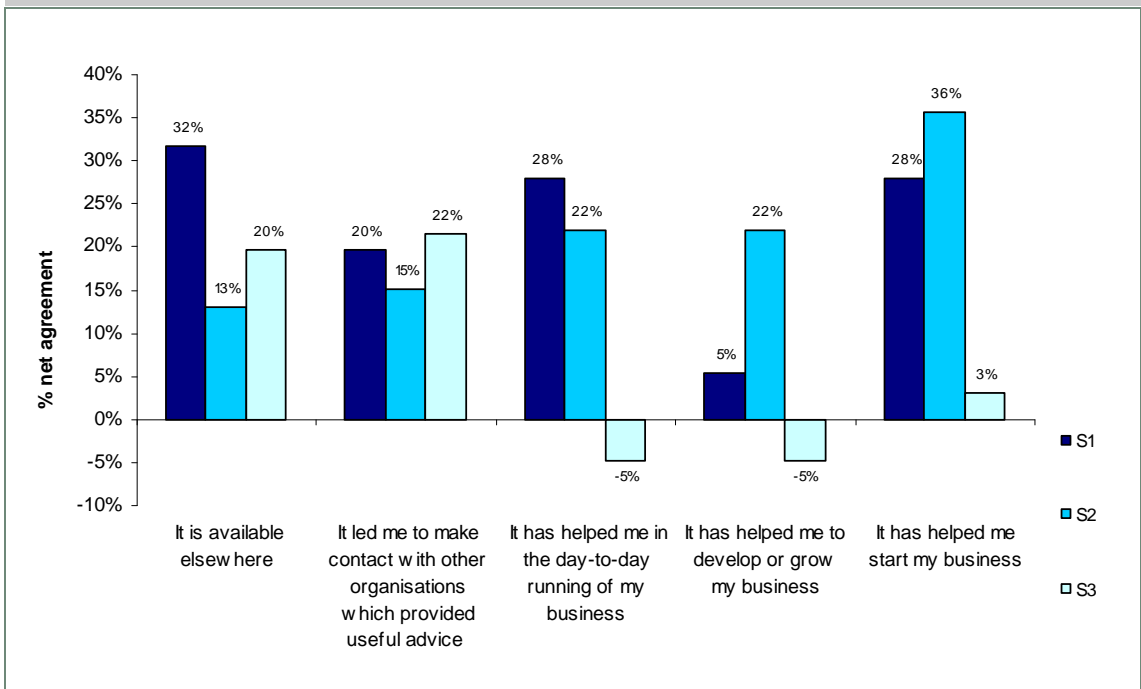
Figure A-19 : To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Business Link website?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 548 - S1 (208), S2 (238), S3 (102).

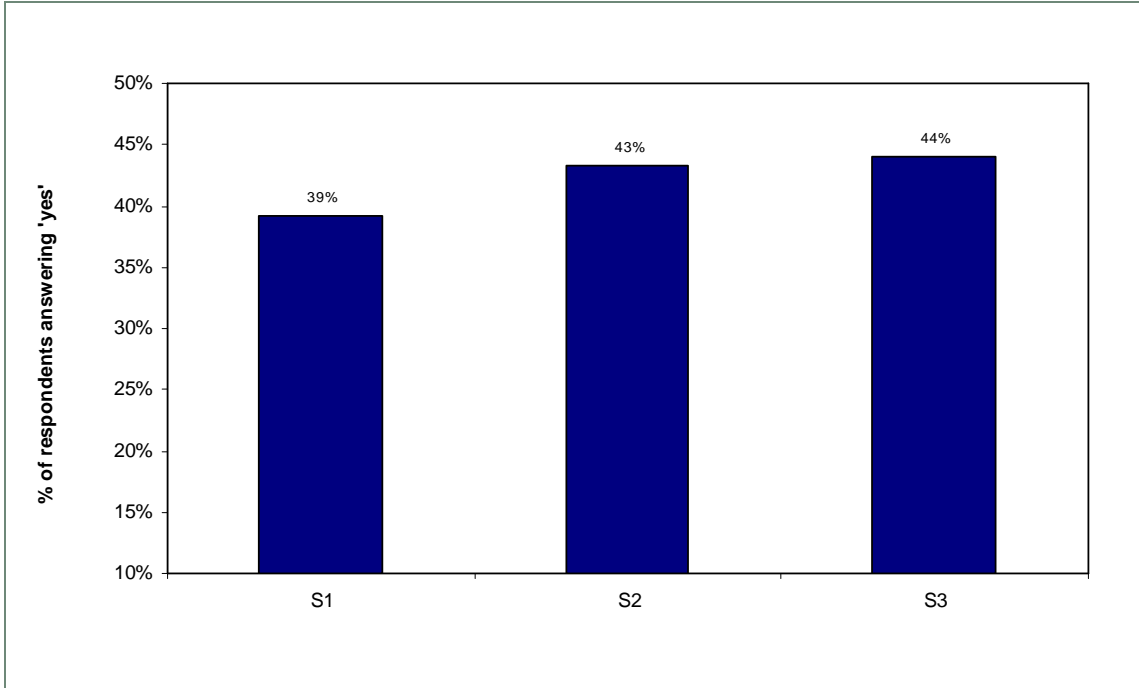
Figure A-20 : To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the information on the Business Link website?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 548 - S1 (208), S2 (238), S3 (102) for all except 'helped you get your business off the ground' S1 (75), S2 (84), S3 (32).

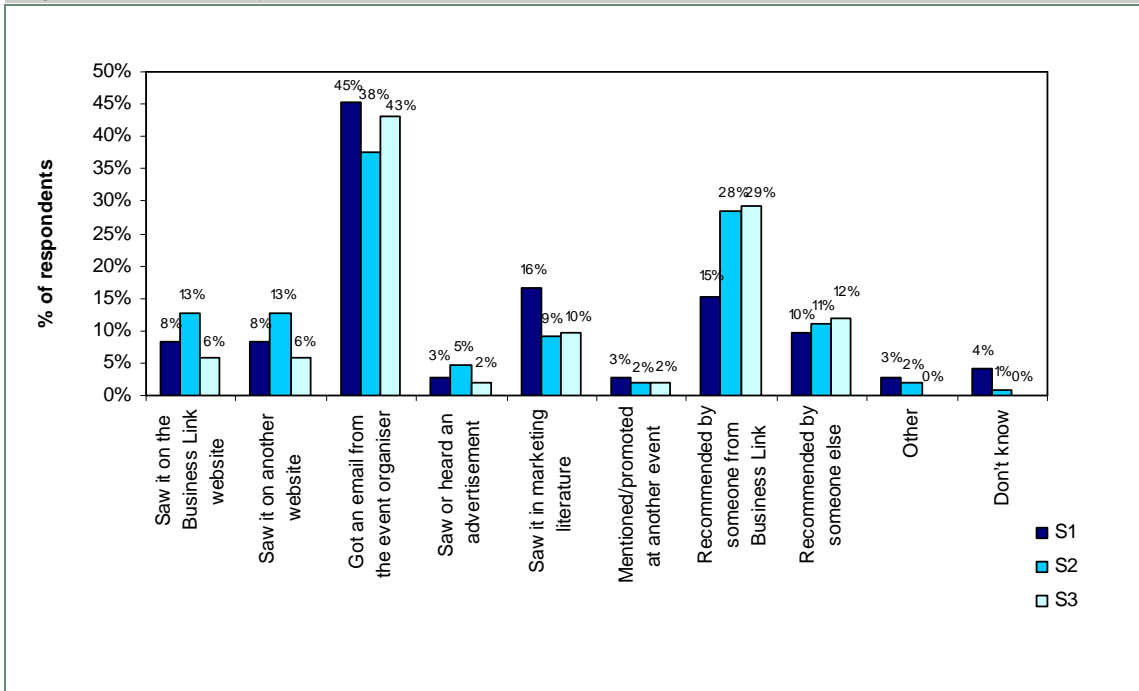
Figure A-21 : You said that you'd attended events such as conferences, workshops or seminars over the last two years. Were any of these organised by Business Link?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 554 - S1 (186), S2 (252), S3 (116)

