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Investing in People to develop the Ideal Culture

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Abstract

While technical skills and professional qualifications will continue to play an important role in the identification and selection of people to join our organisations, the development of life-long learning skills will be the corner-stone of an organisation's ongoing success and capacity to develop and adapt in a constantly shifting market place. Change is the only constant is the catch phrase of the moment. In a climate of ever-accelerating, and often overwhelming change, the ability of individuals to develop suites of skills and knowledge that promote flexibility, innovation and creativity will be a key determinant of an organisation's future success or failure. However, these sets of skills, knowledge and attitudes are often not represented in position descriptions or profiles of attitudes.

Investing in People to Develop the *Ideal Culture*

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Finding and appointing staff with the appropriate attributes is only part of the challenge. Retaining and developing existing staff to maximise human capital investment is an ongoing business task to ensure an organisation has the right people for jobs from within the organisation.

Can organisations make the necessary cultural shift to become a *learning organisation*? They can, but not without investment to develop the infrastructures and systems to lead and develop their people to step outside their ever shrinking comfort zones. It is also an investment that few organisations can afford not to make. The ability to acquire, interpret and synthesise information and knowledge will become a key differential in an increasingly competitive market place.

The University of Wollongong Library – A Case Study

At the University of Wollongong Library we believe the responsibility for ongoing skills acquisition and learning is three-fold in that the organisation, team coordinators (managers) and the individual staff member all have a role to play:

1. The organisation's responsibilities are to: provide resources to assist the learning process; identify training needs and skills gaps; provide, advertise and evaluate training and development opportunities; design and deliver training or fund the provision of external training and development.

2. The Team Coordinator's responsibilities are to: encourage staff to develop a career plan; conduct Development Reviews; conduct pre and post training/development discussions; ensure staff receive effective training; and to inform staff of relevant training and development opportunities.

3. The staff members responsibilities are to: identify training and development needs and opportunities to help them meet their goals; prepare for their Development Review; complete required course application and evaluation documents illustrating relationships between their needs and the Library's key goals; and to apply and/or demonstrate the new skills, knowledge or attitudes back in the workplace.

Training and development has been valued and incorporated into our planning framework for over a decade. As our knowledge and application of best practice in this area matures, so too, do our people systems. Ongoing refinement of human resource management and development strategies has resulted in a stronger alignment between achieving strategic initiatives and business results and the fulfilment of staff's career and developmental needs. A review of the Library's values, coupled with the outcomes of an Executive Committee's teambuilding exercise, inspired a new internal benchmark for excellence.

The *Ideal Culture*

In 1998, the *Ideal Culture* was born. The *Ideal Culture*, an aspirational state, provides a framework for agreed communication, interaction strategies and actions and the development of knowledge and attitudes needed for the continuing success of the Library. The *Ideal Culture* is underpinned by our values framework, it articulates agreed behaviours and is intended to demonstrate commitment to developing staff who take pride in planning, anticipating change and working towards achieving goals, who are encouraged to respond creatively to challenges and to become life-long learners.

Since 1996, staff skills and wellbeing have been formally identified as Critical Success Factors, however, the concept of the *Ideal Culture* represented a turning point for several reasons:

- While recognising that the acquisition of technical skills is still valued and important, it is the development of skills and attitudes to manage change on both a personal and professional level that will provide our staff with the leverage to be competitive in a rapidly changing environment
- Agreement was reached, Library-wide, on the behaviours which are requisite to achieving this ideal state, and that we all share responsibility in reaching our goals. For example, some of the identified behaviours include: *We advocate continued learning through access to information, knowledge and skills; encourage personal and professional growth to develop ourselves and others as independent life-long learners.*
- To position the Library advantageously in an environment of increased competitiveness, we recognised the need to improve our knowledge economies of

scale. Our values include: *Open Communication, Knowledge and Learning, Initiatives* and *Partnerships*, all supported by agreed behaviours.

Full realisation of the *Ideal Culture* requires constant attention to the underlying systems and processes. Access to staff training and development has long been supported and is embedded in the Library's culture. Through consistent evaluation, the process has improved and matured. However, the development of methods of determining organisational outcomes, directly linked to staff training and development, has been more challenging.

In a services-oriented market, financial return on investment is difficult to estimate. It was necessary to identify alternate evaluation strategies. The behaviours articulated in the *Ideal Culture* have been incorporated in the annual Development Review process; staff applying for training and development are asked how that training and development opportunity contributes to the Library's critical success factors or goals; how they intend to demonstrate their new skills, knowledge or attitudes once back in the workplace; and after three months, the staff member and their team coordinator are asked if and how the new skills, knowledge or attitudes have been demonstrated.

Although the evaluation is largely based on perceptions, the ability to demonstrate new learning is indicative that a return on the training and development investment has been achieved. Other indicators include: client and stakeholder satisfaction levels, continuous improvement initiatives, improved accuracy, turnaround times and overall performance.

Emphasis on integrated human resource processes, staff development which are linked to individual and organisational outcomes and the incorporation of agreed values have all contributed to an empowered and motivated staff, who are relatively comfortable with change and who contribute to innovation and continuous improvement.

