

Case Study: Royal Mail Group



Background

Following earlier pilot projects, workplace coaching was introduced by Royal Mail Group (RMG) in 2006/07 as a nationwide programme, both to complement induction training provided for new joiners, and to offer experienced staff an opportunity to further develop their skills and personal potential. New joiners were intended to receive coaching for a minimum 13-week period following their induction training, whilst the amount of coaching provided for others would be varied according to need.

The programme was rolled-out for non-management level staff (other coaching provision was separately made for managers and executives). With a staff-base of close to 200,000, RMG's operations span a wide range of geographies, from thinly populated communities, such as those spread across the Scottish Highlands and Islands, to highly concentrated populations living in large metropolitan areas. Staff may undertake a variety of tasks in receiving, processing and distributing mail between centres and delivery offices, as well as sorting ready for local walks and finally delivering the post to end customers.



Coaching is typically provided by experienced staff alongside their normal roles. Coaches were carefully selected for this role, and undertook training to equip them with coaching skills. Further training was also scheduled to encourage coaches' continuing development, whilst local 'coaching champions' provide an interface for knowledge sharing between individual coaches and the national network of champions, learning and development specialists, HR business partners and the national coaching co-ordinator.

Operating in an increasingly competitive market, RMG has put a high priority on supporting and developing staff to perform at their best, whilst engaging in extensive training and development activities to help individuals transition to using new technologies being introduced both in mail centres and on the road (e.g. PDA hand-sets). Specific customer requirements, comprehensive knowledge of pricing tariffs and an ability to handle a wide range of customer enquiries also rely on effective communication, knowledge and skill. Consequently, coaching was seen as being an especially important means for helping individuals to become proficient with such new methods and to grow their skill levels.

Project Objectives

After the programme had been active for 18 months, RMG commissioned Clive Johnson to evaluate the effectiveness and impacts of workplace coaching, and to quantify the outcomes of coaching where possible. Earlier feedback had suggested that coaching was making a positive impact – and there appeared to be no significant reason for revising the programme – however, RMG wished to validate that this was actually the case.

The evaluation project considered a variety of aspects of the programme, including the potential influence of local office cultures, differing management responses to workplace coaching and how well coaching skills had been sustained and developed since coaches' initial training.

The project also sought to determine whether performance against a variety of measures used to monitor business performance – such as achieving delivery targets and high levels of customer satisfaction - could in any way be attributed to the outcomes of workplace coaching. This would involve isolating the specific impacts of coaching from other factors.



Case Study: Royal Mail Group



Approach

The project adopted the following approach:

(i) Data Gathering

A mix of methods were used to gather data, using a stratified sample to ensure appropriate representation of different mail centre and delivery office sizes, nature of operations (such as having a primarily rural or urban focus), and timing for adopting workplace coaching. Focus group workshops and brief interviews were scheduled at various offices across 3 large regions, allowing a mix of differing potential influences other than coaching – for example, one had resulted from a merger of two previous offices, whilst another had experimented with coaching for new staff recruits over a 5 year period, ahead of the roll-out of the national initiative.



Perspectives were sought from a range of stakeholder groups, including postal staff who had been recruited since the programme launched, staff who were inducted under previous programmes, workplace coaches, HR business partners and operational managers.

Participants were forthcoming in expressing views, and a majority were able to point to specific examples to illustrate their comments, as well as to rationalise the specific influences of coaching. Whilst in general, different stakeholder groups were deliberately separated in workshops to encourage greater candour, in two cases, individuals representing different stakeholder groups from the same team requested participating in a single workshop together – with managers, longer-serving staff, new recruits and coaches all contributing to the same discussion. In both cases, contributions were offered freely by all present, although it was

clear in facilitation that both groups shared a very strong team ethos. Brief interviews were also conducted with a range of interested parties, some by telephone. These provided useful perspectives from different individuals touched by coaching, including HR and operational managers.

Brief surveys were also conducted with a broader sample, again targeting a range of site types across different regions. Deliberately kept brief, special care was taken in framing questions, targeting themes which were considered most appropriate for point-score rating or ranking. Given the nature of many postal staff's work in delivering mail, provision was also made for surveys to be undertaken manually, co-ordinated by a coach champion in each of the regions surveyed. Paper, check-box type responses could be made as quickly as computer-entered ones, albeit a small amount of additional time needed to be allowed for transcribing the data for analysis.

In addition to the primary data sourcing, published business unit scorecard data for sampled units was also examined, alongside key HR data such as new staff retention rates and year-on-year responses to a staff satisfaction survey. RMG benefited from having centralised support for capturing and analysing such data, meaning that only a very small amount of additional processing was needed to allow the data to fit with the project's needs (for example, to match the time periods covered by the scorecards with the periods in which workplace coaching had been active).

(ii) Analysis

More than 300 separate anecdotes were collected by the study, mainly through focus group workshops and interviews. These could be categorised into 28 discrete sub-categories and 10 main ones. Of the detailed items, 66% could be clearly distinguished as being representative of common experiences, 31% as being isolated or rare examples, leaving only 3% that could not be categorised. More than 140 items of data were identified to qualify the influence on performance on factors other than coaching, allowing a robust



Case Study: Royal Mail Group



rationale for their impacts to be established.

Perception ratings collected from surveys were compared between regions and across stakeholder groups, showing a high level of consistency (several gaps in perception were identified in isolated units, although these were insignificant). In addition, unit scorecard and staff satisfaction survey data was also correlated against the extent to which coaching had been embraced beyond its intended minimum implementation by different units, generally though not exclusively revealing strong correlations.



(iii) Reporting

Both graphical and narrative reporting was used to present the findings of the project, including a depiction of impact chains, a graphical presentation of key data correlations and a SWOT analysis. Anecdotal data was completely anonymised, although regional and unit performance data was necessarily taken account of in correlating with the extent to which coaching had been embraced.

Project Outcomes

The combination of correlations for 20 separate performance measures with the adoption of coaching, a large base of common anecdotal data, and quantified cost savings in selected units

Whilst not a specific project objective, data gathering included capturing views of the impacts of coaching for several 'fast-tracked' graduates participating in RMG's Talent Management programme, and also revealed a variety of unexpected secondary benefits – for example, the sense of satisfaction coaches had gained from being able to see others develop, and identifying a range

of guidance aids which workplace coaches had been proactive in developing, which could be shared for the benefit of others.

A wide range of experiences could be identified, distinguishing those which were representative of common experiences from those which were isolated incidents. A business unit Case Study was also produced, for which benefit and cost savings directly attributable to coaching could be derived.

For RMG, the study provided a firm validation of its starting point hypothesis, but clearly highlighted the continued value which workplace coaching can offer in future.

Contact Us...

Coaching Focus Ltd

1 Friary
Temple Quay
Bristol BS1 6EA
T: 0117 344 5009
E: enquiries@coaching-focus.com
W: www.coaching-focus.com

