

Linking English Progress to the Company Bonus Scheme

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The objective of this workshop was to share data from a case study in which the presenter was involved and to encourage other trainers to try out something similar. The data illustrates that language training in a company greatly benefits when the trainer works closely together with the Personnel Department and company management may even be willing to try out new training models.

Introducing the case study company

Biogrund GmbH, is a small, dynamic, young company located near Frankfurt am Main in Germany. The company develops and produces tailor-made film coating products for tablets, etc., that are used in the pharmaceutical and nutritional industries. Apart from dealing with international customers and suppliers, there is also a subsidiary in America. The company offered employees English lessons but up until 2013 attendance was poor as lessons took place on a Friday afternoon when everyone else went home to start their weekend!

Language training is given priority

When the American subsidiary became reality, Biogrund decided to give English a new priority and encourage staff to attend lessons during working time. Three groups catering for different English levels and for specific departments were set up on Monday morning. To ensure that staff were not away from their desks for too long, 60-minute lessons were scheduled. Most companies expect staff to go to language training outside working hours, so this was real commitment on the part of the company.

Annual Staff Review

During the annual staff review in November, Biogrund employees are given individual objectives to fulfil that have a direct influence on the bonus that is paid out. In November 2013, management discussed the level of English needed for their job with the participants of the English courses. In collaboration with the English trainer, the current English levels of the respective employees were defined using the Common European Language of Reference (CEFR) and the target of reaching the next level was written into the bonus agreement. Employees were to prove they had achieved the target by passing a Business English Language Test at the set level. The certificate would be from the internationally recognised exam provider: telc language tests.

Analysis

After the project was completed, the 9 participants were given a questionnaire with 15 questions, which they were asked to fill in anonymously. The results were then collected and analysed and it was these results that were presented and discussed in the workshop.

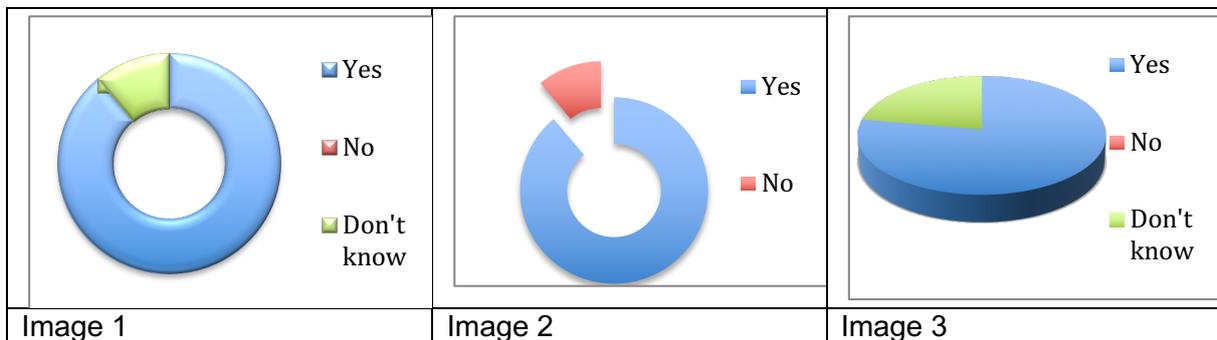
Realistic targets

A 60-minute lesson once a week does not give participants much input. Sales staff were often on business trips and, together with holiday, illness, and customer visits, it was often only possible to attend an average of two or three classes a month. Additionally, moving from, for example, a B2 level to a C1 level within a short year is a very challenging target. After six months, the management and the English trainer agreed that the time period should be extended by one year so that the exam date would be in Autumn 2015. Everyone was happy with this decision and in the survey, a clear majority of participants said that linking their English progress to their bonus payment did not cause additional stress.

Motivation

The English course participants were willing to invest time in studying English and supported each other in preparing for the exam. They were motivated to achieve the target level, not just extrinsically because this had been agreed with the company, but also intrinsically. Participants wanted to prove to themselves that they had improved their language skills and have something in black and white to show for their efforts. There was, however, one employee who noticeably attended class very irregularly, hardly did any homework and was not well prepared for the exam – probably because he felt his English was good enough to do the job and was therefore not willing to invest time and effort in this project. When the exam results came, it was not surprising that this one candidate was the only one who did not reach the target level.

The positive acceptance of the project can be seen in the results for the following three questions. Was this a good idea for your personal development? (image 1) Do you support the company's target of improving employees' English in this way. (image 2) Would you say this project was successful? (image 3) The answer in all cases was a clear yes.



Afterwards

Although staff clearly supported the project, when asked if English progress and bonus payments should be linked again, the answer was clearly negative. Employees confirmed that it had been a good experience, but since they had now reached the required level, the company could also link the bonus to class attendance or other factors in future. Ideally, passing a higher level language exam should be rewarded by an extra payment on top of the usual bonus.

Conclusion

Workshop participants discussed the problem that incompany courses often suffer from bad attendance when participants have too much work to do. A company must clearly show that learning English is a priority and practically encourage employees to reach their language targets - allowing staff to attend lessons during working hours, or linking English progress to the bonus payments are just two possibilities. It's up to us trainers to come up with further innovative ideas.

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