The Investors in People Journey

To test the rigour of staff investment strategies, external assessment was sought. Participation in the Australian Business Excellence Awards (Achievement in Business Excellence, 1996 and Finalist, Australian Business Excellence Awards, 1998) and industry benchmarking had already provided us with constructive feedback highlighting our strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Following a successful internal audit in 1999, application was made for evaluation against the Investors in People (IiP) standard. Accreditation as an IiP organisation would:

- provide external verification that the Library's investment in the management and development of people is in line with best practice organisations
- recognise that training and development is an integral component of the Library's business strategy
- help identify areas for improvement

- provide an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of staff to the overall performance of the Library.

The Investors in People (IiP) standard is made up of four principles and 23 indicators. The principles:

- An Investor in People makes a commitment from the top to develop all employees to achieve its business objectives
- An Investor in People regularly reviews the needs and plans the training and development of all employees
- An Investor in People takes action to train and develop individuals on recruitment and through their employment
- An Investor in People evaluates the investment in training and development to assess achievement and improve effectiveness

External evaluation against this best practice standard was an opportunity to test the application and integration of our multi-faceted human resource management strategies and the success of individual and organisational change management strategies. It was also an opportunity to receive objective feedback on internal benchmarks of excellence articulated in the *Ideal Culture* and the effectiveness of our planning framework. In essence, we could determine if we were receiving a return on our investment in people management and development strategies.

The evaluation process required the submission of a report detailing how the Library addressed each of the four principles and 23 indicators, a portfolio of evidence, consisting of documents that supported statements in the submission, for example: staff training and development policies and plans, strategic plans, trend data and performance measures. A team of two assessors conducted a desk-top evaluation of the submission, and also a two day site visit.

Most staff were involved in the site visit process, either in focus groups or in individual interviews with the assessors. The staff involved, selected by the assessors from a staff list, were representative of all levels and teams and included both new and experienced staff.

In February this year, the Library was one of six organisations in Australia to be awarded the Investors in People Standard. Receiving recognition against an international best practice standard was a significant affirmation that the investment made in developing a culture that fosters continuous learning and readiness for change had been realised. The assessment team wrote: *it is hoped that this benchmark organisation can provide all other potential Investors in People with a higher and higher standard to measure themselves against.*

Conclusion

Ultimately, our future success depends on our people: their adaptability and willingness to change; the success of their collaborative and partnering initiatives; their capacity to acquire, synthesise and apply a multiplicity of new skills and knowledge; and their trust in the vision, integrity and competence of their leaders.

That future success can only be secured when an organisation makes the commitment to resource and develop the systems, structures and cultures which facilitate learning and growth. By articulating and demonstrating overall commitment to the individuals and teams within the organisation, the *Ideal Culture* has proven to be a powerful catalyst for our organisation. The concept of the *Ideal Culture* has been in place for two years now, however, it has experienced several transformations. As the business environment changes, our knowledge of best practice and *best fit* for our organisation will evolve, which in turn will inform our management practices and ensure that we have the skills leverage essential for sustaining excellence.

Sources

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Investors in People – Indicator Framework

1.1	The commitment from top management to train and develop employees is communicated effectively throughout the organisation
1.2	Employees at all levels are aware of the broad aims or vision of the organisation
1.3	The organisation has considered what employees at all levels will contribute to the success of the organisation and has communicated this effectively to them
1.4	Where representative structures exist, communication takes place between management and representatives on the vision of where the organisation is going and the contribution that employees (and their representatives) will make to its success
2.1	A written but flexible plan sets out the organisation's goals and targets
2.2	A written plan identifies the organisation's training and development needs, and specifies what actions will be taken to meet these needs
2.3	Training and development needs are regularly reviewed against goals and targets at the organisation, team and individual level
2.4	A written plan identifies the resources that will be used to meet the training and development needs
2.5	Responsibility for training and development employees is clearly identified and understood throughout the organisation, starting at the top
2.6	Objectives are set for training and development actions at the organisation, team and individual level
2.7	Where appropriate, training and development objectives are linked to external standards
3.1	All new employees are effectively introduced to the organisation and all employees new to a job are given the training and development they need to that job
3.2	Managers are effective in carrying out their responsibilities for training and developing employees
3.3	Managers are actively involved in supporting employees to meet their training and development needs
3.4	All employees are made aware of the training and development opportunities open to them
3.5	All employees are encouraged to help identify and meet their job-related training and development needs
3.6	Action takes place to meet the training and development needs of individuals, teams and the organisation
4.1	The organisation evaluates the impact of training and development actions on knowledge, skills and attitude
4.2	The organisation evaluates the impact of training and development actions on performance
4.3	The organisation evaluates the contributions of training and development to the achievement of its goals and targets
4.4	Top managers understand the broad costs and benefits of training and developing employees
4.5	Action takes place to implement improvements to training and development identified as a result of evaluation
4.6	Top management's continuing commitment to training and developing its employees is demonstrated to all employees