

Regional retailers get into training

The disadvantage of geographical peripherality meant that retailers in the north west have found it difficult to avail of traditional staff training methods, but IBEC's Retail Skillnet has stepped into the breach to help meet their needs

Approved at the end of 1999 as one of the first networks under the Training Networks Programme, the IBEC Retail Skillnet is one of the longest established. Its impact is acknowledged across all participating firms and since its launch, network members have reported a substantial reduction in staff turnover and absenteeism as well as an overall increase in productivity. Over 400 employees of member firms have so far gained certification in the eight modules of the Retail Operations certificate: Customer Service, Security, Merchandising, Sales Procedures, Stock Control, Effective Working Relationships, Retail Health & Safety and Communications.

The IBEC Retail Skillnet is based in the north west region, with member companies that have outlets from Clifden to the Inishowen peninsula. Promoted by IBEC from its regional base in Donegal town, the Retail Skillnet began with just 12 participating companies. It now boasts 78 member firms and is looking to expand by co-operating across the Border and through replicating the network model in the Dublin and Cork areas. It is the proud developer of the Retail Operations Level 2 module of the National Certificate in Retail Studies recognised by the National Council for Vocational Awards, now the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). At the management level the Skillnet has seen 78 of its member firm managers graduate from Magee College, University of Ulster with the Certificate in Retail Management Practice gained through outreach courses it organised in the Sligo and Letterkenny Institutes of Technology.

Network Director Seán Carlin has himself had long experience of retailing in the region and came to the Skillnet from the well known McElhinneys Stores where he was General Manager. He explains that the whole concept was initially driven by the real needs of retailers in the north west rather than great ambition on the part of the early members of the network. With few major towns or third-level colleges and dispersed retailers, training in any

traditional form was always going to be a geographical challenge. Sending people away on courses is unrealistic for most shops. "Clearly, some form of on-the-job training and development was required. From the point of view of encouraging young people into a retailing career as opposed to simply getting a job in a shop, 'learn as you earn' makes sense. The general Skillnets model of generating standards for competence and knowledge that can be assessed and verified clearly fits the major part of the bill. But we also wanted to identify and develop modules of retail skills that would be objectively verifiable as a foundation level on which people could build a progression of professional skill levels in retailing through Occupational Qualification."

Workplace skills

In essence, the idea is that these are qualifications that recognise skills and knowledge as applied in the workplace. They are industry-led and based on what the individual employee can do as well as the relevant knowledge required to carry out the job. They are work-based, relate to work situations and are assessed in the workplace according to structured standard methods by trained internal assessors and external verifiers. From the employee's point of view this is an attractive way to achieve a qualification. It is accessible to all, has no entry requirements or age restrictions, is self-paced and is not run to a set timetable. Importantly, it is available in the workplace and assessed verbally with no overtones of school or exam culture. Highly practical and user-friendly resource material has been developed by the IBEC Retail Skillnet to assist participants, including multimedia presentations on CD-ROM.

The network has made a significant contribution to the development of a new training ethos within the network because, according to Seán Carlin, it addressed a need that existed within the sector for many years. This has been particularly noticeable among the small indigenous retailers.

"It acknowledges that local managements know best what standards they need and what they want their staff to be capable of – it supplies the infrastructure and the methodology to do that," says Carlin, reflecting the wide range of retail outlets the IBEC Retail Skillnet group is currently overseeing. The need for specialist modules aimed at pharmacies, garage forecourts and other



Seán Carlin, Network Director, IBEC Retail

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specifically tailored courses is constantly evaluated from feedback by attendees and management at store level.

Staff contribution

From the point of view of the employers, the scheme recognises and builds on employee's existing skills and experience, increases levels of motivation and enhances the contribution of all staff to the improved performance of the business. It is always aimed at the longer-term development of the business, so enabling managers and especially owner-managers to identify their training needs and set clear, measurable training targets. That investment in human resources in turn helps to build a flexible, multi-skilled and adaptable team that is better able to cope with changing business demands as well as assisting in recruitment. Retail Occupational Qualifications and the quality benchmarks that go with them are also recognised by ISO 9000 and other quality marks.

The management in participating companies believe that as a result of the Skillnet they are communicating

more effectively with their staff and many have reported a new 'buzz' in their stores. Many of the participant firms are very small businesses, which would not otherwise have had the resources to upskill their staff and offer opportunities similar to larger enterprises. Member workshops have enabled owner/managers particularly to share valuable experience and best practice information on key issues in their businesses. An example is the impact of rising insurance costs, where members were able to learn from each other and mutually develop strategies to contribute to a reduction in their premiums.

In addition to the Skillnet programme itself, many individual companies have been stimulated to introduce related measures on their own initiative, such as formal staff development programmes, annual appraisals, company handbooks and policy documents for clarity and guidance. Such added-value benefits of Skillnet participation ensure the benefits of the Skillnet will go beyond mere training and will have a beneficial impact on wider areas of the business.



