

Treats for trainers

Debbie Carter finds out how the Borough of Telford & Wrekin has been using 'brain-friendly learning' to invigorate its trainers

The Borough of Telford & Wrekin has a reputation as an effective council, and one of the key contributors to its success is the learning and development team.

The council recently moved to new premises and wanted to refresh its own skills and provide a new stimulus to its learning and development programme.

Realising the key role that support staff play in transferring effective learning, the L&D team introduced 'brain-friendly' learning techniques. These would deliver learning that was enjoyable, stimulating, memorable and easily applied.

A clutch of awards testify to Telford & Wrekin's forward-thinking and innovation:

- Overall performance has been recently reaffirmed as 4 star (excellent) by the Audit Commission;
- The HR team are regional winners of the LSC Workforce Development Investors in People Implementation Plan 2005;
- For the fourth year running, the Council's personnel and development team has won a national award for the excellence of its HR service.

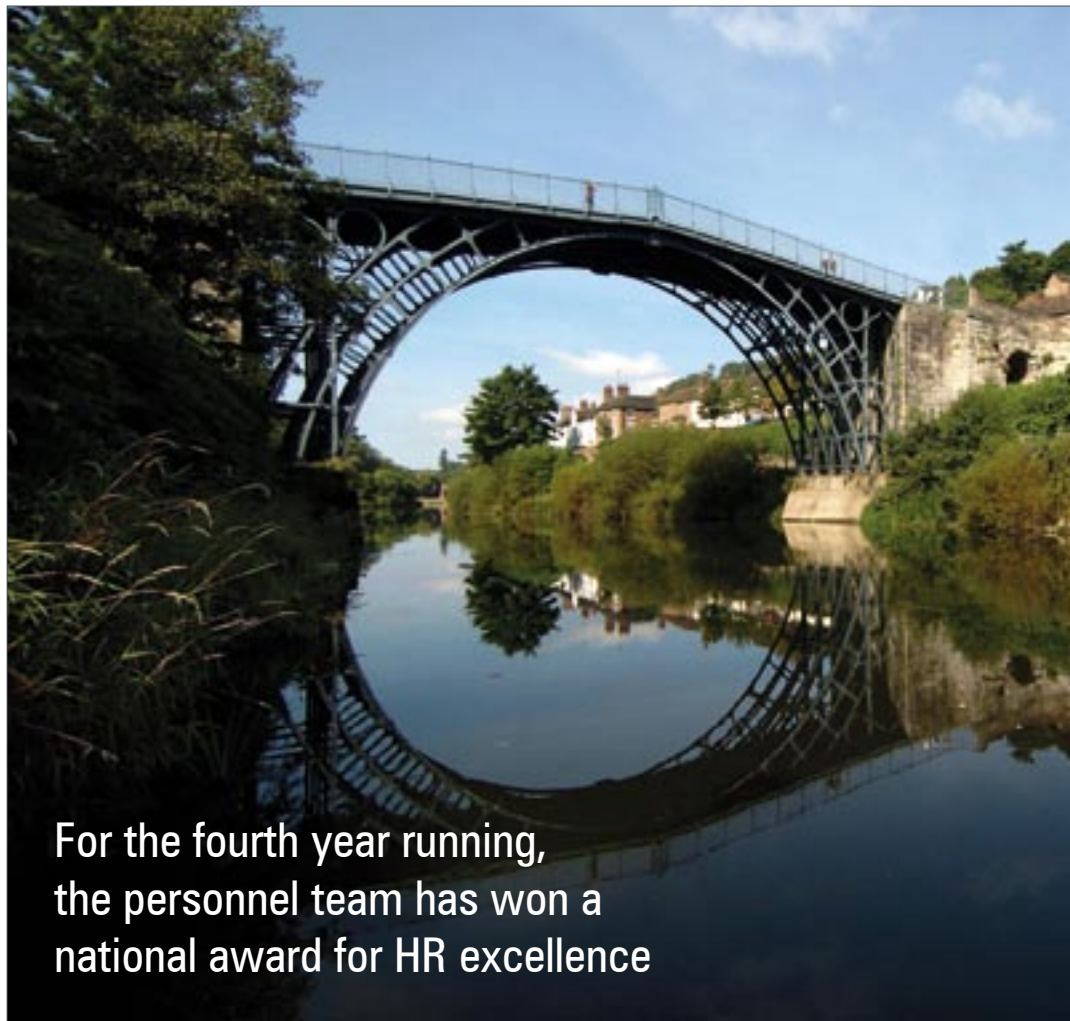
The contribution of everyone within the council is recognised in gaining these awards and there is strong commitment to the training

and continuous personal development of all employees.

