

Staying on-site: the secret of work-based learning

Brendan Clarke CEO for OCN NI explains the developments in work-based learning and how it can be applied to good use within the health service



Brendan Clarke

There can't be too many business managers who would let a good opportunity go by if it could lead to organisational improvement and better productivity. Yet within Northern Ireland there is strong evidence to suggest that one in three employers is still reluctant to invest in up-skilling their staff. So much so, that a significant percentage of our current labour force have not received training to up-grade them in their current role. Added to this are the high number of employees needing to attain basic skills qualifications or be progressed at least to level two skills.

In the Leitch Review of Skills 2006 (a review of long term skills needs) Lord Leitch described the case for skills upgrading in the work force as compelling and urgent and argued that the potential of the UK workforce was vast and untapped. This has led in England to initiatives like the Skills Pledge, which employers are being urged to take in an attempt to increase their commitment to helping every eligible employee to gain the skills and qualifications that will meet the

needs of their business and will support their future employability. Funding is being made available to incentivise this commitment and such moves have left Northern Ireland, with its extreme need to up-skill the workforce, without similar support or initiative but with the same priorities in terms of strengthening the workforce and improving performance.

A long-term challenge

The Leitch review clearly identified the urgent need to raise achievement at all levels of skills and described this ambition as a long-term challenge needing to be met if the UK business community and economy are to prosper in competition.

Within our own context in Northern Ireland, thinking is heavily influenced by our public sector commitments and the development needs of staff to perform more efficiently and be better motivated have been profiled through the media. While in his previous role as Finance Minister, Peter Robinson highlighted that increased work efficiencies in the Civil Service could ultimately free more cash for reinvestment in the Executives public expenditure priorities. Consequently he established a performance and delivery unit that should include people from outside the public sector with a strong record in delivering greater efficiency.

The 2005 Government White Paper Getting on in business; getting on at work had already articulated the justification for work-based learning as a means of achieving social justice through the right of the labour force to be up-skilled and learn continuously to reach its full potential and as a route to greater productivity and revenue effectiveness for business employers.

The current reform of the qualifications system which will embody a corpus of national qualification units has thrown a new focus on the validity of developing demand-led, work-based learning opportunities for staff needing to up-skill in order to improve efficiency and boost quality and productivity.

Creating an environment and culture in which work-based learning can meet the economy's requirement for productive efficiency is a coherent and assertive response to the needs of employers in the private and public sectors. That environment will best be served by leadership and management strategies that can fully exploit flexible learning solutions that can draw down the most useful and relevant qualification units under different rules of combination as skills deficiencies are pinpointed and targeted. This can make a significant contribution to lifelong learning as the gate to learning opportunities that are fit for purpose can be left open to the individual.

Whether it is at the beginning-of-career training or at some other stage and to meet some particular skills or competency need it is in the employers' and the employees' interests to identify, agree and upgrade in the hard and soft skills. Through co-operation and strategic education management, employers can design eclectic in-house training programmes that incorporate progression pathways and combine different skills training. In this way formal training can be flexible and does not have to take place off-site.



Breaking down barriers to learning

'Unleashing Talent' is the name given to a local partnership venture initiated by the Beeches Widening Participation Unit, which aims to increase Health and Social Care (HSC) productivity through engaging HSC support staff. The partnership serves to highlight the potential benefits when realistic and more effective workplace partnerships between employers, trade unions and employees are developed whereby employment relations can be improved, and better skilled and motivated staff can then contribute to higher performance and productivity.

The Open College Northern Ireland (OCN NI), the leading adult learning credit based awarding body in Northern Ireland, contributed to the partnership by providing a suitable, flexible learning pilot for local Health and Social Care Trusts to raise the skills and productivity of their

staff through non traditional learning on-site and in the context of the workplace. A number of Health and Social Care Trusts worked in partnership with the Beeches' Widening Participation Unit and local further education colleges to introduce OCN NI's Level 2 Health and Social Care Progression Certificate (HSCPC) to address productivity and widening participation issues affecting local Trusts.

The HSCPC programme is intended for health or social care staff in band 1-4, who may not have had many opportunities for development in the past. The programme was developed around the Knowledge and Skills Framework's (KSF) six core competencies (levels 1 and 2) and designed to improve organizational performance, capacity and effectiveness through learning. An independent evaluation carried out by London South Bank University concluded the course built front-line staff and supervisors' confidence and self-esteem while at the

same time giving them the skills to undertake their work more effectively. Comments from learners and service managers included strong endorsements of their individual involvement.

OCN NI has been able to find flexible solutions to meet the needs of employers, and practitioners within different aspects of the public sector. Our willingness to accommodate the specific, very important requirements of organisations provides a clear picture of just how flexible work based learning can be and of how diverse the benefits. Feedback from both organisations highlights the positive outcomes in terms of greater efficiency, improved performance, better attendance, confidence in performance and motivation at work. It's really quite difficult to put a concrete value on that, although the organisations involved clearly see the value of their investments.

For more information contact a member of our Business Development Team on tel: 028 9065 0200 or visit www.ocnni.org.uk

OCN Northern Ireland, Building 3, 212-218 Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast, BT4 3ET