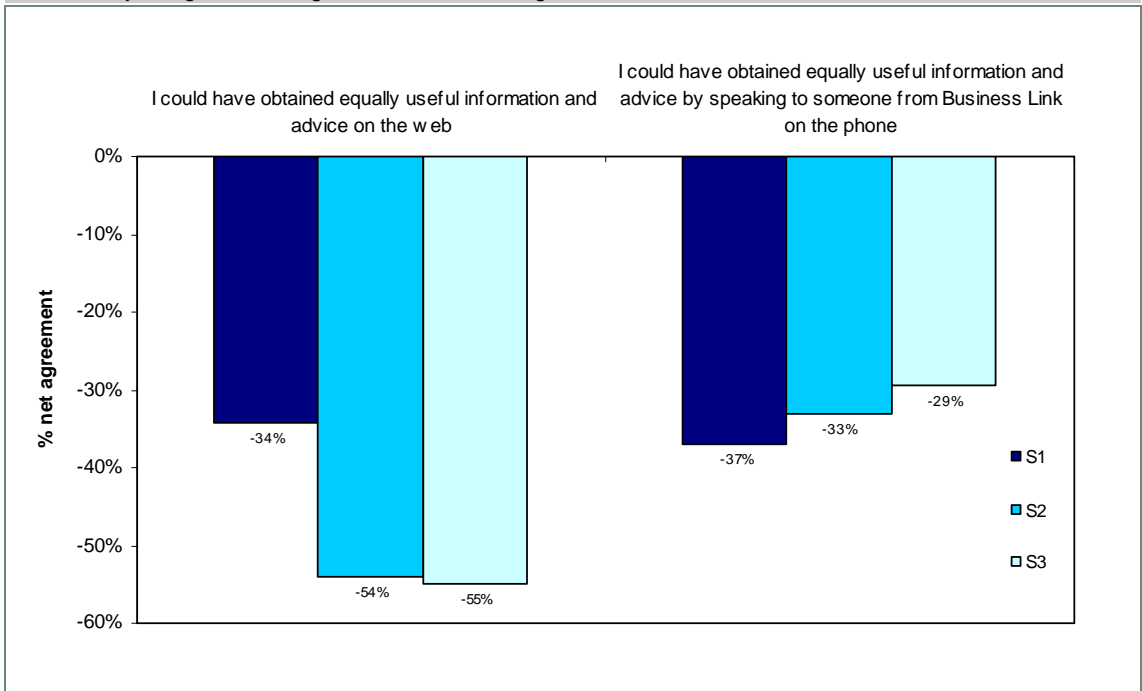
Figure A-22 : How did you hear about that Business Link event?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 233 - S1 (73), S2 (109), S3 (51)

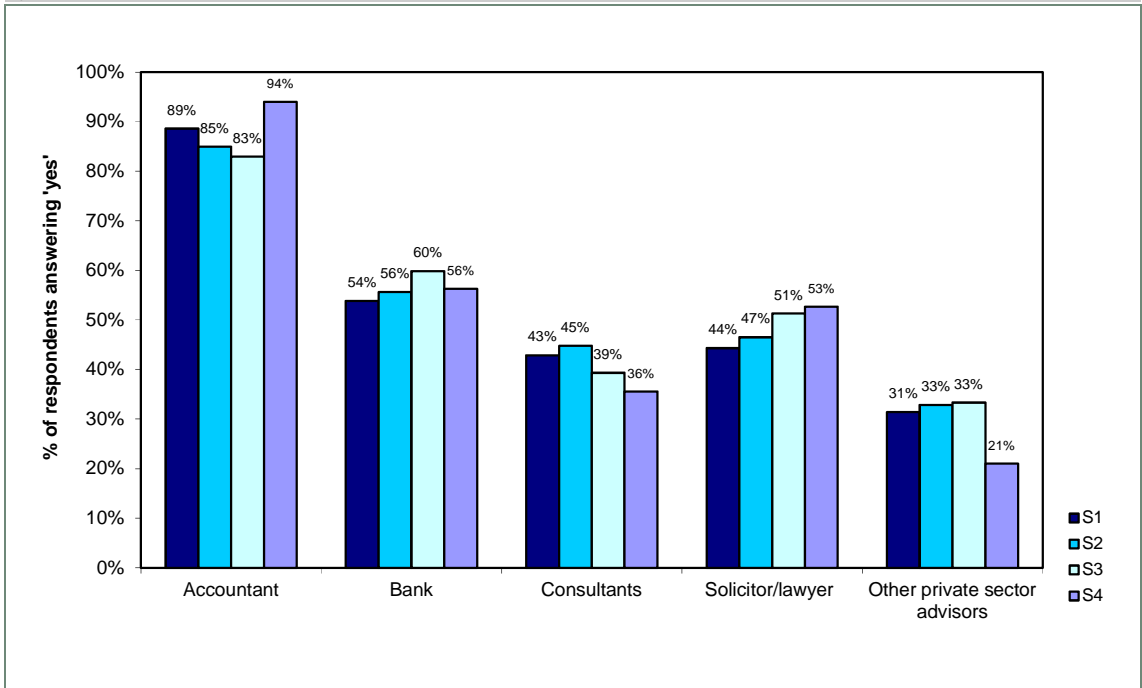
Figure A-23 : Thinking about the information and advice you got at the Business Link event, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 233 - S1 (73), S2 (109), S3 (51)

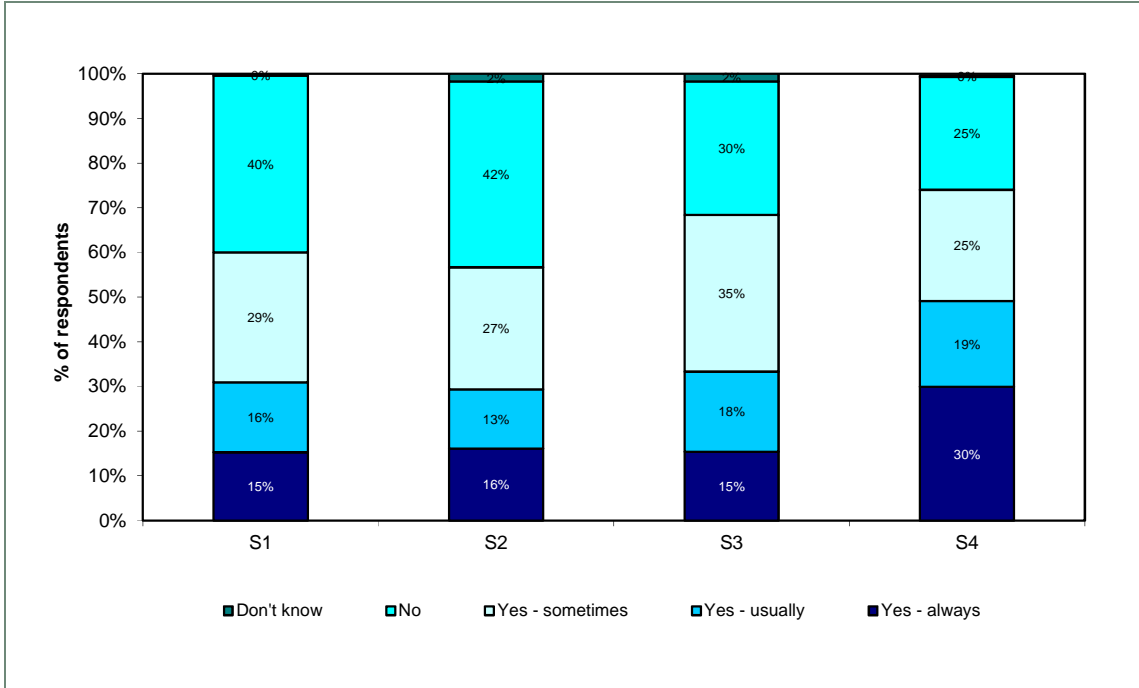
Figure A-24 : You mentioned that you'd consulted professionals to inform the way you manage and develop your business. Which of the following have provided you with business advice in the last two years?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 894 - S1 (210), S2 (286), S3 (117), S4 (281)

