Training & Employment Agency leads by example

Job Centres

The Business Benefits

The implementation of NVQ level 3 in Customer Service has resulted in a wide range of benefits to customers, organisation and staff:

Customer Service candidates played an active role in their Job Centre achieving Charter Mark

Day to day competence level of staff improved

Greater confidence and commitment to customer service

New methods of surveying customers have been introduced

Customer waiting time reduced from 15 to 8 minutes

Improvements to reception areas including child's play area and easier access to job display areas

Private interview rooms and screened off areas introduced resulting in 100% of customers feeling that there was more privacy

Service information more widely accessible and is available in Braille, audio cassette, and large print form for disabled customers. Information available in Chinese and Irish and a translation service is now also available.

The full story inside

Adrian Arbuthnot

"As a result of completing the NVQ Programme, staff have demonstrated greater confidence in their approach to their work and a greater commitment to providing an excellent service to their customers."

T & E A Job Centres

The Training & Employment Agency, which is part of the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, aims to assist economic development and help people find sustainable employment through training and employment services delivered on the basis of equal opportunities. To support this aim the Training & Employment Agency has a network of 32 Job Centres throughout Northern Ireland, linked by a central computer. This provides a fast and efficient method of recruiting workers of all ages and at all levels of education, ability and experience.

The main features of the Job Centres are:

Immediate display of vacancies throughout the network and at selected community outlets, coverage in local press and radio;

Distribution and collation of completed application forms;

Sifting of applications;

Administration and adjudication of entrance tests;

Administrative support for interviews, including provision of accommodation and support staff.

The Job Centres also provide a Careers Guidance Service providing an all age careers guidance and placement service. Individual interviews can be arranged to examine the range of education, training and employment opportunities available. The Careers and Occupational Information Unit is the sole provider of local careers information in Northern Ireland and its services and publications can be accessed through the local Job Centres.

The NVQ Programme

The NVQ programme was implemented in relation to the Citizen's Charter, which was published in 1992 aiming to raise the standard of public services up to and beyond the best that are available.

The Training & Employment Agency Job Centres worked in close partnership with the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment who carried out a training needs analysis between the current competencies of the Job Centres and the Charter Principles.

This analysis showed a lack of consistency in the standard of customer service delivery across the 32 regional offices and limited recognition for those staff providing good service to the public. To address these weaknesses and therefore achieve excellence in serving the community the Department needed to:

- Equip its staff with the skills needed to achieve business, team and individual objectives
- Set in place a standard for the delivery of customer service
- Recognise the excellent performance of staff.

The measures chosen to meet these requirements were the achievement of NVQ Customer Service level 3 and the achievement of Charter Mark.

The NVQ programme was launched as a pilot programme in May 1996 with 16 candidates and 7 assessors in 4 regional offices. A steering group was set up to oversee the programme and the evaluation was carried out against the objectives of the programme.

Staff were involved in additional project work within their own offices which provided them with the opportunity to increase their knowledge, learn new skills and recognise the importance of good customer service. This provided them with the evidence for their NVQ while also providing their centre with the evidence for Charter Mark.

Projects included:

- Chairing or membership of working groups with employers and job seekers
- Designing, issuing and receiving customer survey forms
- Analysing feedback and presenting reports on recommendations to management
- Implementing new practices and evaluating changes in response to customer needs.

In April 1997, the NVQ programme was extended beyond the pilot offices to include 20 Job Centres, 41 participants and 18 assessors. Two trainers now deliver the programme, one of whom acts as the internal verifier. Participants can join the programme at any stage on a rolling basis and where possible line managers are appointed and trained as assessors to ensure open access to assessment. On average the participants take a year to complete the programme.

The feedback from senior management has shown that the NVQ programme and Charter Mark fit well together, encouraging continuous improvement to customer service at individual and team level and resulting in 25 offices receiving Charter Mark awards.

"Customer Service Level 3 and Charter Mark compliment each other. The NVQ programme provides staff with a standard for good customer service enabling them to make a valuable contribution to the achievement of Charter Mark."

Employee Benefits

Excellent performance of staff has been recognised through the achievement of NVQ Customer Service level 3

Employees are more confident in their ability to implement positive changes in customer service

Customer Liaison Officers have been appointed in some offices

Employees felt that the customer service standards formalised the way in which they communicated both with customers and other staff in the Department

Employees now possess the skills needed to achieve business, team and individual objectives

Employees were provided with the opportunity to increase their knowledge, learn new skills and recognise the importance of good customer service.

The Future

The Training & Employment Agency felt that the NVQ programme encouraged them to take a fresh look at their customers and their needs, leading to the development of improved communication. Projects were set up in response to the NVQ programme and Charter Mark and these are continuing, resulting in continuous improvement in customer service. The programme, including assessor training, is now fully delivered in-house resulting in a cost-effective programme, which offers value for money in terms of individuals, teams and the organisation. It is therefore the Training & Employment Agency's intention to continue with the programme and the Department is committed to having its offices re-assessed for Charter Mark using the NVQ standards as its basis.

For further information on NVQ implementation and general NVQ information please contact:

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