

Switching on to career development

Energy company Npower has begun a programme of career development for its call centre training team. **Elizabeth Eyre** hears about the benefits that have flowed from it

Better staff retention, closer alignment with business objectives, increased credibility within the organisation – these are all things that any self-respecting L&D professional would want for his department.

The trainers can now become CIPD-qualified, receive regular support in developing their careers and apply for newly created posts as consultants.

Npower says the initiative, which began last year, has already started to deliver tangible results, and it is currently looking at ways to measure its ROI.

Npower has a call centre in Peterlee, County Durham, which deals with residential electricity supplies. A team of 28 looks after the training needs of around 2,000 staff but, up until quite recently, their own needs have been pretty much neglected: they received career development on an *ad hoc* basis, usually from more experienced colleagues within the team, but there was no structured career path or professional accreditation. There was also limited opportunity to progress within the team.

Sarah Challis, training team manager, said: "When I first joined

Npower in August 2003, there was an existing development programme, delivered in-house to the group of trainers.

"A colleague and I took over the programme, revitalised it and enhanced it: we established a series of modules, some based around CIPD requirements and others based around core training skills.

"We were very keen to have a fully qualified, accredited training team"

"It was to develop the skills of the more experienced trainers in the team but it didn't give them a structured accreditation process. They got a certificate at the end of it but it wasn't recognised externally and it wasn't as structured as a CIPD qualification.

"We were very keen to have a fully qualified, accredited training team but the majority of our trainers hadn't had the opportunity to achieve that qualification, which is a benchmark standard within the L&D community."

Some members of the training team, said Challis, had been with

the company for more than five years and had no formal training qualifications: "They'd come initially as contact centre operatives. Some had been promoted to team leader and had joined the training team from there, while others had gone straight from being advisors to training. We take very much a 'grow your own' approach – we look for potential when we're recruiting and develop people – very rarely do we look externally for trainers.

"A lot of people are interested in moving into a training career and we want to give them the opportunity to do so."

A laudable approach, but not altogether an altruistic one – the cold, hard economic facts speak for themselves. The complex systems and processes within the energy industry necessitate a lot of training for newly appointed employees – Challis says Npower spends six weeks training new call centre staff and a minimum of six months bringing externally appointed training team members up to speed – and an effective way of minimising the disruption is to promote people from within the ranks who are already familiar with those systems and processes.

But Challis says that, even though formal qualifications were rare among the training team members, the standard of training that they delivered to call centre staff was “excellent”, and the aim of the programme was to develop other aspects of training, such as evaluation, and to give the trainers a completely new set of skills.

“We’ve created a new role of training consultant. We have four new positions available, primarily to work on project development and delivery within the business. Eighty per cent of the consultants’ time is project-focused, so we had to deliver a different set of skills to people who were previously spending 100 per cent of their time delivering induction programmes to new starters,” she says. “We’re giving them the skills to be able to consult with stakeholders within the business to identify what their training requirements are, and to think more creatively about meeting those requirements.”

At the beginning of last year, individual development plans were created for all training team members, taking into account differing experience and ability. Challis turned to Development Processing Group (DPG) for help in implementing the programme.

DPG put together a programme, comprising eight workshops, nine open learning modules, four assessments and a work-based project, that enabled the ten most experienced members of the team to start studying for the CTP last June. It focused on Npower’s current business initiatives and introduced training best practice into everything they do.

Challis wanted the programme to last six months instead of the usual nine, and the ten trainers achieved the CTP last December. “I was really keen to have the initial pilot group’s completion by the end of the year,” she says.



On their way: Npower trainers Jamie Blake, Graeme Cooper, Andrew Kane, Andrew Mills, Paul Morley, Lisa Mugridge, Ashley Murray, Pauline Pigott and Helen Sirrell (pictured with head of training and development Andrew Bewley) have achieved the introductory award and are now studying for the CTP

“DPG assured me that that was feasible, providing everyone was committed and would put in the time required.”

Robert Wagner is the CTP programme manager at DPG. He says: “They wanted us to professionally train their team of trainers. There’s nothing unusual there; that’s what we do. But the speed with which they wanted us to do it *was* unusual. They gave us six months, which was tight.

“Unfortunately, in training, you spend all your time focusing on other people’s development but never on your own!”

“We condensed the spaces between the workshops and also made sure that the support they got between the workshops was spot on. The tutor that we had in place – Duncan Drummond – was dedicated to that project; normally a tutor would have two or three clients at a time. He was there to support them by email and phone between the workshops, then face-to-face when they met up.”

Apart from the time scale, the varying degrees of experience and skill of the programme participants also presented challenges.

