

Category: Recruitment**Organisation: The Co-operative Group****Date: October 2007****EFA overview**

The Co-operative Group's 'altogether different' graduate programme has resulted in impressive diversity outcomes. Making diversity an integral part of the graduate recruitment process has been a key part of the branding behind the scheme.

For the 2005 intake, 27% of all applications were over 25, with 30% of those who gained a place on the programme in this group. In 2006, 24% of applications were over 25, with 23% of those appointed in this age group. In a recruitment sector traditionally the preserve of those straight out of university, these are extremely unusual results. The age diversity of the intake has resulted in managers having the utmost confidence that the best person for the job is offered the role, irrespective of their personal make up.

Initiative

The Co-operative Group has taken an 'altogether different' approach to graduate recruitment by opening their scheme up to all candidates regardless of age. An open policy initiated in 2000 was formalised in 2005.

Aims and purpose

- To ensure that the business was selecting from the broadest range of talent possible when recruiting for the graduate programme.
- To ensure that the best candidates were recruited to fill available positions, no matter what their age.

Business drivers

Changing UK demographics mean that the Group can no longer rely solely on traditional recruitment pools. While as a co-operative, exclusion of any group is against the values and principles on which the business is rooted.

Approach taken

From the outset considerable care and attention was exercised to ensure that the selection of external graduate recruitment partners was based on their ability to demonstrate commitment to and understanding of the Group's diversity requirements.

In order to ensure that the Co-operative Group continued to be attractive to this key population of talent age diversity was made an implicit part of the marketing/attraction strategy. For example, efforts were made to stage events where part time students could attend outside of traditional hours, and closer links formed with the Open University.

Four specific changes in the recruitment process were also made:

- UCAS points are not included as part of minimum entry criteria as this can represent a barrier for many mature students, who are more likely to have entered higher education through a non-traditional route.
- The applicant's date of birth is requested in the optional diversity monitoring section of the application form, not the compulsory personal details section.
- Each application form received is read and marked by one of a group of trained managers. All personal information is held separately. This process has been developed to ensure that every applicant is judged on their individual merit and to ensure rich work/life experiences are appropriately marked against behavioural criteria.
- Similarly at the interview and assessment stages all managers have attended a half day training session in which the benefits of age diversity are a key topic.

Barriers

As with any change to an existing process, a degree of management hesitation was experienced. This centred on the additional time and cost associated with an in-depth application screening process and the suitability of more experienced individuals for a graduate development programme. A number of different strategies were used to overcome these barriers, including emphasising the business value set which includes equality, testimony from managers who had worked with more experienced graduates and a clear exposition of the business case for employing a wide spectrum of different ages.

One of the key mechanisms enabling the implementation of these changes was extensive consultation with the business, enabling buy-in to the new processes. This came to life in senior design consultation, an extensive business project team and briefings for every manager involved in the process.

Impact

In the challenging business environment of the last five years, older graduates have been very successful and added a great deal of value to the business.

The variety of backgrounds of experienced graduates who have joined from all walks of life includes an Olympic swimmer who decided to pursue a career in business after retiring from top level sport, a teacher looking for a different career path, a consultant who had worked for the Group and discovered a strong affinity for our values and way of doing business, and an experienced member of our food retail operations team who decided to study for his degree whilst working in store.

The Group believes that the balance of younger and older graduates collectively adds more value to the talent pool of future leaders. Based on feedback from graduates and managers we have observed a number of key benefits for our business.

These include:

- Experienced graduates have been adept at quickly picking up information due to previous experience working in commercial settings

- Greater maturity, self awareness and ownership of personal development, often as a result of individuals wanting to be successful in the new career that they have entered into
- A willingness to use their own initiative rather than waiting for others to tell them what to do
- An ability to cope with personal challenges and demonstrate organisation diplomacy in an appropriate fashion
- A wider spectrum of ages on the scheme has helped all participants to understand different perspectives, and engage in two-way learning which has been beneficial for creativity and development for all.
- Career change graduates tend to have conducted a good deal of research before making the significant decision to change their career direction and as such have a good affinity for, and understand the culture of the organization

Monitoring

Anonymous monitoring takes place at all stages of the recruitment process (application form, first interview, assessment centre and so on) to identify any factors impacting on the fairness of our recruitment process.

The Employers Forum on Age

Floor 3, Downstream
1 London Bridge
London
SE1 9BG
T 0845 456 2495

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