

STA Travel Case Study

Background

“We book people of all ages but the mindset is very much that of a younger attitude towards their travelling experience” (Diana Molloy, Head of Training UK)

STA Travel has a network of around 40 branches throughout the UK with innumerable staff who strive to provide customers with a travel experience tailored to their needs. Although not catering exclusively to the younger traveller, they tend to specialise in making bookings for students and young adults.

As with all good companies, a major component of their success is in ensuring they employ the right people. For STA Travel this means employing individuals who understand the customer and their needs and also those who have a passion for travel and a drive to sell.

In addition to employing the right people, STA Travel has a comprehensive training process in place with a robust induction programme supported by ongoing development and specialist training for employees at different levels throughout the company.

The training has changed over the years and is extremely responsive to both new developments within the industry and the organisation’s evolving core beliefs. Recent changes to the training programme have helped towards the company experiencing a reduction in employee turnover by 20 percent in the last 12 months with increased sales and revenue also being evident.

It is often said that people are an organisation’s greatest asset. This philosophy seems to be at the heart of STA Travel with a strong emphasis on listening to feedback from their staff, re-assessing the direction the company is going in and adapting training programmes in line with this.

All of this is possible on account of the organisational culture within the company where the importance of training is understood, appreciated and embraced by employees at various levels throughout the company.

Development of training

“Our role is about preparing them for their career” (Anna Lofthouse, Induction Trainer)

The induction training offered by STA has evolved greatly over the years. Initially it consisted of little more than a basic introduction to the company accompanied by an outline of the systems used. There was a very theoretical emphasis which, although allowing new employees to learn how to, say, book a flight, did not develop any skills in building a rapport with customers or up-selling additional products.

The market has become increasingly competitive since then and so the training has become much more sophisticated to reflect this.

Until recently the standard induction training lasted up to a total of 3 months and consisted of a mix of training in the classroom and also the branch.

The format began with an initial week of training in a central location. This covered an introduction to the basics of geography and the systems used within the company. This would take the individual's skill level up to the point of being able to put together a simple return trip within Europe. An additional feature of the first week was that the various heads of department spoke to the new staff and explained what happened in their departments; this allowed inductees to appreciate what other people in the company were doing, understand their roles and see how this fitted into the overall organisation's structure.

Armed with this knowledge, the trainees would join their branch for 3 weeks, putting what they'd learned into practice in a real environment. This afforded individuals the opportunity to develop some of the 'softer' skills required in understanding how to deal with customers.

The second stage of the induction involved returning to classroom based learning for a second week. At this point the systems, booking procedures, geography examined and understanding of the business as a whole became more complex. Additional continents were considered too, for example, to fully understand STA's links with airlines and trips to North America. Once again, the new personnel would return to their branch for 3 weeks in order that this information might sink in and be further developed outside of a purely theoretical environment.

The final week of classroom based learning aimed to bring trainees up to speed with the full range of products offered by the company. By the end of it they should be able to fully understand how to route a round the world trip and complete all the related bookings, which this involves. Following another 3 weeks at the branch, the employees' formal induction would be concluded.

The beauty of this approach was in letting new recruits build up their knowledge gradually, allowing new components of the business to sink in through a prolonged mix of classroom based teaching and practical experience.

Key to any organisation's success, however, is in understanding what their employees need to be able to perform at their optimum level. An evaluation of branch managers' opinions of the induction process was therefore undertaken. This resulted in a number of changes being made.

Rationalisation of the induction programme

"Training gives us an opportunity to set up best practice and to try and implement where we want to go as a company ..." (Beth Owen, Training Supervisor)

In order that best practice be achieved throughout the organisation, a review of the induction process took place with a managers' evaluation of the programme playing a major part in its restructure.

It transpired that although the basis of the programme and content covered within it was very well thought of, business requirements would be better addressed through a rationalisation of the process. It was discovered, for example, that managers sometimes found their branch short handed when staff were taken back to the classroom. In addition it could have a detrimental effect on sales with a member of staff only capable (following the first week of training) of dealing with very simple customer bookings. It was therefore decided that, whilst the content of the induction process would remain largely the same, it would be condensed into an intensive 3 week programme.

In addition to having operational benefits for the branches, this approach had a number of financial benefits. The company has branches throughout the UK and inductions take place in a central location. It is therefore clearly far more economical to have all new recruits in the same place for 3 weeks than incurring the extra expense of individuals travelling to and from the training venue on 3 separate occasions.

The current incarnation of the induction process is therefore an intensive 3 week programme. This is complemented by a subsequent 7 week period in branch. The plan for this latter period is drawn up to allow the inductee to attain all the additional skills required to excel in their job. This programme is given to the branch managers who, in turn, take the new recruit through all the remaining points of the programme.

Feedback from managers on the new process is that trainees are now going into their branches much better prepared to deal with anything, which might be thrown at them. In addition, it has had the added benefit of empowering staff themselves. Whilst previously, new staff members may have felt a little redundant at only being able to conduct the most basic of processes, they now find themselves to be a much more valued member of the branch's team from day one.

