

CASE STUDY ATKINS

A plan for tomorrow

Graduates are the lifeblood of Atkins, but a mismatch between the image it promoted and the reality meant the loss of too much talent. A graduate development scheme was the answer, finds Jane Simms

Graduate trainees are the lifeblood of international engineering and technology consultancy Atkins. The firm recruits about 200 graduates a year, but by 2004 attrition had risen to the point that, within three or four years of joining the firm, more than half the graduate intake from any one year had left.

'We need to keep a pipeline of smart young people progressing through the organisation: they are our future,' says Brian Fitzgerald, director of HR development. Atkins specialises in the planning, design and management of public and private-sector projects in industries including aviation, defence, transportation and health to oil, gas, nuclear energy and telecoms. Three-quarters of its 15,000 employees around the world are in the UK.

Most of the graduate intake are civil, mechanical or electrical engineers, though many are scientists or have environmental or financial backgrounds. 'Graduate recruits are a significant population for us, and represent a considerable investment,' admits Fitzgerald. Much of the training Atkins has traditionally offered its graduates is designed to help them gain chartered status.

The scale of the defection was costing Atkins dear, in terms of recruitment and replacement, lost skills, wasted training and opportunity costs – the

graduates were leaving just as they were about to start making a significant contribution to the firm. The problem was compounded by the increasing shortage of talent: the number of science and engineering graduates is falling and companies are competing harder than ever to attract and retain them.

Fitzgerald knew Atkins needed to take action to staunch the haemorrhage of young talent before it became life-threatening. His analysis quickly revealed that, while pay wasn't an issue for Atkins' graduate recruits, there was a mismatch between the expectations the company created and what it delivered.

'We were selling the firm on the graduate milkround as a big global company, where people could have an international career and see the world,' he recalls. 'Not only were we putting off graduates who were more interested in technical and engineering careers than in a wide-ranging, high-flying, global career path, but we were also failing others by not being able to live up to our promises. We needed to recast our message in order to attract the variety of people we needed to match all the jobs we had and to make a promise we could actually keep.'

One of the first steps was to map out what the different permutations of life as a graduate actually looked like after



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they joined the company, by talking to managers, graduates still with Atkins and those who had resigned. 'If they wanted variety, for example, were they getting it?' says Fitzgerald. The next step was to establish exactly what the key attributes of successful Atkins staff were, in order to create a template against which to recruit new graduates. 'I wanted to get beneath the surface of candidates' academic qualifications to find out whether their motivations, attitudes and skills matched our true requirements,' he explains. 'The idea of "attract, interview and deploy" was simplistic and potentially risky.'

The list of core skills and competencies that Atkins drew up with business



psychologists Kaisen looked very different from the criteria it had previously recruited against – or indeed, those that most of its competitors used. ‘Companies typically assess candidates’ report-writing skills or arithmetical reasoning, but that’s not what they spend most of their day doing, nor is it core to what most businesses do,’ argues Fitzgerald.

Atkins and Kaisen identified four core skills: energising – which involved people’s motivation, determination and initiative; thinking – the ability to analyse complex data quickly and deal with ambiguity; communication – the ability to exert influence in different situations and to different individuals; and emotions – individuals’ ability to

manage their own emotions, as well as monitoring the impact of their behaviour on others and anticipating others’ emotions and needs.

Atkins also adapted a model it had designed to assess the skills of more established staff to help it recruit the ‘right’ graduates. ‘In the past, people were promoted on the basis of a eulogy by their own boss and a presentation to other bosses,’ recalls Fitzgerald. ‘We created a model that would provide evidence of their progress in the four key areas of people, commercial, stakeholder and technical expertise. We knew this model worked, so it also seemed sensible to use it in graduate recruitment, as we wanted graduates to

Mixed messages: Atkins was pitching itself as a global company, but not all graduates found this attractive

develop expertise in these areas as they progressed through the business.’

