Focus on training wins McFarlane Telfer learning award for 2015

Commercial catering and refrigeration maintenance specialist McFarlane Telfer not only makes sure its staff are technically adept, its training also addresses the vital soft skills prized by clients – a strategy that helped its team win a top award, says Sara Bean.

The terms ‘people-focused’ and ‘hard FM maintenance’ don’t often sit well together. But catering and refrigeration maintenance contractor McFarlane Telfer – winner of the BIFM Learning and Career Development Award – could teach the whole sector a lesson in the benefits of taking a trailblazing approach to learning and development with what the BIFM judges described as a company-wide “passion for learning and development”.

McFarlane Telfer (MFT) was established initially as a metal fabrication workshop in January 1992, developing over the years to add catering and refrigeration maintenance which, following the downturn in 2010 was made the sole focus of the business. The market in which it concentrates is a tough one. Catering environments are invariably stressed and more so than when a piece of essential equipment such as the fridge or cooker is broken. For MFT’s technicians this means engaging every day within a customer environment, not the best office, so the standard of their performance represents that of the whole company.

Unlike most of its competitors, the firm specifically targets the FM industry, servicing corporate customers, private healthcare, education and the public sector, and since expanding into Dubai it now employs 68 people in the UK and five people in Dubai.

Quality of delivery

The other unusual approach is that in an industry where neither formal training, qualifications, nor even an accepted standard as to what might constitute an appropriately qualified catering engineer, MFT only chooses to make sure that its technicians are trained in all the trades they cover – gas, electrical, water and refrigeration – it concentrates on much on addressing soft skills as commercial and technical ones.

This, explains managing director Chris Crapp, is because the quality of delivery of service relies solely on the excellence of the staff.

“There is no technology in our industry; no software or fancy gimmicks – it’s all about a guy turning up in a stressed environment, (after all chefs are not known for their patience) doing his job and convincing that he’s happy to be there, proud about what he does and performing a job diligently. “Everything we do is dependent on people, so if we choose to do this well that is 100 per cent of our competitive advantage.”

By committing very significant resources – both time and money – to developing a comprehensive learning and career development programme, he believes the firm can genuinely aspire to be the employer of choice and make a difference to peoples’ lives.

Yet, says Crapp, although FM clients tend to have high expectations – not just of technical performance but also of levels of customer service, speed of response, documentation and accreditation – the FM sector still treats its maintenance suppliers as commodities.

“We understand that looking after our staff with proper commercial benefits, but it doesn’t seem to have filtered through to the supply chain. FM is in many ways a remarkably primitive industry – but it’s not unique, I started out in the hospitality sector, where the cult of chefs in kitchens who shout and bully employees is celebrated.”

Emotional intelligence

Not so at MFT. In fact, one of the main inspirations for the focus on soft as well as hard skills was when Crapp participated in an emotional intelligence course. He took the experience back to the workplace where, in conjunction with a development expert, a programme of emotional intelligence courses

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was introduced, exploring issues such as what people wanted to do with their lives and their motivating and demotivating factors. This process was first viewed with suspicion, but eventually led to ‘life-changing’ discoveries.

Craggs says: “This is a solidly blue-collar environment and largely male, as is most of hard FM, and that combination is not known for its ability to communicate and empathise. So having had a favourable response to that, we thought ‘what’s the next step?’

As a small business with little experience in learning and career development (L&D), McFt went through investors in People, which provide a standard framework, [see box] for people development, highlighting areas such as rewards and recognition.

The decision to invest so heavily in L&D was, says Craggs, not driven by some woolly altruistic dream. Rather, it was, he says: “A very hard-edged decision, as we needed to ask ‘how does my business survive in what is a limited talent pool’, I went the best people, and in order to attract and retain the right people we have to offer a quality proposition, which is why this has essentially been a very commercially driven process.”

Underlying this strategy was the creation in 2013 of a dedicated three-person, professional HR and development team that, says Craggs, “is not in favour of the month – but is the bedrock of everything we do.”

According to Kate Smith, McFt’s people development manager, each new recruit is given a detailed induction, going into the company training programme which constantly looks at ways to enhance their technical, commercial, interpersonal and leadership skills.