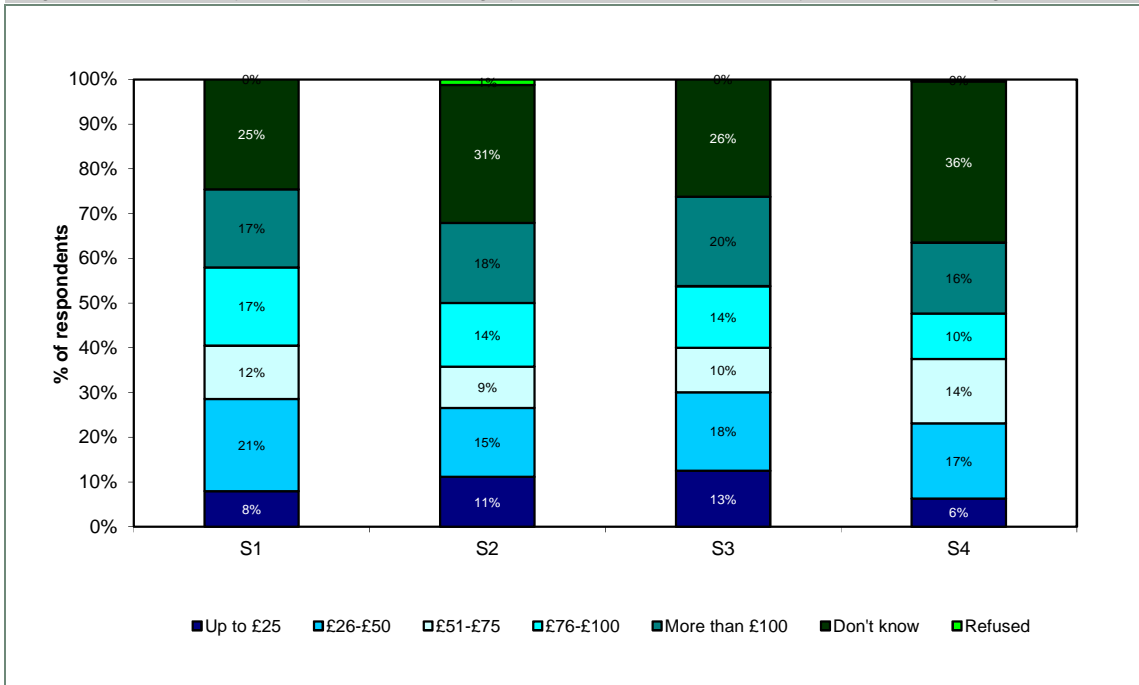
Figure A-25 : Have you typically paid for that advice?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 894 - S1 (210), S2 (286), S3 (117), S4 (281)

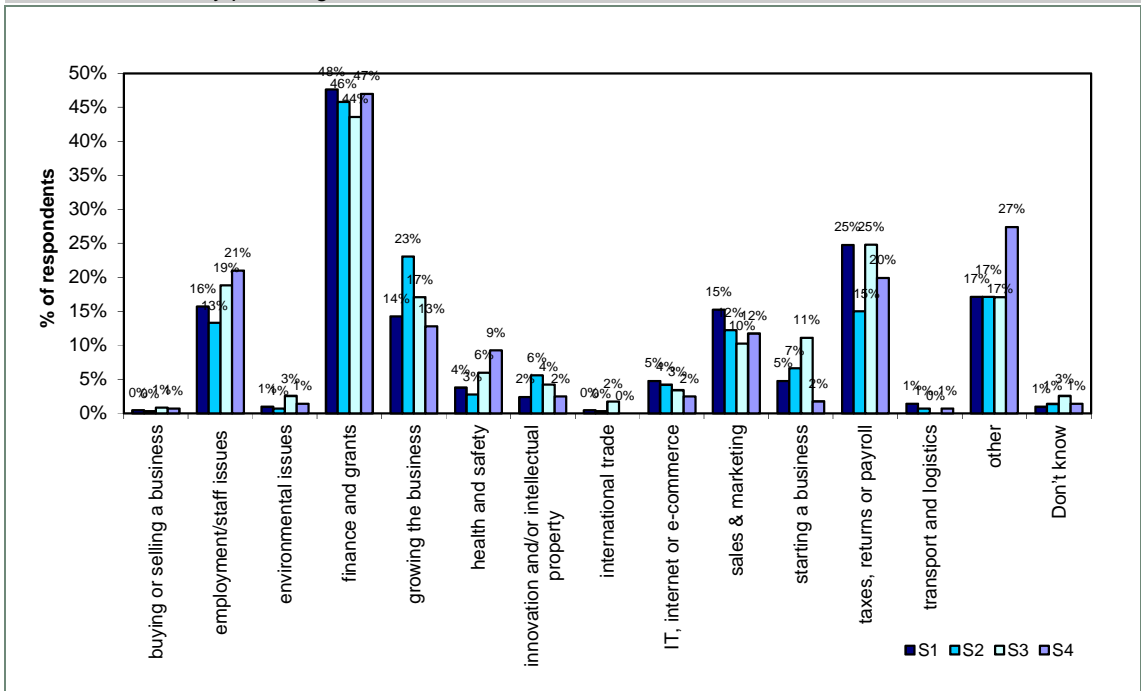
Figure A-26 : When you pay for advice, roughly how much per hour have you paid on average?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 576 - S1 (126), S2 (162), S3 (80), S4 (208)

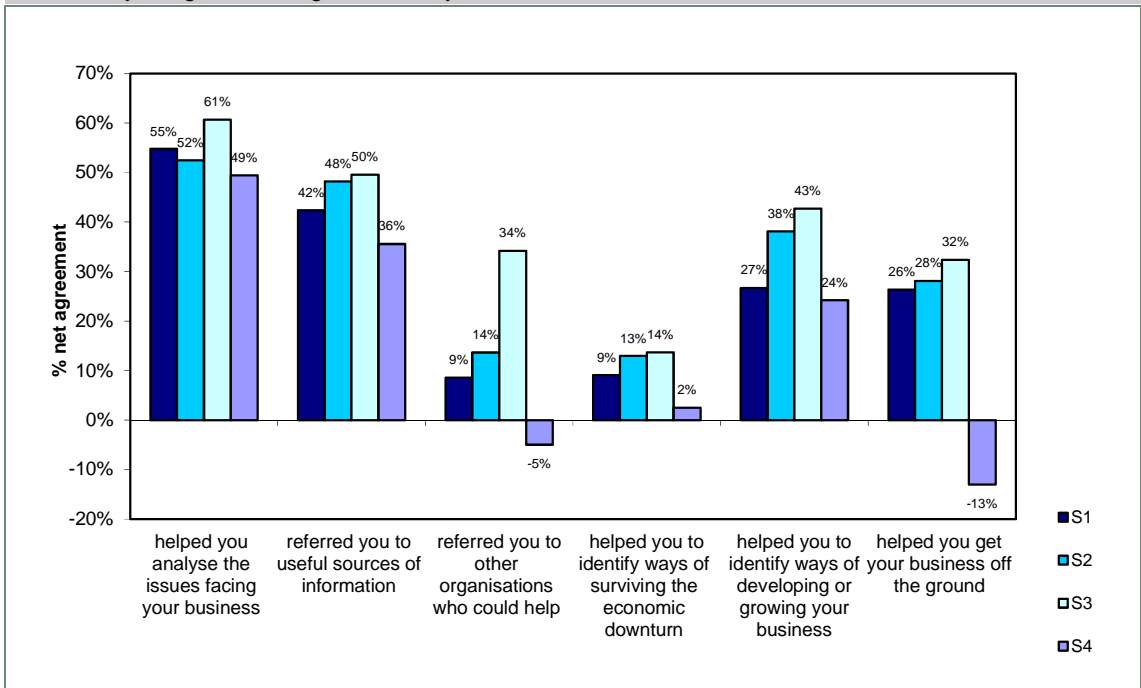
Figure A-27 : You said that you'd had advice from professionals in the last two years. What area of your business were they providing advice on?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 894 - S1 (210), S2 (286), S3 (117), S4 (281)

