

Leicester College

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BODEN – ‘A Catalogue of Culture’

Employer Description

Established in 1991, Boden is one of the UK's leading mail order clothing companies, offering quality women's, men's and children's clothing by mail order from their catalogue or website. The UK distribution centre is based in Leicester, where the opportunity to take learndirect courses has recently been introduced to the 140 warehouse staff.

Background to the Initiative

“The idea of learndirect courses actually came from the workforce itself,” explained Kevin Shooter, Head of Distribution at Boden, who has been responsible for working out the details of the programme. “We have a regular committee meeting where employee reps come together with management and discuss issues and ideas. Someone had done a learndirect course with a previous employer and suggested it might be something Boden could look into.

“We already had a training room with computers where new recruits go through their inductions, and it seemed the perfect place for some online training.”

Boden got in contact with local learndirect Employment, Education and Training Access Centre (EETAC) at Leicester College. A tutor comes in to the warehouse once a week for two hours to support people on their courses.

How Learners were Identified

Kevin continued: “In the warehouse we use computerised systems, so having staff who are confident on computers is obviously beneficial. While most people originally wanted to do some sort of computer course, EETAC were keen for everyone to do a learndirect ‘skills check’ first to check their English and maths is up to the right standard for them to get as much as possible from the courses.

“The result is that most people have started off on literacy and numeracy courses, and boosting those skills also has direct benefits to people's efficiency and confidence at work. We have a very multi-cultural workforce, and the opportunity for people to improve their skills or get a qualification to validate existing skills is great both for them and for us.

“I want learndirect to be something integral to Boden, something that’s going to be here in several years time,” explained Kevin. “Rather than opening it up to everyone at once, and in the initial enthusiasm have loads of people sign up but never complete a course, we decided to introduce it more slowly.

“By taking on only small groups at a time, enthusiasm for the courses is building by word of mouth. Everyone will get a chance to get into a group and do their first learndirect course, and then we’ll go back and offer people second and third courses.

“Learners get 30 minutes off work, and in return they give up 30 minutes of their own time to do their learning. Sharing that commitment is really important, and it’s part of the culture we’re trying to build at Boden.

Staff Development Opportunities

“For us, training isn’t just about getting better skilled employees – it is about culture, and a way for us to build a positive relationship or ‘partnership’ with the people who work here.

“We try to be a very inclusive company, without a traditionally hierarchical structure. Johnnie Boden himself spends time working on the factory floor to get a feel for what’s going on at ground level! He built Boden up with strong values of opportunity and equality which are still central to the company. The flexibility and accessibility of learndirect fits in well with what we’re trying to achieve here.

“We want to encourage people to develop and be ambitious in where they want to go with us. By investing in people I believe we’re encouraging them to invest something back in us, and it’s only by sharing a commitment to each other that we can thrive.”

Learner Progress and Achievement

It is now 18 months on from the committee meeting where learndirect was originally mentioned, the first six learners have just achieved their Certificates in Adult Literacy.

One of the group is Ragini McKee, 38, who has been a warehouse operative for nearly a year. She said: “I’ve just completed my Level 2 Certificate in Adult Literacy, and I’m really happy I passed the test!

“I left school at 16 and jumped at the chance to brush up on some of the skills I left behind there. I’ve always been so busy with work and my family I wouldn’t have been able to do it if I hadn’t been supported by Boden. There just isn’t enough time to fit everything in.

“Learning on the computer has actually been really easy, and Glenda - our tutor - also makes it a lot of fun. She’s always around to help if I get stuck, and now I can be around to help my kids if they get stuck with their homework.

“My youngest comes home with a list of spellings to learn each week, and I’m much more confident in helping her. I’m also more confident at work. Obviously the computer system we use isn’t like learndirect, but somehow knowing more about computers in general means I don’t panic when something goes wrong or beeps at me! If I get the opportunity I’d like to do another course – maybe to improve my maths.”

Kevin concluded: “I’m really proud of everyone who has already achieved a certificate, and I look forward to continuing to work with learndirect and see the difference it makes to life at Boden. Even at this early stage I’d certainly recommend learndirect to other companies. It has an important role to play not only in improving business performance but in becoming the sort of company people want to work for and buy from.”
