

Home Retail Group director of organisation development Pat Lee says the company began its Academy programme in 2002, with the initial aim of helping senior managers – such as trading managers and financial controllers – become more commercially adept and agile.

“We wanted to keep and stretch our top people, with a view to ultimately filling board-level jobs. It

was also felt that improvements could be made to leadership skills and commercial thinking at the senior management level,” says Lee. “We teamed up with the Manchester Business School to develop a programme that is tailored closely to our business, while being rooted in academic MBA-level learning.”

The selection process is based on past form and future potential with Home Retail Group using a 12-box talent matrix to narrow down candidates. In 2003, they brought in Kaisen Consulting to broaden participants’ thinking.

“Most people we were dealing with were demonstrating very logical and excellent operational abilities, but after the first year we felt participants were not thinking conceptually or broadly enough,” says Lee.

To address this, Kaisen Consulting’s Business Mindset programme was introduced to individually assess each of the selected senior managers, giving Home Retail Group and each person an insight into their capabilities, their level of self-belief and – very importantly – their motivation to become a leader.

“Very often, top managers have clear potential, but it’s not always obvious what for,” says Kaisen Consulting managing consultant Aurea Fellows. “We help them identify how they could move on and in what capacity within the business they would be best suited.”

Having a detailed psychological

profile of individuals will give companies valuable insights when succession planning across a large group. “Some people stand out as being ideal for making a sideways move, for instance,” says Fellows.

Lee agrees that this insight will help Home Retail Group fill executive posts that are traditionally harder than others to fill.

On the Academy programme, Kaisen Consulting puts all participants through the two-day Business Mindset module after they have been individually assessed. “This helps them broaden their commercial awareness and covers all aspects needed to make commercial decisions and see things from new angles,” says Fellows. “We help people to develop their drive to achieve goals and help them to build on their emotional intelligence, communication and influencing skills.”

Following the Business Mindset and Manchester Business School modules, participants on the Academy programme are required to deliver a live business project, which will typically have full board approval and financial backing. Each Academy member will also have the ear of a dedicated board director who acts as a coach and mentor.

“All this serves to enrich the individuals and give them a greater ability to progress,” says Lee. “For us, the benefits are nurturing quicker-thinking, commercially astute, highly productive managers. The programme gives them a real taste of what they will face when they do get promoted, so they are well equipped emotionally when they take high-level posts.”

The high-flyers can see they are being valued, invested in and wholly supported, but is there a risk of ill-feeling among those who have little chance of getting onto such a scheme, or who narrowly miss qualifying?

Lee says this is carefully handled. “We make sure that if people don’t make it into the Academy they know why. Perhaps they are too busy on a

CASE STUDY: DAVID ROBINSON, TRADING DIRECTOR, ARGOS

David Robinson was selected for the Academy in February last year, when he was an Argos trading manager. He has since been promoted to head of product marketing and last month became trading director at the chain.

“The programme works because it’s entirely cross-functional, so it gives you a solid understanding of all areas of the business,” says Robinson. “The mindset element teaches techniques to broaden your thinking and you learn which new directions you might be able to stretch in.”

Robinson says he hopes he would have progressed in a similar way if the Academy had not existed, but adds: “I am probably better equipped for the job having done it. It gives you the opportunity to do your best and it garners trust in the company, because they clearly have your interests at heart.”



major project to be able to spare the time, or it might be that there are a lot of highly talented people in certain areas of the business to choose from,” she says.

Companies should offer alternative ways to progress, or at least be flexible about the possibility of future opportunities opening up. “Of course, you can still develop people in a variety of ways, even if they don’t make the talent set,” says Fellows.

Lee admits that poaching of those who have been through the talent progression process has occurred, but insists it is not a problem. From 64 Academy graduates, only three have been poached in four years.

You must commit to doing the best for people despite the risk that your investment may be in vain, she argues. “We also believe there is a strong chance that people will return to the company after a stint away, if you have demonstrated your commitment to them at crucial points in their career,” she adds. “You can’t

create opportunities out of thin air. The real disappointment would be if there were opportunities and people still left, but that hasn’t happened to us yet.”

Fellows says: “If you have an identified talent set, you are raising the expectations of those chosen people. As an organisation you have to consider whether or not you can deliver the implied opportunities to those people, otherwise they may be tempted to move on.”

The Academy initiative has paid off, according to Home Retail Group. Three trading directors and six regional retail operations directors have finished the programme and, as Lee puts it, the company now has a backbone of fully trained and competent executives and future executives. Perhaps most pleasing is the return on investment being seen. “The value is phenomenal,” says Lee. “If it keeps one person with us for another year, the programme pays for itself.” **RW**

STORE MANAGER'S DIARY – RUTH SIEGLER, MANAGER, LUSH, GUILDFORD



In-store, Christmas is completely manic

Customers stockpile our seasonal products

Christmas may come but once a year, but little do customers know just how long the season lasts for retailers.

Having just returned from one of our quarterly managers’ meetings – where we all saw the Christmas product range – I am suitably excited and hyped up for the busy festive season.

At these meetings, we are all given the opportunity to share ideas, discuss issues and give honest feedback – good or bad. As managers, we are not only the public face of the company, but also the mouthpiece for our customers and staff.

In-store, Christmas is completely manic: long days with huge deliveries, late nights, thousands of customers and tired feet. However, this is my sixth Christmas with Lush and I am looking forward to every minute of it.

There is no Scrooge at this company – unless you dress the part. Yes, it does take six months to recover, only to start preparing for the next one, but it is so much fun. Where else could I get paid to play with bubble bath and get covered in glitter while singing along to *Dolly Parton Does Christmas* all day?

Like all retailers during Christmas, we recruit lots of temporary staff and, in fact,

many people who are still with the company after 10 years started as Christmas temps. Lush has a way of making you want to stay.

Our Christmas products are once again amazing and the new range of gifts is fabulous. It’s great to be so inspired that you can’t wait to share them with customers, who in turn give them to friends and family and spread the word. We have cult Christmas products and customers regularly stock up so they will last, but their stash usually starts to run low in the summer and they can be heard in July asking when the Snowflake soap will be back in.