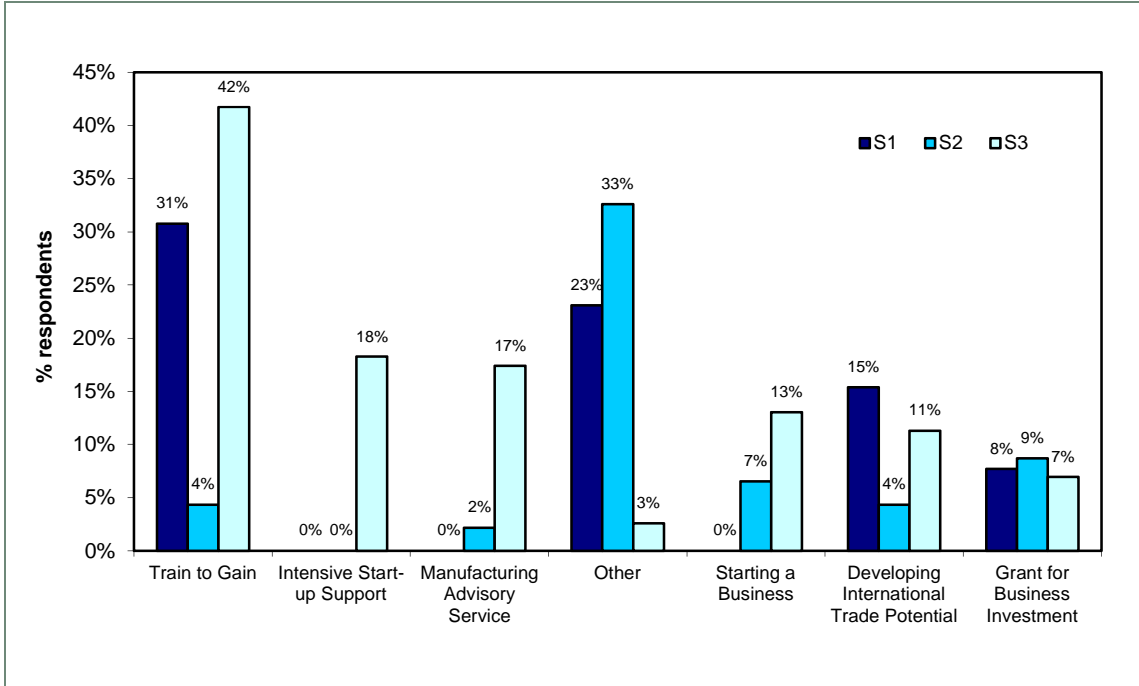
Figure A-28 : Thinking about the contact you have had with professionals in the last two years, to what extent do you agree or disagree that they have:



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 894 - S1 (210), S2 (286), S3 (117), S4 (281), for all except 'helped you get your business off the ground' S1 (72), S2 (89), S3 (34), S4 (23)

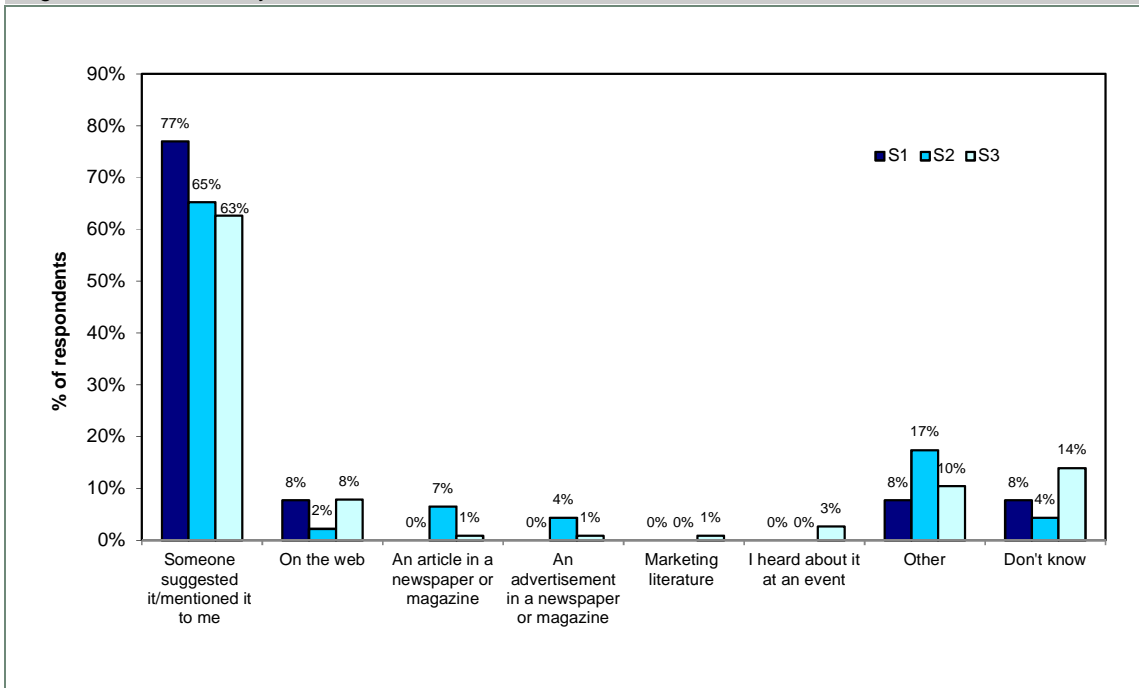
Figure A-29 : Solutions for Business – Can I just check, what sort of support was it ?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 174 - S1 (13), S2 (46), S3 (115)

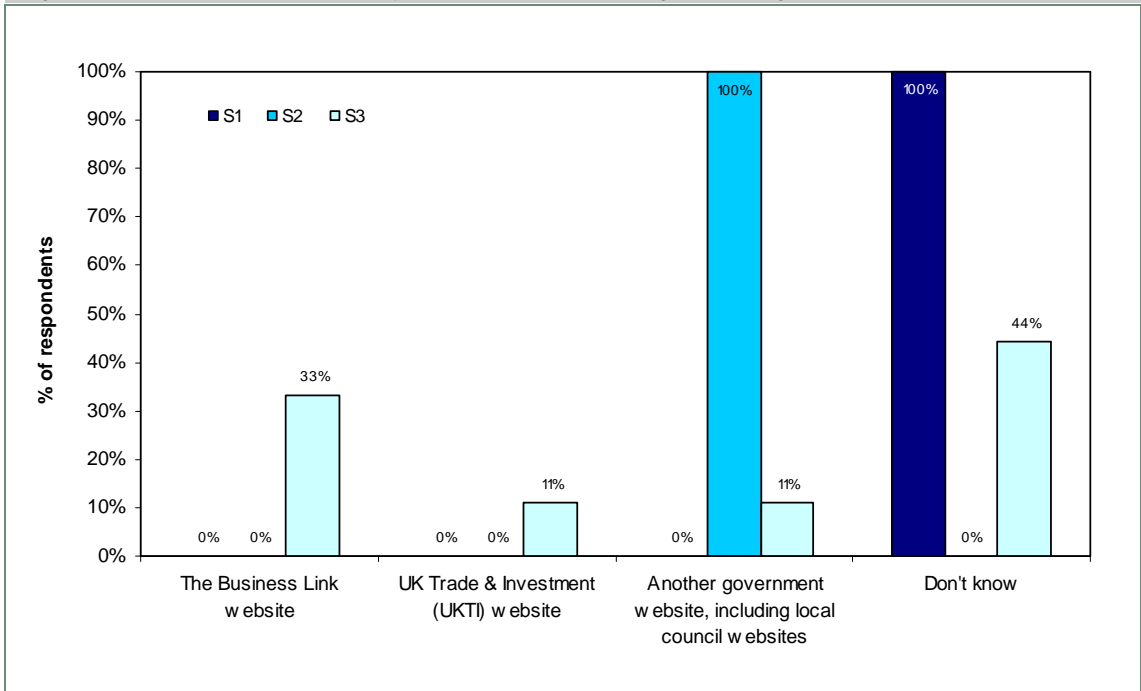
Figure A-30 : How did you first hear about that service/those services?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 174 - S1 (13), S2 (46), S3 (115)

