



School Trends

School Trends continues to strive to offer all its employees reward and enjoyment from their careers. Employee ownership and representative employee involvement are among the new ways in which the company continues to drive employee engagement and customer satisfaction.

School Trends has been producing personalised school wear since 1988. It is a rare example of a customer-focused organisation that combines strong collective 'community' ethics with individualised reward and the opportunity for personal development (see IPA case study series 3, number 4). In November 2004 School Trends also became a fully 'employee owned' company.

Direct involvement

The 'right to involvement in decision making' is a key pillar of 'community membership' and non-managerial employees have significant influence over both day-to-day and senior decision making activities.

Monthly action groups have an important role in the company's drive for continuous improvement in the quality, cost and delivery of goods to customers. "These are the operational engine room of the staff involvement structure," says Beeby.

Typically led by a team leader, these meetings deal with specific operational and performance issues. Departmental meetings for line managers and policy and information meetings for senior managers allow employees to raise issues through the management chain.

Employee representation

A recently elected 'governing council' of four employee representatives also sits alongside the

Business information

Company:	School Trends
Business description:	Clothing manufacture
UK Headquarters:	Sheffield
Staff:	130+
Sites:	The entire operation runs from one site in Sheffield

management board and is the main channel for indirect employee information and consultation.

The role of the governing council is to ensure that the organisation is true to its mission and commitment to employees. It has a remit over policy issues but not individual cases, and does not propose policy.

Chris Lightfoot, support services director, believes that the governing council has actually sped up decision-making. "We have learnt a lot in the last year and the quality of the representatives involvement has been very high," says Lightfoot.

"This is not an adversarial set up," says Beeby. Though not all business decisions pass before the council, both the council and board have an equal say and seek to reach a consensus.

continued overleaf

"Action groups are the operational engine room of staff involvement... the Governing Council give employees through their reps a say in how the company grows," Peter Beeby, managing director

Consultation arrangements

Structure:	Direct team-based employee involvement and management forums alongside an elected 'governing council' working with the senior management board.
Union role:	No recognised unions.
Frequency of meetings:	Formal monthly action groups, departmental policy and information meetings and company meetings. Regular formal and informal meetings of the governing council throughout the year.
Representatives:	Four employee representatives elected by all employees to represent the entire company on the governing council including management.

Where differences of opinion do arise, the president (or vice-president) of the general council, who are elected by and from the four employee representatives, meet with the relevant operations director to discuss the issue with the managing director. The managing director and president are charged with finding a solution that is acceptable to both.

Making it work

Engagement: Employees are also involved in local and more strategic decision making in a number of ways:

- 'Community classes' open to all employees, especially those considering leadership development, are intended to develop awareness about the company's philosophy and values.
- 'Development days' held annually for all employees are intended for discussion about company wide issues. These were recently used to update the values.
- 'Figures meetings' held monthly or as the need arises. These are used to share important information about the financial position of the company and future prospects.

The company has also recently introduced a regular engagement survey. This is held every 3 months and consists of 12 questions designed to draw regular attention to how well departments and teams are working together.

It is important to the company that the employees' experience of working at School Trends is consistent with the values it aspires to. The survey provides objective information on how existing policies and practices can be improved or new ones adopted.

Delivering customer service: By involving employees in continuous improvement and other consultative opportunities, School Trends has not only improved efficiency and reduced waste but also transformed the service customers receive. For example, between August and September 2005 (traditionally the company's busiest time of the year) it achieved a new record of 95.6% complete orders dispatched within 14 days.

The high performance workplace

This case study forms part of a project entitled 'Adaptable Enterprises'. The project includes educational and networking activities on: high performance working, healthy working and performance, the future of work and organisation, and intellectual capital.

The project is conducted by the UKWON, coordinated by the IPA and supported by the European Social Fund.

Further information is available from juliet.webster@ipa-involve.com

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This case study was researched and written by Robert Stevens, Research and Information Manager, IPA. The views in this case study are those of the participants and may not reflect those of the IPA.



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IPA Bulletin, ISBN 1-902922-20-4



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