

## Retail Sport Ltd.: A New Customer Care Training Programme

## Introduction

This project will evaluate the training and development needs of Retail Sport Ltd., a family owned company which deals in the sportswear and sports equipment retail market. The company currently operates seven stores throughout Ireland with plans to open a further three stores--one in Kildare, one in Westmeath, and one in Sligo. Retail Sport comprises of a very diverse workforce, with multiple nationalities, multiple age groups, and a good gender diversity, all with various levels of retail experience. The training requirements will therefore be as diverse as the workforce itself, with many of the employees requiring or favouring different delivery methods. To analyse the training needs correctly, a training needs analysis (TNA) has been performed on Retail Sport as well as an analysis of the company's strengths, weaknesses opportunities, and threats (SWOT). Several key areas of training have been identified. To fulfill these training needs, on-the-job as well as off-the-job training methods have been proposed for the employees of Retail Sport, across all levels.

Finally, a policy document that outlines all of the requirements and training processes for all employees is prepared and contained within the appendix. This document will form part of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) of Retail Sport Ltd.

## Training Needs Analysis (TNA)

At Retail Sports, TNA would be a crucial aspect of overall company growth and development, as HR is the most important asset and investment to the company. The three new stores to be opened need the employees to work to their best of abilities, as a standard has been already set by the older stores. In order to compete firstly with those stores, and then with their competitors, the new stores need their employees to be trained to match those standards and live upto it.



diagram, there exists a gap between the un-trained professionals and standard up-to-the-mark work. This gap needs to be filled in to assure the success of the company.

At Retail Sports, most of the employees have previously not worked for a sports retail before, though they have a lot of experience in the retail field. This creates a gap, and TNA identifies this gap; and acts as an alarm to indicate who, what, why, and when training is to be given.

TNA would not only help them uncover gaps within their workforce, but also define what kind of training is to be given, at which level of hierarchy. There would be costs involved for the training process, but these costs would be more of an investment, than a purchase. Retail Sports will be able to gauge their employee performance before and after the training, and compare and evaluate the results.

### **SWOT Analysis**

The reason of doing a SWOT analysis for Retail Sport Ltd. is to identify the strengths because the company is trying to enter the new market. SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis is used to analyse and evaluate the business by Retail Sport. If any business is entering the new market, it is crucial for the company to know its internal strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats before entering which can help the company to expand and grow. Strengths and weaknesses are considered as internal factors on which a retailer has more control. On the contrary, opportunities and threats are external factors, which are positive and negative situations. The first step in doing SWOT analysis is to identify certain strengths initially. The possible strengths of Retail Sport are a strong presence in Ireland and reputation in the sports retail industry, acceptance by customers of excellent service provided, highly specialised equipment and supplies, and that they are equipped with the latest technology. Another strength is the company being one of the largest and most widespread sports retail in Ireland. They can sell the equipment at wholesale price to increase the customer base in the new market which they want to enter. Additionally, they can offer some unique products which other sports retailers are not doing currently in Ireland. Any company who wants to enter the new markets should focus more on their strengths. Retail companies should not just identify their strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats; they must also use their lists to develop various marketing strategies (Suttle, 2016). The weaknesses of the company helps them understand the

flaws within their system of working. The weaknesses of Retail Sport are a weak focus on process innovation, more reliability on retail store sales to sell, and staff that are work-oriented as opposed to result-oriented. Their opportunities are the ability to move into European and Asian markets, have more focus on the online market, focus on upcoming European Sports Events, start manufacturing of sports equipment, and have Economies of Scale. Possible threats are local retailers coming up with reliable and cheap sports products, other official sponsors of sporting events, having to catch up with new technology, and the fluctuation in price of raw material.

### **On-the-Job Training**

In implementing a new customer care training program for all store employees, on-the-job training could prove beneficial for Retail Sport Ltd. Some training and development practices are shadowing and mentoring. These are viable options because they are cost-effective. The mentors would most likely be the Store Managers, so nobody would have to be hired from the outside to come in and teach/mentor. Therefore, this would not be expensive and the employees learning from the instruction would know they are getting accurate information from competent teachers. The employees can also refer to them at any time following the on-the-job training because Store Managers are available for day-to-day questions and concerns, unlike a hired, external trainer who would not be as easily accessible after the initial training. With that, Store Managers must be the example, be available, and follow through with their teachings. Being such small regional stores, Store Managers at Retail Sport Ltd. can be under much scrutiny. McKinsey supported this:

To ensure that the lessons stick when training ends, companies must have meaningful support from the relevant leaders beforehand...we've seen many training programs stall when leaders agree with program goals in principle yet fail to reflect them in their own behavior, thereby signaling to employees that change isn't necessary (2010).

The Store Managers of the three regional stores have sufficient experience as well, which is advantageous for training and development practices. They have access to the vision and goals of RetailSport.com regional management (Managing Director, Finance Director, and Marketing Manager). They are able to accurately portray the long-term strategic goals of the organization.

