

Paving the way to success with effective training

HospitalityGEM managing director Steven Pike explains how to develop a managed learning programme that will enhance the experience of guests

We know from guest feedback one of the key ingredients leading to a positive experience is the confidence and competence of the staff serving them. Effective training with the necessary skills and knowledge can empower team members to offer guests a fantastic experience and engage with them on a personal level, as well as delivering brand standards consistently. Guests want those serving them to give the impression they are both good at their role and they enjoy it. Their movements, actions and communications need to be effortless, rather than looking like they are trying too hard. When it comes to the training required to achieve this, it should begin with making sure staff understand your standards and processes so the experience “flows” and that, as a result, the team member is able to interact with guests in a more individual way.

Operators need to have a clear programme in place to ensure training covers all the necessary skills and processes, that it engages learners, and it has a good balance between theory and practice. Role-plays can give staff the opportunity to practise what they have learnt so they can build their confidence at an early stage.

Structured training in hospitality tends to be quite limited, covering just the essentials such as compliance, and then everything else is done “on the job” with staff members learning as they go along and even having to “self-teach” some aspects. In my view, there is a lack of investment in development pathways and actually trying to retain people in the business. This doesn’t help to improve the general view of hospitality as a transitory job choice rather than a dedicated career path. There are some operators doing a great job here though – Wagamama particularly sticks out for me: it’s doing very well at creating aspirational pathways and then integrating these with its culture, giving people not just something to work towards but a reason to do so.

When an operator is building a new training programme or even enhancing an existing one, it’s worth reflecting on the very high staff turnover figures that are common to many hospitality businesses, then considering the competitive advantage that could be gained from being able to hang on to the best people for longer. This changes the perspective from just thinking about ticking the boxes on compliance training to one more focused on development pathways and the things that make people sticky to an organisation.

Once that perspective is established, training managers should define a handful of different pathways based on key job types (front-of-house and back-of-house are the two main ones) and then map out some key milestones along the way that people can identify with in terms of their own career development. They should then explore what training activities may help people to acquire the skills necessary to progress to each milestone, and the format that may best suit those activities. However, when doing this, make sure that what you do is aligned with your company culture and values, as this is what will really make you stand out and feel valued by the employee. There are various ways to achieve this but the chances are that you may benefit from the development of training materials that are bespoke to your business (perhaps with the exception of compliance training where it is usually safer and more cost-effective to buy off-the-shelf).

Balancing act

In terms of training styles, often the best approach is a blended combination; e-learning is good for setting guidelines, offering games to help staff learn and then testing retention, while “on the job” or group sessions are great for practising scenarios in a real-world situation. It’s not that one’s better than the other; each brings something different to the learning environment and it’s about getting the right balance.

Operators need to think about accountability for training too. It’s often the case people only do training if they’re told they have to, which suggests they don’t see a close connection with their own personal goals. There’s scope for getting team members, and particularly managers, to take greater ownership for their own career development. But the format of the training needs to be both engaging and relevant for this to happen.

Whether you choose to outsource your training or deliver it in-house depends to a large extent on your internal capability. There will always be a market for outsourcing certain training, particularly when it comes to some of the essentials such as food hygiene or health and safety, as you benefit from the supplier’s economies of scale and regular updates. But where you can miss out, unless you have a very close relationship with the provider, is in getting across the cultural differences that make your business what it is and which get it noticed among the competition. Some of this may come from the passion of people who work for you. However, some operators are complementing this with branded and customised e-learning materials designed to reinforce that culture and form part of a clearer career structure that is managed in a way that reinforces brand loyalty among staff.

It is now possible to get training materials you can update at any time without any specialist skills – getting more value from any upfront cost. We are seeing an increase in the use of user-friendly tools such as Articulate Storyline, which can be used for rapid e-learning development in-house or in conjunction with a specialist. Furthermore, through using a highly configurable learning management system such as GEMacademy, companies have more freedom regarding where they source learning from (whether electronic or instructor-led), how it is blended into unique programmes, and how performance can be tracked across a multi-site estate.

I think a best-in-class training provision is one that views training as a long-term process, where career pathways are properly mapped out in the context of the guest experience journey, where they are integrated with the company’s culture, and where progression along the pathways is effectively managed. Materials need to be engaging and interesting, whether they’re online or face-to-face so team members can enjoy learning but also recall and apply what they have learnt.

When operators can genuinely say they have achieved the above, the result can be clearly seen in the feedback we get from guests on their experience. In summary, here are five top tips:

- 1 Invest time to develop clear training pathways so you’re looking further than just compliance
- 2 Content is king – get the best quality content and you’ll engage your learners
- 3 Integrate what you do and how you present training into the context of your culture and identity
- 4 Use a system to manage delivery and tracking of training
- 5 Give managers ownership to take responsibility for the completion and application of training on-site ■



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HospitalityGEM is the UK’s leading expert in Guest Experience Management (GEM). The company provides hospitality operators with tools for intelligence gathering, guest engagement and staff learning, working closely with them to help generate revenue growth through effective GEM. HospitalityGEM services include mystery guest visits, online feedback, social advocacy, performance analysis and learning management. Clients include Wagamama, Brasserie Blanc, Malmaison and Peach Pubs. For more information, visit: www.hospitalitygem.com