

The more things change...

Change management is near the top of many training agendas. Why so, and how should it be addressed?

To say that change has become the only constant in business has become something of a cliché, but managing a constant flow of change presents challenges to UK employers and trainers.

Research by our sister publication, *Employment Review*, released in November 2007, shows the major role HR plays in change management. It polled 114 HR professionals on change management, and 93 reported their organisations had undergone major change in the previous two years. Indeed, they each averaged seven major changes in two years – that's 651 in total.

The survey found that HR was most involved in change management at the planning stage and took a leading role in assessing the likely impact of change on staff. Some eight out of 10 respondents said they prepared information for staff to help them cope with change.

As for L&D, 67% of respondents said HR was responsible for developing training programmes to support change.

Vanessa Robinson, an adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, says change management training is becoming more important.

"It's important that senior leaders have the right training and guidance on how to manage change, with two-way communication absolutely vital."

Gill Homan, a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, says that change is accepted as a constant now, and although employers are investing in skills training, many have been slow to recognise the different types of change.

"Managers are becoming much better, but there are areas where even the most obvious things are neglected – not willingly, but because of a lack of understanding of the process of change," she says.

Harvest ideas

Homan adds that training is a key part of any change management programme and that managers should learn to support people and develop techniques for harvesting ideas.

"Managers need to have the ability to understand what skills should be applied to a particular change process. I think people are often surprised at how a few basic steps can improve things dramatically," she says.

CASE STUDY: ALLIANCE & LEICESTER

When financial services group Alliance & Leicester decided to review its overall business strategy, it embarked on a major change programme that would see training for more than 4,000 staff.

The change programme was designed to 'capture the hearts and minds' of employees and, as a result, drive up the experience for the customers.

The firm launched its people change agenda in a bid to make excellent customer services the factor that would make it stand out from competitors. This meant launching a massive change management training programme for staff, which was handled by Advance Performance.

The training involved workshops, conferences and courses to help create a

common organisational language and change the way the whole company interacted with consumers.

Shaun Astley, distribution director at Alliance & Leicester, says the learning has really helped drive change through the entire group.

"We knew that gaining our people's commitment was pivotal if we were to stand out from the competition, and that is where Advance helped. Right from the boardroom to every customer-facing operation, we use the programme at every opportunity to try to influence those customer interfaces," he explains.

Since the course was introduced, Alliance & Leicester has also reported increased staff satisfaction rates, recorded by employee opinion surveys.



Gary Miles
Roffey Park

John Freshney, a programme co-ordinator at training firm Righttrack, says the growth in demand for change management training is due to organisations realising that proactive management of change is far more effective and less costly than simply implementing change, and then taking action to deal with it.

"In organisations, change can cause great uncertainty, and so investing in change management training will ensure the smoothest possible transition in behaviour, processes and systems," he says. "This will help minimise the loss of productivity, resulting in the organisation saving time and resources."

His training focuses on communication, influencing and planning skills, while encouraging delegates to understand how people respond to change.

"From a practical perspective, the focus is on strategies for managing emo-

tions and behaviours driven by enforced change, both for stakeholders and the change manager themselves," he adds.

Judging how people will react and using training to help staff cope is one area that is being neglected, according to Dan Redland, from change consultancy Getfeedback.

"The biggest failing is that organisations are trying to enforce change without thinking about the people. This is currently the main reason why many change programmes fail," he says.

"The key training challenge is around helping staff deliver the change and then cope with the consequences. To make it work, you also need a properly trained leadership team."

Trixie Rawlinson, a partner with training firm Impact Factory, agrees that learning to empathise and support people through change is one of the key functions of training in this area.

"We try to focus on the overall reaction to change. Everybody reacts differently to change and it's about understanding the patterns and trying to get buy-in. You need to learn how to communicate with all people in a way that's accepted," she says.

Impact Factory runs a course that helps individuals and teams become more aware of how to approach uncertainty in their work environments.

Motivating force

The company has an exercise called 'silent graffiti', which explores how people behave when they don't know what to do. This helps managers understand more about facilitating change and looking at what motivates people.

"People like patterns, and change means uncertainty. Everybody needs to be learning how to cope and it's essential that the message gets through to all parties," Rawlinson adds.

She says that communication skills are vital, and managers need to be trained to keep talking – even if there is no news, it should be communicated that there's nothing more to report, because people often assume the worst.

In fact, change is now such a common feature of the workplace, the skills needed to manage it should be part of a range of training courses.

Helen Hill, lead consultant on change at development firm Mast, includes change management skills in several more general management courses.

She thinks training should focus on

transformational and persuasion skills, with a real emphasis on dealing with people's fears and anxieties.

"I think people are good at recognising the business challenges but not so great at managing people through change," Hill adds.

Gary Miles, principal consultant at management college Roffey Park, thinks many organisations try and push through too much change without building up a long-term psychological resistance.

"A key factor is that there is often no leadership to keep the momentum going as senior managers lose interest once the change starts to happen. Organisations must build a psychology to deal with this negative attitude towards change; a psychology that says 'change is business as usual'," he says.

Slow and steady

Ongoing training and a strategy to help smooth change when it happens are important to making it a success, although many organisations leave it too late then panic when things go wrong.

Miles adds: "Organisations should adopt a gradual and incremental attitude to change. Make it a long-term strategy. Organisations often fail to realise that change needs to happen before you change."

People make the change process work and it's vital that managers and staff are properly developed to cope in an ever-changing world. "It's crucial to involve employees in the change process. Our research into high-performance organisations found that the most effective change management strategies are bottom up, rather than top down," Mills says.

by Ross Wigham

FURTHER INFO

Manchester Metro University Business School

www.business.mmu.ac.uk/

Righttrack

www.righttrackconsultancy.co.uk

Impact Factory

www.impactfactory.com

Mast

www.mast.co.uk

QA-IQ

www.qa-iq.com

Roffey Park

www.roffeypark.com

Advance Performance

www.advance-uk.com

'Our research into high-performance organisations found that the most effective change management strategies are bottom up, rather than top down'