With on-the-job training like mentoring and shadowing, the employee typically receives one-on-one attention and instruction. This ensures a safe environment for the employee, as well as sustainable knowledge.

However, there are some risks to mitigate. Not every employee learns the same way and may need a different form of training and development. It is important to keep in mind the three new regional stores. The more diverse workplaces such as the Athlone, Co. Westmeath, for instance, has a higher chance of encountering cultural issues like language, employee/employer relationships, business customs, and workplace environments. This is an important factor to take into account. Future stores like Naas, Co. Kildare and Sligo town may not be as susceptible to such situations because most are Irish workers. Another point that might discourage mentoring and shadowing would be the possibility of mentors and/or shadowers teaching inefficient or incorrect ways of doing the job. To prevent this challenge, “train the trainer” workshops should be implemented prior to any training. This will ensure that corporate goals and vision are incorporated consistently in the on-the-job training. With this, there also needs to be a training manual as a point of reference for those who learn in different styles. Store Managers serving as mentors do not necessarily guarantee that they are effective trainers. Although the Store Managers of the new three regional stores seem to have plenty of experience, this is not always synonymous with being a suitable trainer. Mentoring and/or shadowing may also be time-consuming. The mentor must take time to explain and demonstrate different tasks to the mentee, which may be taking time from the mentor’s essential everyday duties.

### **Off-the-Job Training**

Off-the-job training refers to multiple forms of training and development that do not take place in an employee’s normal workplace but instead are performed in a designed learning environment, delivered by a trained professional. There are external methods of training and development, including external training courses, online training courses and workshops, seminars, simulation exercises, observing an external high performing firm’s procedures, apprenticeships or mentoring by a hired consultant (Huang, 2001). Typically, off-the-job training is better suited to training specific new skills not currently practiced in the current environment. Although these methods are an excellent way for employees to learn new skills, knowledge, or abilities, they come with the downside of being costly for the employer. They typically involve hiring a professional to deliver the courses, renting of suitable learning space, and travel

expenses for employees--all of which make them a larger financial burden for the organisation. As they are commonly performed in an external environment, they also require employees to sacrifice their work hours to attend the training programs. This is a time-based expense on the employer as it means time spent where work is not getting done. The employer must balance the time and financial burden with the expected rewards for off-the-job training to be a success.

Retail Sport currently employ a diverse workforce in terms of gender, age and have will employ a total of 129 employees across multiple job roles with varying experience in customer care. It would not be only management that will require training in customer care, but staff at all levels and they will all need to be brought up to the same knowledge level for the training to be effective. The advantage of adopting an off-the-job training approach would be that the training program could be held in the form of conferences and lectures which could cater for the large number of staff at one time, minimising the time spent away from their ordinary jobs. Specialized, skilled staff could be employed to deliver the courses ensuring the material is understood correctly.

Another suitable strategy for delivering training material would be the use of online courses in which the employees may take in their own time and in which they must obtain a certain score. This would provide the training for the large number of employees while lowering the cost of the external training by eliminating the need for rental of a venue and lecturer. This has become popular in the form of gamification (Kapp, 2012), whereby the staff could enter a "learning game" in which they play a character role that will go through a retail interaction. The aim of this would be to teach through interaction within the game.

An extremely useful strategy would be to send the key floor staff that interact with customers daily, into a high performing store or rival store to observe their practices and go through their customer care system. Perhaps even sending the shop assistants through their own process in store would highlight the potential issues with the current system in place. This would help the employees "to learn their way out of problems rather than try to apply known solutions to them" (Baldwin et al, 1997). This approach may not work on a large scale but it may be useful for the floor staff to understand the customer interactions and the correct way to deal with customer needs.

A further method that would be particularly useful would be to place the current employees in a role based situation with a customer care professional. This would help them be

more empathic with customers in the stores as they would understand both sides of the interaction with customers. This would allow the sales team and managers to develop a new policy for customer relations management (CRM).

Analoui identified a major problem associated with off-the-job training, being that it requires management to ensure that the learning material is taken back and employed in the actual workplace. This could be overcome by appointing each store manager to ensuring that the training is effective and implemented immediately across all stores.

Perhaps the most important obstacle faced in using this off-the-job strategy is the diversity of the workforce. Retail sport may need to use a combination of training methods to account for this diversity. For example, the older demographic in the workforce may be more accepting of more traditional learning methods such as lectures or conferences, and they may be hesitant to learn via online courses or gamification as they may see this as more of a game than a learning approach. The opposite may be true of the younger demographic who may prefer the learning style of online lectures, webinars, or gamification because they may find conferences a waste of time. It should be the duty of the store managers (who should have some experience in customer care) to determine which methods are suitable for the members of their team, and the training methods should fit with the preferred learning style of the employee.

