



Gaining through training

David Gilliver reports on the training of non-professional staff, with customer skills particularly important in times of economic uncertainty

Training can be a thorny issue in the optical sector. For optometrists and dispensing opticians, one of the requirements for registration with the General Optical Council is participation in Continuing Education and Training (CET). But what about training for non-clinical staff? And in today's increasingly cut-throat retail sector, isn't effective training in people skills and commercial awareness almost as important as the clinical aspect?

'Any business, if it's going to survive, needs a skilled and trained workforce, and optics is no exception,' says Lt Colonel John Salmon, clerk of the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers, which trains optical technicians. 'It adds to job satisfaction and aids retention.'

'Within optics training is massively important,' says Mark Stables, director of retail training for Specsavers. 'The pay scales for retail optics are very similar to other retailers, but the amount of technical, personal and behavioural challenges that we give all optics staff in optical retailing is enormous.'

That training, however, although hopefully profitable in the long run, can be a costly business in the short term. 'If you're training the staff on a work day then those staff are not selling,' says Nick Girling, UK managing consultant for global training consultancy Krauthammer. 'That's a double cost and a real dilemma in optics because you need to train the professional staff in both clinical and non clinical areas – the more commercial and human behaviour focused things – but when you do that they're not producing.'

This means that in some cases training opportunities for those on the lower rungs can be limited, he maintains. 'A large organisation is going to look at whether its interests lie in really investing in a 19 or 20 year-old who could be gone in six months. So they don't tend to invest in that end of the market as they do at the higher end.'



The valued member of staff understands the commercial environment

This is clearly not the case across the board, however, and many of the multiples pride themselves on their structured training programmes for staff at all levels, seeing training as a key way of staying ahead of the game in a competitive market. 'For optical assistants and contact lens assistants we have a structured induction and three-tiered training programme that increases their technical ability and also their ability to understand the dispensing of more challenging prescriptions,' says Stables. 'The retail training department takes people from potentially a very limited understanding of optics through to the level where they can confidently apply to train as a professional dispensing optician, if that's what they want to do.'

Investing in quality

Boots also regards the provision of training opportunities at every level as a key driver of quality. 'We invest a lot of money in our pre-reg programme,' says head of professional resource and development, Richard Edwards. 'We do a lot of work to get people through their professional exams and once we get people qualified we really start to focus on the softer skills, the commu-

nication skills and the more holistic nature of the optometrist role.'

According to Girling, however, whose company has done extensive work with many of the multiples and independents, there is a fundamental problem across the wider optical sector in terms of the unrealistic expectations organisations can often have of how training should translate into day-to-day practice on the shop floor.

'Training in the optical sector is vital, but it's completely misunderstood,' he says. 'People think it's a panacea or a quick fix and it's not. To a large extent, even the people on the shop floor are trained in the technicalities of the products. Not many of them are trained in the behavioural skills needed to effect really good quality customer relations.'

While the realisation is sinking in that, in times of economic uncertainty and reduced customer spending, customer skills matter almost as much as clinical competencies, companies are singularly failing to understand how to turn this into effective business practice, he believes. 'They think that if they've trained someone to do something differently then the answer to their problem will come. But if you



want a person to change their behaviour in the workplace, the first thing they need to understand is the meaning of what's being asked of them.

'You can say "I'd like you to advise all the people that come through this door to have their eyes photographed with this new machine, and we're going to charge them 30 quid for doing this," he continues. "That person is then sent on a course with the assumption that they've been trained and not only do they know how to use the machine but they're confident approaching patients about using it.'

The reality, however, is often that employers fail to explain why using a particular piece of technology makes sense for the customer, and staff are anxious about what to do if the customer says no. 'You can train them as much as you like but when the manager walks away and leaves them on their own they don't change their behaviour,' he says. 'They'd come back "trained" but the uptake of this photograph option wouldn't have increased and the company wouldn't be able to understand why. Similarly, people are trained in contact lenses, but the market penetration of contact lenses in the UK is still way behind Europe and America.'

Workplace culture

A fundamental issue lies with workplace culture and whether it is supportive of a change in behaviour, he believes. If that's not the case, then any amount of training is effectively rendered little more than a box ticking exercise. Managers in particular, therefore, need to be seen to practise what they preach.

'You can train and train and the organisation comes back to the training company and says "your training didn't work", when they didn't create the right culture for the training to be implemented well,' he says. 'The other thing they need to consider is that the retail market is on its knees. What they have to be able to do is get more from the people coming through the door, and they do that through better behavioural skills.'

So effectively it comes down to a matter of companies winning hearts and minds within their organisation. 'Actually, we used to call our behavioural training "hearts and minds",' says Edwards. 'The essence is about getting staff, particularly professional staff, to really buy into the concept and get passionate about what they do. In our industry if you don't equip people with the skills they need they're very



Customer skills can matter almost as much as clinical competencies

quickly going to feel pretty uncomfortable and exposed and unlikely to stick around in your practice. The thing that makes you employable and a valued employee is an ability to understand the commercial environment in which your professional discipline now operates and be able to communicate with your customers in the most effective way possible.'

Staff support

Over at Specsavers, the company provides training on everything from employment law to business skills, but Stables says it has a robust approach towards making sure that training is properly focused and followed up with the right support. 'We have a structured tier system, but we also develop bespoke plans for people so it's not just a sheep dip approach,' he says. 'We provide comprehensive training needs analysis tools for store directors and managers to go through the needs of each member of staff and help them identify the appropriate training – it's not just going on a course. It's about when the training intervention needs to occur, what people need to do before the training and – in my view more importantly – what support there should be for individuals after training has taken place to help them develop those newly learned skills back on the shop floor or in the test room.'

Girling, however, believes that often it is the processes and systems within an organisation that are at fault. 'You train an optometrist to refer a patient to the retail staff with a really clever, good quality hand-over, but if the business is set up in such a way that the processes don't support it and there isn't anybody

available to give them to, the optometrist loses the motivation to try. After two or three goes of trying to implement the behaviour they've learned in the training room into the workplace they give up, as anyone would. Often a strategy is set by a company and delivered abstractly into the workforce. Training is only a part of it, and it can't work alone.'

So is this a widespread problem across the sector as a whole? 'I believe it is,' he says. 'People are becoming more aware that optometrists and dispensing opticians have to become more commercially-focused and people-focused, but the management even of some of the larger firms is still miles behind in running effective quality businesses. The people with the right model – culturally and systems-wise – are the people who are running away with the market.'

Balancing act

So what advice would he offer to the sector? 'I really believe that many companies need to look at their systems and processes – the alignment of different departments, reporting structures, appraisal structures, management tools and information tools – a lot of those need updating. The balance between clinical training and behavioural training – how to be with another human being to get the best out of them – is out of kilter. They mustn't lose the clinical focus, because ultimately they are clinicians, but they don't invest enough in the behavioural training of key performers. My advice would be to get the balance right and have a good look at the processes that underpin the training.' ●