

Nurturing skills to retain your staff

The recruitment and training challenges that face the project forwarding sector are well known, so what are the solutions? Felicity Landon reports.



Your workforce is ageing – and/or retiring. Training up the new generation takes time – and money. And, with a severe shortage of experienced, skilled and professional personnel, there is that natural fear – if I invest in the training, what is to stop my competitors reaping the benefit?

There appears to be a robust response to this quandary. Kevin Stephens, general manager of the Project Professionals Group (PPG), said: “If you think good employees are expensive, try bad employees.” As Sir Richard Branson commented: “Train people well enough so they can leave. Treat them well enough so they do not want to.”

“PPG regards training as an essential part of a company’s growth and development. There is a critical international skills shortage in the supply chain and logistics industry. PPG recognises that a company’s main resource and asset is its people. I urge companies to consider training as an investment in the ongoing success of their business and as an incentive to retain talented employees.”



Sarens has this year introduced an independent training centre where its workforce can follow certified courses at operational level.

Stephens said he was aware of several global forwarders who are hiring recently retired professionals on a temporary basis “to fill large voids in their staffing”.

Employer responsibilities

He believes the industry does not do enough to encourage the professional development of its rising stars. “Employers have a responsibility to ensure their workers have the knowledge base and confidence to move to the next level of management. A major advantage that employers should remember about training is that it offers them an improved retention rate. Employees are more loyal to companies that value their growth and want to cultivate it, and thus provide a better performance and decrease the rollover rate at any company, no matter how small or large. If an employee thinks a company values him or her, that sentiment will go into whatever the employee is undertaking.”

deugro’s Most Promising (DMP) trainee programme has been running since 2000, with the focus on developing ‘all-rounders’,



Sarens' training centre enables it to work on any lack of specific skills by organising customised training.

sometimes with a special focus such as on project forwarding, more technical aspects or finance and accounting.

Treating each person individually, and jointly designing their career path, is vital in retaining them, said Klaus Strahmann, executive vice president at deugro. "The risk [of staff being poached] will always be there," he said. "But what is the alternative?"

The DMP programme is based on two years of hands-on training. The trainees change every three months to another deugro location; these are worldwide assignments and could cover operations, sales, administration, tender work, technical inspections, supervision or other areas. Strahmann said: "The trainees come from all over the world. The structure is multicultural and absolutely global."

deugro's answer to the threat of a skills gap is 18 years of constant recruiting and developing of young talent – focused on internal as well as external candidates from all over the world, he said. "That is the answer. Today you will find ex-trainees within the deugro Group at all levels in the

hierarchy, up to the top global board."

Sarens, the Belgium-based crane rental, heavy lift and engineered transport specialist, has this year introduced an independent training centre where its workforce can follow certified courses at an operational level. The company has also launched an internal e-learning platform.

"There is a lack of education centres that deliver junior crane operators or lifting engineers into the labour market or in our work area, especially in a market where the war for talent is raging," said Pieter Van den Eynde, Sarens' human capital manager.

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—Klaus Strahmann, deugro

"Most of the people working in our business have learned everything they know by themselves, in the work field. People are joining our company with their own educational background, with their own experience and, hopefully, with a big motivation for heavy lifting. It is up to us to provide a lot of input to support their personal development. An extensive input during this time helps them to discover their strengths and the most interesting area to explore, develop and use these strengths."

Departmental needs

Sarens' training centre is valuable in meeting the different needs of its various departments, said Van den Eynde. "We can work on any lack of specific skills by organising customised training. We can determine quality levels by ourselves, and that gives us more control over the skills level in our company. From another view, we can now organise independent, certified courses that are needed to enter specific client sites."

Sarens has some internal e-learning

platform pilots running and enthusiasm is really high, according to Van den Eynde.

“The possibilities of this medium are endless. We can offer general introductory training for all kinds of employees.

“Afterwards we can focus on specific tools and/or skills relevant to specific functions or departments. It is giving us the opportunity to develop training modules from a general introduction level up to a very detailed technical insight. We can offer these modules in a personal training path – and all over the world.”

With older, experienced people retiring or perhaps keeping their knowledge to themselves, how does Sarens work to pass those skills to the next generation?

Retaining skills

Van den Eynde said: “It is always a challenge for a company to keep knowledge within the organisation while skilled people are, due to different reasons, leaving. It is our duty to create a climate where people are motivated to share their experiences with new trainees. On the one hand we try to involve them in the developing of training modules, so we can share knowledge built in the company directly with a huge audience within the company. On the other hand, after several years of working out in the field, an employee can move into a training role. These people are the best Sarens ambassadors for our business – they are able to make a very good estimation of new employees and guide them towards their new roles.”

He was also direct in his response when asked about the perceived risk of investing in training only to see staff poached by others. “There always will be certain personnel changing from one employer to another.”

When it comes to new or young staff, companies are often hesitant to invest time and money, said Rachel Humphrey, ceo of Project Cargo Network (PCN). “What happens if they move to another company or start their own venture after all your help? Sadly, it does happen and once bitten, twice shy. However, that does not help our industry or the genuine newcomers who would like the chance to become knowledgeable, loyal staff and, ultimately, they are the ones that will help your company grow.”

She added: “To manage a project well, it is important to know the practical and technical aspects to avoid surprises, or worse, a disaster. It is true that in the past, training was obtained ‘on the job’, but this is in part because appropriate courses were not available. It is risky to think this is how it should still be done today.”



Users of Project Cargo Network's eLearning Platform can complete each training module at their own pace.

As there is no formal education to prepare staff for the heavy lift and transport industry, many individuals have entered without proper training, said Humphrey. “Some have been in the trade for many years and do not know the laws of physics. No disrespect to those individuals, they were the forerunners of the industry and worked with what they had and knew.

“However, we believe theory, physics and principles should be learnt first and then applied on the job – not the other way around.”

PCN has invested heavily in professional training from an industry expert and a bespoke eLearning Platform to provide its members with a comprehensive online training programme.



Nidheesh Kurumangalath, of Khimji Ramdas Shipping in Oman with his PCN e-certificate.

“Besides the benefits of not having to travel to workshops and seminars, there are additional advantages to the eLearning Platform, such as being able to stop and start the training at the user’s convenience with no deadlines,” she said.

Regional imbalance

“Another issue we found when researching what training was available, is that most courses and workshops were only available in the US and Europe. There were very few options for staff wanting to train in emerging markets. It is important when project forwarders and heavy lift companies work together across continents that they speak the same heavy lift language and have the same level of expertise and knowledge.”

PCN has representation in more than 100 countries, “so to solve this, we made sure our online training was affordable and easily accessible to everyone – if you have the internet, you can access our course. So far, this has resulted in our training being used in countries as diverse as Denmark to Djibouti. Upon completion, an e-certificate is sent via email, so that the trainee can verify his or her training to clients and officials quickly and easily.”

Nidheesh Kurumangalath, of Khimji Ramdas Shipping in Oman, said: “The course was lengthy, but I never felt bored. There is no time limit for completing the course, which is good for understanding each session very clearly. We can study the course after office hours with peace of mind. As a beginner in our project cargo department, it is very useful for me, no doubt.”