Said Challis: “We faced the same challenges that everyone would have, with deadlines and time scales. Some of the group hadn’t studied since being at college – we’re talking 15 years ago – so it was a bit of a culture shock for them having to learn, write assignments, study, having the pressure of achieving a qualification. We put a lot of measures in place to support them – we have two resource centres that were able to offer additional support, for example – and, in the end, the results they achieved exceeded their own expectations.”

In the end, just one person failed to achieve the CTP. Challis admits that she engineered the composition of the pilot CTP group to ensure the best possible result: “I went through everyone in the team and selected the initial pilot group. I wanted it to be a success – I had to demonstrate to my boss and to his boss that we would get a return on our investment, so I ensured that the people we selected were ready to move on to the next step and were ready to develop into managing projects and leading projects within the business. All of them were absolutely delighted – it was something they’d been keen to do for a long time.

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The senior trainers were not the only ones to benefit from career development. A group of nine, slightly less experienced, team members, who were not quite ready to take the CTP, were prepared for the qualification with a two-day workshop. It gave them an overview of training best practice and showed them how to centre their training sessions on the learner more; it was followed

up with a formal presentation to Challis and her boss which had to be awarded a 'pass' before they could begin the CTP.

All nine trainers passed and started studying for the CTP in February.

A third group of new trainers will be going through the two-day workshop later this year, with a view to embarking on the CTP.

Ongoing career development is now available to everyone on the team. Several of the senior trainers have developed their skills even further by taking the ILM Certificate in Coaching and Mentoring. All the successful CTP delegates have follow-up sessions to review their progress and add new skills and knowledge at half-day workshops, and the development programme itself is regularly reviewed and updated to keep pace with industry developments.

Staff are also encouraged to use the personal and career development material available in the resource centres.

The programme has been a success from DPG's perspective – "We're really pleased about it," said Wagner. "The fact that they've asked us back to do a similar project for the business supply part of Npower is testimony to how successful it's been." – but what are the benefits for the training team itself?

One of the positive aspects of the programme is the work-based project. Said Wagner: "What we aim to do as often as we can is make sure that the project is linked into real business initiatives. All those who went through at the end of the programme presented projects to Sarah and her manager, who signed them off. Seven out of the ten were taken on board.

"That piece of work needed doing anyway but, because they've been through the programme, the trainers have best practice in their heads so they've done it to a



Successful completion: Npower trainers Lesley Blower, Robina Din, Jeff Lynn, Scott Pearson, Gary Shepherd, Amanda Smith, Angela Stringer and Andrea Tench (pictured with head of training and development Andrew Beasley) have achieved the CTP and are now CIPD qualified

higher standard than they would have done otherwise. Being on the programme has raised the standard of training and, in turn, raised the credibility of the training team within the organisation."

According to Challis, the programme has had a "fantastic" effect on team morale and has improved retention: "It was an opportunity that people wanted. I was hearing rumours that people were thinking of leaving because there were no career development opportunities and this programme has definitely made a difference – I know that some of the people who were definitely looking outside the organisation have now achieved their qualification and have received a promotion within the team.

"Retention was one of the reasons I instigated this programme in the first place. To replace someone with that level of experience takes at least six months – which is time we just can't afford."

The training team is a lot more confident in its abilities and is able to challenge requests for training, rather than being a passive service provider. And the fact that its members are working towards accredited qualifications increases its status within Npower.

The team is also more aligned with Npower's business objectives.

Said Challis: "It's absolutely critical that everything we do now is clearly tied into the company's vision and objectives. We need to know what the strategic business objectives are for the whole organisation as well as what they mean to us as a team and how we fit into them.

"It's definitely something that we're focused on."

Challis' key focus now is on ROI and evaluating the programme's impact on participants' day-to-day work. She is using the company's own performance-management processes to measure how people are progressing through a series of competency-based levels.

"My boss is really delighted with how the programme has gone," said Challis. "He wants to see the results, so it's absolutely key for me to evaluate its impact on the team's performance. By the end of the year I need to be able to demonstrate really clearly the ROI of the training team."

Inevitably, Challis is taking a speedy approach to evaluation. By the end of the first financial quarter, she aims to ensure that every trainer is operating at Kirkpatrick level one and that, by following a structured process, everyone is operating at level two by the end of the second financial quarter, at level three by the end of the third financial quarter, and so on.

"My team is developing that internally at the moment. I've also got people working on key projects, conducting a lot of analysis of people's achievements after the programme and the change in knowledge. We'll be providing a statistical analysis of the contribution that training has made, and we're busy producing figures and evidence to back that up."

And the moves to develop the team members themselves continue unabated – Challis says the focus now is to get people who have gained the CTP moving up the internal career ladder. ■