The overarching aim of the HR team is to 'contribute to the achievement of the council objectives by putting in place strat-

egies, policies and practices that enable the organisation to optimise contributions made by its people'.

L&D manager Marie Whitefoot described her team's role as ensuring that employees



For the fourth year running, the personnel team has won a national award for HR excellence

have access to appropriate learning, and development opportunities that are relevant to the corporate organisation. This means delivering transferable skills that are a priority for the organisation, such as customer service, management development, health and safety, and equality; as well as organising a comprehensive corporate induction including some mandatory courses.

The contract to deliver the training was awarded to Stellar Learning, a training company that has been in operation since 2001, with the aim of developing people to be active learners, encouraging their innovation, creativity and involvement so that they can reach for their own stars.



Whilst actively applying brain-friendly learning to many areas of management and development training, Stellar Learning has an additional ambition to increase the use of innovative training techniques in the IT world, putting learners' requirements before those of software or hardware.

The L&D department wanted to relaunch with new skills of its own

So a key goal is to work with learning and development teams, encouraging them to incorporate practical, pragmatic techniques that infuse fun and energy into learning - especially into those areas that are traditionally tagged as 'boring' or 'difficult'.

Stella Collins from Stellar Learning explains her company's work with the council: 'In 2003 T&W wanted something innovative for Learning at Work Day to encourage people who didn't normally attend training to get involved, and our Brain Boosts product fit the picture (two-hour sessions on a range of topics, aimed at groups of about 20 people).

'Since then we've made regular trips to Telford to deliver Brain Boosts - particularly [the session] 'Enhance your Memory', which means staff are more likely to remember your name if you go into a council office in Telford.'

Whilst already having an impressive record, and a high degree of satisfaction with delivery of learning to employees, L&D felt it was time to go further. The move to new premises presented an opportunity to relaunch with some new skills of its own, that modelled the culture and style for which the borough was recognised.

It was also important to give the trainers some development - they were often so busy thinking about developing others that it was easy to neglect themselves. Now was the time to have some 'Treats for Trainers'.

Whitefoot says: 'Some of our topics are traditionally perceived as 'dull or dry', like council policies, and we wanted new techniques which would be able to inject some fun, energy and, most importantly, ways to make the learning stick.'

Marie was clear that she wanted to spread a culture of informality, friendliness, innovation and creativity across the borough, so decided to extend the invitation to other trainers within the council and its partner organisations.

The treats

After initial discussions with the L&D team, Stella Collins and Ann Grindrod of Simply Learning started to design a workshop to meet the organisational objectives, involving:

- creative approaches to training design to invigorate training;
- how to make training stick;
- how to make the dullest/driest of subjects at least a bit exciting;
- how to send delegates away feeling a 'wow' factor - and for this to be reflected in evaluations.

After gaining agreement about the general structure and some key elements, they sent a questionnaire to all participants to ascertain which particular topics were important to their needs. They also wanted to know what experience participants had.

The information from the learning needs analysis was used to shape the design of a three-day workshop. They were confident that, so long as they had all the basic elements, they would be able to do further tailoring 'on the day' to meet any more individual requirements.

The learning state

The first stage in accelerating the learning process was to create the appropriate state for learning, and this started well in advance of the workshop.

- A relevant theme was devised to become an anchor;
- Colourful, themed invitations were sent;
- The LNA document was carefully worded to encourage people to be honest about their personal development;
- The LNAs were responded to with friendly emails, and, where appropriate, phone calls;
- A brain-friendly menu was provided by the T&W catering department;
- The training facility was large and airy, with plenty of natural light and breakout space.

Stellar's Collins explains: 'On the day, we created an art gallery in the coffee area with colourful, practical information about brain-friendly learning. This was studied by our participants, and delegates for other courses running that day. It certainly generated interest in what L&D were up to that week.

