



Bodyshop wins London's employer of the year title

AJC Wilson puts emphasis on training so employees understand the entire business process

By Rachel Burgess

If staff are not learning, jobs become stale and boring and employees move on, according to Paul Cunningham, operations director at AJC Wilson.

The Dagenham-based bodyshop has recently won small employer of the year at the Learning and Skills Council's Skills for London Awards after being nominated by further education centre Thames Gateway College.

Cunningham estimates AJC Wilson spent around £25,000 in 2008 on employee investment, not including productivity lost.

In recent years, staff have been taught to understand the entire business process.

Staff are now given the opportunity to shape their roles to benefit themselves and the business. Examples include six non-productives who have recently completed an NVQ in business improvement techniques. Another six

are now studying for it.

"We truly believe in succession planning," said Cunningham.

Indeed, he joined in administration six years ago and is now one of five directors and a shareholder.

Training

Of 14 productive workers, seven are Automotive Technician Accreditation (ATA) qualified and three are senior ATA qualified. Cunningham said when staff pass "it changes their whole outlook".

Training needs are discussed in one-to-one feedback sessions. "We ask them where they want to be, discuss strengths and weaknesses and develop a training plan."

Most employees want to progress, but Cunningham said it would not "force staff out of their comfort zone" with training.

However, in a fast moving industry,

instruction is necessary to keep up-to-date with products

When employees go for external training, management ensure specific objectives are met by having a meeting with them when they return and then again at three and six months.

Recruiting staff

Local school leavers visit AJC Wilson for work experience and shadow one of the technicians. Last year, Wilson's took on two apprentices in this way. Cunningham said he likes to recruit people with a blank page rather than those who are already set in ways different to those of AJC Wilson.

There are plans for expansion when the market stabilises and this will mean increased numbers of staff. There are some productives that are keen to take on more responsibility and





growth will provide a good opportunity for promotions from within.

Salaries and rewards

Cunningham said money alone does not keep staff loyal.

Technicians' salaries are based on sold hours.

Aside from basic salaries, staff might receive random rewards for particularly good work. An example was two administrative staff recently did a brilliant job while a colleague was away and received a cash reward as a thank you.

If an employee comes to ask for a rise, it's usually a bad sign added Cunningham. It's about showing them they are valued with signs of appreciation.

Its management has recently decided to give a car with a year's insurance to the best performing apprentice. There

are also trips out for staff every quarter. Most recently, the team went greyhound racing.

Mentoring

All new apprentices are assigned a mentor who they work alongside for a year or so.

Cunningham said having a mentor means apprentices learn much quicker and have someone to turn to.

"It gives them more of a focused and relaxed attitude as a mentor gives day-to-day support. Apprentices know they can turn to them without fear of retribution."

Staff retention

Only two staff have left the company in recent years. "They just don't leave us," said Cunningham.

One moved to Wigan as a newly-wed. The other started up his own

business and still does work for AJC Wilson.

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