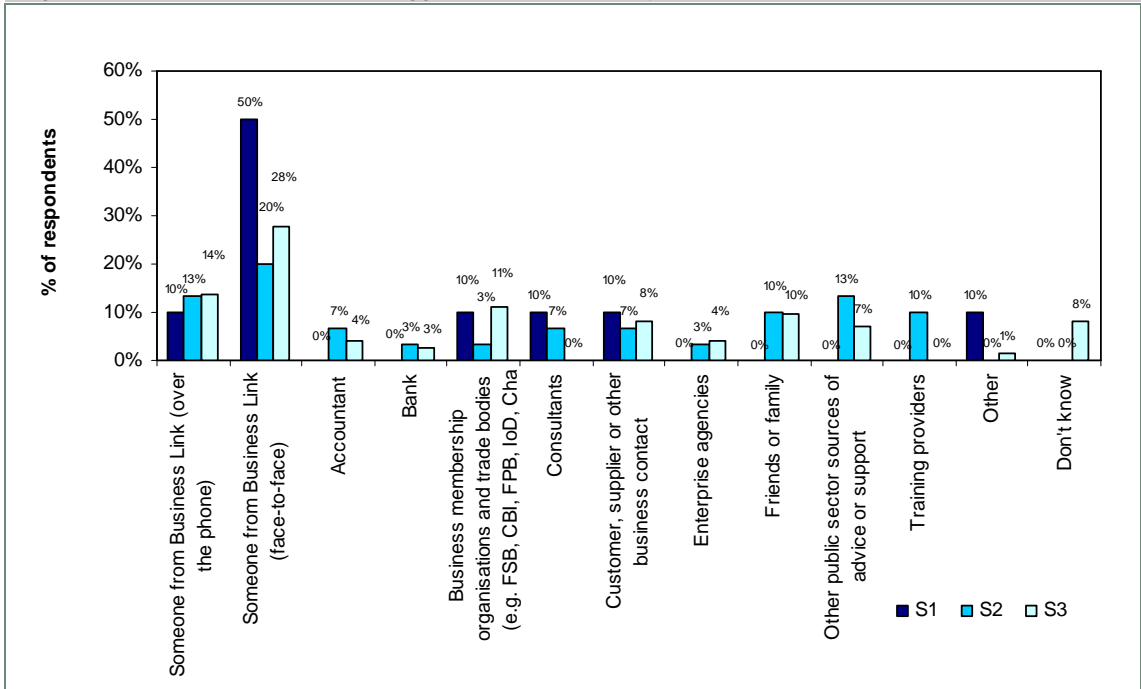
Figure A-31 : On which website do you remember first seeing something about the service?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 11 - S1 (1), S2 (1), S3 (9).

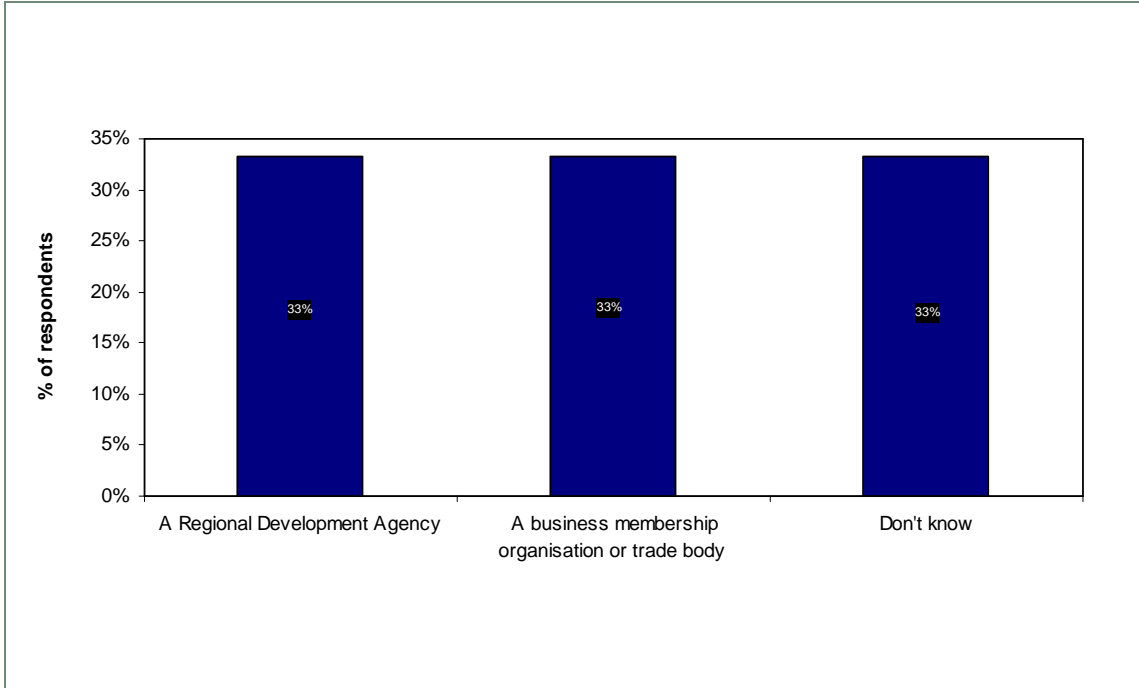
Figure A-32 : Who was it that first suggested the service to you?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 112 - S1 (10), S2 (30), S3 (72).

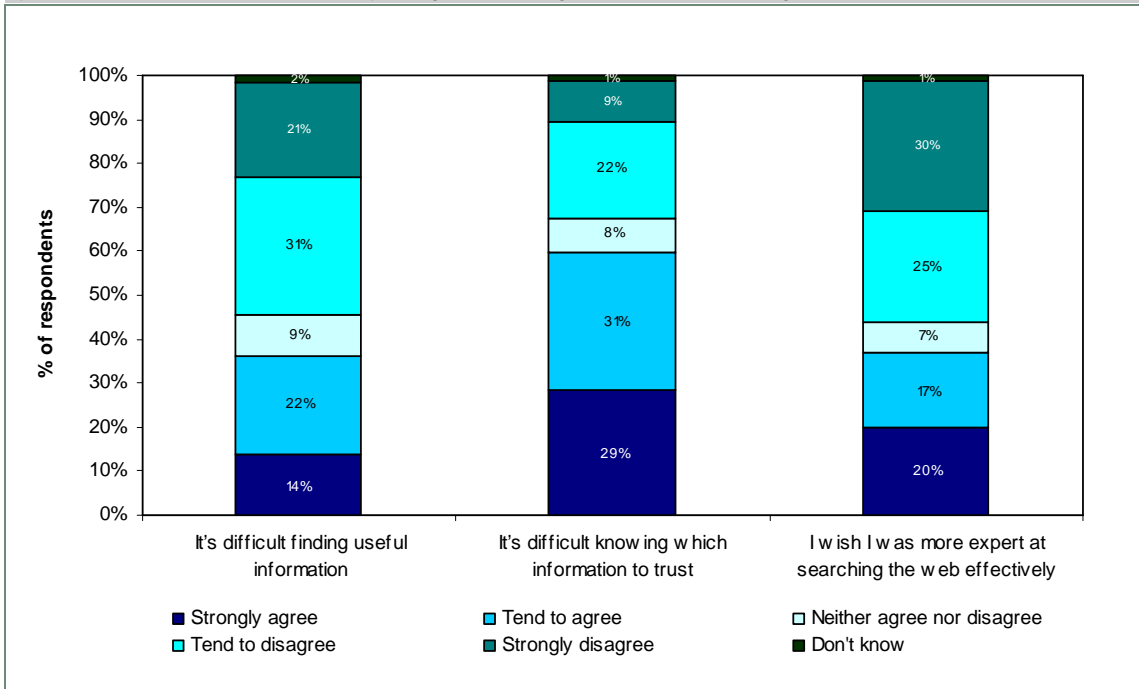
Figure A-33 : Who was running the event at which you first heard about the service?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products

Base: 3 - S3 (3).

