

SWITCHING ON TO LITERACY

W Lucy is one of Oxford city's oldest businesses and has been run from its premises in Jericho for over 100 years. This manufacturing firm was centred originally on foundry work. It produced lampposts, railings, street furniture, library shelving and manhole covers. It is now an international organisation serving diverse markets, with its core businesses now being manufacturing and letting residential property.

The latter does seem a little removed from manufacturing, but arose from direct investment in the locality. The main product is now electrical switchgear, which evolved from adding value to the lampposts.

The company employs some 400 employees in both the UK and overseas. These employees are recruited from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The company has many restrictions and difficulties in remaining competitive, and this has resulted in changes within the organisation.

As a result, Carol Clark, HR manager, has had to cope with various issues. For example redundancies, low morale in manufacturing, loss of key skill sets, staff retention, the need for culture change, managing the transition process and re-training to cover loss of skill sets.

Commenting on the changes, Carol said: "An HR change management strategy was necessary, of which developing a training and development programme was key. This included basic skills at work, NVQs, specific departmental training and so on. The aim was to promote a fully flexible workforce that was motivated and trained."

She continued: “Basic skills training was crucial because it was central to achieving our business improvement programme. We wanted all associates to attain NVQ 2 in performing manufacturing operations, all team leaders to attain NVQ 3 in supervisory management, all managers to attain NVQ 4 in management and all senior managers to attain NVQ 5 in management. Also, a basic skills need in logistics was identified (by accident).

“We realised that under-performing employees were having negative effects on the performance of the department and on other employees in the department. The bottom line was that two employees could not read, write or count, which was affecting stock reconciliation and business performance. This evidence was enough to make us contact the Basic Skills at Work (BSAW) team at Oxfordshire County Council and meet with Grace Stone, the project manager. We have never looked back!”

Grace met with Carol soon after the self-referral was made. After this initial meeting Grace and Dot Gittelson, who was to be their project leader, talked to the relevant managers to raise awareness and discuss any queries. “I really enjoyed the shadowing work, and found that it was an excellent opportunity to start building relationships with future tutees,” said Dot.

This approach helped enforce the training needs analysis, which identified a need for both maths and English. Initially, a pilot to trial the programme was run for a small group, and it just grew from there. Basic skills were offered to other departments, which resulted in more groups undergoing a variety of programmes such as English for Speakers of Other Languages, report writing, maths and English. A series of workshops were also run for employees leaving under redundancies, and these helped to equip employees with skills to go out into the workplace.

It would have been difficult to achieve the same amount of success without the support and hard work of HR. They worked with production managers to ensure employees could be released from work.

Initially many felt very awkward about taking part in training, but being able to meet with the staff who would be delivering the training helped to prevent any difficulties and put people at ease. Training was delivered in an informal and light-hearted manner, which created a non-threatening environment.

Sometimes the learners had to return to the production line while receiving their training. This was never a problem as time was usually made up in another session, thus highlighting how flexible the programmes were. All the materials used were directly relevant to the paper-based reporting systems that were used at work, and this helped the staff to do a task better, and more confidently.

Direct results of the training have included :

- positive change in the attitude to learning and continuous professional development (CPD)
- employees have entered the learning cycle
- employees have gained confidence
- people have changed and are more open to change
- managers are managing better
- greater efficiency
- improved working relationships have developed
- employees have become more approachable

Lucy, a production manager at W Lucy, was very impressed with the training. “By having this training through the Basic Skills at Work Program we have addressed both business and personal needs,” she said.