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Training in the SME sector of the food and drink manufacturing industries

Training may be defined as the transfer of skills and knowledge from those who have them to those who do not; an alternative definition can be the bringing about of a significant improvement in performance as a result of instruction, practice and experience.

Training is a specialised function and employees should learn the specified operating procedure for a job and not just another worker's version. The benefits to be gained by both employees and their employers from a properly designed training and development programme are difficult to overestimate. There is a great advantage to the employer to have



Butt Foods

Based in the East Midlands, the company make speciality own label breads for UK retailers and food service customer's products. The bakery plant is modern with the capacity to make large volumes of bread each hour. The in-plant course has 15 enrolled students, 13 of which are overseas born whose first language is not English. Again, the progressing NVQ course has stimulated the employees. In many cases, it has been their initial and only experience of structured development and accreditation of skills.

The plant is highly mechanised and further automation is anticipated. The course is seen as a vehicle to transform the employees from 'bakery workers' to 'bakery technicians'. Even at this early stage, most of the students are looking beyond level 1 and are demanding higher levels and other vocational courses.

over recent years. An estimated 900,000 people are employed in 45,000 business units.

However, the overall employment trend in the industries has been downward for at least 30 years and this is expected to continue across all occupational groups. In spite of the reductions in the workforce, recruiting and replacing staff is a very important issue.

Employers claim that skills shortages lead to increasing operation costs, difficulties in meeting customers' needs, and problems introducing new working practices that would increase profits. A recent Employer Skills Survey reported that some 60 per cent of vacancies in the industry were hard to fill. In part, this is because of low wages and unattractive working conditions. Skill shortages and gaps such as communication and team working, can often be more damaging in smaller businesses because they have a proportionally greater impact. They also need more help in identifying and planning to meet learning needs. Shortages of skilled employees may militate against the survival and development of both small businesses and modern niche suppliers.

The reasons given for skills gaps include the introduction of new working practices and technology, but also simple failures to train and develop the workforce. In addition, high levels of staff turnover exacerbate the problems.

Qualification levels are low throughout the industry. The reasons for this are an industry failure to

train, lack of interest by employees, concerns over the relevance of qualifications, lack of public funding of lower level qualifications for adults, and the diverse need for academic, vocational and basic skills qualifications. The main barriers to training are time-release factors and financial resources. It is interesting to review the impact on attitudes that prioritising funding for adults at achieving a level 2 qualification has.¹

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)

In many smaller companies across all industries, training is a hit and miss affair. It has been difficult for employees without formal qualifications to demonstrate their skills and it has been hard for employers to know the best way to train staff. The multiple roles required of managers and, in many cases, owner managers, mean that very few have a specific perception for training. However, NVQs are now established in a range of sectors including business administration, engineering, hairdressing, retailing, and the food and drinks industries.

All NVQs within a sector are based on the same occupational standards. Several different awarding bodies can offer the qualification and often suggest different routes for learning and assessment. Standards are set by the Sector Skills Councils (formally National Training Organisations) in each industry, in association with employers and training organisations. Training is likely to be a combination of learning on the job and attending training courses. Assessment is undertaken most frequently on the job.

There are five levels of NVQ ranging from 1, which relates to basic skills, to 5 that covers management. Each level is made up of separate units representing specific work areas within a job. Each unit contains the

skills available and to make effective use of trained staff.

Management Services have always been involved in training and ensuring that employees with the appropriate skills fill the given tasks. The training of new entrants and the retraining of existing employees may commence once the method has been defined and specified.

Growing industries, shrinking workforce

The food and drinks manufacturing industries are important as an employer and contributor to wealth in all parts of the UK. The sector contributes some £20 billion to annual gross domestic product and this value has been growing steadily

'In small companies, training is hit and miss.'

William Barrowcliffe & Sons Ltd

Barrowcliffes is an SME based in Nottingham and is in the prepared fresh fruit and vegetable-marketing trades. Around 80 per cent of the company's business is with the food processing industry, whilst the remainder is in the catering sector. Up to 120 people are employed and the business has a turnover of £7 million a year.

The premises occupy 30,000 square feet and contain some of the most modern and efficient facilities in the industry. Produce is prepared, conveyed, inspected, cut to size, packaged and delivered.

The company's objectives are centred on teamwork. The key focus is on the need to 'attract and retain top level employees and develop individuals through training'. It is committed to continuous improvement in all areas of its business.

