

HUMAN RESOURCES

Taking the training test

Staff development is, for many retailers, an essential part of investing in the business. However, some trainers suggest that staff should be assessed before money is spent on training courses, should retailers be listening? Samantha Lyster finds out more

Investing in staff development is now a given for many companies, but if managers were to observe a training session, how often would they be confronted by bored or distracted faces?

Training is seen as beneficial for staff, but it can be a waste of money if the people involved are not interested and are only taking part because they feel they have to.

If the training is essential, such as bringing someone up to speed on changes in working practices or customer service, then assessing an employee before sending them to a training session makes little sense. However, if the training is for personal development, such as acquiring extra skills or in preparation for a promotion, then the consensus among trainers is that it would be better for all involved if the employee receives an assessment before they start the course.

Hugh Alford, a senior training consultant for sales, management, training and development company TACK International, says that to get the best return on investment in a training scheme, management should consider who is the right candidate. They should also choose on the course and

select the best time in the individual's development.

"Retail staff need to avoid the 'I was sent here' syndrome," says Alford. "Line managers should take an active responsibility for the assessment of the delegate, prior to the training interaction. Maybe an analysis of training needs could be undertaken to identify any skills gap. For example, is it new skills training or refreshment training that is needed?"

Pitman Training managing director

Michael Graham agrees that both the candidate and the type of training should be looked at carefully, especially when it comes to IT training.

"Before a company implements a training programme, I would advise them to take a step back and undertake a needs analysis to examine the company/individual's requirements to ensure they are maximising their investment," he says.

"It is also important to consider the training techniques that will be used.

I recommend a blended-learning approach. I also recommend a self-paced style of learning, where an individual is not under pressure to keep up with the trainer or the class."

Graham adds that training is a unique requirement, so it doesn't make sense for a company to send whole teams on courses and expect them all to benefit. He warns: "It is important to check that the candidate is committed and ready to be trained so you are spending your budget on those who want to learn. Reputable training providers can help address this through the use of psychological and skills-based tests to identify ability and willingness to embrace the training programme."

Orange head of store operations Antony Smith says the mobile phone retailer holds a quarterly review with staff, who each have a personal

development plan they can discuss with managers. "We want to retain staff, and to do that we need to offer a career path," he says. "Training is a two-way street and we listen to our staff and encourage their input."

Smith points out that, as part of Orange listening to its employees, the retailer asks store staff to nominate colleagues for promotion to Elite Phone Trainers, who travel from shop-to-shop helping to bring other workers up to speed.

He adds that nominees are sent to an assessment centre, where Orange decides who gets promoted. "For everyday training, we put staff members through to an academy where they learn in a traditional classroom setting, but we try to make it fun by building the training around a theme," he says.

Pat Wilce, work-based learning manager for The Source learning centre at Meadowhall in Sheffield, says that by pre-assessing, retailers can also discover which areas need improvement. "If money and time is going to be invested, it is important to speak with management and individual learners to gain interest from all parties involved, and it's equally important to see what level of training is required," he says.

"When proper assessment and consultation takes place before committing staff to learning programmes, clear areas of strengths and weaknesses can be identified, along with an idea of long-term career goals. This can be later used as a yardstick by which to measure progress."

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF TRAINING

James Bass, manager of retail professionals at recruitment, retention and development consultancy PRO, provides some tips on how to make sure retailers, and their staff, get the most out of training:

- Training content should be pertinent to the immediate and/or developmental needs of individuals, so genuine progress can be achieved against personal development plans
- Allocating courses should be based on achieving strategic or operational goals, rather than just feeling that your staff would respond to it
- Those that do not respond will most likely fall into two camps: those that do not feel the content was well presented, and those that have little ambition or drive to make personal progress
- The apathy of certain staff should not detract from your objectives to develop and retain the high performers that will drive and enhance your business

