

Reflections from a Branch Member

The Bristol Bath & Surrounds Branch was launched in 1999. The Branch had an enthusiastic committee who worked well together, and we offered training, networking and social opportunities. Our annual summer Ball proved to be a great success: at its most successful we had over 200 guests at the Ball.

Of course, some committee members left for a variety of reasons with new committee members joining. We found that certain events were more popular than others. Soft skills training were more popular than specialism-based training. Social events were generally successful although an attempt to have a once-a-month get together for drinks after work did not work at all (to our surprise!).

We were fortunate with sponsorship for events through committee members' varied contacts and built a good relationship with our local Law Society and Bar and with our local FE College, where the lead CILEx tutor was extremely popular and supportive.

By 2005 the numbers attending the Ball had reduced but were still around 150 guests. The relationship with the local Law Society and Bar remained good as did the relationship with the FE College. Sponsorship was a little more difficult to obtain. The relationship with the FE College changed as the lead tutor retired. His replacement was not as charismatic although his deputy was enthusiastic and supportive, as a former legal executive who had re-qualified as a solicitor.

It is fair to say the Branch had reached a plateau by 2005 – not quite as high flying as in the previous years, but still in a very comfortable place which continued for the next couple of years.

We then faced some challenges in about 2007/2008 due in no small part to the economic downturn which affected so many of our members.

We found that we were continuing to organise events but they were not very well attended at all. We would advise that even if you only have a few people confirmed for events it is very important to go ahead with that event and do not cancel it as you may just have a couple of people turn up who have not registered their interest. Whilst it is disheartening, going ahead with the events does still keep you profile going.

With the running of the committee, in addition to the usual Chair, Vice Chair, Treasurer and Secretary roles we have created other roles e.g. media liaison, college liaison and training etc. These roles have been allocated to various committee members and they have responsibility for updating our social media and organising the training events etc. This is a good way of sharing the work load between everyone and also making every committee member feel part of the team. As your committee grows you will no doubt create your own roles.

As to the organisation of events, it is very important that it is a team effort and not left to one person to organise especially with the larger events. It is a good idea for the larger events and it has certainly worked for us, is to have a smaller team allocated to organise that event and each person has a specific task or job to do and everyone reports back to one person who manages the event. This way there is no duplication in any tasks and

the workload is divided, after all the Committee is not paid and we all have day jobs to contend with!

You must think carefully before committing financially to the larger events. Head office will not bail you out if you need financial assistance and if you are entering into any contracts i.e. hotels etc. then it is the personal responsibility of the committee to make up any shortfall of the branch funds to pay for that event. Therefore you must ensure before committing to any contracts that you either have sufficient funds to cover the cost or you will be able to fulfil that contract.

Sponsorship can be key to running events especially for the larger events e.g. Summer Ball etc. It is important to keep the relationship with your sponsors going, stay in touch with them and they may well sponsor you for events for several years. We found that during the downturn, sponsorship was very hard to come by but we did still approach them with the request, the worst that could happen and did; they said no but at least they were still aware that the branch were actively organising events and in actual fact the majority of the sponsors that said no during the downturn have sponsored events in recent years.

Not only does this retain a link with what is coming out of head office, it is also helpful to make yourself available to meet and greet potential new, as well as existing, students where they can be encouraged to join the branch as student members. They might be the future of CILEx so best to get them early!

In summary, it is essential to have a dedicated committee who is willing to put in the effort to raise the profile of CILEx at both local and national level through holding and attending social events with associated networking, by the use of social media, and through the provision of training and attendance at local careers fairs. We only meet once per month but maintain communication via email/telephone so that meetings have a set agenda and our business can be dealt with effectively with each committee member taking responsibility for their own department. And lest we forget, it is often fun and enjoyable too!