



Employee engagement and commitments sits in the hands of the line manager



High street bakery, Greggs plc, faces a complex set of challenges when it comes to developing staff commitment and engagement strategies. Its 19,000 strong workforce throughout the UK encompasses everything from senior executives to shop managers and part-time workers. This level of diversity creates a multitude of issues, needs, demands and expectations.

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Retention is the flip side of the same coin

Noreen Harrison is the organisation’s Group People Manager. Her role covers resourcing, retention, compensation and benefits, reward strategies and research: in short, everything that goes into getting and keeping people in the business.

She believes getting it right at the recruitment stage is the key to a healthy attrition rate:

“Retention is the flip side of the same coin,” she states. “If you get it right at the recruitment stage the likelihood of people wanting to leave is reduced. We give retention the same amount of focus as recruitment. It’s part of everything we do.”

‘Recruit to the Values’, a structured and rigorous interview process for all roles, is the cornerstone of Greggs retention strategy.

“It not just about having the right experience and qualifications, people have to fit our culture,” Noreen explains. “If they don’t match the culture, they aren’t right for the business.”

She also believes in discussing career progression at the interview to make candidates aware that it is positively encouraged: *“It lets them know development is possible without having to go elsewhere,”* she says.

Ironically successful recruitment and retention measures do bring their own problems. The business is ever changing and the approach Greggs had 20 years ago is no longer appropriate. Long-serving staff can find it difficult to adapt to new working practises.



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Keeping an eye on talent

Talent management plays a big role in the company's approach to retention. Through its assessment centres, Greggs assesses talent, how to keep it and crucially, how to develop key people into senior positions.

Much emphasis is placed on personal development. All managers undergo 'values' training programmes. In addition psychometric training for managers including shop managers, highlights training and development needs.

Engaging a diverse workforce

The workforce diversity influences the type of incentives Greggs offers. Strategies are graded to fit a range of circumstances.

"We work to ensure it's a good environment so people want to come to work and are proud to be a part of Greggs," says Noreen. "We look at flexible working arrangements, part-time working; everything we can do to tempt people to stay."

Greggs is very active in the community and encourages employees to get involved with initiatives such as breakfast clubs for school children.

"People love it because it's their community and their issues," says Noreen.

None of this is a cynical leap onto the Corporate Social Responsibility bandwagon nor is it a calculated strategy to hold onto employees: charitable work is ingrained into company culture. That it makes the company a fun place to work and gives workers a sense of pride, however, has obvious business benefits.

Falling into the benefits trap

With such a large number of part-time staff Greggs faces a very specific retention problem: the benefits trap. In exit interviews people often say, although they like the job, it's not worth their while to work because of the benefits they lose.

Greggs pays more than the minimum wage but, as Noreen points out, this doesn't offer the same level of security as having the rent or mortgage paid.

There are challenges too from within the sector. With the largest supermarkets recruiting tens of thousands of new people across the UK, retention is even more important.



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“Keeping people at this level is a big challenge,” admits Noreen. “But we need to put our resources behind the things we can do something about and not waste our time on the things we can’t.”

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The cost of losing people

With such a large and varied workforce, the cost of recruitment is potentially high. It is for this reason that the interview process is so structured. However, it is lengthy. Four to five interviews, each lasting two or three hours, is not uncommon for executive positions.

Losing staff has an obvious impact on financial performance. If shops aren’t fully staffed, the result is long queues and customers will go elsewhere rather than wait. It goes without saying that if the bakeries aren’t staffed to optimum levels, productivity falls.

Retention is not an HR problem

Noreen is adamant that recruitment and retention issues do not belong to HR alone: they are a business problem.

Greggs has done a lot of research among staff, using surveys developed specifically for them by TalentDrain. ‘FirstImpression’ targeted new people while ‘LastOpinion’ surveyed leavers. When the two surveys were analysed together to find commonalities, the results indicated that vertical relationships were a main reason for staying or leaving.

“People often don’t leave businesses: they leave managers,” Noreen contests. “Line managers lie at the heart of how we manage people. The right solutions need to be found and implemented by line managers and HR working in partnership.”

“The surveys also told us that people need to feel they are treated fairly and are respected. It’s often the small things that matter and sadly, they can get over-looked,” she comments.

“Managers at all levels need to celebrate successes with their teams. It doesn’t cost much to show appreciation or to be understanding and supportive. It’s a question of balancing their needs with the workload.”



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Although the basis of the TalentDrain work was to examine the negatives, the company is also keen to know what makes people want to stay as this is an important element in understanding engagement factors.

Two way communication

With such a large workforce, engaging people and forging a sense of belonging requires effective communication. As well as divisional and corporate newsletters there are bi-annual employee opinion surveys. These yield what Noreen describes as 'fabulous information'.

"The return rate is very high – usually 40%. The last one was actually 75%," she says. "They give us a lot of information that we can feed into recruitment and retention initiatives."

Despite all the measures that are in place Noreen accepts people inevitably leave for a myriad of reasons.

"It could be that the fit between their style and the business isn't there after all," she states philosophically. "We put our resources behind those things that we can most affect which are making sure Greggs is a great place to work, that people are valued and that they fit with the culture of business. We certainly don't believe in a one size fits all approach."

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