'We have always handled training events like hosting a party, so it seemed natural to join the participants in the coffee area to welcome them to the workshop and get to know them before the formal part of the day commenced. We were, therefore, delighted when some of the experienced trainers commented that they had found this to be a really positive experience. From now on they intend interacting informally first, getting to know people and gauging participants' state for the coming event.'

The training room was decorated to create curiosity, generate interest and make a com-

The Borough of Telford & Wrekin's training centre



fortable environment. This was achieved by appealing to all five senses by using posters, music, toys, sweets and fruit, natural smells and fresh flowers.

Energy

Grindrod and Collins delivered the workshop together to provide a mix of approaches and also to maintain high energy levels, as there was a lot of material to cover in three days.

The brain-friendly lunches were very successful and prevented post-lunch lethargy. Collins describes an experiment: 'We wanted to contrast post-lunch activities. On day one we had an appropriate, energising activity to keep people awake, and on day two we built in a visualisation, complete with relaxing music and dimmed lights.

Some people commented that it was quite hard to emerge from their relaxed state but, as trainers, we noticed very good energy levels that afternoon.'

The participants observed that by the end of each day they felt as if they had worked really hard, but their brains were buzzing and they were excited about putting their learning into practice.

Review

At the end of every session everyone was asked to think about how this new learning would affect their design and delivery. Those who wanted even more review time were encouraged to use the breaks to continue their reflection.

Memory and anchoring

The model that was developed for the learning delivery had three key elements: the learning brain, a results-based process for learning, and creativity.

For Telford & Wrekin the aim was to help its people anchor this learning, so the model was adapted to suit the borough's specific environment. It was called The Iron Bridge Model.

The whole team

During the initial workshop the L&D trainers were particularly impressed by the importance of state to learning, and realised that this approach would only be effectively delivered if the whole team was involved, including trainers and support staff. It was agreed to deliver a one-day introduction to brain-friendly learning to the complete L&D team.

It was important for the whole team to be together for this workshop. This meant that three of the participants would be revisiting some of the same material, so a new theme for the day was introduced, and the learning was approached from different angles with fresh activities. The trainers said they really enjoyed re-examining some of the concepts and felt it was good reinforcement.

All the learning took place on-site, so taking out the entire L&D team for a day (without them rushing back to pick up emails or answer the phone) was quite a challenge. However, T&W rose to it by very positively declaring that though they were on-site, they were off duty, and brought in adequate administrative cover.

The highlight of the day was both trainers and support staff reinforcing their commitment as a team by communicating and understanding each others' roles, so that they could add value to the experience of their customers – the learners.

Results

Reactions to both workshops were really positive, with lots of energy quickly put to use in thinking through, and designing changes to procedures and course materials (whilst still managing all the practical activities in transferring to a new site).

A follow-up evaluation with the participants three months later demonstrated positive and measurable results.

All the trainers were getting better evaluations in their redesigned courses (on top of a high level of satisfaction originally). The L&D team noted that they were thinking from the learners' point of view and understanding some of the diversity of needs that they come across, in and out of the training room.

One participant had particular success from rapidly integrating brain-friendly learning into mandatory courses; the Health and Safety course has been completely rewritten with a host of new resources, including a collection of Lego firemen and policemen. In the previous year, attendance on this course numbered 400 – since introducing brain-friendly learning, attendance is already up to 600.

Word of mouth has spread the message that this course is fun, memorable and useful. Senior staff are so pleased with the results, they have awarded this trainer a pay rise.

Telford and Wrekin's L&D department altered some of their processes and documents so that they are more user-friendly and encourage a really good state for learning.



Other trainers feel more inspired and found it easier to work with disparate groups – one said she was able to train a 12 year-old and a 50 year-old at the same time very effectively.

All the participants think more creatively, are positive about their work and are 'finding life more colourful'. Their delegates now comment on the variety of training methods and range of training materials that have contributed to their retention of learning. The higher levels of interactivity are also valued. Now:

The L&D team with some of their training tools

- Trainers are more motivated, feel more creative and enjoy work more;
- The L&D team are focused on engaging learners well before they come to a workshop;
- Management are finding that more people attend mandatory workshops and retain more information; and
- Learners like attending training, learn more and apply it successfully at work

So, Treats for Trainers has turned out to be treats for all. ■