

ACADEMIES OF LEARNING

Privatisation saw a downgrading in the amount and quality of staff training. Now train operators are once again seeing the value of investing in people, particularly in areas like customer service.

Peter Plisner reports

Training is important – but how many companies understand this? All too often new employees receive ‘on-the-job’ training and are then cast adrift to either sink or swim.

That wasn’t always the case in the rail industry. British Rail was for years held up as a shining example of how to manage lifelong training. Many senior figures working in today’s railways started out on BR’s famed management trainee scheme. People like Chris Green, chairman of Virgin Rail, who joined the scheme in 1965 and later went on to hold a variety of senior posts in the industry.

Looking back, Green says: ‘One thing that British Rail got right from the very beginning was management training. There was a hierarchy of training ranging from junior to middle management to a fully fledged senior management training college. It was unique and world-class.’

That changed in the aftermath of privatisation when training budgets were slashed. Safety training was maintained, of course, but in other areas, such as customer service, the need for planned training was often overlooked. However, as operators have begun to realise the importance of improving the overall ‘travel experience’, the customer-staff interface has become a crucial issue.

National Express Group (NEG), which runs eight rail franchises, realised early on that customer service was vital for business success. Three years ago one of its train operating companies, Midland Mainline (MML) opened a customer service academy in Derby. The idea came out of MML’s franchise extension in 1998 and a wish by the Strategic Rail Authority for a more customer-focused railway.

Jackie O’Brien runs the academy. She says: ‘There’s such a willingness to learn and some of the courses, like the one on disability awareness, we’ve never done before. People have done a little bit during skills training, but we now do a full day for everybody from the MD downwards.’

The idea has caught on, with another NEG-



The Internet Café at Central Trains’ training academy in Birmingham.

owned train operator, Central Trains, setting up its own training centre in Birmingham. Indeed the scheme is now an integral part of NEG’s bidding strategy for other rail franchises. This autumn a third academy is due to open at Stratford in east London to serve the One rail franchise. NEG chief executive Phil White says: ‘We believe that there is a direct correlation between employee morale and investing in employees and the quality of service we provide to our passengers.’

The investment in training has been welcomed by the Institute of Customer Service, an independent professional body that champions the cause of customer service professionalism. Spokesman Peter Osoria says: ‘This kind of training is very worthwhile. Some customers, for whatever reason, can be less than cooperative, and knowing how to deal with them is a useful skill.’

The main purpose of the customer service academies has been to create what NEG calls a ‘step change’ in investment in, and delivery of, training. The aims are to improve the quality of training for new starters and to provide a structured approach to refresher training. Previously training within the group’s railway companies was provided using a variety of different in-house and external trainers. It was also held in any number of different buildings including back offices at stations and depots – not many people’s idea of a quality ‘training centre’. Now the academies have brought everything under one roof.

Colin Jones, head of training and development at the Central Trains Academy, says: ‘One of the key lessons I have learned is that it doesn’t matter

how good the course is, if the environment isn’t conducive to learning it does affect the quality of the learning that takes place.’

Both the Derby and Birmingham academies run similar courses including training in operations, safety and retail. There are also a number of company-specific projects including the Midland Mainline ‘Win Win’ programme that covers issues like understanding human behaviour, including aggression and drugs and alcohol awareness. Central Trains runs a ‘Customer First’ programme providing refresher training and a forum for sharing best practice amongst existing staff. More prosaic issues are also covered. For example, station staff are trained on how to use the ‘Tribute’ ticketing and timetabling system; senior conductors receive training on ‘Avantix’ PDA systems. Even platform staff now have hand-held computers providing up-to-date information about services.

Beyond the classroom, there is an internet café where staff can search for personal development programmes, industry information, or simply surf the net. The academies also house the company human resources departments.

Last month Network Rail announced that it was spending £20m setting up a new training academy in Coventry. The site will welcome more than 4,000 managers and supervisors over the next two years. It’s an example of how the industry is once again taking training seriously. That has to be good news for both employees and the passengers they serve.

Peter Plisner is the BBC’s Midlands Transport Correspondent