Furthermore, the company is already performing well in its sector showing that it has a successful culture within the organisation and has effective sales and marketing strategies. Any external training and development specialist should first observe and understand this successful culture and develop a training program that fits with the culture of Retail Sport, in conjunction with the current management.

Lastly, the cost of off-the-job training for a relatively small firm such as Retail Sport may be beyond budgetary limits. In order to make a case for upper management to accept these off-the-job methods despite the higher cost, a cost benefit analysis would need to be performed for each training method and the cost should be pitted against the benefits of undergoing the training in order to justify if the case is worth it for the organisation or not.

## **Evaluation**

Using the Kirkpatrick's model to evaluate is seen as the most effective way for trainers to measure their training in an objective setting. The model is broken down into four levels to

discuss effectiveness which include Reaction, Learning, Behaviour, & Results. Each level provides an evaluation which must be met in order to progress to the next level. For example, if participants did not learn at Level 1 (Reaction), they cannot progress to Level 2 (Learning) as it will reveal barriers to learning.

The model is generally popular amongst organisations as it helps to critically analyse the effectiveness and impact of training so that an organisation can improve in the future. It represents a straightforward guide about the kinds of questions that should be asked and the criteria that may be appropriate.

However, there are several limitations and restrictions of this model. One major issue that companies may think about the model is that it can be time consuming and also very expensive to carry out levels 3 and 4. This statement is backed up by an ASTD survey that states 91% of organizations evaluate at level 1 (reactions), 54% at level 2 (learning), 23% at level 3 (behavior change), and 8% at level 4 (impact on results) (Shepard, 2008). In fact, most training evaluations in organizations have historically focused on collecting only reaction measures (Grider, Capps, & Toombs, 1988). This is because evaluation at levels 3 and 4 is often seen to be difficult to measure. Hence, trainers are encouraged to have targeted outcomes in place as it is seen to be more manageable to conduct these evaluations. If these levels are not fully complete, it often leads to a misleading view of training effectiveness, thus leading to a narrowed focus on an organization's development and growth.

As stated above, some companies ignore levels 3 and 4 for differing reasons. Companies need to be prepared to embrace these levels as it will only benefit them in the long term as the challenge is to remember that 'the end is the new beginning' (Kirkpatrick, 2016).

To conclude, the Kirkpatrick model provides one technique for appraisal of the evidence of any reported training program and could be used to evaluate whether a training program is likely to meet the needs and requirements of both the organization implementing the training and the staff who will participate (Smidt, Ballandin, Sigafoos, & Reed, 2009). Although there may be flaws and limitations within the Kirkpatrick model, the majority of organizations would be extremely happy if their training and learning evaluation were planned through the Kirkpatrick model.

Questionnaires, surveys and focus groups are also good ways in which companies get feedback on different training practices. Questionnaires can be an important element in the

success of an organization. At times a company can often underestimate the importance of the questions asked within this questionnaire. Questions need to have a clear meaning and to ask the right questions to the right people, A questionnaire can be described as a method of conversation between two people which in return will provide positive feedback for the company. Advantages of conducting a questionnaire include: large amounts of data can be collected from a large number of people; it is practical; and when data is collected, it can be used to compare and contrast other research, as well as measure change. However, as there are plenty of advantages for conducting a questionnaire, there are also some flaws. At times, it may be hard to tell if the respondent is being truthful and if they have put too much thought into it. Researchers may sometimes not get enough information back from the questionnaires as they are usually short and without an explanation (Brace, 2008).

Similarly, the use of surveys can be a useful tool for researchers in gathering information. They are easy to conduct and can be very cost-efficient, along with being extremely flexible as companies tend to use online surveys, phone surveys and paper surveys. They see it as easy means of communication with their customers.

Focus group interviews nurture different perceptions and points of view and are used to gather information for discovery, benchmarking, evaluating, verifying perceptions, feelings, opinions, and thoughts (Patton, 1990). Focus groups can be seen as useful tools to companies as they can resolve potential weaknesses of a particular program. However, it is important that companies employ an experienced training instructor as failure to do so can often lead to misuse of information.

## **Conclusions**

Several aspects of introducing a new customer care training program have been outlined and discussed above. A SWOT and a TNA analysis were used to identify the strengths of the company and also the opportunities and training needs that face Retail Sport. To summarise, a single “one size fits all” approach would most likely not be suitable for Retail Sport to adopt. Management need to recognise the diversity of their workforce and that one single training approach will not suit everyone. It has been suggested that a variety of on and off-the-job training methods be used and that management are responsible for ensuring that staff take the training back to their working environment and implement their learning there. This can

successfully be monitored and evaluated using Kirkpatrick's model. It has also been suggested that the Store Managers should use their experience to mentor the current staff in customer care policies, but that care must be taken to ensure they are credible teachers. If not, a "teaching the teacher" approach would be needed to train the managers in how to best pass on their skills and knowledge. Finally, the personnel chosen to deliver the training programs should be aware of the culture within Retail Sport and the training programs should align with this culture and vision of the company.

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