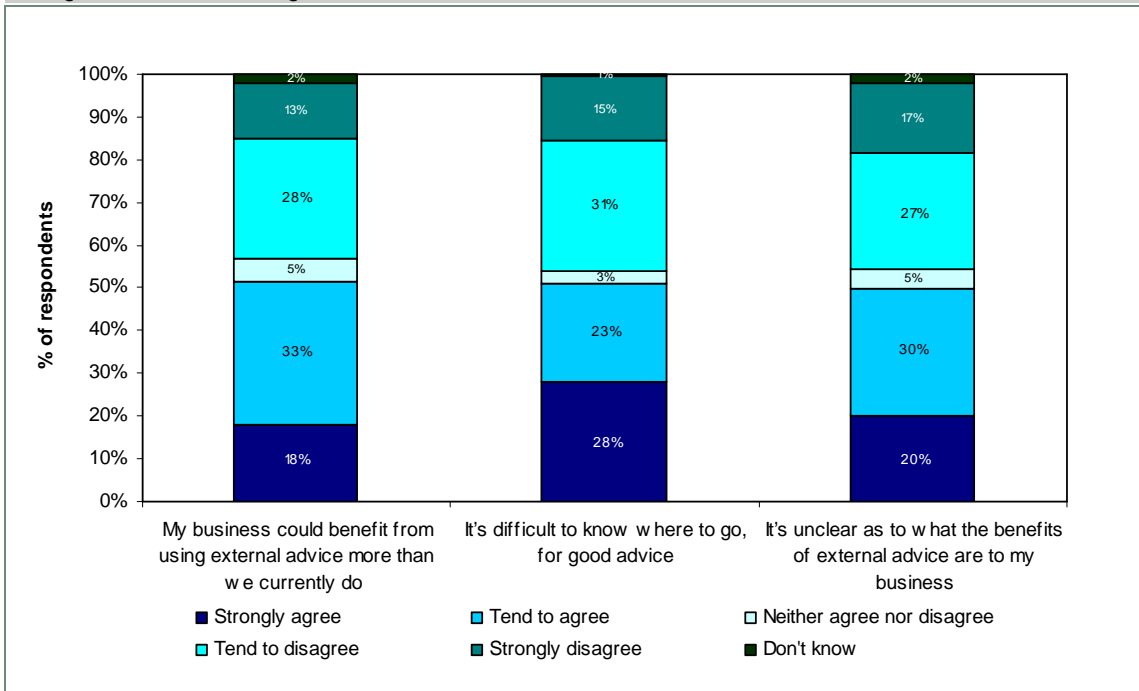
Figure A-34 : Thinking about the times when you have looked for information to help manage or develop your business, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Note: S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 350 - S4 (350).

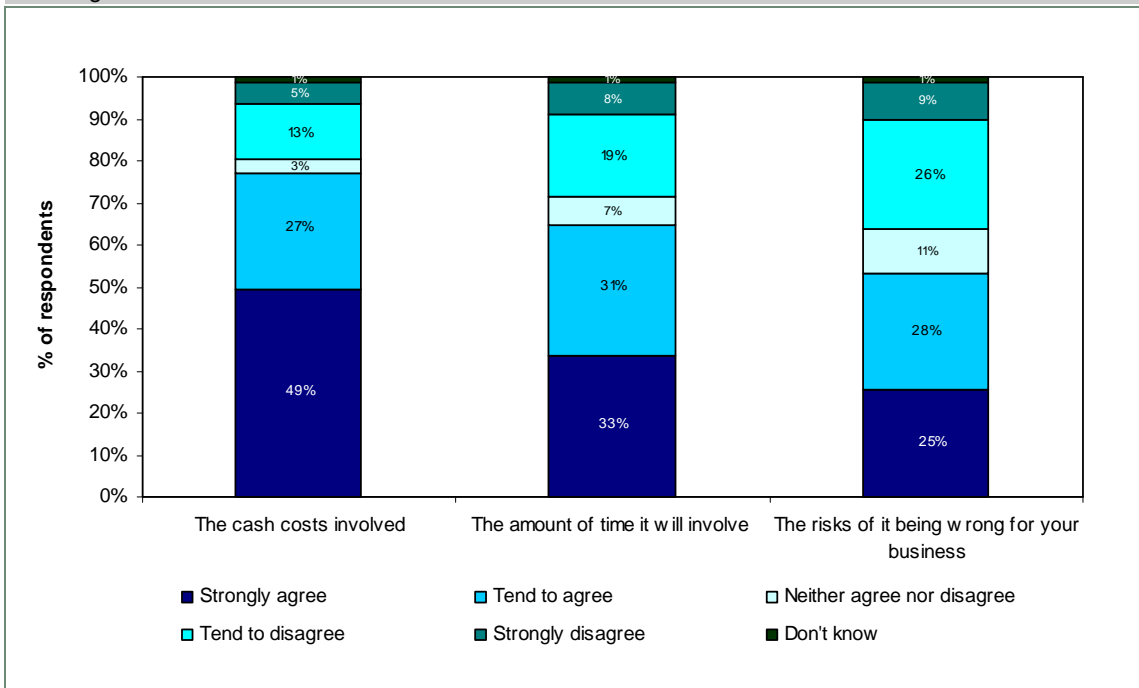
Figure A-35 : And thinking about potential sources of external advice, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Note: S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 350 - S4 (350).

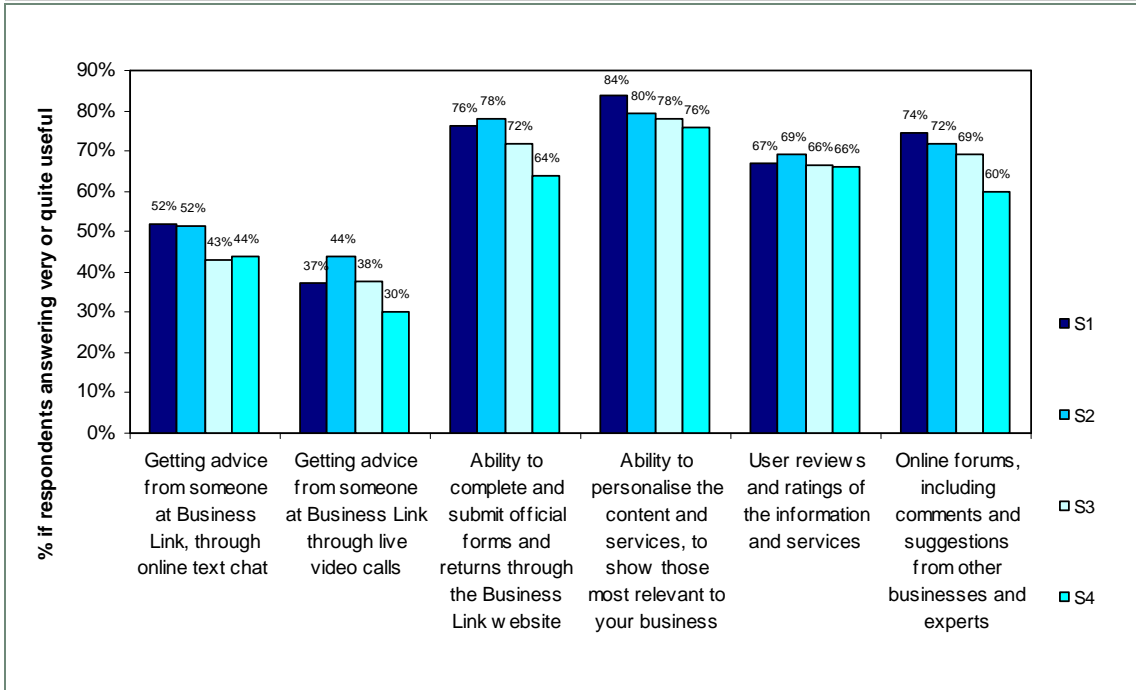
Figure A-36 : And to what extent do you agree or disagree that the following considerations put you off seeking external advice?



