CIS Assessment Case Study

Improved staff retention by almost 50% at Bracknell Forest Borough Council

This case study describes how a new PC based assessment system was developed to assist the Common Induction processes for staff working in adult social care to enable the assessment of capability for social workers at Bracknell Forest Council.

Highlights

- **Staff turnover reduced by almost 50%**
- **Saved costs by avoiding unnecessary training**
- **Resources can be targeted where they are needed**
- **Ensures the manager accepts their responsibility**

Background

Bracknell Forest Council is a unitary local authority in Berkshire, South East England. It provides a range of educational, social services, leisure and planning services to residents of the town of Bracknell and neighbouring villages.

Employing some 4,000 staff and serving a relatively compact area, it is a smaller unitary authority but **Bracknell Forest prides itself that it "punches above its weight" in terms of delivery**. It was recently awarded four stars in the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment of the council - one of the very few authorities this size to achieve this accolade.

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Learning and Development Challenges

Leah Thompson is Bracknell Forest's Learning and Development Manager. She describes the major challenges she faces in her job as follows:

First, meeting government requirements which are ever changing and can require action against tight timetables and uncertain remits.

Second, money is always tight and there is a need to maximise available resources.

Third, managing change at times of internal re-organisations which often involve new processes and systems. It can be difficult to maintain motivation and give people time to adjust; effective learning and development is a critical part of any solution.

Context

Bracknell Forest Council has some 370 staff working in adult social services. The focus of their support is to enable people to retain their independence, which will mean people can stay in their own homes for as long as possible. Support may be needed for a 'crisis' or a longer period, and this need generally arises from age or disability.

Adult Social Care provide specific support for the following areas for individuals and/or their families: older people; people with a learning disability; asylum seekers; carers; people affected by HIV/Aids; people with mental health needs ; people who misuse substances; people with physical disabilities.

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The Induction Problem

The social care profession is highly monitored and regulated. One feature is that all new staff are expected to demonstrate capability against Common Induction Standards. These 'Induction Standards for Social Care' are derived from six categories specified by the government sponsored Sector Skills Council, Skills for Care. When a local council is inspected one of the key areas for investigation is whether staff can apply these Standards in their work. It is essential therefore that any deficiencies in the knowledge and skills of new staff are identified and remedied at the earliest opportunity. If not, staff will be unable to perform in their role. Not only does this produce a cost for the Council in terms of unproductive staff, it is frustrating for the individual and has resulted in higher turnover.

The traditional approach to ensuring that staff are competent was the taught course. Every month between 8 and 10 new entrants would undertake two induction courses: both would last five working days. The first would be a general introduction and comprise the essential elements that staff need to be able to perform their role. Ideally, participants would attend this course before they started work but this rarely proved possible in practice. The second course would be delivered in a more modular basis and concentrated on specialist topics. At the end of this training the Common Induction Standards, and hence the formal requirements, could be seen to have been met.

However, this was recognised to be wasteful. The prior knowledge of new entrants to the adult social services department varied enormously and delivering a common classroom module was challenging. The learning and development team received the names of those joining and needing this training but little (and sometimes nothing) else in terms of their background. As a result, the courses were seen by the team as far too much of a 'sheep-dip' approach – where participants received the same experience and there was no opportunity to tailor to their individual needs. This was frustrating to the participants. Helen Smith, the Learning and Development Officer with responsibility for adult social care, estimated that about 70% of those attending induction had some prior social services experience before they joined the Council. Inevitably, for all of that population there would be some wasteful elements in induction.

The New Processes

Helen Smith attends regular meetings of six unitary councils in the County of Berkshire where common training and learning problems are discussed. At a meeting held in the summer of 2006 one of the participants, Sarah Knapp from West Berkshire Council, suggested a solution to the induction problem. This was then developed by four of the six Councils in co-operation with a software house (Common Induction Standards (CIS) see www.cis-assessment.co.uk). As it was seen as a product development opportunity for CIS Assessment, no costs were incurred beyond the time of the learning and development professionals in the councils.

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Continued…..The New Processes

The approach used is simple. On, or ideally before, arrival the new member of staff accesses assessment exercises based on the six Standards (now 8). This is hosted on the CIS Assessment website. The new staff member works on his or her series of questions – each of the six elements takes about eight to ten minutes to complete. At the end of each module a short report is generated giving the overall percentage correct, and, for each section, the list of correct answers is compared with the individual's answers. When all six modules have been completed an overall summary report is generated.

The important next stage is for the individual to discuss their report with his or her line manager in the Adult Social Care Department. There may be reasons for a wrong answer – possibly misinterpretation of a question for example. Equally important is **that this discussion will save costs by avoiding unnecessary training** and it **ensures that the manager accepts their responsibility** for ensuring that staff receives appropriate support in the department. To quote from the internal guidelines on professional care in social services:

"Managers have a duty to ensure new staff know enough to meet the required outcomes in each knowledge area. How this knowledge is gained is flexible and can include observation, reading books, attending training courses or discussion with other carers. Managers assess staff progress themselves, as the governing bodies believe that line managers are best placed to make sure induction of new staff is carried out properly."

The flowchart for using the CIS Assessment tool to establish subsequent training requirements – taken from the guidance, is set out as an attachment. It can be seen that even for experienced joiners, there is a requirement to attend some training courses – general or departmental inductions for example. However, **the main result is that resources can be targeted where they are needed**.

Going Forward

The most visible results are on retention in the adult social care department which has **improved by almost 50%.** According to Leah Thompson the downside of this approach is that some people are still resistant to IT led solutions, or simply do not have IT skills. The Learning and Development team are currently considering the minimum IT skills requirement across the Council. Also it is recognised that problems can arise if English is not the individual's first language and adjustment must be made in interpreting performance. Currently, plans are in hand by CIS to include audio or "voice" options on the assessments to assist those people who are less confident with written English.

Overall, the success of the initiative can be judged by the fact that, after approximately six months in operation, plans are in hand to extend the approach to inductions for staff working in children's social care. The tool is now also being used by the Council's family placement team to assess Foster Carers against the relevant standards.

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