



Apprenticeships

Unilever

Enabling apprentices to deliver tangible business impact can transform an organisation, explains **Hazel Elderkin**, project manager – engineering development with global household goods giant Unilever



Key learning points

1. Use initiatives less skills-based and more solution-focused
2. Seek to recruit above average apprentices
3. Apprentices a key component of talent management strategy
4. A business can invest up to £125,000 per apprentice

To maintain its market position, Unilever has invested in a range of ‘off the shelf’ training and development opportunities for many years. While these solutions have enabled Unilever employees to secure and implement business-relevant knowledge of specific products and issues, the business welcomed a fresh

perspective to technical training and development in 2006.

At this time, in partnership with Festo Training & Consulting, we seized the opportunity to review the effectiveness of these ‘off the shelf’ solutions and question whether they were the most appropriate for the operational and people development issues the business needed to address.

An IDEAL approach to training

We were keen to learn how a fresh approach to training could deliver a positive, tangible difference to the business. By focusing on the Crumlin site in south Wales, the business assessed a new training model – IDEAL – to outline how we could secure these results.

Rather than offering managers a knowledge-based training programme, the IDEAL approach focused on giving employees the skill and understanding to identify problems and find the best and most effective solutions. It was not about increasing skills and knowledge levels; it was about reducing factors, such as downtime, and increasing productivity. By keeping these objectives at the forefront and by working through each stage of the IDEAL model the team at Crumlin was able to review how a focused approach to identifying training needs, alongside issues within the business, could offer significant ROI.

In April 2007, the Crumlin team presented their experiences at a meeting of our technical managers. The results were impressive. They included, for example, financial savings of over £26,000 per annum and improvements in site Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE) from 64 per cent to 76 per cent. The results also included improved skill and knowledge levels within the workforce. So, the work undertaken with Crumlin was notable. The IDEAL model really took the theory of training evaluation and put it into a business context. I could see immediately how the approach might apply to aspects of our existing apprenticeship programme because of its focus on implementation, offering apprentices a vital business context to their development.

Investing in apprentices

Apprentices are a key component of our talent management strategy and we recognised the need to ‘up our game’ to ensure our programme could continue to deliver exactly what the business

IDEAL provides a structured approach to projects, ensuring results are delivered and clients have the ability to repeat or multiply the success of projects without the need for ongoing consultancy intervention

I... Identify

Properly identify the needs of all stakeholders. If the needs and expectations of all parties are not properly evaluated, it's unlikely any solution will deliver.

D... Develop

Once the identification process is complete, the development stage can begin. The objective is to develop the core skills, knowledge, processes and tools the project requires in partnership with the client, rather than attempting to apply a preconceived textbook solution. This involvement ensures the solutions are customer-specific, based on reality and appropriately evaluated.

E... Engage

Once the development stage is completed, the full implementation can begin. It's critical here to engage stakeholders who will be affected by the project and who can therefore influence its ultimate success. Typically, this stage includes workshops and training as the core project team passes on their knowledge, skills and experience.

A... Apply

Many organisations stop after the ‘engage’ stage of the process, but the reality is, without this stage, the solution is likely to become unstable and will not deliver the expected results. Consider how the solutions and changes are applied and understood at a function level. By installing a feedback loop the project can become self-sustaining in the long term.

L... Learn

This stage demonstrates how the new skills and knowledge are being applied and measures the business impact. Apprentices complete specific projects – such as achieving energy savings, reducing production downtime and increasing productivity within the business – that are reviewed by all project stakeholders.

needs now and in the future. To this end, the business took steps to review and refresh its apprentice programme in 2004. We recruited to a centrally-led programme, rather than at site or factory level.

The apprenticeship resulting from this review is a four-year programme

offering apprentices ‘freedom within a framework’. The first year requires all apprentices to attend full-time courses at West Cheshire College (Capenhurst Technology Campus) with subsequent years combining ‘hands on’ learning in the workplace, interspersed with block release back at the college.

To better understand how the apprentice programme could meet the challenges of a changing market and business, the project team conducted a series of site visits looking at every production environment within the business

Apprentices are reviewed throughout their four-year learning journey. Not only are regular reviews undertaken every 12 weeks (as required by the Government), but they have a quarterly line manager review to assess their development and receive regular feedback from the college on their learning and technical capability. They also receive informal feedback from existing Unilever engineers at their host site as they develop and apply their skills to the workplace.

Feedback is also proactively sought from apprentices themselves. Not only does this help us to ensure they're happy and are enjoying the programme, but it's their opportunity to comment on their experience and how they think they are performing to date.

