

OPEN LEARNING

New Opportunities at Diamonite Holdings

GAINING NEW OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH OPEN LEARNING



Diamonite Holdings Ltd is a small group of manufacturing companies based at Fishponds in Bristol, currently employing around 100 workers. During the 1980s, the group found that an increasing part of its work was coming from the aerospace industry and realised that this new business presented a great opportunity to increase turnover and profit.

As a result, Diamonite formed two new companies, Diamonite Aircraft Furnishing and Diamonite Design Services

Ltd. The group then developed a Business Plan which was accepted by the Diamonite Board in November 1989. The plan recognised that Diamonite's future growth would depend to a great extent on the consolidation of the new companies. These new opportunities meant it was essential that the workforce had the appropriate skills for the new tasks that awaited them.

The group looked for assistance in implementing its plan. The Employment Department's Business Growth Training (BGT) programme appeared to offer a good solution. Diamonite believed that the BGT initiative could help it achieve its corporate objectives and provide the workforce with new skills.

The Business Growth Training Programme

The Diamonite project was aimed at all employees, from production staff to senior management. Diamonite opted for an open learning system, which offered many benefits including:

- Flexibility: people could learn at their own pace and, if necessary, in their own time.
- Versatility: an open learning package could be used by a wide range of people, with different abilities, skills, interests and experiences.



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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY

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- Responsibility: Open Learning would allow employees to control their own learning.
- Effectiveness: Open Learning had a good track record as an effective form of training.
- Financial savings: workers could be trained on site and so there would be no need for employees to travel to a college or learning centre. This would save both time and money.

Aims of the BGT Programme

Diamonite set out a number of aims for the programme including:

- a significant and measurable increase in productivity for all areas of company activity
- an increase in overall quality
- improved production methods
- increased capacity
- increased turnover per employee
- the development of an Open Learning Centre.

The Open Learning Centre would use computer and video equipment. The BGT programme provided funding of £60,000 during the 1990/91 financial year and this figure was matched by the company. The funding helped Diamonite establish the Open Learning Centre.

The Open Learning Centre

Diamonite's Open Learning Centre was located in an upstairs warehouse. It had a variety of equipment including Computer-Aided Design (CAD) workstations, desktop computers, video equipment and Open Learning resource material for foreign languages. Diamonite

decided to produce much of the training material in-house so that it could be customised for the company's needs.

The Centre in Action

An effective Open Learning programme requires enthusiasm and commitment from company management and self-discipline and motivation from the workforce.

The programme began with an introductory video in which Diamonite's chairman enthused about the project. The staff were also told about the objectives of the Open Learning project, the facilities it would offer and the way in which it would operate. This meant that employees could see the benefits offered by the Open Learning Centre and understand how it would work in practice.

The Centre was used in a flexible way. Sometimes there would be formal lessons with a mentor, but on most occasions employees would work alone, either during working hours, for example during a lunch break, or in their own time. Employees were encouraged to use the the Centre during working hours, with the proviso that the same amount of training was also carried out in their spare time. All groups of staff used the Centre including aircraft furnishing production personnel, design engineers, sales staff and senior management.

Examples of the Open Learning Centre in Action

1. Furnishing Production Personnel

In 1990 the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) issued new regulations regarding aircraft furnishing. The rules resulted in a move towards the use of composite materials for

aircraft interiors. However, many of Diamonite's furnishing craftsmen had learnt their skills on a particular material, such as wood or metal. Diamonite employed some ex-British Aerospace workers to provide on-the-job skills training. The demonstrations were also video taped and available for viewing in the Open Learning Centre. This allowed staff to review the demonstrations at any time and was particularly useful when a worker encountered a problem. This approach saved much time and helped to improve the efficiency of the workforce.

2. Design Engineers

Some of Diamonite's design engineers had little or no training in computer aided design work (CAD). CAD is playing an increasingly important role in the field of design because it offers many advantages over traditional paper and pencil design work, making it easy for designers to experiment, test ideas and alter designs. In short, it is a flexible system which can save companies much time and money. The Open Learning Centre's CAD workstations helped in this area.

3. Sales and Administration

Although English is widely regarded as the international business language, British companies need to employ staff who are proficient in foreign languages. Many business letters and documents may need translating and this can be expensive if outside language specialists have to be employed. Diamonite's sales staff are frequently in contact with companies based abroad and some of them receive language training. The Open Learning Centre offered a foreign language package which helped to reinforce this training.

4. Senior and Executive Management

The Open Learning Centre gave management staff an opportunity to see how the CAA regulations affected working practices. This helped in their decision making.

Project Results

The Open Learning Centre has played a significant role in Diamonite meeting its original goals:

- During 1990/91, productivity rose by about four per cent. Now that the Open Learning Centre is established, Diamonite expects this figure to rise to ten per cent in 1991/92 and 15 per cent in 1992/93.
- There was a significant improvement in quality. The reduction in scrap and rework was £35,000 against an original target of £30,000. Customer complaints were down by ten per cent and Diamonite received a number of quality approvals from the Ministry of Defence, Civil Aviation Authority, British Aerospace and other organisations.
- Diamonite expanded its aircraft production capacity to the level envisaged by the Business Plan. There were substantial orders from home and overseas markets, with £1 million worth of extra business. This was on target with the goal set out for the BGT programme.
- Diamonite's turnover increased by 30 per cent during the life of the BGT project.
- Employee turnover increased from £20,000 per person to £23,000. This is all the more impressive when you consider that this figure was achieved in current economic conditions which had seen some manufacturing companies close down, contract or reduce productivity.

O P E N L E A R N I N G

- Diamonite expanded its business activities into Europe and the company is now well placed to exploit the opportunities offered by the Single Market and the expansion of eastern European industries.

The reactions of the staff were very positive. Diamonite's managing director felt that, "The workers responded well to the trust and responsibility placed on them. It has been a team effort." A group of production workers said that, "To have the opportunity to study correct manufacturing procedures both in company and our own time has proved a tremendous asset in drastically reducing the long learning curve. It was beneficial to be able to check complex processes on video. It was also very pleasing to study in a comfortable and friendly atmosphere."

Summary

Diamonite's training programme was an outstanding success. Productivity, turnover, capacity and quality were up, whilst wastage was reduced. The employees responded positively to the Open Learning system and as a result, training was more efficient, effective and enjoyable. The company had the vision to see the benefits of an Open Learning Centre and the commitment to back this up with investment. The resulting programme gave Diamonite's employees new skills and new opportunities. It also enabled the company to expand its horizons and face the future. There seems to be no reason why other companies could not benefit from Diamonite's positive and imaginative approach to training and Open Learning.