

CASE STUDY: GRADUATE MANAGEMENT FLEXI-PLACEMENT: ACHIEVING STAFF ENGAGEMENT AT UNITED UTILITIES

The NHS North West HR Graduate Training Scheme gives its trainees the opportunity to spend two months working on flexi-placements in organisations that are external to the NHS. Such placements are a great opportunity for trainees to gain experience and share good practice. This develops their skills and confidence, whilst also benefiting the NHS through the knowledge they gain. This case study forms part of a series of three, all of which are based upon placements undertaken by graduate trainees in August and September 2013.

This case study is specifically based upon the flexi-placement that was undertaken at United Utilities, where a staff engagement project was designed to learn about the approach adopted there, and to help develop a strategy to improve engagement.

There were two main parts to the employee engagement project:

1. The pulse surveys and barometer sessions
2. The engagement and communication strategy

The pulse surveys and barometer sessions focused on taking a 'temperature check' of engagement levels within the organisation at a point that was halfway between the previous and the upcoming annual surveys. The engagement and communication strategy work involved examining current communication channels and researching ways in which these could be utilised more effectively in order to boost engagement.

Key Outcomes

As the project has just been launched, and the placement was only of short duration, it is difficult to demonstrate improved staff engagement. The communications aspect is still in the planning phase and any improvement in the organisation's engagement score as a result of the action plans won't be evident until the completion of the staff survey, which should be around March/April time. However even within a limited time-frame of two months the following outcomes can be evidenced:

- The engagement and communication strategy created will be taken forward to create an online community for innovation, collaboration and idea sharing.
- Staff feedback and service improvement suggestions are being incorporated into executive action plans.
- Plans have been put in place for the promotion of different business areas to improve understanding across the organisation and facilitate cross-departmental working

Background

United Utilities Group PLC was founded in 1995 as a result of the merger of North West Water and the North West Electricity Board (NORWEB). The group manages the regulated water and waste water network in North West England.



Some facts about United Utilities:

- the UK's largest listed water company
- covers Cumbria, Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside
- caters for a population of nearly seven million.
- 9,000 employees
- HQ at Lingley Mere in Warrington

Key Aims

- Learn about and get involved in the approach to employee engagement at United Utilities
- Research best practice for utilising communication channels to boost engagement and create a strategy around this
- Achieve the research, project leadership and organisational development (OD) graduate scheme competencies.
- Identify areas of key learning in engagement that are relevant, transferable and valuable to the NHS.



Key Stages of Placement

Mid-March
2013

• **Initial contact with United Utilities** - contact details were provided for United Utilities by the strategic HR manager at North West Ambulance Service, who also helps coordinate the North West Graduate Management Training Scheme. This enabled the trainee graduate to contact the company to explain about the scheme, date and duration of placement, and to outline what type of experience she required from a placement; such as being able to own the project and complete it within two months.

End-March
2013

• **Deciding placement focus** - telephone call and in-depth discussion with the head of communications from United Utilities. More detail was discovered about the HR department, its constituent teams and any upcoming projects that might be of interest for the placement. Engagement was chosen as the main area of interest for the placement

Start - April
2013

• **Meeting at United Utilities** - a meeting was arranged with the head of communications to discuss potential engagement projects for the placement. Agreement was reached on the two aspects of the engagement work, and the competencies to work towards. Toured United Utilities offices and met the team.

April 2013

• **Flexi placement proposal submission** - after confirming final details with United Utilities, the flexi placement proposal was submitted to NHS North West.

Mid -May 2013

• **Flexi placement proposal presentation** - delivered presentation on placement proposal to NHS North West and executive panel. Approval received for the placement.

5th Aug - 27th
Sept 2013

• **Flexi placement undertaken**

End - Oct
2013

• **Flexi placement outcomes presentation** - delivered presentation on the project undertaken, key learning and outcomes to NHS North West and executive panel.

Key Stages of Project

• **Research began on communication/engagement strategies for hard-to-reach staff groups.** This involved researching strategies and case studies for best practice in this area. Time was also spent in the United Utilities contact centres talking to staff to gauge success/utilisation of current communication channels.

• **Question sets finalised for pulse survey and barometer sessions** via conference calls with Towers Watson. It was ensured that questions focused on areas of concern/interest from previous annual staff survey results.

• **Random samples selected** from across the organisation's business areas to take part in barometer session. Communications were sent out to managers to remind them of upcoming pulse surveys and barometer sessions and to ask for their support in accommodating staff in attending sessions/completing surveys.

• **Invitations sent to barometer sessions and pulse surveys dispatched to sites across the region.** These included a brief overview of the purpose of the surveys/sessions to manage staff expectations.

• **Pulse surveys circulated and barometer sessions initiated** – with results written up after each session

• **Report written on communication/engagement strategy research** – this included recommendations for the strategy i.e. Yammer-SharePoint integration, and results from the pulse surveys were used to write a report and action plan for each business area.

How it Works

Pulse surveys and barometer sessions

The pulse survey is a condensed version of the annual staff survey. The questions it contains are aligned with the organisation's engagement priorities that are reviewed each year in line with annual survey results, but they are fewer in number and there are no free text/comment boxes. The pulse survey is also distributed to fewer employees – a random sample is taken from each department and provided with the survey. The survey questions are aligned to the organisation's three core values: innovation, integrity and customer focus, and the survey is compiled and processed for United Utilities by Towers Watson. The aim of the pulse survey is to take a halfway 'temperature check' to ensure that the organisation is on-target for achieving expected engagement scores in the upcoming annual staff survey. The project work undertaken during the placement involved selecting a sample of staff to receive the survey, liaising with Towers Watson to finalise the question set, communicating and promoting the survey, and co-ordinating its distribution across the organisation. This is something which is normally done internally every year.

