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Don't leave me this way: why apprenticeships work

With staff turnover in the leisure industry running at over 80% over four years, Colin Huffen makes the case for apprenticeships as a way of countering 'churn'.

It is no secret that one of the biggest challenges to leisure operators is how to address high levels of staff turnover. Industry statistics, including a leisure operators survey conducted by the ASA, reveal that current levels of staff 'churn' in the leisure industry are as high as 83% turnover across a four-year timeframe. When coupled with low levels of motivation it spells a big headache for human resources managers and those responsible for staff recruitment.

While it is easy to blame rising inflation and low levels of pay for influencing staff to look for new roles in order to increase their household income, the reasons are often far more values-based than purely monetary. For example, if an employee feels they cannot progress in their role and has no control over their career development they will eventually begin to look elsewhere. Similarly if they are not stimulated by the requirements of their role and have low levels of job satisfaction they are more likely to have an eye on the next opportunity that might pay the same, but offer better career progression routes. So how can you act to reduce the constant churn of staff and manage the level of turnover?

Multi-skilling for maximum motivation When your customers walk through your doors they make contact with many different members of staff as part of their leisure experience. A receptionist, lifeguard, class instructor, swimming teacher, fitness coach; all employees who have had varying levels of training, hold all sorts of qualifications and ultimately possess their own schedule of individual tasks for the day.

The industry needs a workforce that has the capacity to be multi-skilled with individuals capable of fulfilling more than one role, not just be a swimming teacher or a gym instructor. Research into employment models has revealed that introducing full-time contracts through the combination of leisure centre roles can vastly improve staff retention levels, an important factor when people are one of your major assets at the very heart of customer service excellence. Indeed research by Birindelli and Rustichelli (2007) suggests that an attractive job role offers flexibility in its work design, rather than a specialised, narrow point of focus, and Dhondt et al (2002) discovered that employees should be empowered by the transformation of their role from a "low job demand, low job autonomy/control" position to a "high job demand, high job autonomy/control" position.

In my role at the Institute of Swimming (IoS) it is clear to me that experiencing lots of different environments and job roles, particularly in the early stages of a career, can bring success for all concerned. This approach helps provide a more motivated, energised and dynamic workforce who have greater awareness of the wider picture and expanded abilities to achieve the goals of both the business and themselves as individuals. Staff are more committed and motivated and it makes staffing plans easier. For example, learn-to-swim lessons may be cancelled at short notice if a teacher calls in sick but if staff are trained appropriately an employer can immediately have a stand-in available from the pool of existing staff. Customers thus benefit from having several different 'touch points' with leisure centre staff, which helps to build relationships and therefore improve customer satisfaction.

From the employee's perspective the development of clear career paths and structured continuing professional development programmes is absolutely key so that they can develop their skills and progress as an individual, while providing the employer with motivated, enthusiastic staff.

Of course, ongoing training needs have to be continually addressed, particularly

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if staff are being asked to step outside of their normal operating environment. This need not be an expensive exercise as training packages can often be delivered via e-learning to make use of the latest innovative ways to learn in a convenient and cost effective format.

A new generation of managers

Apprenticeships are increasingly being used by leisure employers as a cost-effective way of reducing staff churn, addressing skills gaps and harnessing the enthusiasm, flexibility and energy of fresh new talent. Spanning a wide variety of practical skills and qualifications that organisations need to remain effective, productive and competitive, they are effectively creating a generation of new managers for the leisure sector.

Leisure management company Parkwood Leisure have implemented an apprenticeship scheme which provides young people with unique opportunities to experience working in varied environments and ultimately achieve a rewarding career. Taking the form of a three-year programme, it begins with foundation qualifications in teaching aquatics and lifeguarding. In year two apprentices can choose options in exercise and fitness, leisure operations or customer service and in the final year further advancement is available in leisure management, facilities management, advanced fitness instruction or sports development.

Parkwood's human resources director, Alan Tucker, explained how the apprenticeship scheme provides benefits for all involved: "The leisure industry is one of the greatest secrets in the UK. It has many opportunities but most people do not think of it as a career. This flagship apprentice scheme is a win-win-win opportunity. The apprentices get a good first step for employability with a broad breath of training and development; our training partners, the IoS, get individuals who will champion swimming, teaching the public at large how to enjoy the sport to its fullest; and the company gets good, all-round employees with skills that can develop into careers for the future."

Monitoring and moving forward

Once a programme is in place it is important to regularly review and monitor the progression of staff through appraisals, particularly as staff may be performing more than one role and possibly have conflicting priorities and demands on their time and resources. Encouraging teaching and coaching staff to become officially licensed is one way of providing recognition of an individual's competence, professionalism and capability. It also brings benefits to the employer when used as part of the recruitment process in providing a level of confidence that the applicant is committed to continuing personal development and is signed up to a code of ethics.

Colin Huffen is the assistant head of the Institute of Swimming.

For more information on how apprenticeships can benefit your business visit www.swimming.org or Swimming TV online

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