

CASE STUDY



SUNDERLAND UNIVERSITY



- **Staff retention has increased by 3% between 2006/07 and 2008/09**
- **Absence management activities have contributed to reducing the average length of absence by 3.2 days**
- **Implementation of flexible working options for all staff**

"We knew that people development would be an important issue for us and saw that the Investors in People Standard could help us to focus on this. Since achieving the Standard, we have found it integral to people development and a key element of our HR strategies and planning. Every manager in the organisation has to take responsibility for Investors in People; they want to understand what is directly affecting their staff and take ownership for making changes where necessary. We are really using the Standard to maintain a true culture of continuous improvement."

**Linda Bird, Development Manager,
University of Sunderland**

BACKGROUND

Size:	1600 people
Sector:	Education
Location:	North East of England
Recognised:	Investors in People

THE ORGANISATION

The University of Sunderland has been providing higher education in the city since 1901, becoming a Polytechnic in 1969 and achieving University status in 1992. It has a reputation for being able to adapt to change and is proud of its ability to take opportunities to continuously improve the organisation to benefit students, staff, the city and the region. Currently, the University provides for more than 17,000 students and employs 1,600 people across four academic faculties and seven services over two campuses, located in and around Sunderland City Centre.

The University acknowledges that its people – both staff and students – are its greatest asset and that is why the University places such importance on them. We are committed to providing an environment where staff are highly valued and feel motivated, where there are personal development opportunities and where colleagues understand and support the strategic aims of the University.

The University is equally committed to ensuring that its students have the best learning environments and support by listening to, understanding and acting on their needs.

The University's Vision is: 'To be recognised as one of a new generation of great civic universities - innovative, accessible, inspirational and outward looking; with international reach and remarkable local impact'.

The University has established itself as one the best 'new' Universities in the UK for the overall quality, quantity and range of research.

HISTORY WITH INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

People development has always been an important issue for the University. The people management policies and practices that were in place needed to develop as the institution began to grow. The Investors in People framework was identified as the ideal tool to help the University focus and develop its people management policies and practices.

The University of Sunderland first committed to using Investors in People in 1994. The key factors that motivated the University to work with the Investors in People business improvement framework were:

- To seize the opportunity to review current policies and practices against a recognised benchmark
- To gain external assurance that the University's people development strategy was effectively recognising the needs and development of their people
- To improve internal and external communication as the organisation grows
- To encourage a culture of openness across all schools and services to make sure all staff felt valued

After achieving recognition in 1996, the University was re-assessed in 1999. At this time, the University opted for a yearly rolling review cycle; the University is now reviewed three times a year, with a different faculty or service being reviewed each time. Rolling reviews can be of tremendous benefit, particularly to those organisations with a complex structure. Linda Bird, Development Manager, comments, "An Investors in People review every 3 years, or even annually, never gave us the depth we required to get a full picture of what was happening in the University. We are now reviewed three times a year, with a different department being reviewed each time against the entire Standard so every faculty and service within the organisation get the feedback they need to progress."

The University undertook significant work to develop and improve the frameworks for Recruitment and Selection and Work-Life Balance, reinforced through its commitment to equality of opportunity in employment for all staff. The aim is to attract and retain high quality staff by enhancing selection procedures and improving the quality of the appointment process, and to develop working practices and human resources policies that support Work-Life Balance. The achievement of Investors in People Recruitment and Selection, and Work-Life Balance best practice awards accreditation in 2008 acknowledged publicly the impact of the University's frameworks, policies and procedures and working practices in these areas.

BENEFITS OF USING INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

The University of Sunderland's engagement with Investors in People has delivered a number of important and valuable benefits to the organisation including those set out below:

- The assessment provides an independent view of the University's people development practices and provides the opportunity to benchmark progress in this area against a national standard. Assessment feedback is an invaluable resource to the HR team not only providing external assurance that HR strategies and planning are moving in the right direction supporting the institution, but also allowing the approach to strategy development to be proactive in line with assessment feedback.
- Since achieving the Standard, the University of Sunderland found Investors in People to be an integral part of its people development strategy. Continuing to work with the framework has supported the implementation, review and development of the appraisal system. The University constantly reviews its appraisal scheme and ongoing development of the process has ensured the alignment of people's objectives and personal development to that of their team, faculty or service and the organisation.
- By implementing rolling review, managers utilise the Investors in People feedback report to fully understand what is directly affecting their staff and the focused feedback enables them to take ownership for making future improvements.
- The University of Sunderland has implemented a whole range of flexible working options, in line with the Work-Life Balance best practice framework including, enhanced maternity, adoption and paternity leave. Most recently implementing a special leave policy recognising there may be occasions when employees need the flexibility and support to balance work commitments and personal circumstances.
- Absence management activities have contributed to a continuous reduction in sickness absence year on year. Currently the University has fewer than average days lost due to sickness absence per employee compared across all sectors according to the CBI, and has made a significant reduction to average length of absence from 8.7 days in 2004/05 to 5.5 days in 2007/08.
- Management and monitoring of staff recruitment has demonstrated that the University is recruiting fairly and equitably across a range of indicators. There has been a 3% reduction in resignations between 2006/07 and 2007/08 and the University through detailed monitoring and

benchmarking continues to identify ways to improve staff retention.

- The assessor's feedback is more specific when concentrating on one area of the University it is more practical therefore, more meaningful. The flexibility that comes with conducting a rolling review means every assessment report is tailored and targeted to the individual area. It helps to quickly identify any key areas for development and to plan for this clearly.
- The Investors in People framework has helped to embed the concept of "individual development" as the responsibility of both the employer and employee. As a result, individuals are being more proactive in identifying their own development and training needs and this is not only benefiting them but also the University as a whole.
- Working with the Recruitment and Selection model has led to improvements in the organisations recruitment strategy, new staff inductions and training. This has helped the University to attract high quality staff from a range of sectors as it is recognised as an organisation committed to staff development.
- Working with Investors in People has encouraged a culture of openness across the organisation, frequent and improved methods of communication at all levels helps to ensure staff and managers feel valued.

business plans. They are also incorporating feedback into learning and development strategy with measurable outcomes that are regularly monitored and reviewed.

Having effectively embedded the Investors in People Work-Life balance and Recruitment and Selection best practice within its systems and practices, the University of Sunderland is now actively using the leadership and management framework to identify desired key management competencies and behaviours to realise business objectives through the effective management and development of its people.

The University will continue to use the rolling programme to progressively work with the Investors in People to demonstrate current strengths and pursue improvements utilising the new choices approach to assessment.

WHERE NEXT WITH INVESTORS IN PEOPLE?

The University of Sunderland is using the Investors in People framework to maintain a true culture of continuous improvement. "Our initial Investors in People accreditation gave us an independent benchmark and a reassurance that we were doing a lot of the right things already. Now it is a fundamental part of what we do and our relationship with our assessor is a key partnership", Alan Hardie, Head of Organisation and Staff Development.

The University continues to believe the approach it is using is working really well as Investors in People has become part of life and not just something that a 'lead person' is delegated to manage every three years. Good practices identified in assessment reports are shared across the organisation and form the basis of learning and development action plans that mean something to managers and staff. The University is currently using feedback to build learning and development plans that explicitly support the delivery of faculty and service