The barometer sessions are focus groups conducted in parallel with the pulse survey. They provide qualitative data in place of the free text option that is omitted from the pulse. In each business area a small, randomly-selected group of staff is invited to attend a barometer session specifically for their department. The session is structured around a set of seventeen questions, which are again aligned to engagement priorities and organisational values. The aim is to gain feedback from a representative sample for each business area – including things that the area does well, things that could be done better and ideas for innovation and service improvement. Over the course of the placement the barometer work involved communication and promotion of the barometers, selection of the sample groups and organisation of the sessions, facilitating the sessions and provoking discussion, feeding back barometer results and suggestions for incorporation into executive action plans.

The benefits of the barometer sessions are that they:

- provide verbatim qualitative feedback which supports the quantitative results from the pulse survey and create a richer picture of engagement levels
- create a comfortable environment for honest feedback and ideas sharing
- allow ideas and innovations envisioned by staff on the ground to be identified and acted upon

Engagement and communication strategy

The brief for this aspect of the engagement project was to examine the current communication channels used by United Utilities to engage hard-to-reach staff groups (such as call centre operatives) and research best practice in utilising these channels and in engaging similar staff groups. Then following this up with a strategy, identifying ways in which current channels could be used more effectively to boost engagement.

During the placement the work focused mainly on the SharePoint and Yammer communication channels. The usage of SharePoint up until this point had been as a central online document repository. United Utilities was using Yammer in parallel with this as a social media platform within the workplace. This is an enterprise social network service used for private communication within organisations. Access to a Yammer network is determined by a user's internet domain so that only individuals with appropriate email addresses may join their respective networks.

There had been some interest and participation in the two, but the organisation felt that it was not getting the most out of either of these tools. The research undertaken during the placement uncovered a development in how these two software packages could be used. Microsoft's recent purchase of Yammer meant that integration of the two platforms had become a possibility and indeed had already proven a great success in many organisations. Integration of SharePoint and Yammer would amalgamate two channels into a single central information hub, and more importantly, it would transform a simple document repository into a social collaborative environment. This would enable people, no matter what their location, to share ideas whilst pooling innovation and resources in a single online community. The research evidence was collated and presented along with the proposal for integration of the two platforms. Key contacts in IT were brought in to discuss the technical side of the work and plans are now in place to take the initiative forward.

The benefits of the Yammer-SharePoint integration strategy are:

- fosters innovation and facilitates a more spontaneous and social approach to idea sharing
- promotes understanding of work of other departments prevents 'silo working' and duplication
- facilitates collaboration, cross-department working and sharing of best practice

Resources

The project work was undertaken as part of the NHS North West HR Graduate Management Training Scheme and was therefore funded as part of the programme. The placement did not incur further costs for United Utilities.

Challenges

- Hard-to-reach staff groups are difficult to engage - research had to be directed specifically to find the best communication practices for these groups. Case studies of similar work environments were examined.
- Negative and challenging feedback offered in barometer sessions - it was important to record this accurately to gain an honest picture of staff opinions, whilst also keeping focus group discussions constructive.
- Working alongside sometimes reluctant communications business partners - this was overcome by encouraging them to take ownership of the barometers for their business areas and to recognise the value of the exercise for staff engagement.

Key Learning

- The importance of getting out amongst the workforce and talking to people face-to-face. The people with the ideas are out there amongst the workforce, and if we foster the kind of culture that encourages people to share these ideas and then follow this up with a mechanism for acting upon them, we can add value to the organisation whilst giving individuals recognition and thus boosting engagement.
- The close relationship between good communication and engagement levels. Recognising the importance of the communication function is crucial - it helps us to keep staff in the loop rather than allowing the rumour-mill to do its work. This is particularly important in the management of change. Making the communication process a two-way conversation is also important in getting employee buy-in for new initiatives, as they are more likely to feel a level of ownership of the change.
- Finding ways to make idea-sharing and cross-departmental working easier encourages effective collaboration and best practice sharing, whilst reducing the risk of duplication and silo working.

Sustainability

- Following on from the pulse and barometers, engagement action plans particular to each business area are being implemented and the associated changes embedded. Engagement champions working in each business area act as the 'eyes and ears on the ground', relaying feedback from colleagues to senior management and monitoring the progress of the action plans on a day-to-day basis.
- The online communication channels are used frequently for a number of reasons. SharePoint is used on a day to day basis, allowing teams to access standard documents, notices and news items, team briefing documents for

use by managers, staff recognition articles and so forth. Yammer is used for project group collaboration, social discussion for internal clubs and societies, sharing health and wellbeing information, troubleshooting and asking advice on systems and processes.

Next Steps

- Data gathered from the pulse and barometers will be presented to executives, with key engagement findings highlighted and compared with previous results.
- Engagement action plans will be drawn up specifically for each business area and led by senior management within each area, with support and assistance from engagement champions.
- Outcomes and action plans from barometers and pulse to be communicated to staff, to emphasise the 'you said, we did' link.
- Further meetings to be held with I.T. and other key stakeholders to drive forward the Yammer-SharePoint integration strategy.
- Promotion and communication of upcoming Yammer-SharePoint integration to be carried out by internal communications department.

Further Links

Key articles used to support Yammer-SharePoint integration strategy:

- simply-communicate.com/case-studies/company-profile/nationwide-insurance-hits-%E2%80%98spot%E2%80%99-enterprise-collaboration-platform
- practicalcollaboration.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/social-collaboration-with-yammer-and.html

For more information contact:

Rebecca Bailey
Deputy HR Manager/HR Graduate Management Trainee
07952 257 574
rebecca.bailey3@nhs.net