Time and motivation
Right from the outset the expectation is drummed into people that while McFt will provide a supportive environment, they are expected to put in the hours and motivation in – with team leaders working with trainees or new staff to ensure that is a priority.

This results in an average of 13 days of training and development for each employee across the company – and it’s not confined to technicians (from novice to team leader), but other roles such as accountancy, administration/back office and so on.

Training is delivered through a mix of external and internal providers. External courses provided both on and off site include formally accredited specialists in compliance, for example, those delivering qualifications from City & Guilds. The first batch of engineering technicians will train through the Institute of Mechanical Engineers.

Internal training ranges from guided visits to trade shows, to a wide range of CPD opportunities, including ILM, ThinkFM, Institute of Mechanical Engineers, London Chamber of Commerce, Arab English Chamber of Commerce, and the Middle Eastern Association. There are also regular communications meetings and an extensive junior leadership programme.

One of the issues for the maintenance sector is the challenge of turning a good engineer into a good manager, as the two don’t always follow.

Kate Smith explains: “Our top engineers aren’t just notable for their technical ability, but also the way in which they can resolve customer complaints and establish a relationship with clients. You can be fantastic at fixing things, but if you can’t engage with customers that is a problem. So our secret is in understanding that technical competence does not instantly translate into good management.”

Junior leaders are trained in a variety of skills – from understanding financial reports through computer skills to supervisory and leadership skills that are delivered both internally – where directly relevant to the business – and externally.

Smith adds: “External training puts some people out of their comfort zone, but ultimately they benefit as it gives them the chance to go out and talk to other people in a different industry but similar job role.”

Recruiting for attitude
Senior engineers are also encouraged to take on leadership roles or act as mentors for the novices. Although training and skills go a long way to prepare many of the engineers for management, it’s also important to find the most suitable recruits in the first place.

Craggs says: “A lot of the interview stage, we tell all the candidates that technical skills alone will not get you a job at McFt – or keep you there. “We need a mix of technical, commercial, stuff that has to happen on time, safety, and profitably with people skills – not only with customers (regular sessions on walking in the customer’s shoes) but with colleagues – if the classic scenario develops where technicians start blaming the back office, we will be lost, so everyone needs to recognise and value the effort and difference which our colleagues make.

So it’s become a lasting, cliché, but we recruit for attitude. If something is broken down we’re going into a stressful environment and our engineers must handle that. So, yes, we need people for the technical bit and it would be great if they came in fully formed, but the reality is we probably need to provide quite a lot of that technical training as long as our recruits can demonstrate capability, desire and engagement,” he adds.

To help address the fact that 60 per cent of the workforce is usually out on the road, the firm also holds regular company meetings, at which the whole company gathers together for three hours to hear updates from department heads and explore different themes with the occasional help of guest speakers, such as retired athlete Steve Barkley OBE.

The impact of these initiatives on the company have been immense, with negligible staff churn rates, a waiting list for recruits and an average 25 per cent compound organic growth since 2010. Instant feedback from customer service rates are consistently at 98 per cent rating and McFt became the first SME to achieve the Customer Service Excellence standard in 2013, followed by becoming the first Investors in People (IIP) award-winner in 2014.

Intern programme
The company has now expanded into Dubai and has plans to expand into Europe, aided by an ambitious intern programme that includes taking a placement student from NTU in the Netherlands, two more Dutch FM interns due after Christmas, a recent recruit from the FM programme at Conestoga College outside Toronto, Canada, and continuing recruitment from candidates with Wentsworth College in Boston, Massachusetts.

Days Chris Craggs: “The difference in our self-perception as an organisation, and as individuals, is impossible to overstate.

“Travis a parochial business, we now operate on the world stage. The team leaders who’ve spent time training and coaching our colleagues in the Gulf can’t quite believe the direction their career has taken them – and the difference they are able to make to others.

“If you’ve been teaching in Dubai about gas pressures or about refrigerant recovery – both alien concepts – you know you are making a difference to the development of technical standards, safety and the environment – as well as spreading the message about respecting and developing people and opportunities.

“I just don’t get why more people in the FM industry don’t get the benefits of learning and career development,” he says.