

GLASGOW SCIENCE CENTRE, GLASGOW, SCOTLAND

Delivering world-class service through Employee Participation and Development

Introduction

Glasgow Science Centre is the fourth top paid visitor attraction in Scotland and welcomes 480,000 visitors annually through its doors on the banks of the River Clyde. Housed in a state-of-the-art facility, which was funded as a UK Millennium Project, Glasgow Science Centre was one of the flagship projects underpinning the redevelopment of the Pacific Quay quarter. In the eight years since it opened, the Centre has become the leading Science centre in Scotland and is widely respected for its innovative practices in the areas of accessibility, outreach and employee development.

As a five-star Scottish Visitor attraction, Glasgow Science Centre offers a wide range of facilities to tourists and locals alike. The centre is home to five key attractions: (i) the science mall; (ii) Scotland's only IMAX theatre; (iii) the climate change theatre; (iv) the planetarium and (v) the 127 metre high Glasgow tower. Proactive involvement is a key feature of the visitor experience, with live science shows, workshops and displays running daily. Making the visitor experience fun, challenging and inspiring are central to vision of the Centre.

Accessibility is a key principle underpinning the work of Glasgow Science Centre. The Centre was the first science centre in the UK to employ a community liaison manager. Mark Hughes works closely with regeneration groups, local community groups, youth groups and groups of disabled people to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to access the resources of the Centre. Such has been the success of this initiative that Glasgow Science Centre has received "Positive about disabled people" accreditation. The Centre also employs a specific outreach team who visit schools in remote areas; attend local festivals and community events; hold displays in shopping malls and run CPD science-based programmes for teachers.

This case study will examine the employment strategies underpinning Glasgow Science Centre's delivery of a world class service to visitors. In particular, it will look at how the Centre sources employees and the key characteristics expected from those working at the Centre. It will explore employee involvement in decision-making and consider how employees have actively participated in determining the strategic direction of the Centre. Finally, it will discuss the issue of employee development and analyse the structures in place for delivering world-class service.

Sourcing High Quality Employees

Glasgow Science Centre employs 115 permanent staff, including engineers, security staff, science advisors, administrative staff, customer service staff and café staff. The centre is a 24/7 operation requiring a wide range of skilled staff, including engineers, technicians, catering staff, administrative support, and event planners. Consequently

sourcing high quality employees who are mission-focused and mission-driven is a key priority for the Centre.

A positive attitude, good team-working skills and strong communication skills (verbal, written and presentation skills) are necessary for employees. But above all, the Centre seeks out individuals who can deliver on visitor expectations. Passion for science is thus a key requirement, particularly for customer-facing staff as HR manager Niall Cockburn explains:

They don't necessarily have to have qualifications. They don't need to possess a doctorate in science. They need to have a strong interest in science and some of our best science communicators have a massive interest in it. It's probably their hobby and they are here to take that hobby forward and bring it out to the people of Glasgow and Scotland.

Getting individuals who are passionate about science and who are friendly and helpful contributes to creating a positive uplifting environment for both staff and visitors. Roy Aitken, Retail Purchasing Manager for Glasgow Science Centre describes the working environment in the following terms:

Within the Science Centre, the working environment is absolutely fantastic; everyone tries to help each other to get through what you need to on a day-to-day basis. The nice thing about it is that we're a visitor attraction – so it's kind of like Disney, I guess. You are coming in to have a fun day out – mum and dad are coming with the kids to have a fun day out. So, staff and visitors attitudes in the building are positive.

In furtherance of its mission to be as socially inclusive and accessible as possible, all new vacancies at Glasgow Science Centre are advertised through the local jobs centre, the Glasgow south-west regeneration agency, the ethnic minority enterprise council and other community groups. Currently, over 40% of the workforce at the centre comes from regeneration postcodes within Glasgow.

Employee Participation at Glasgow Science Centre

Employees are expected to take an active role in the development of Glasgow Science Centre in a number of ways. Open and honest communication between management and staff has been critical to positive employee relations. Meetings of the board of directors take place every week, with minutes of weekly meetings and monthly board reports made available to staff. Staff meetings take place every two months. At these meetings, staff are briefed on the organisation's financial situation and strategic direction, and this is followed by presentations from individual staff members or departments.

Employee performance is assessed through the annual staff appraisal system, which takes place in April, with a six monthly follow-up review at the beginning of November. This is supported by continuous feedback on an informal basis and staff are free to

make suggestions for the improvement of standards and processes. The Climate Change Theatre was developed as a staff initiative and it remains the only such venue in Europe.

Glasgow Science Centre has also run a number of “ideas weekends” to capitalise on staff suggestions and proposals for improvement. Through staff focus-group and poster sessions, staff were invited to comment on areas for improving customer service, and identifying priorities for the development of the Centre. The “ideas weekends” initiative has led to a number of significant improvements for staff and visitors at Glasgow Science Centre, including the creation of e-mail accounts for part-time and casual staff to keep them informed of developments; the establishment of a more comfortable staff room, and changes to the retail and café products being carried at the Centre.

Staff Development at Glasgow Science Centre

Ensuring staff are trained and developed to the highest standards has been critical to the success of Glasgow Science Centre. The Centre was recognized for its commitment to training and development at the National Training Awards 2007 for the learning module system that it established. The key driver behind the creation of the learning module system was the need to match the centre’s five-star visitor attraction status with a five-star approach to staff development. In the early stages of its development, Glasgow Science Centre discovered a mismatch in its staffing skill-set and the solution lay in the creation of the learning modules. Niall Cockburn, HR manager explains the dilemma faced by the Centre in the following terms:

There were some frustrations from managers who were getting a lot of people in with different skills and experience and some frustrations from staff who were working solely in one area. We were bringing the people in with a strong customer service or strong science background. So, they were one or the other. Training one to do the other wasn't always possible – we didn't have the time. On the science side, we found a lot of scientists who did not have a customer service background – very academic in what they were doing – our learning modules have helped enormously in giving them this customer service side.

Currently there are 52 modules available to staff at the Centre covering everything from how to wash glasses to Glasgow Tower training and specialist equipment training. To incentivise staff, groups of modules are linked to pay scales, and progression through the modules is often related to career planning and individual motivation. The modules have allowed the Centre to benefit from a multi-skilled, flexible workforce, providing individual employees with job variation and challenging work.

Management development has also been prioritized at the Centre. A Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) accredited smart management programme was implemented to develop the skills of managers and supervisors. This programme was delivered online with face-to-face mentoring support sessions organized on a monthly basis and delivered by “Training Matters” – a Glasgow based training consultancy company. This programme allowed managers and supervisors access to management education

materials, but also provided time for reflection about what the organisation was doing and how they were doing it.

Glasgow Science Centre has also participated in the Investors in People programme. This process encouraged greater reflection and planning in relation to staff development and delivering higher levels of employee performance through more effective people management.

Conclusion

This case study examined the importance of developing staff and encouraging staff participation with a view to achieving world-class service delivery. The success achieved by Glasgow Science Centre can be attributed to a commitment to sourcing staff with a positive mental attitude, developing these staff in core areas of the business, and recognizing that staff are an important source of ideas and innovation. Both the ideas weekend and learning module system have contributed significantly to individual and organisational learning and provide a strong foundation upon which to base future growth and development plans.