Note: S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 350 - S4 (350).

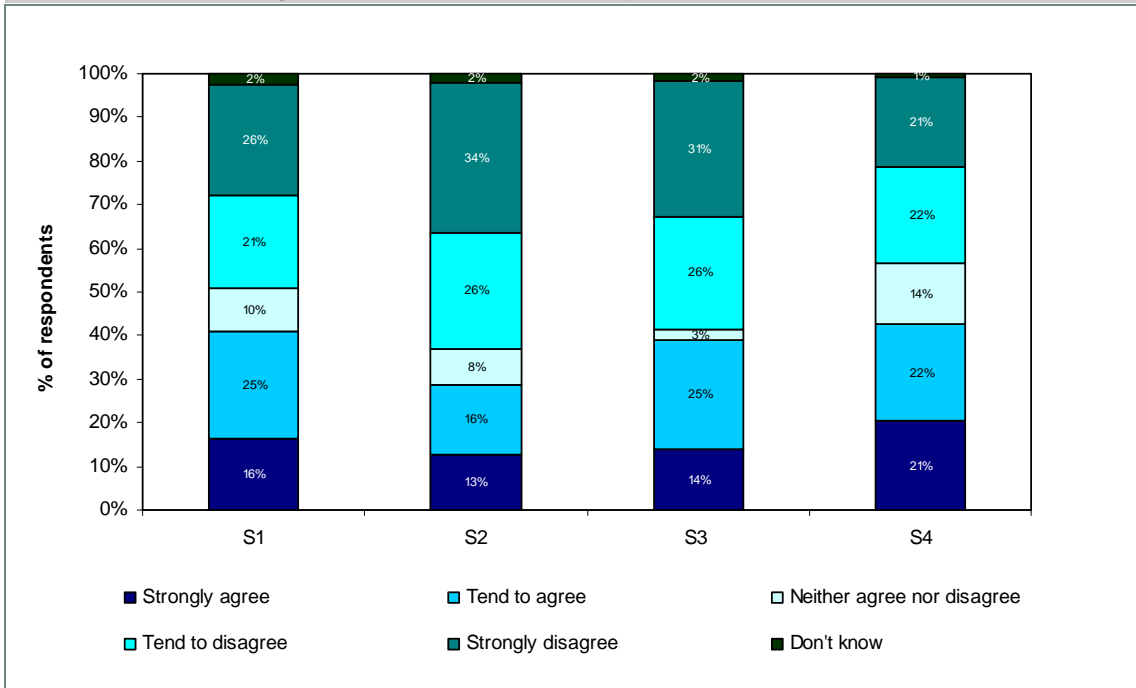
Figure A-37 : The Government is looking to enhance its Business Link website, to make it as useful as possible to businesses looking for information, advice and support. How useful, if at all, do you think the following features would be?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 1096 - S1 (250), S2 (347), S3 (149), S4 (350).

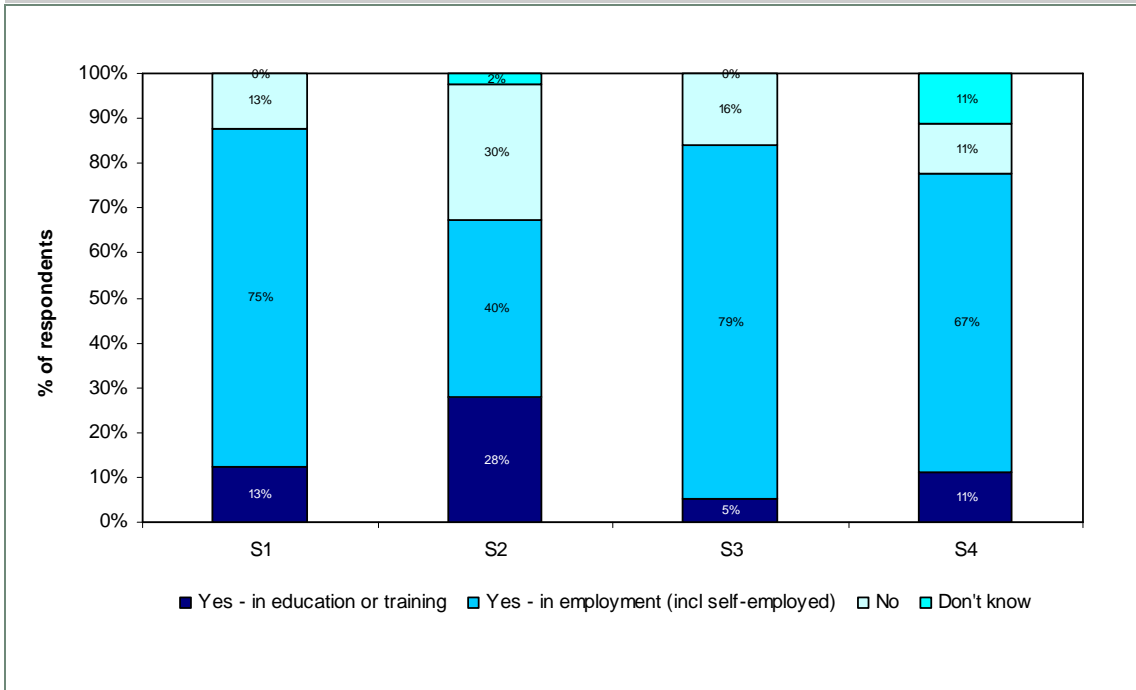
Figure A-38 : You mentioned that you'd had discussions with someone from Business Link. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: Most of the advice I've had from Business Link could be delivered through their website in the future. Do you...



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 691 - S1 (171), S2 (287), S3 (116), S4 (117).

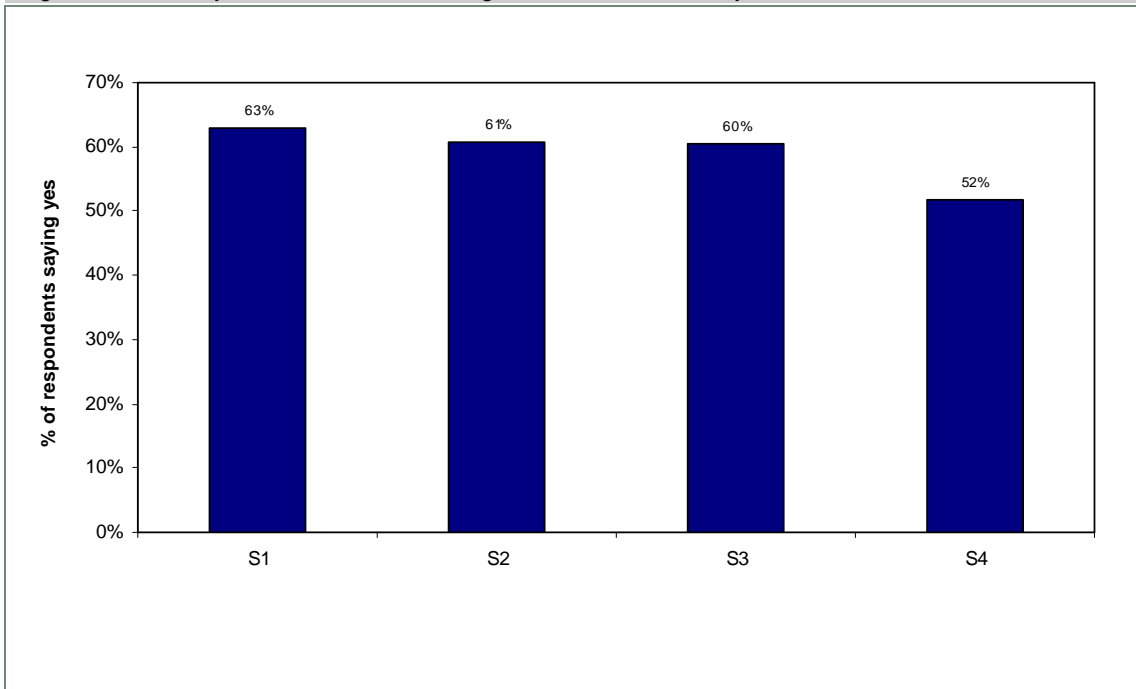
Figure A-39 : You mentioned that your business has been trading for less than a year. Can I just check, were you personally in education, training, or paid employment immediately before this business started?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 87 - S1 (16), S2 (43), S3 (19), S4 (9).

