

Up to speed

James Cory-Wright, Instructional Designer at Brightwave, looks to the future of onboarding and the role of job simulation.

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Retaining key talent is crucial for any business that wants to maintain growth and profitability. The average cost of losing an employee is estimated at 100–125% of that employee's annual salary. According to The Employee Retention Handbook, this figure accounts for the loss of productivity of the leaver, recruitment costs and initial sub-optimal performance as the new recruit settles in. It appears that many organisations can spend more money annually losing staff than finding the right candidate for the job. So how should organisations address this?

In an ideal business world, we would pick the right people in the first place, settling them in quickly and thoroughly then demonstrably sustaining interest and providing support and opportunities for them to develop in their job roles and careers.

Increasingly nowadays, this whole end-to-end process can be supported online – from initial employee assessments and filtering tools at recruitment, to on-the-

job e-learning courses and performance support tools right through to work-based social networking tools to enhance development.

That's the delivery. The actual content derives from the job role itself: induction, processes, compliance, IT systems, networking, product and service knowledge and soft skills.

The combination of a single mode of delivery for a high proportion of the knowledge and to a lesser extent, skills, relating to a particular job can be said to be a job simulation. However we rarely see them formally brought together successfully within a single holistic design.

Job in a box

You don't have to look too far into the future to recognise that we will increasingly package skills and knowledge into easily accessible formats that reduce the time it takes for an individual to become competent within a chosen role – a sort of job-in-a-box if you like. This approach may be the norm for our future generations of Call Centre Operatives, Bank Tellers and Telecoms engineers etc with much of the day-to-day detail being quickly and safely assimilated as they work. So while we're some way off the skills "upload" seen in the Matrix films, we are entering a time where we can create believable virtual environments that mimic the dynamics of real world jobs.

Here are just some ways that job simulations can impact on the various levels of company training starting from the beginning:

Recruitment

Right at the start of the employment journey we hear of job simulations being used to assess job candidates for example in call centres, as banks tellers and industrial engineers. In one job simulation for the civil service, candidates are presented with a range of questions related to a variety of work related scenarios which attempt to identify what they would most likely do in situations they could face if they were in various job roles. This is an example of a job simulation being used as a filtering exercise to see whether a person may be suitable for the role.

Cable&Wireless has adopted this approach using a web portal site devoted to potential employees. It includes a self-assessment that helps the respondent decide whether they may be right for the company from a company culture point of view. There are also interactive career trees which give examples of the job paths people have taken inside the organisation as well as video clips of interviews with employees describing what it's like to work at Cable&Wireless in a variety of job roles.

Let's now assume we've offered the right job to the right person. They're keen as mustard and excited at the prospect of starting their new job.

Pre-joining

What an opportunity this is to feed the hunger for information and endorsement of the decision they've made to join. The Cable&Wireless approach we've just talked about picks up on this. On accepting a job the pre-joiner is given a user name and password, returns to the portal on the internet site and can now access a wealth of online training before day one. A short interactive module can communicate key facts, give a flavour of the organisation and paint the bigger picture – as well as providing links to other supporting information.

To make sure everyone has access whether they own a computer or not, West Sussex County Council mail out a 15 minute CD-ROM to all new starters. The minimum specification is deliberately set at being able to run on computers in all the county libraries so all the bases are covered; what better place for a suite of job simulations than libraries and career centres.

Induction

ACAS on induction: "A good reception, with the line or personnel manager spending time with the new employee, is important on the first day....and of course enough information to give the new starter a good grasp of the working practices of the organisation. Any particular health and safety requirements should be made known."

Induction tends to cover general subjects such as compliance and the organisation as a whole, but understandably, there's often little if anything about the individual's specific job. Perhaps the assumption here is that the job itself will take over and learning will be on-the-job with remedial training if required.

However, here's an excellent early opportunity to train the whole job and in terms of best practice. For example as well as training in the IT system or software used to do the job there could be complementary simulation of the context and environment and the situations within which the system is used.

Compliance

As well as the more obvious subjects, compliance applies to internal administration such as financial processes; expenses, gifts & hospitality etc. For example, EDF Energy supported their initiative on improving financial processes with a suite of short e-learning modules. Perhaps the greatest strength of the online dimension in these areas is the ability to launch from a single managed

platform, tracking the user's completion of the training and assessing the knowledge gained – vital constituents of a job simulation.

Diversity and equality

An emotive and important subject where organisational policy is increasingly not enough.

Alongside any e-learning module on this subject any job simulation should provide opportunities at least to register responses via an online attitudinal questionnaire and compare it with other people's responses. Better still an opportunity to watch, say, a video online and discuss it with others via a message board or live chat.

Performance support

Moving on from induction, Ron Compton talking about performance support in his keynote address to the first Electronic Performance Support System Conference held in the early 1990s, introduces the rationale for job simulations well:

"We've been looking at learning as an outcome, when learning is only a by-product. Performance is what we want. And by providing the supports employees need to learn their jobs while they do their jobs, we'll get competent performance faster and more consistently."

One of these areas is IT systems training. The 'Show me/try it' approach is a proven methodology that doesn't need to be delivered as a big course. Bupa has well over a hundred 5-15 minute tutorials in how to use key parts of their company wide system. And as part of an ongoing learning strategy, they continue to commission more of these bite-sized tutorials as and when they need them. These double up as ongoing performance support.

Another example of just-in-time performance support are interactive process flows you can click on for more information about each stage of any given process, or step-by-step guidance in a particular skill set such as how to delegate, manage meetings etc.

Networking

The final part in the job simulation jigsaw has to be the social and communication dimension. Remember the innovative Cable&Wireless approach mentioned earlier? Within the portal they envisage a Social Network tool which will enable employees to identify like minded souls and get in touch with people in similar job roles across the organisation's offices worldwide.

Intriguingly, Lars Hyland, Brightwave's Director of Learning Services, envisages further applications for networking:

"Let's bring this back to a more traditional situation. We have a group of staff attending an off-site training event. This could be visiting a newly fitted shopping outlet that will eventually roll out across the network, or perhaps a product launch event. Or you could be a travel company, wishing to send a team to experience some new resort hotels. Logistically (and economically) not everyone can go. However, it is now possible for everyone to share in that experience. Those attending could maintain a daily blog, posting their thoughts, photos/video taken on their phones. Not only that, the recipients can participate by sending back comments and responses meaning that those attending can ask questions on their behalf."

Hyland goes on to suggest that a company social network can accelerate that enormously with profiles filled in during the "pre-joining" period by enabling new staff to connect with staff of similar interests and job roles irrespective of geography.

Bringing it all together

Everything we've talked about currently exists in one form or another but it is generally speaking, a patchwork of training provision occasionally held together by a Learning Management System. What we need instead is a unified whole, categorised by job role and personal need.

In many cases this could be a simple case of re-packaging, positioning, even branding the training materials that already exist - perhaps adding the networking dimension. In other cases this may involve bringing online resources together for the first time in a beneficial and unified manner.

So for job simulation, mix it up a bit! Think My Space, Facebook or even You Tube on the internet with all their video clips and networking message threads. Think about how you envisage the training of the future. There will always be the basic fundamentals to work from – induction, IT simulations, customer facing skills, compliance modules and performance support tools - build on them and innovate. Finally use the tools of 21st Century - re-positioning, marketing, branding – and hey presto, that portal site you've been working on can become an effective and engaging, all round, or even specialised job simulation.

Call us on 01273 827676 or email us at enquiries@brightwave.co.uk to find out more about our corporate learning solutions and how we can help your business.