

Informal learning in a hotel context

Swinton Park is an exclusive luxury hotel of 30 bedrooms located in North Yorkshire eight miles from Ripon. It is set in 200 acres of parklands and gardens, and offers a wide range of facilities to guests. It also has a Cookery School run by a celebrity chef. The hotel was opened in 2001 and employs about seventy full-time and part-time staff, although this number fluctuates due to seasonal demands. In April 2002 the Hotel was awarded Investors in People Award¹ in 2006. The hotel's approach to training and development is a blend of formal and informal initiatives. Given the nature of most jobs at the hotel both induction and ongoing training are highly practical. New employees undertake a comprehensive induction followed by an informal staff review after three months. This socialization process is further supported by informal learning activities such as job shadowing which has been highly successful for the transfer of knowledge and skills from experienced individuals to new employees (although there have been some failures indicating that this approach does not suit everyone). Job shadowing is also used when employees are first promoted. The emphasis is on the relatively gradual accumulation of expertise rather than 'throwing people in at the deep end'. Experienced employees have also learnt from new employees who often have knowledge and skills gained from working in other organizations.

Ongoing training is predominantly on-the-job for managers and other employees and includes interventions such as job rotation which enables individuals to broaden their knowledge and skills as well as gain an insight into other aspects of the organization. Selection for this is based on a lottery system (taking names from a hat). Although the frequency of this intervention is affected by trading circumstances it is clearly a key aspect of the hotel's training and development strategy. A research study that involved a series of staff interviews reveals that employees learn informally through doing their work and resolving problems that they encounter on a daily basis. Employees are encouraged to try out new ideas for improving their jobs and if the idea is successful it will be adopted as a new work routine. The employees who were interviewed spoke positively about the opportunities available to them to learn and seemed to appreciate the interest taken in them by the owners and managers.

Employees are keen to acknowledge the help and support they receive from colleagues and it is apparent that this social aspect of work is seen as being very important. Managers stress the importance of teamwork as well as good communications and the sharing of information. Consequently, formal staff committees and meetings are held regularly and employees are able to submit feedback forms to management on any issue. Informal shift meetings tend to be held daily and employees are able to raise any issue they want at these. Support networks between individuals in different departments have also emerged and evolved over time.

Management believe in recognizing the efforts of their employees and also in providing them with customer feedback. Monthly work reviews are conducted to recognize any staff achievements and this approach is seen as being highly motivational by many employees. The hotel's owners would like to see a system that recognizes the organizational benefits of informal learning including some form of qualification for individual employee's informal learning. Full-time staff are also formally appraised on an annual basis.

Sources

- ¹ <http://www.inflow.eu.com> (Informal Learning Opportunities in the Workplace—Case Studies) (accessed 25 March 2008).
- ² <http://www.swintonpark.com> (accessed 27 March 2008).
- ³ <http://www.mrsconsultancy.com/Services/Pages/News/Swinton.htm> (accessed 9 July 2008).