

Co-operative Group induction inspires enthusiastic and engaged employees

Award-winning program proves to be great value for money

Dry Monday-morning induction sessions in an old-fashioned training room were hardly reinforcing the impression of a quality-focused ethical business among new recruits to the Co-operative Group's Manchester headquarters.

But now a new induction program – winner of a National Training Award in 2010 – is enthusing recruits, increasing their engagement with the organization and its values and reducing employee turnover.

More than 300 people a year join the staff of the Co-op's head office in Manchester, ranging from directors to clerical staff in the finance, HR, information-systems, marketing, membership and estates directorates, together with a few from the food, funeral-care and pharmacy businesses.

"Induction for these new people was *ad hoc*, varied and sometimes non-existent," said Pam Mosedale, group training and development manager. "Those who attended the Monday-morning sessions had a friendly welcome, but that was about all. The training was dull. Delegates were talked at by presenters. This was not the best start in an organization that is repositioning itself as a quality-focused ethical business."

Members of the Co-op's values and principles committee had questioned whether new recruits were being told about the group's values and principles.

"Inductions were not being viewed as an integral part of our employer brand, employee engagement and the long-term investment in our employees," Pam Mosedale continued. "Line managers had a crucial role to fully engage with new employees and ensure their first 90 days working for the Co-operative Group were well supported, but this just was not happening."

Feedback from the induction sessions was, unsurprisingly, negative. One new recruit said: "That was a waste of time; nice coffee and biscuit, but I didn't learn anything. It was old fashioned and didn't mention the new brand. I was bored."

Moreover, staff turnover at the Manchester headquarters was high. Some 15 percent of people a year were leaving in some functions, and 28 percent after three years.



How reform was implemented

"We relooked at the whole induction process, from how we engaged with new employees immediately after they had accepted a job to the point of being a fully competent member of a team," said Pam Mosedale. "We also carried out research and obtained feedback from stakeholders such as HR, the trade unions, safety managers, our membership and employees themselves."

A small working party was set up to develop the new induction policy.

A written policy was established to inform recruiting managers and new employees about their responsibilities. This included checklists of things to do. The policy was approved by HR and line managers. A copy is now sent to the recruiting manager before a new employee starts work. It is published on the intranet.

A welcome pack was developed to provide new employees with essential information about the organization. The pack, including a DVD, is sent to the new employee. It is written in a vibrant, colorful style, in-line with the Co-op's branded communication.

A new induction workshop was developed, to use more participative learning methods. "This creative and engaging workshop helps new employees to understand our values and principles, the expectations of our organization and our brand, so that they become part of a team quickly and effectively," Pam Mosedale commented. "We use music, lots of activities, DVDs, our brand exhibition and local stores to make the event memorable and engaging."

The development costs of the induction process were around £18,000. This included designing and developing activities, producing the welcome pack, buying the necessary presentation and publicity material and training two trainers to lead the workshops.

The workshop is delivered internally by two trainers for around 20 people every month.

Benefits of the new induction

The induction program has produced more engaged employees, who are more likely to stay with the organization.

Employee engagement at the group's head office rose from 78 percent to 85 percent. Head-office staff turnover fell to 4.5 percent. This led to a £400,000 saving on recruitment and training costs and management time.

New employees are enthusiastic about the induction process and the Co-operative as an employer. Positive feedback on the process has risen by 50 percent. Managers are more actively involved in the induction process and in meeting compliance requirements. All head-office employees now become Co-op members, compared to around 85 percent who became members before the reforms.

"The £250-per-person program is sustainable and transferable to our other businesses, and provides excellent value for money," said Pam Mosedale. "Feedback from our HR, training and membership colleagues from across the group and in other co-operatives indicates that the tools we have developed are going to be of value to the wider organization – saving time and development costs and bringing some consistency, where appropriate."

Comments of participants

Among the comments of participants in the new induction process are:

- "It makes me proud to work here and I will tell people about it."
- "I feel more engaged with the organization and the values and principles it believes in."

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- “This confirmed that the Co-operative really is as value-driven and ethical as it claims.”
- “From my induction experience I made suggestions to the pharmacy business that were taken on board and well received.”
- “The induction helped me when interviewing for a better internal role, where I was successful.”
- “The packs are brilliant and we will use the material straight away.”
- “The toolkit is excellent – very colorful, creative and engaging.”
- “I would rather work for this business than any other organization in the world.”

Comments of Co-operative Group executives

Richard Bide, group HR director, commented: “We have created a whole modern induction program that puts the Co-operative at its heart – shouldn’t everyone work this way?”

Amanda Jones, head of business change and transformation, said: “Induction and employee engagement are crucial to our employer brand. Our superb new induction process is really effective. It sets the right tone and atmosphere for our organization. We want new employees to feel really engaged in our business, creating a feeling of pride about the organization that they have joined and ready to contribute to our success.”

Russell Gill, head of membership, enthused: “The new induction program has made a real difference to our business. There is a genuine and positive focus on our Co-operative values and principles throughout the workshop. They are not just words anymore. New employees really understand how they affect our businesses, how they should uphold them in their day-to-day work activities and how membership is vital to our organization.”

Phillip Willsmere, head of operational risk, concluded: “The group’s new induction program is comprehensive and has proved to be very effective. There is a good balance between health and safety requirements, business continuity, data protection and welcoming new people to this very diverse organization. Managers are far more aware of their responsibilities and carry them out in a diligent way to ensure that we keep a safe working environment for all our head-office staff.”

The Co-operative Group is the UK’s fifth-largest food retailer, third-largest retail pharmacy chain, No. 1 provider of funeral services and largest independent travel business. It also has strong ethical banking and insurance businesses.

The Rochdale Pioneers are recognized as the founders of the co-operative movement. In 1844, 28 working men opened a co-op shop in Rochdale selling basic items. They decided it was time shoppers were treated with honesty, openness and respect, and that they should be able to share in the profits and have a say in the business.

These values and principles live on today. The Co-operative Group is the UK’s largest mutual retailer and the world’s largest consumer co-operative. The group employs 123,000 people, and has 3 million members and 4,900 retail outlets.

Note

David Pollitt, *Human Resource Management International Digest* editor, wrote this article.

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