

National Vocational Qualifications for support staff

Speaker: Peter Kearns

41st Autumn Conference - 7th/8th October 1996

The Back Room Revolution

The National Vocational Qualifications system has now been established for over 10 years. In that time NVQs for technical staff have become well known and used by many members of the Society. They are less well established for support staff in the baking industry.

The purpose of this paper is to encourage members to think about how this broader range of NVQs can contribute to overall business success.

The first question to consider is, what are NVQs for? The answer, of course, depends on whose perspective is being considered, but for the employer, I suggest, they can be a way of structuring overall business quality improvement. Certainly they should make a significant contribution to business success and profit. As with any other investment, their benefits should outweigh their costs.

It is worth considering some of the findings of the 1985 paper from the Institute of Manpower Studies, *A Challenge to Complacency*, which said:

'Virtually all the companies saw a link between the level and quality of training and the quality of their products, which they recognised is linked ultimately with their success and profitability. However the implied link between training and profitability was not often recognised.'

This report also provided the initial arguments leading to the Review of Vocational Qualifications, which then led to the establishment of NVQs.

In many industries, on the technical training side, this was not so much a revolution as a continuation of an evolution of pre-employment training which had been around for some time.

On the commercial and support side of many businesses, however, there has been a real revolution in the training of staff.

Customer Service

The most significant change, perhaps, has been the development of NVQs in Customer Service. Until then, none of the major awarding bodies issued qualifications in customer service.

Customer service training had very much been the Cinderella of the training world. Many otherwise quite rational businesses spent millions on advertising and promotion, and then left direct customer contact to armies of spotty youths with little training and no real understanding of what the business is all about - and yet the key to success for every business is giving customers the service they require!

In the mid 80s this issue was addressed by the Customer Service Lead Body, to whom the speaker acted as technical consultant for the development of Customer Service Standards.

This lead body was very different from most others. In most other cases there was considerable research and practice to look back over, and generally there was an industrial and training infrastructure from which information could be drawn. In customer service, however:

- there was very little high quality UK based research, although there was a great deal from the US
- there were no established nationally recognised qualifications
- an astonishing number of employers had no identifiable policies or practices about training or standards of performance for customer service
- many employees in regular direct contact with customers did not see themselves as being responsible for customer service
- few support staff employees saw themselves as responsible for internal customer service, or as part of the customer chain.

There was a large amount of training materials and courses about customer service, much of it of the 'smile school' mentality, very little of it related to the strategic needs of the business (although some examples of excellence were found).

The findings of the initial research by the Customer Service Lead Body showed that excellent customer service was dependent on:

- maturation - best performance from experienced staff with good knowledge of products and systems
- personal competence - the key to effective customer service
- product knowledge
- excellent management of the customer service staff
- excellent internal customer service to support those staff who are in direct contact with customers.

Systems help only if people are capable of working them. Sanctions, the lead body reported, can do more harm than good.

Sales

There have been qualifications in selling for some time, although not issued by the major awarding bodies. In reality, an individual's sales figures have tended to be taken as a measure of sales performance. This means, of course, that a good salesman who is badly managed may appear to be a poor salesman.

More importantly, it ignores the revolution which has been taking place in the selling profession. As all will be aware, a revolution has been taking place in the retail business. Retailers have moved from large to enormous, for some of them their buying power has grown considerably, so the role of the salesman selling into these organisations has changed out of recognition.

The basic skills of selling are still required - it is the measure of success which has changed. In the bakery industry there are still many local, small businesses operating successfully, and these need to be serviced. There are also a small number of large, multi-sited businesses with central buying facilities.

There are local wholesalers which supply a variety of materials to the smaller businesses. If using these, the salesman's job needs to move from focusing mainly on getting orders to fill the wholesalers stocks, to encouraging the factor to push your own products. The key selling skills are about passing on product knowledge and enthusiasm, rather than collecting orders.

The salesman may also be spending time with the ultimate customer, dealing with problems or opportunities identified by the factor's salesman, but which are too detailed for him to deal with. This support should result eventually in increased sales, and it requires traditional selling skills and knowledge, but the traditional, direct link has been lost.

It is therefore necessary to help the salesmen, who are naturally target orientated people, to establish an alternative set of goals to strive for. National Standards for Selling, and for Field Sales Management, can supply such goals. They can be used initially as the basis for NVQs in selling, and later to focus on particular areas of performance.

Retailing

There have been various qualifications, of differing levels of appropriateness, in the field of retailing for some time. The progression towards National Vocational Qualifications in this area has more closely mirrored the industry's experiences in the technical fields. There is now a well established structure of standards and NVQs in Retailing.

Administration

The training of clerical and administrative staff lagged far behind the technological changes which had enabled another revolution - in working patterns. Word processing has replaced shorthand or audio dictation and typing in many offices. This change was not reflected in clerical qualifications, which still had separate routes for clerical and secretarial staff, reinforcing old ideas about pay and undermining the potential for much more flexible working patterns.

The new National Vocational Qualifications in Administration provide a framework for this multi-skilling and flexible working.

As such they can directly influence the effectiveness of one of the non productive cost centres, reducing the costs, and, by giving better service to productive units, possibly enhancing income.

Purchasing

The effectiveness of the procurement function has a direct effect on profitability. This can be by reducing costs of purchases, enabling reduced stocks by increasing reliability of supplies, or by increasing the consistency of standards of quality of material purchased. Achieving each of these is heavily dependent on the competence of purchasing personnel. Achieving

such competence can be planned and monitored through the National Vocational Qualifications system.

The benefits may not be direct, but can avoid potential serious loss. Recently, a purchasing candidate identified that her employer did not have written terms and conditions for purchasing. Her development advisor helped her to draft them for adoption by the directors. Thus the company became protected against unscrupulous or negligent suppliers.

Management

Last, but far from least, it is worth considering the levels of competence of managers. Few people would challenge the need for competence among managers in any business. Yet few businesses have any internal system for identifying the current competence of each manager and then planning development or training activities to meet their needs. The National Standards of Competence for Managers can provide the framework for doing this, and can provide access to National Vocational Qualifications in Management.

Summary

The message is that everyone you employ should be making a valuable contribution to the success of the business. It is therefore essential that they are fully competent in doing it. National Vocational Qualifications can provide a framework for ensuring that competence.

It is also worth remembering that achieving overall competence of all staff and competently managing it to achieve the overall business goals is the core of Investors in People. This is another powerful tool to contribute to business success.