

Smart & Kleen Laundries – an interview with the MD



Background of Organisation

Smart & Kleen Laundries is a laundry providing cleaning services and linen hire for the hotel, restaurant and hospitality industries. The Managing Director, Brian Moore, started it as a sole enterprise in 1998. It originally started trading from a single rented unit on the industrial estate, and Brian Moore remembers that in his first week, he made £7.50. The business has now expanded to operate out of 4 units and a further expansion is planned. Brian now employs 12 staff on day shift and twilight shift rotas, and the majority are female and part-time. There is a distinct educational and cultural difference in the background of the staff. Approximately half are of UK background and have few or no educational qualifications. The other group are of Chinese/Taiwan background and are working towards Masters degrees at Newcastle University. The annual turnover of the company is now £250k-£300k.

What is the organisation's unique selling point/ Who are its customers?

Smart & Kleen laundries prides itself on the quality of its customer service. Its ethos is that it will always endeavour to meet its customers' needs, and once a job is undertaken, they will always deliver. To this end, they position themselves as being the company that if a customer rings up on Christmas Eve with dirty table linen, Smart & Kleen Laundries Ltd will ensure that they have clean napkins and tablecloths on Christmas Day. Brian Moore feels that the quality of the workforce is vital in being able to deliver great customer service, and that he now has a better paid and better trained workforce than any of his competitors.

What is the organisation's future direction/What external factors are impacting on growth and development?

At the moment, Smart & Kleen laundries is benefiting from the present boom of credit finance. The 'feel-good' factor of rising house values has seen an increase in the demand for leisure and hospitality services with more people going out to hotels and restaurants. This in turn has fuelled a demand for cleaning services for these businesses. A number of other small independent cleaners have recently been established in the local area to compete for the expanding business market. While they have been mostly undercutting their prices to win business, Brian Moore has been concentrating on staff training. He feels that when this period of economic growth starts to slow down, he will still be able to expand his business because of Smart & Kleen's added-value customer service skills.

Why did the organisation decide to get involved with workplace basic skills training?

A number of factors came together. Firstly there was a customer who showed Brian a delivery note that had been written by one of Brian's staff, that used the word "bank-witting" instead of 'banqueting', when accounting for the bales of freshly laundered linen. This was obviously not conducive to the image of professionalism that Brian was keen to cultivate for his business.

Secondly, Brian was keen to promote Rachel, one of his most experienced and competent members of staff, to the position of stock controller. However, in order for her to successfully undertake the relevant sector-specific training; she first needed to brush up on her basic English and Maths skills, along with boosting her self-esteem and confidence.

Brian decided to contact Business Link, who put him in touch with Harvey Stranger (Tel 0191 516 6746) a 'Learning Champion' for the Employer Training Pilot (ETP) in the North East. Harvey was able to access EQ8, a source of government funding, to pay for training offered by Newcastle College.

Describe the early days of being involved in workplace basic skills training. What benefits did you hope to achieve?

Newcastle College initially came in on Monday mornings to run a small class for 5 learners for 18 weeks. The class was held in a meeting room on the workplace site with 1 tutor in attendance. The class was scheduled to run from 10-12 and an initial assessment was carried out, which indicated that the main focus of the sessions would be on spelling, mental maths and imperial/metric conversions. The learners

were all very reluctant to attend in the beginning, so Brian suggested that they all attend the first session, and if they didn't like it, they wouldn't have to go back. He hoped that attending the lessons would improve his staff's self-esteem and confidence to learn. Fortunately, the first session proved to be a success!

What has been your experience of being involved in workplace basic skills training/ what has the programme achieved ?

The short-term gains have been more confident staff who can work with less supervision. This is crucial for an owner-manager like Brian as it frees him up to spend more time on developing the business. Longer term he hopes to continue to expand the business, and to do this he needs to recruit staff with specialist skills or to train from within.

What are the benefits to you as an employer?

- Staff retention has improved
- Able to maintain our current pricing structure
- More time to be a managing director

What have been the benefits to employees?

- Increased confidence, particularly in decision-making
- Improved communication skills
- Improved staff morale and ability to motivate others

Have there been any other benefits and/or unexpected benefits?

Brian and "Smart & Kleen Laundries" have been featured quite extensively in the local and national press as a role model for basic skills training at work. His customer base has appreciated the publicity and Brian feels that his standing in the business community has improved as a result.

What have been the challenges?

Unsurprisingly, the issue of productivity and losing staff at key times when trying to run a business was felt to be a key challenge. Brian has resolved this by the use of seasonal staff to cover, and his staff have also helped out by sometimes agreeing to come in on their day off.

What are you going to do now (ie changes, more training, new development etc)

In the short-term, Brian has no immediate plans to arrange more training, although hopes to offer some whole team training later on, if funding is available. If he is unable to access any more funding, he will still consider offering further training to those staff ear-marked for promotion, feeling that the cost of such training is a necessary investment for the growth and success of his business.

What advice would you give to another employer thinking of taking up basic skills training at work?

- Consider the likely impact on your productivity and don't necessarily offer training to everyone
- Expect to be surprised by the commitment of your staff and by the outcome of the training – in Brian's case, one of his employees that he previously thought of as "weak" has now become a supervisor.

Any other comments?

Don't underestimate the impact that workplace basic skills training can have on your whole business.