

Innovation needed in training to develop your employees.

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Johannesburg, South Africa, 7 March 2007 - There are two types of organisations in the business world today – those that are focussed on results and those focussed on performance.

The result-focussed organisation is obsessed with reaching profit targets and business objectives no matter what the impact on its staff is. Conversely, the performance-driven organisation will attain results by default, because it obsesses with something entirely different: its people.

In truth, it is rather obvious that companies should strive to be performance-driven if they want to build a sustainable business, however, these companies remain the exception rather than the rule. To become a performance-oriented business requires a multi-faceted strategy. And to do this, innovative ways of training and developing people are key factors that ensure that they are able to deliver value to their customers.

This is especially critical in businesses where people play an important role in the everyday operations, for example, in the contact centre industry.

Training has long been recognised as a critical element of running a business, however, in many instances it would appear that training is done for training's sake as opposed to evaluating the outcome of the training and determining if the training has had a long term impact on an individual's mindset.

Another common result of many training courses in SA is the unrealistic expectations that the trainees often have. Unfortunately, not all training is equal and the training itself is not developing the individual in a host of areas that create and build career-enhancing experience.

Training in industry sectors, such as contact centres, is an expensive, time-consuming and continuous endeavour. As a result, more innovative and ultimately more cost-effective ways of training have been developed.

One could argue that until such time as there are appropriate development programmes, greater recognition and accreditation of the contact centre industry from a career perspective, the high levels of attrition will continue.

This industry is also plagued by staff poaching and churn as individuals job-hop for minimal salary increases given that a career in the contact centre environment is not considered a long-term career.

Overall, there is insufficient tenure in the contact centre industry which exacerbates the need for training at great expense but with relatively little return.

So what is the answer?

Firstly, training is an absolute requirement so this is a non-negotiable aspect. What is needed is a creative way of trying to build competency amongst people in an industry that is plagued by a high level of attrition. In other words: how are you able to get people to stay longer?

Secondly, reinforcing the options available in the contact centre industry from a career perspective is very important. The contact centre environment essentially gives individuals the most incredible life skills that can be used in many different industries and whilst you don't want to reinforce the "transience" of the contact centre industry, it is worthwhile illustrating how individuals can personally develop themselves within this industry.

Equally, however, unrealistic expectations of what individuals can expect out of the industry also need to be managed. The Contact Centre environment is complex and requires a varied skill set if someone is to move up the ranks.

Often in exit interviews, reasons cited for leaving refer to "growth" or "development", yet the same agents who leave on those grounds turn up in other contact centres, doing exactly what they were doing before.

One way to overcome these issues is through modern training and development programmes aimed at people who are serious about their jobs. Organisations can't offer 1400 people 1400 team leader positions, but they can offer their staff high-level training that equips them to control their own destinies.

The proof

A programme that has been initiated by Merchants, called Destiny, makes use of a number of training stages in an ongoing developmental programme, which incorporate an internationally-accredited BTEC qualification and life skills training.

Relevant individuals enter into a "learning contract" with Merchants, which requires that the person commit at least 12 months to the company in return for an internationally-recognised BTEC contact centre certification and further skills and competency training. This offers them the proposition of a medium-to-long-term career and solid developmental growth.

Traditionally, organisations offering learnerships deducted the cost of the training and development from the learners' salaries for a specific amount of time until the course was paid off – putting the learner out of pocket from the outset.

While it worked on paper, this approach led to trained agents leaving for higher salaries, costing the organisation the time and money it takes to re-train another agent.

Where Merchants' programme differs is that the cost of the course is paid back to the learner in a lump sum on the successful completion of the course and the obligatory 12 months.

This shares the risk between both the learner and the organisation, and increases the chances that an agent will stay in a position longer as one

obligation of the contract is that if it is not seen through, half the training fees are payable back to Merchants by the agent.

In addition, Merchants has started tapping pools of resources that have previously not been considered for work in the BPO sector. This means going outside the usual profile of a contact centre agent, which requires a Matric qualification and relevant work experience

The objective is to grow the number of people who are employable into the sector (essentially those who have not had the opportunity to enter this line of work), which aims to build that holy grail of the BPO sector – sustainable careers for people and consistency for organisations.

“People are a business’s most important asset” is how the old saying goes. But how many businesses actually practice what they preach? And what are they doing to help their people create their own destinies?

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