

Case Study Pro-forma

Name: British Bakeries
Size: 650 employees
Sector: Bread bakers and morning goods
Location: East Midlands

The organisation

British Bakeries Ltd is one of the UK's largest bread bakers, producing over 450 different types of bread, their best known products being Hovis, Mothers Pride and Nimble. Previously owned by Hovis McDougall, they were taken over in April 2007 by Premier Foods Group, a large food producer with an annual turnover of over £2.7 billion, employing almost 20,000 workers at over 60 sites across the UK. The Nottingham site has 650 employees. Around 70 per cent of employees are classified as production/factory based and 30 per cent as office based. Unions recognised include the T&GWU, USDAW, URTU, UNITE and the BFAWU (Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union), the latter having the greatest density and influence within the workplace.

The history of workplace dialogue

Much of the food production industry has been stigmatised as having confrontational employment relations and this was historically the case at British Bakeries. However, from the mid-to-late 1990s British Bakeries' management took the opportunity to develop closer relations through local partnership approaches. A partnership agreement was signed in 2001 and workplace dialogue and relations between management and the unions improved, resulting in a further commitment to dialogue over training issues.

The unions' independence from management meant that they were ideally placed to administer tests/quizzes to employees in the canteen at lunch breaks to identify their training needs and level of numeracy and literacy. Management was supportive of the union in administering these tests but also understood that the key to getting employees to participate was by making them completed devoid of management influence. As a result take-up was high and around three quarters of employees participated. Management was also keen to identify and improve computer skills as they predicted that the industry would require investment in computer aided technologies and systems in the near future.

Set against a backdrop of disputes and historic mistrust, dialogue developed at a cautious pace. However, in March 2004 the improved relationship bore fruit as a state of the art workplace learning centre was developed. Management provided a large room, security cameras, door locks with key

card access, electricity, cabling, and internet access; the union gave expertise through an external project worker, provided the computers and obtained financial resources from the Union Learning Fund (ULF).

The learning centre was viewed as testimony to the benefits that could be generated through improved relations and this solidified the commitment to workplace dialogue over training.

How do we discuss training and skills?

Unions are permitted to raise any issues or reasonable requests around training and skills as they emerge. A clear distinction is made between dialogue over training and dialogue over terms and conditions of employment.

Issues around terms and conditions, though not training, are discussed at management-union meetings. In addition to this, a 'partnership meeting' is held every six weeks where issues discussed include wider product market and financial issues, how to spend the 'partnership fund' (generated from profit from the staff shop), and issues relating to the learning centre and skills and training. Information from these meetings is fed back to the workforce via charts and posters and the electronic notice board.

ULRs from all the different unions are viewed, by management and unions alike, as essential in promoting learning throughout the workforce, as well as relaying training concerns from employees to management. A ULR meeting is held every six weeks which management attend, this is then fed back into the 'partnership meetings'. The informal manner in which employees can approach a ULR, a colleague who they recognise and trust, and how this information/enquiry can enter formal structures anonymously, is seen as essential to its success. Apart from occasional union meetings, there are no other formal means by which employees raise concerns or engage in dialogue in respect of training. It is how these informal discussions are integrated into formal structures at higher levels that is partially responsible for the success of the workplace dialogue over training in this instance.

Further support for the training agenda and dialogue over training is provided by a full time 'roaming' BFAWU project worker funded exclusively by the ULF. Operating at regional level she attends network meetings with various institutions, including the TUCs unionlearn, to identify potential funds and new initiatives that could be implemented at sites where the BFAWU are recognised. She identifies and vets training providers and liaises with local colleges. She feeds this information back, in an impartial manner, at the 'partnership meeting'.

How we benefited from dialogue on training and skills

- Over 125 employees have received training and acquired a national certificate (level 1 or level 2), through a 'Skills for Life' programme. This has been viewed as beneficial to employees, improving employability and giving them a second chance to gain skills and qualifications. It has benefited the company in terms of both work competencies, such as IT

skills and basic food hygiene, and in changing employee behaviour. As a manager illustrates:

“There was one lad who wasn’t up to the national test standards so we gave him some training. He’s sitting on a few panels and focus groups and is really engaged now. Before that you couldn’t get him on anything ... it gave him the confidence to get involved.”

- The ECDL (European Computer Driving License) is also very popular. One employee described how many people were “literally scared of computers” before attending. These courses were of personal benefit to employees, but also satisfied operational objectives as new computer aided technologies were being planned for the coming year. A new ‘IVYSoft’ software package had also been purchased to allow IT courses to be undertaken at home as well as in the workplace.
- The food production industry has always been affected by migration. Recent EU enlargement incorporating the new A8 countries from Central and Eastern Europe in May 2004 has resulted in new skills needs being identified. The learning centre offers ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses, which had a high take up. For example, one Polish woman who spoke “next to no English” when she started the ESOL course has progressed so well she now holds the post of section leader. Those undertaking courses benefited through the language skills they acquired. Moreover, management benefited as these workers better understood what they were being told by line managers, better understood health and safety notices and communication and thus relations with British speaking workers improved.

Key challenges and top tips

An early challenge was to get employees themselves to engage in dialogue over their own training needs, which in the past had been hidden due to fears these would reflect badly upon them. This was overcome through informal ULR structures, union-run tests and overall management commitment. Staff are granted 100 per cent paid time off for training in the learning centre. The learning centre environment allows employees to be open about their needs and thus focus on upskilling.

Operational pressures on line managers also initially acted as a barrier to workers leaving the factory to undertake training. This was a particular problem as external tutors from local colleges would administer the courses and would be paid irrespective of non-attendance. This was rectified by senior management communicating the importance of attendance to line managers and union officials. ULRs also personally deliver reminders to line managers prior to course dates.