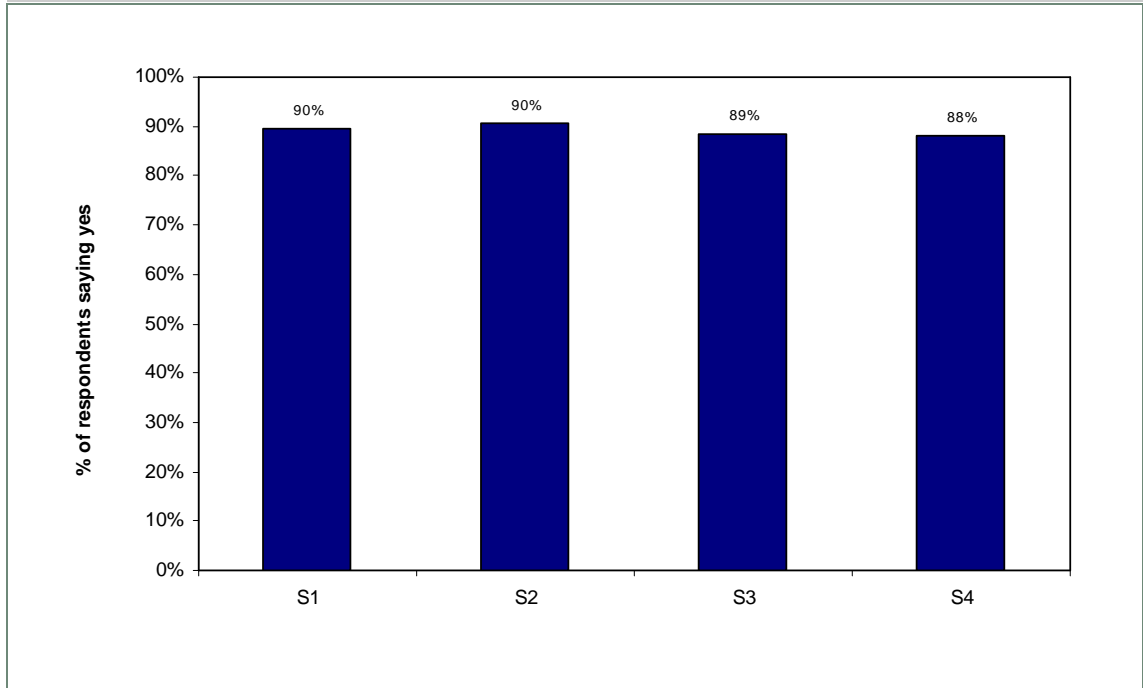
Figure A-40 : Has your business's turnover grown over the last two years?



Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 1096 - S1 (250), S2 (347), S3 (149), S4 (350).

Figure A-41 : Over the *next* two years do you intend to grow your business's turnover?



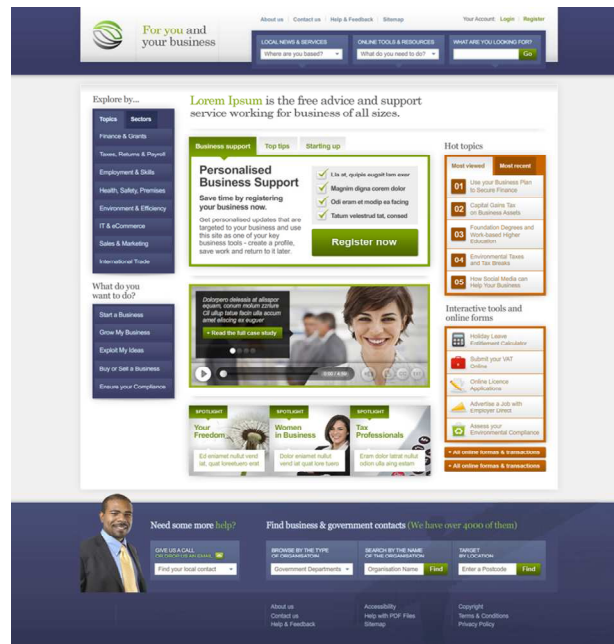
Note: S1= sample drawn from known businesslink.gov.uk users; S2 = sample drawn from known Business Link users; S3 = sample drawn from known users of Solutions for Business products; S4 = sample of SMEs from Experian

Base: 1096 - S1 (250), S2 (347), S3 (149), S4 (350).

Annex B: Scenarios tested in the focus groups

Scenario 1

Figure B-1 : Description and conceptual screenshot for scenario 1



For you and your business

This is government's service for businesses, giving you guidance and support for your business needs and your dealings with government.

Developed by government, this service provides expert knowledge and practical solutions, giving you up to date information for your particular business needs - as well as access to all your interactions with government.

Providing easy access to a comprehensive resource centre, it allows you to find valuable information, advice and support to help you make your business more effective.

Featuring useful and practical material – such as best practice case studies, support tools and calculators, regulation guidance and advice on accessing grants and support schemes. The breadth and depth of these resources will be invaluable, whether you are looking to start-up; in a small, local business; or a major PLC.

Helping you conduct your business with confidence.

Source: Businesslink.gov.uk

Scenario 2

Figure B-2 : Description and conceptual screenshot for scenario 2



Working for businesses

Connect to us and gain the confidence you need to make better decisions. We are a powerful source of information, support and services from government that helps you to be more effective in your business.

Whether you work in a large organisation or are a small start-up, we can help you find what you need to conduct your business more effectively.

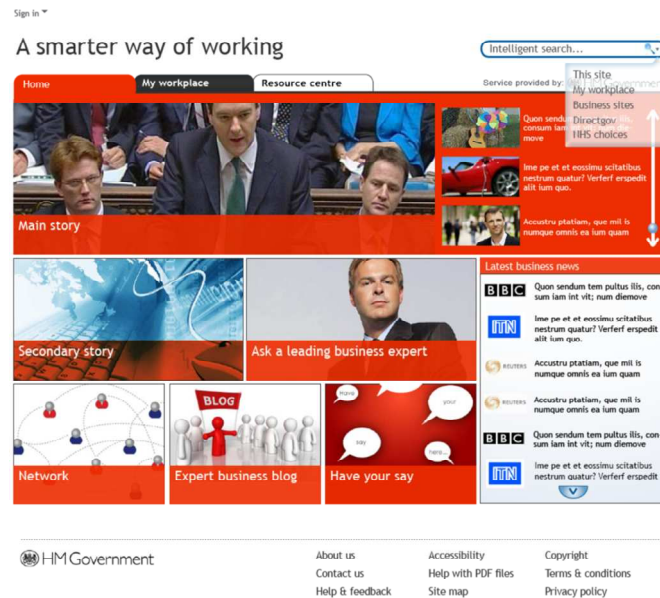
Fast, efficient and comprehensive, this is a powerful tool that can adapt to the specific needs of your business – providing the help you need, when you need it. Whether it's keeping up to date with the regulatory aspects of your business, conducting your dealings with government or searching for practical help with your business planning, we will be there to guide you to where you need to be.

Working for you in your business.

Source: Businesslink.gov.uk

Scenario 3

Figure B-3 : Description and conceptual screenshot for scenario 3



A smarter way of working

Welcome to our service - an open access, business resource channel that works interactively so that you can tailor our resources to suit your needs. We provide clear, well presented, essential services and information that will enable you to manage your work and business more efficiently.

To be successful you have to have the right information, at the right time. This has been specifically developed to give you direct access to the resources and guidance you need, whenever you need it.

Our interactive resource channel will provide you with the level of support you want to help manage any aspects of your work or business more effectively. Join a community of professionals relevant to your business world and access the type of business service you want us to provide; through our intelligent and individualised delivery.

Connected. Smart. Successful.

Source: Businesslink.gov.uk