

Innovation in Attracting and Retaining Baby Boomers

British Gas

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EFA Overview

British Gas Services is the largest domestic central heating and gas appliance installation company in the UK, providing customers with maintenance and breakdown cover. The British Gas Academy was developed to recruit and train individuals to be part of British Gas Services and it recruits approximately 1,000 engineers in a year. It was originally set up to address the shortage of qualified plumbing, gas and electricity technicians, and to recruit and train them to an accredited standard. In response to age legislation, the company set out to look at all its recruitment and training policies and to overhaul them where required. The initiative led to significant numbers of older apprentices being recruited for the first time.

Initiative

British Gas Service's campaign to fully embrace anti-ageism legislation led to sweeping changes to its training and recruitment activities and introduced new contracts for staff who wanted to alter their working arrangements.

Aims of initiative

British Gas Services engaged positively with the new anti-ageism legislation introduced in October 2006 and saw it as a positive step to help build on its already successful diversity strategy. The Academy's main purpose was to recruit and train apprentices but it had a secondary function to increase diversity in relation to age, gender, disability and ethnicity in the company's engineering workforce, to reflect the communities in which it operates. British Gas also wanted to attract older individuals to be able to tap into their experience and well developed life skills, especially among the baby boomers who may be wishing to make life changing decisions in respect of their work life balance.

Approach taken

British Gas set out to review all the existing processes, policies and strategies relating to the age legislation, while at the same time determining the risks to British Gas of non-compliance. The overriding aim was that the legislation was to be embraced not just complied with and that the organisation was prepared to go the extra mile.

It undertook a complete audit of the Academy with the following objectives:

- Identify the risks of the current and proposed legislation to the business.
- Review policies, practices and procedure in line with best practice and equality legislation, embedding these into mainstream Academy functions and organisational culture.
- Design an action plan to address the outcome of the audit and take forward the aims.
- Provide high quality advice on the issues identified in compliance with the diversity agenda.
- Suggest training outcomes for the Academy staff.
- Design a monitoring system to ensure policies comply or an objective justification for not complying.

As a result, the British Gas Academy decided to remove existing age bands for its apprenticeship and trainee positions, opening up jobs to all age

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groups. The company also removed use of words such as 'experience' and 'young' from its printed and online recruitment information and application forms to remove any age bias. Recruitment and diversity specialists were trained on the possible danger of using these terms.

Lifestyle contracts have been introduced to enable individuals, who find the rigours of call out and shift working incompatible with their lifestyle, to opt for a less demanding role. Many of the roles are physically demanding so these contracts allow people to vary their working arrangements while helping British Gas retain their skills.

Challenges

British Gas faced a number of challenges in opening up the age range of apprentices, including:

- Significant cost due to reduced grant funding from central government, which offers a lower rate for apprentices over 24.
- Fewer young people joining the company and forming the workforce of tomorrow'
- Opening up the world of apprenticeships to older people represented a real culture change within the organisation.

Outcomes and benefits of the initiative

The impact of the initiative has been positive; with the average age of British Gas apprentices rising from 21 to 24 years. The oldest apprentice taken on was 56 years old. In 2006 all apprentices were 24 or under but in 2007 over a third, 37%, of the apprentice engineers were over the age of 25 when they joined the company.

British Gas training officers report that the behaviour and maturity of the groups of apprentices, since the introduction of the age legislation has improved. The introduction of more mature members to the training groups brings gravitas to the team and younger members say the older trainees often act as life mentors for the less experienced team members.

Impact on the organisation

British Gas reports a range of benefits from the initiative particularly in the recruitment market. The removal of age bands for its apprentice schemes has enhanced its reputation in the marketplace and positions itself as the employer of choice to all potential recruits regardless of age. A bigger target recruitment market means reduced costs and the company has seen wider diversity in the applicant pool, benefiting from reflecting the communities in which it operates.

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