Identifying apprentice need

To ensure the IDEAL model offered the 'right' solution for our apprentices, the business took the opportunity to clarify and understand the role they were to play within the business now and in the future. Alongside this we assessed the needs of individual apprentices: what they need to know; the competency levels required; and what should be included in any future apprentice offering. We want our apprentices to be up and running quickly, which means that following their formal training they must be able to apply their learning in a

real business setting. However, when we take on a group of apprentices it can be difficult to predict exactly how the business will deploy them, so we needed a flexible solution that can cope with any eventuality.

Therefore, to better understand how the apprentice programme – and specifically a module based around IDEAL – could meet the challenges of a changing market and business, the project team conducted a series of site visits looking at every production environment within the business to understand the world the typical apprentice would live and operate in. Following these site visits, the project team developed the 'Improvement Project', a five-day Pneumatics & Mechatronics module based around IDEAL, blending the theory delivered in the academic apprentice programme with the practical skills, knowledge and behaviours required by the business. The module is undertaken in the final year of the formal apprentice programme and was delivered for the first time in September 2007.

We need to be sure our investment in these young people is a wise one and we have a high benchmark for success. One only needs to look at the calibre of current and recent apprentices to see the quality and impact of their work, as well as more intangible qualities such as their motivation and drive, the ownership

of their own development, their creativity and innovation.

Following graduation from the programme, apprentices take responsibility for finding a full-time role within the business as a position within Unilever isn't an automatic rite of passage. All candidates are required to undertake the formal application and interview process. Many are interviewed alongside external candidates.

As tough as this may seem on the individuals, it does help us assess the quality of our apprentices. At one site, for example, an apprentice scored higher than any other candidate. Line manager feedback has confirmed this calibre of apprentice candidates has not been seen within the business for a long time.

Extending the learning journey

The Improvement Project module ensures the learning journey is not restricted to the classroom. It enables individuals to continue their learning and development within the work environment, transferring their knowledge into tangible skills that have a real impact on the business.

Taking place over eight weeks following the academic programme, the project module encourages apprentices to use the IDEAL tool to extend their learning. They use it to report and

record the business issue they're working on, diagnose potential solutions, outline the action they took and measure what this means for the business in financial and non-financial terms.

Throughout the module, examples from the business are used to demonstrate what apprentices are likely to experience in their everyday work. For example, we find a typical problem that causes a headache for the apprentice and work with them to find a solution in the safe, controlled environment of the apprenticeship programme. This enables them to realise they can apply practical and manageable solutions while increasing their engagement and confidence in their own ability. It also means that when they graduate from the programme they can observe issues and be confident they have the correct solution to address them.

The module concludes with a formal presentation by the apprentice to outline what the project has meant to them and the organisation. It helps everyone – especially the apprentice – to understand exactly what they have accomplished and feel good about it.

Delivering a measurable ROI

The effectiveness of any training solution very much depends on how an employer or individual participant regards the intervention. That is, whether it's regarded as a cost or a business solution. In the recent downturn, for example, many organisations have wanted to reduce costs and therefore cut training spend. However, this isn't necessarily the right answer. If training and development of this nature can be used to solve issues that are costing money, it makes sense to keep investing in them.

ROI is a key factor in the apprentice programme, particularly because the business can invest up to £125,000 per individual during their four-year apprenticeship. Although this is a significant cost to the business, the results each apprentice can achieve – initially through the direct financial savings on their Improvement Project and later through their work on the shop floor – are much higher and represent a considerable ROI. The investment required is manageable; it's only necessary for apprentices to undertake the Improvement Project module once. The skills they learn and the confidence

they acquire can be applied to most issues, sites and situations within the organisation.

The future

Our successful approach to recruiting and developing apprentices is largely down to the way the business has worked together to ensure it meets the current and future needs of all sites.

Consistently checking to see how we can deliver positive results for the business has driven our apprentice programme forward. Our mindset now is focused on recruiting to meet the needs of manufacturing in five or 10 years' time; by partnering with experts and sites across the business, we can be confident that we're on the right track.

The success of the engineering apprentice programme to date has had a positive effect on other areas of the business. This year we have recruited an apprentice into logistics and we're already looking at other functions and specialisms within the business, such as research and development, to see where an apprentice programme could have a positive impact.

It's a credit to the programme and to our partners that our apprentices can quickly make a positive impact when they take on full-time roles. Before making significant changes to the programme, I think it's fair to say apprentices were regarded as the 'help' within the business rather than a proactive, valuable resource capable of getting involved and making a difference. This viewpoint has certainly changed and I, for one, see no reason why it should change back. ■

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Recruiting and placing apprentices

- Unilever seeks to recruit above average apprentices who are passionate about working with us and can meet the future needs of the business. We recruit high calibre apprentices who offer the complete package, including academic ability, a strong work ethic and a positive attitude.
- The majority of applicants for the apprentice programme are aged between 16-19 years old. The business recruits up to 10 apprentices per year, although the number can vary depending on factors such as business and succession planning.