

Cultivating the Next Generation

Everyone agrees that the key to delivering a successful service is to have a well motivated and well trained workforce. Despite this investment in training has come under intense pressure to cut back over a long period of time. APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence) has concerns at the long term problems being created for communities as a result of lack of training investment which leads on to skills shortages and recruitment difficulties for employers.

Running parallel to these concerns, the rising importance of environmental issues in the eyes of the public and the Government has brought an increased focus on how the public realm is maintained. Surveys and research carried out by APSE have indicated that many providers initially used a variety of methods to tackle difficulties such as revised workload planning, increased overtime working and seasonal agency working. Clearly these are not long term solutions.

It is apparent that the topic of training and workforce development for local authorities is a much wider issue and had direct and indirect consequences. Looking corporately and at the wider community it needs to be linked to factors such as local economic strategies, regeneration and capacity building. Taking a service delivery view, the increasing age profile developing within the industry could eventually impact on both sickness and productivity.

It is becoming essential to take steps to address these issues. With the number of school leavers falling it is important to get the message across in schools that a job working in the environment is a worthwhile career (for both girls and boys) to follow. Glasgow City Council for example have been proactive using apprentices to talk and answer school kids questions direct at road shows in schools and community centres.

Additionally, as the population ages, the industry cannot continue to take such a narrow focus in terms of recruitment. The industry needs to look at both gender equality and diversity issues. Despite many initiatives the number of women currently employed in construction is less than it was 10 years ago. Clearly employers will need to look job redesign. This could involve offering better job packages in terms of work-life balance or even targeted measures such as lone parent initiatives.

Overall though initiatives such as the above should form part of the wider strategic role of local authorities.

In searching for long term solutions, local authorities have introduced many innovative and ground breaking initiatives to overcome problems. These include

- Set percentages of turnover being ring-fenced for year on year investment in training

- Modular based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) in Grounds Maintenance, Street Cleansing, Waste Management etc.
- Investors in People (IIP) accreditation within and across services and authorities
- Specialised in-house schemes including Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) training
- Dedicated NVQ's in both technical skills (sports and amenity turf maintenance) and softer skills (customer care)
- Multi skilling initiatives
- Managerial competence initiatives to meet the changed environment
- Tailored training initiatives with direct Trade Union engagement in both planning and delivery

Multi skilling or the development of generic working methods has been used in many types of council. A good case study is the New Harrow Project in London. The New Harrow project developed because Harrow's residents were unhappy about the quality and appearance of their borough, and the 2002 CPA rating was 'Weak'. The council decided that the solution was to introduce area working, with multi-skilled staff having ownership of 'their patch'. Council restructuring helped to break down departmental silos, with a single contact centre liaising between customers and council staff. A pilot project proved highly popular with residents, businesses and staff.

Complete new teams were recruited with instead of having individual roles (park keeper, street sweeper or truck driver); each person works on a broad range of tasks. They now clear litter and fly tips; remove chewing gum from pavements, remove graffiti and fly posting; prune trees and shrubs; maintain flowerbeds and grass verges; steam cleaning street furniture and repairs to pavements. This multi-skilling makes work much more interesting as the team and residents can see a complete difference when they've finished in a street, morale is high. Teams have a very real sense of ownership of "our patch".

Harrow also now has new patterns of work with flexible shifts that cover from 6am to 10pm seven days a week where staff can liaise directly with residents outside normal working hours. Regular team meetings and development time are also built into the schedules with staff feedback being used for planning. A result of this was that teams keep in contact by radio and mobile phone. Investment in new plant and equipment, such as graffiti steam cleaners, cut and collect mowing machines and chewing gum scrubbing machines, were only ordered after the team members themselves tested different options. Additionally teams co-ordinate refuse collections with street cleaning. Environmental enforcement, and engagement with young people, are among the issues now being addressed on an area basis. Training and development of staff continues to enhance the scope of the area teams, with increased staff satisfaction.

Local authorities have a good track record in successful recruitment, training and retention of employees. This could all be put at risk if the wider skills issues are not resolved. The resources to combat the problem of skills shortages are out there already. Locked within the current workforce is the potential to upskill and multiskill where appropriate. They are also within society in the groups that are under represented in the industry. We all need to start adopting the practices of the best!

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