

They won't be high flyers until taught to take off

Engineering firm Atkins has forged ahead since it started hiring psychologists to bring out the potential of its top team, writes **Roger Eglin**

FIVE YEARS AGO, Atkins had already become one of the world's most successful consulting and engineering groups, employing 8,000 people. However, when Brian Fitzgerald joined as the business's first human-resources director, he realised the company could do better.

The problem Atkins faced five years ago — and Fitzgerald believes it has still not gone away entirely — arose from the group's diversity of talent and its success. Until Fitzgerald joined, the firm's operating divisions had been acting virtually autonomously when it came to performance management, career development and promotion. A manager was as likely to describe himself as a bridge engineer as an Atkins engineer.

"Atkins is a multi-faceted organisation," said Fitzgerald. "Aside from offering civil-engineering expertise in areas such as transport, defence, aviation, health, power, we also provide complementary project management, project finance and property services. In short we are employing talented people across a very wide range of disciplines."

However, just recruiting and employing talent was not enough. The company had been expanding rapidly and its strategic objectives had changed. "In order to meet these objectives, we realised that we needed to introduce a more robust and cohesive approach to developing our people," said Fitzgerald. "We had to be able to understand our managers' current strengths and what they needed to realise their potential as a group, rather than a series of specialist divisions."

He decided to bring in Kaisen, a firm of consultant psychologists he had worked with before joining Atkins. It

agreed that Atkins needed to review what it was doing in terms of developing people. "The market for good engineers was a competitive one," said Rowan Bradford, a consultant at Kaisen. "We felt there was a need to up the ante. A starting point was to devise some way of measuring the capability of the talent in the business so we could identify its potential."

Fitzgerald wanted Atkins to focus its spending on "the taller poppies — the people who stood out, who would be as much an investment as a cost".

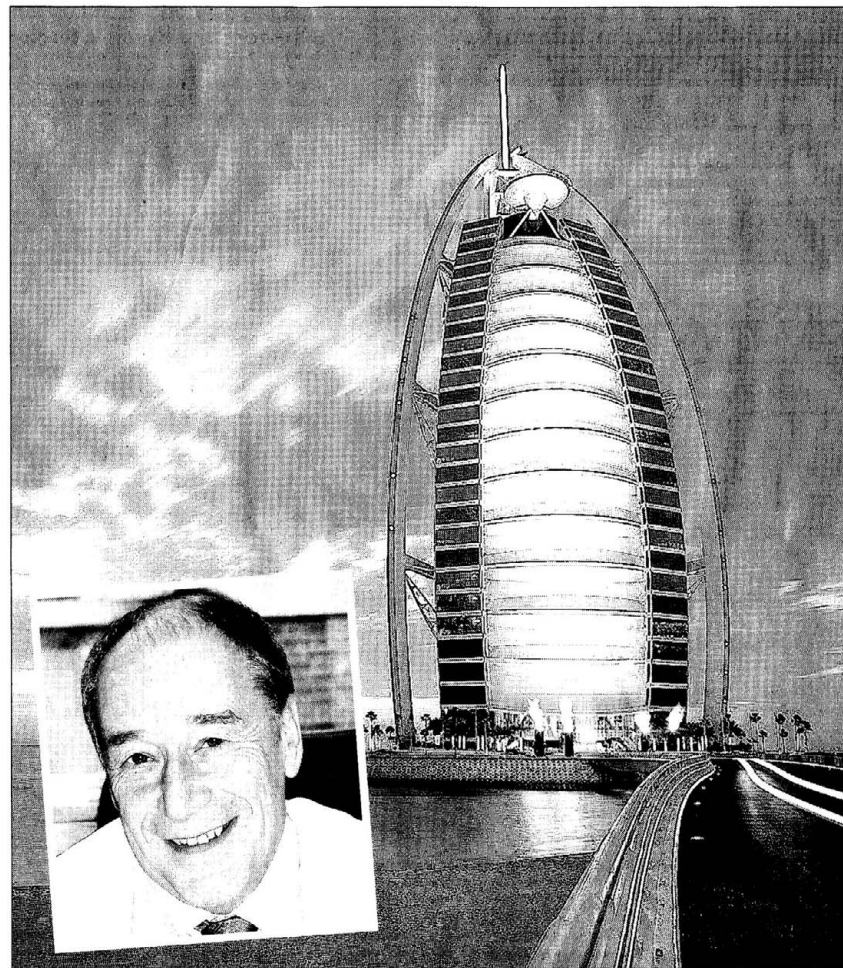
Not everyone at Atkins was convinced. Sceptics questioned how this strategy would work with such a disparate group of people. However, Fitzgerald convinced the management team and they decided to create an MDC — a management-development centre. The course would cover two days with six delegates selected from Atkins' management.

The engineers who make up a large part of the Atkins' team are not necessarily experts at people management, and the pilot course is a revelation.

The first day is spent assessing individual capabilities. This involves completing a self-assessment questionnaire and psychometric tests. Day two includes an interview with a Kaisen consultant.

"On the first day we shine the spotlight on delegates from a lot of angles," said Bradford. "We want to make sure the data we gather is as robust as possible. Psychology is not a very precise profession so it is important to collect as much information from as many sources as we can."

As well as assessing the candidate's basic capability, the consultants also studied how the individuals could be deployed in the most effective way.



Towering achievements: Brian Fitzgerald helped Atkins staff to excel at projects such as the Burj al Arab

Were they best suited to working abroad or in Britain, were they natural team players or would they prefer working independently?

Fitzgerald said: "It's not a question of trying to impose particular characteristics on people, or finding them wanting. We start from the premise that all the delegates are talented. It's just a question of finding out how that talent can be used to maximum advantage, both to support Atkins' business objectives and the individual's career."

Using the feedback from their experience at the MDC, managers devise their own development plan. This is presented to their bosses. This ensures that even middle-ranking managers, who often get overlooked, have an opportunity to make their mark. "Everyone has a plan at the end. There is no pass or fail," said Fitzgerald.

Ruari Maybank, a 34-year-old chartered electrical engineer with Atkins, had reached the point in his career where he was wondering what to do next. He joined Atkins in 2000 and was employed virtually full time on secondment to private-finance-initiative projects. The latest one, called Holdfast, was in the defence industry with Mowlem and Babcock.

Maybank had a chat with his line manager, who suggested that he go on an MDC assessment. Maybank was sceptical about the assessment being carried out largely by psychologists, but those fears were soon dispelled. "I really enjoyed the assessment but, by God, it was hard work. It forced me to do things differently. At the end of the day, I felt quite worn out. But it's left me with quite a lot to think about."

The feedback he received was thor-

ough, looking at ways he could do his job better. The doubts he was beginning to have about the direction of his career have been overcome. "I have a clear idea of what needs to happen and when. Not many companies would let you do this. It's made Atkins shine in my eyes as a good employer."

Staff turnover among MDC graduates is now running at a mere 2% — and this has been one of the most rewarding things about the programme, said Bradford. "The retention rate is much higher among people who have been through an MDC course. It's no good finding and developing talent if you can't hang on to it. Talented people are ambitious: if they don't think they are being looked after appropriately they will go elsewhere."

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