Additional features of the programme

"I think in today's competitive market, there is a much greater need for a real understanding of sales techniques and questioning to find out more about the customer's needs" (Beth Owen, Training Supervisor)

In order that some practical training is covered in the induction a number of other features are covered. On the final day of week 2, the inductees spend a day with their branch, shadowing consultants and gaining a more informed appreciation of how the booking process works.

In addition, the 'softer' skills are also examined with increased intensity. For example, on the third week of training, a dedicated sales trainer speaks to them about sales techniques. This is an area, which is increasingly attracting attention and ensuring all staff have a good grounding in sales techniques is essential. In recent times there have been a number of casualties in the travel industry. XL Travel for example formally went into administration on the 12th September 2008 citing rise fuel costs as an important factor in their downfall. In order to combat such difficulties it is essential that companies look toward extending their product offer to their customers and that sales staff have the knowledge and techniques to do this.

Like the industry itself, STA's training is dynamic and ever changing. The training team are not reluctant to change their methods as the market and industry changes and it is this responsiveness that allows STA to grow as a business and maintain its position as one of the market leaders.

Ensuring consistency in approach

"When it comes to management, the expectation was that internal candidates sold well and had done well in the interview and therefore they could manage a team so we would appoint them and off they would go. However, now we are providing them with the tools to help them become a manager" (Catherine Wilson, HR Director UK)

Having a thorough induction programme ensures that all new recruits are qualified to do the job well. In addition to the training team however, the role of management is also key in ensuring that good

practice is built upon and continued. A number of initiatives aimed at management personnel have also recently been introduced.

An initial examination and appraisal of the management structure was undertaken. This identified that there were inconsistencies in the extent to which managers developed and managed their teams. Some, for example, may be focused on different goals than others.

A programme of management realignment was therefore undertaken. This sought to understand where STA were as a management team, what factors were driving managers and what issues were preventing goals from being achieved. By identifying these issues it allowed any difficulties to be worked through and ensure that the goals that everyone is working towards are the same.

This has proven especially useful for new managers who were perhaps lacking in experience. Formerly there was a general assumption that new managers who had performed well in their interview would automatically be able to step into the role with the minimum of fuss. In practice, however, this was not always the case so by undertaking the management realignment exercise it ensured that all involved were provided with the tools they needed to become effective managers.

One of the specific courses designed for management personnel therefore ensures that all those attending are fully versed in all the usual day to day management tasks. This includes such things as holding a meeting, setting objectives, getting the most out of people's performance, driving sales, time management and other skills which are beneficial to management staff.

In addition, a personal leadership programme has also been introduced. Initially aimed at senior management staff, this proved so popular that it was rolled out throughout the business including branch managers. It is a 3 day training programme which encourages people to take responsibility for their own actions. Taking into account such factors as leadership and communication skills, STA hope to empower their staff to realise that they have the ability to make a difference as an individual. Rather than perhaps escalating problems to their manager, this training puts the individual in control and makes them realise they can take ownership of a problem and deal with it themselves. Further to improving individuals' work skills, a number of those attending the course commented on how this had also helped them in their personal lives.

Future developments in training

"We're trying to structure things a lot more round business needs and individual needs. We identify what we need to do as a business and then provide people with the skills to do this but we are also asking people what they want and try to provide this rather than make assumptions about business and individual needs. (Catherine Wilson, HR Director UK)

Recent research undertaken by STA has allowed them to understand their customer better. They have taken this research and have developed their training offering to take this into account.

In addition, there is a real push to engage employees. One of the areas of engagement is to assess how people feel about training and development so that those in management can get a much better understanding of how people view training and development within the company.

Succession planning will also be developed. This will help to assess which employees might be going into which jobs in the future and ensuring they get the right training in order to prepare them for these roles.

Summary

“We’re keen to promote that people don’t just come to work for work’s sake and for the money but that they come because they want to work for us as a company.” (Catherine Wilson, HR Director UK)

In short, STA Travel has developed a network of training mechanisms, which ensure that all individuals in the company are working towards the same goal.

The induction process allows new recruits to gain a full appreciation of what’s expected from them. In turn, branch managers are fully briefed to take a consistent approach to supervising and developing their staff. The training provided also helps to transmit messages throughout the company when there are changes to company policy. Not only does the training benefit the employee both in their working life and sometimes even their personal life but it is of major benefit to the company itself. In the case of STA travel, staff retention has improved by 20 percent in the last 12 months.

The positive benefits of training are believed in across the board and, as summed up by STA’s HR Director:

“Not only does training get people up and running at the very beginning but it keeps people engaged, it gives people the ability to be flexible and adapt to the job. “It drives our business – it drives sales, it drives knowledge, it is one of our routes to success and that’s been shown in our increase in sales and revenue.”

Further information

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