With the current situation in mind, the company embarked on an NVQ programme for its shop floor employees and initially attracted 11 operatives to the scheme. Most were engaged in multi tasking throughout their shift, which included preparing produce, operating various machines, quality assurance, and moving containers.

The Meat Training Council was the National Training Organisation responsible for the occupational standards in the NVQ selected, 'Food and Drinks Manufacturing Operatives' Level 1. The units selected were Health and safety; Hygiene standards; Work with others; Rectify operating problems; Maintain product quality; and Move and handle materials. The six were selected as the most appropriate for the company and its employees from a total of 26 units available.

The company relied entirely on external training and assessment. The process can be summarised into two parts. The first part is where the assessor checked the understanding of the candidates' job role by presenting a standard list of questions in a written format, which is called the 'Underpinning Knowledge Evidence'. In the second part, the assessor observed the candidate carrying out his/her normal work duties to ascertain if the work met the required standards. If it did

not, explanations were given as to how the position could be rectified at a future observation and assessment. In a few cases, additional training was needed and provided by the company.

Groups of two or three candidates attended 'Knowledge' sessions for 30 minutes every two weeks and shop floor observations were carried out at convenient periods. The entire process lasted up to eight months, when all candidates achieved the requirements for the six units of the scheme.

An 'Internal Verifier' ensured consistency, accuracy and reliability of assessments carried out by different assessors. This person also advised, supported and mentored assessors to guarantee the quality assurance of the assessment process, in preparation for the 'External Verifier'. The latter, who is employed by the awarding body, maintained rigorous quality assurance and control arrangements, which ensure the accuracy and consistency of assessment decisions against national occupational standards specified for the award.³

As far as Barrowcliffes is concerned, the NVQ course has been highly successful and was achieved with the minimum of disruption to normal shop floor operations. The employees were refreshed and their interest has been stimulated. Each has asked to continue participation to Level 2. In addition, two employees say they are interested in attending a Leadership and Management (ex NEBSM) Course at a local college, and another is making enquiries about enrolling on an Open University degree course. They are all in a position to accept higher levels of responsibility.

Since the start of the course, two students have been promoted to supervisor grade, one to quality assurance duties, one regraded as a chargehand, and another has been transferred to purchasing. They now have salaries that recognise their commitment and skill. Potential new recruits to the company have been asking at interview about possible enrolment onto NVQ courses and the availability of further training.

standards that must be achieved, as set by the industry to which the NVQ relates.

'Qualification levels are low throughout the industry.'

Issues that SMEs have with NVQs

Traditional training has been principally centred on City and Guilds and BTEC courses delivered at local colleges of further education, some of which were 'competence based', but all with an over-arching emphasis on knowledge and understanding. In contrast, the style of assessment demanded by NVQs, the way in which the funding of training was structured, and other factors, placed new demands on employers.

A number of carrots have been dangled in front of industrialists to support the introduction of NVQs, including membership of lead bodies with the purpose of drafting the sector standards. This has been seen as a false promise for many in the SMEs who feel that they have had inappropriate standards imposed, resulting in them being unable to complete all of the NVQ competences in the workplace.

The most attractive inducement for many has been the availability of funding for training leading to an NVQ award. However, it is also clear that the training managers have not been prepared to chase the prospect of 'free' training at any cost, each needing to see relevance and value

'Staff should learn an operating procedure and not another worker's version.'

to the company and the individual.

Few benefits have been identified for mature, qualified, experienced workers in completing NVQs, since they would be only validating what the company already knows about their competence.

Benefits to employers

NVQs benefit companies by giving employees better motivation,



creating more loyalty and improved reliability. There should be less staff turnover and reduced recruitment and induction costs. Product wastage should be reduced and customer service should be improved.

NVQ training can form an important element of quality assurance/customer re-assurance procedures. Customers are likely to place more confidence in suppliers whose staff meet nationally agreed

standards. Where training has been successfully implemented, it has often been in areas covered by legislation, such as hygiene and health and safety.

Conclusion

There is evidence that NVQ schemes, when operated in a supportive environment, will produce positive results. Industry cannot function without an adequately trained

workforce and this is recognised by government, employers and trades unions. The case study supports the relevance and effectiveness of these qualification systems and new ways of learning at an operational level. The importance of support structures and expertise in the initial assessment, determination of needs, identification of suitable qualifications, and rapid returns to the organisation, cannot be overemphasised.

References

1. Skills Dialogue: Listening to Employers. An Assessment of Skill Needs in Food and Drink Manufacturing. Department for Education and Skills. 2001.



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