Caroline Heagney, HR Manager, The O'Connor Group

The O'Connor Group

Founded by Seán O'Connor in Westport, this group of North Western stores is a Super Valu franchise now under the direction of the second generation of the family. It has extended to nine stores from Clifden to Claremorris and Kiltimagh and though Donegal town and Dungloe to Derry and Strabane in Northern Ireland. There are nearly 1,000 on the payroll, according to Human Resources manager Caroline Heagney, between part-time and seasonal staff to cope with six- and seven-day weeks and the extended opening hours of today's convenience retailing. Heagney was recruited three years ago, principally because of the increasing administrative demands in the HR environment today with tight legislative requirements covering recruitment, employment terms and staff relations, etc. "But when you've got the admin side settled, you have to look to the future and the positive things like retaining your best staff, attracting good young people as well as back-to-work candidates and so on."

That was the thinking that led Caroline Heagney and the O'Connor group to the IBEC Retail Skillnet and the concept of Retail Occupational Qualification. "We piloted the Skillnet training in two of our smaller and slightly remote stores, in Clifden and Dungloe. It was very successful and frankly that was principally because the staff made a success of it. They took pride in the very idea of accreditation from the first day."

The Group has gone on to run programmes in all of the shops in the Republic and incorporates the Skillnet process into the way it manages the business. Caroline Heagney's enthusiasm for this development has led her to act on the Retail Steering Committee leading the further development of the project. "The first and foremost thing about the Skillnet and why it works so well is that it is enterprise and workplace-led, developed and run by retailers and for retailers. It is down to earth and practical with the authority of real experience coming through every aspect."

Cost-effective

It is also cost-effective, because it is delivered at the workplace. Although it can be difficult to measure the results quantitatively, the O'Connor Group management is in no doubt about the overall value. "We have seen a positive effect across all the stores and certainly motivation has been raised, communications between managers and staff are better and there is a comfortable atmosphere and a new openness," says Heagney. "We believe that productivity has gone up – although that's hard to measure exactly, especially in the smaller stores – and certainly standards of customer service and individuals' performance in their jobs have improved."

Heagney points out that the Westport store recently won the Super Valu Store of the Year and the judging panel specifically referred to 'the high standards of customer care' which she believes can be directly attributed to the introduction of the Skillnet system and occupational qualifications.

"Our staff people have responded because the system puts the focus on them and how they do their jobs – proves that they do things well and know what they're about, with objective assessment and verification. It is also verbal and not like school examinations, so there is no fear factor and they actually enjoy mastering the elements. People take more responsibility and like the idea that there are best practice standards that everyone works to," she says.

At any one time these days there are about 150 O'Connors staff working through the Skillnets modules, at their own pace and encouraged by colleagues as well as management.

"It's a very competitive market today and our bigger competitors may match us on prices," says Heagney, "But they will find it considerably more difficult to match us on standards and service."

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Phil Noonan, Claremorris Super Valu

**Phil Noonan, Dairy Merchandiser,
Claremorris Super Valu**

Although she has about 15 years' experience in retailing of various kinds, it is only in recent years as a back-to-work mother of school-going children that Phil Noonan has developed a specialist expertise. She is responsible for the dairy merchandising in the Claremorris Super Valu branch of the O'Connor Group and has been an enthusiastic 'student' on the IBEC Retail Skillnet occupational qualification programme in the store.

Now four years on the staff, Phil Noonan is actually a permanent part-time employee, working 9.00 to 2.30 daily. Her domain of milk, cheese, yoghurt, butter and health spreads is one of the busiest sections of the store. There are constant requirements in terms of hygiene, refrigeration and temperature control, stock rotation and expiry date monitoring and so on. But an increasingly sophisticated market for cheese means there is plenty of opportunity – and challenge – to exercise her creative talents in product display. Customers can be tempted to try something new or simply attracted by a nice display to add a cheese product to their baskets.

"What I really like about the training is that it's practical, it has to do with what I know about and carry out day to day – and the assessments are equally practical and verbal. I wouldn't much care for exams at this stage!" Phil Noonan is clear that the system does give more job satisfaction and it is good to have her skills recognised: "Put it this way – I've spent 15 years in retailing of one sort or another, I've learned a great deal, but I had no 'qualification' as such. Now I do and it's based on objective assessment so I can be proud of it."

Customer Service was the first module Phil Noonan worked on. In a sense it was hardly needed because apparently when the Mystery Shopper reported on the store at quite an early stage of the programme she gained points for Claremorris by recommending and explaining an appropriate alternative for some product that the shop did not stock. "The actual learning involved is not difficult, especially since it is so directly related to what you are doing," she says. "It is often based on common sense or what an experienced person would tend to do anyway. But it is useful and interesting to put all the elements together, to see how different areas relate, to put 'best practice' in context."