

“An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.” — Benjamin Franklin

STOKING THE FIRE

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Employee Training Boosts Loyalty, Results

Ever sit by a campfire and watch the flames slowly burn out until someone takes the initiative to add more wood to the fire?



Employees from Inovateus Solar install a 27-kilowatt solar system on top of Valparaiso University's engineering building to help it achieve Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) status.



Mentoring is part of the culture at WestPoint Financial (top left). Training, says partner Jack Hettiger (left), is all about people. Knowledge comes in many forms at Financial Center – as do unique (and entertaining) learning opportunities. On-site crane awareness training helps Shiel Sexton employees hone their skills.



Businesses can help prevent employee burn-out and reignite their passion for learning by providing training opportunities. Investing in growth and development can help organizations strengthen their workforce and boost their bottom lines.

Learn how Inovateus Solar, Shiel Sexton, Financial Center and WestPoint Financial Group – all 2014 Best Places to Work in Indiana honorees – keep the fires burning by providing engaging and valuable employee training.

Getting their hands dirty

South Bend-based Inovateus Solar, a full-service solar energy installation company, encourages its electrical engineers and solar designers to earn North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP) certification. Applicants complete 40 hours of training, which blends classroom work with hands-on projects.

Inovateus covers training costs for the certification, which is valid for three years. Three people at the company have earned the designation.

“It’s a tough certification to get. A lot of solar companies don’t have anyone with that certification. To have three people on our team (out of a total of 25 employees) with that certification is a big deal,” comments president T.J. Kanczuzewski.

Training potential future employees is also a priority. For the past two years, the company has hosted interns from the University of Notre Dame.

“We give them real work to do,” emphasizes vice president of operations Joe Jancauskas. “We have them doing hands-on work with solar panels and wiring and tests down in our parking lot so they can see how things work.”

Shiel Sexton, a construction management company headquartered in Indianapolis, also requires highly-specialized skills. Aspiring foremen/superintendents can gain real-world, “in the trenches” experience through the organization’s site leadership program.

Over the course of approximately two years, employees participate in 36 classes that focus on technical and soft skills. Among topics are business writing, steel erection, fire protection, site utilities, and concrete and foundations.

“Employees are hungry to learn,” asserts vice president Kevin Potter. “I think what people are looking for is opportunity and environment, and the last thing they’re looking for is compensation.

“If we can provide the opportunity for them to learn new skills and to move up and take another position, there’s a career path. You know the next rung of the ladder and what you need to get there.”

Peer pupils

Mentoring is deeply woven into the culture at WestPoint, a comprehensive financial services firm. Approximately 70 employees work at its Indianapolis office (Fort Wayne is home to another Indiana location).

WestPoint offers a variety of educational outlets such as online courses and membership in industry associations. In addition, it holds several interactive sessions each week. Staff members receive 120 hours of training (on average) annually.

“One thing that separates us from others in the industry is that our training is all done through our most successful advisors,” explains partner Jack Hettiger. “We combine the experienced advisors with newer advisors so everyone is getting a feel for what needs to be done or how we can help them.”

Financial Center is a member-owned, federally-chartered credit union serving Central Indiana. It has eight public branches and two student-run locations: J. Everett Light Career Center (at North Central High School) and Arsenal Technical High School.

Kylie Porter, a personal banker whose career has grown since he started working with the organization two years ago, says he learns something new from colleagues every day, and adds that the organization’s focus on

training is one of the reasons he isn't interested in seeking employment elsewhere.

"Financial Center constantly encourages my growth and development by encouraging me to participate in training and making training available so I can do my job better," he remarks.

Shiel Sexton's Potter seconds that.

"Providing training opportunities is necessary to attract and retain top employee talent," he declares. "(At Shiel Sexton), I have all these experts who are building things. To bring that expertise to market, it requires vast amounts of training, education and experience."

That's a 'rap'

Make it fun. That's a big part of the philosophy at Financial Center when it comes to employee growth and development.

Raps, role playing and humorous skits come with the territory during regulatory training at all-staff meetings. Last year, Porter provided a unique overview of Regulation E, which deals with opting in for overdraft protection on a checking account.

"I incorporated fun into it and got a lot of involvement from the audience," he recalls. "(Understanding that regulation) is very important for us because of some of the products we offer with overdraft protection."

Senior vice president Jo Kiel emphasizes that training not only helps employees do their current jobs more effectively, but also helps prepare them for advancement.

"It may be months before the next opportunity presents itself, but then 'bam!' it's there. We want them to be ready."

Hettiger of WestPoint takes pride in seeing careers flourish.

"From the advisor perspective, where we have younger advisors that are now on their fourth or fifth year (of experience) and are now leaders in our organization – whether that's sales leaders, leaders in training, doing joint work in mentoring younger advisors – we've had some huge strides in that area," he relays.

Risk versus reward

Despite potential benefits, some businesses deliver few, if any, growth and development opportunities. What may be holding them back?

"Training can be a complicated topic," Kanczuzewski reflects. "I think most companies want to give their employees as much training as possible, but it can be challenging to put a training program together for the various skill sets you have within your team. Also, company budgets dictate how much training you can afford."

But he emphasizes that as employees grow their skills, the company becomes even stronger.

Jancauskas adds, "We haven't been shy about paying for training and haven't been shy about equipment that we need. At Inovateus, to do our jobs well we need the training and the tools."

"We have kind of a training culture – no one here hoards knowledge."

RESOURCES: T.J. Kanczuzewski and Joe Jancauskas, Inovateus Solar, at www.inovateussolar.com | Kevin Potter, Shiel Sexton, at www.shielsexton.com | Jo Kiel and Kyle Porter, Financial Center, at www.fcfcu.com | Jack Hettiger, WestPoint Financial Group, at www.westpointfinancialgroup.com

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