Atkins and Kaisen then used this framework of eight core skills and competencies to design graduate development centres, targeted at graduates in the critical third year of their employment with the company.

‘The new graduate development centre has both symbolic and functional value,’ believes Robert Myatt, managing consultant at Kaisen. He adds that Atkins has struck a careful balance between assessment – matching individuals’ strengths with job roles – and development – helping them progress (see box, p25). ‘The greater emphasis is on individuals’ progress, where it should ▶

◀ be,' he says, but points out that the development centre also helps identify technically oriented individuals who don't want to move into management, allowing the firm to focus on creating opportunities that will be both motivating and offer value for the business. Although Atkins has well-established management development centres, people with a more technical orientation have, in the past, often missed out.

The first development centre had its launch last summer, and all 162 third-year graduates have been through it. The company is now embarking on the second centre. Ten individuals – or 6% – have left since going through the process – far fewer, claims Fitzgerald, than would otherwise have defected.

'The feedback from line managers and graduates has been extraordinarily positive,' he insists. 'People really seem to appreciate the trouble the business has taken to engage with them as individuals, particularly given the size of the company. They are better motivated and have a clearer sense of direction.'

Both HR and line managers are heavily involved in the assessment and development process. 'We gave them the tools and the training, and then handed it over to them,' says Myatt, adding that the high level of engagement by the business is key to the success of the initiative.

The very positive feedback about the new development centres has made Atkins realise just much how it had neglected its graduate population – despite its acknowledged importance to the firm. Myatt says: 'Atkins was not unusual in that. Companies tend to focus on getting graduates in and then take their eye off the ball. The fact that development is the key to retention is an oft-rehearsed mantra, but at Atkins we have seen that in practice.'

HOW IT WORKS

There are three procedural elements to Atkins' graduate development centre. The first is an anonymous online 360-degree survey that canvasses graduates' views of themselves, along with the views of two bosses, two peers and two subordinates. Armed with this feedback on their skills and competencies, they turn up for a day's assessment in the development centre to help them understand and interpret the results – the second element of the process.

In the centre, a member of the HR team interviews them to gather further evidence of their core skills, focusing particularly on the 'energising' component (see p23). Their communications skills are tested through a role-play exercise, and their convergent and divergent thinking measured through psychometric tests. The individual and an HR facilitator pull together all the information gathered during the day to provide a picture of their strengths and areas for development, discuss their career options and preferences based on the results, and construct a development plan to help them fulfil their career potential and aspirations.

The third stage involves the individual and an HR representative engaging with the relevant line manager to ensure the development plan is put into action.



Career road map: a three-stage process aims to ensure graduates get a development plan to fulfil their aspirations

The development centre is also a good example of the significant and measurable impact that HR in general, and learning and development in particular, can have on a business, he adds. 'It was set up with very clear business goals – not just retention, but to help the business fast-track high-potential individuals and to help them drive their careers forward in order to make a greater contribution more quickly.'

Fitzgerald expects attrition to fall even further next year as a result of measures introduced to attract and retain the right graduates. The message focuses on Atkins' commitment to training and development, exemplified in its new competency model, while a new suite of events is designed to engage first-year graduates more closely with the business. The inducements for new recruits also include a 'golden hello'

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Robert Myatt, managing consultant, Kaisen

payment and a mentor, while second-year graduates receive share options.

'We are better now at attracting the right mix of graduates and, by focusing on different types of contribution, we are now making promises we can keep much more easily,' says Fitzgerald.

Development centres normally target individuals who are already managers, while graduates typically do placements around the business. Atkins' approach takes it a step further, argues Myatt.

'People who have been through a management development centre often tell us they wished they had had that experience 10 years earlier,' he says. 'Atkins has given people the opportunity to understand themselves, what motivates them and how they learn and develop at a relatively early age. Both the individuals themselves and the company will reap the benefits.' ■



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