

# OPEN LEARNING

*Computer-Based Training in the Tourism Industry*

## VIVE LE TOURISME



Seventy per cent of the millions of overseas visitors entering the UK each year pass through the South East. This number is set to grow by as much as 25 per cent, as a result of the Single European Market and the completion of the Channel Tunnel. Hotels, restaurants and tourism companies in Kent were quick to recognise that they should capitalise on

these new opportunities and identified customer care as a key factor in the renewed drive to improve business performance.

The outcome was an ambitious public/private sector initiative involving the Eurokent Hotels Organisation (EKHO), South East England Tourist Board, Kent County Council and the Employment Department. The aim was to create and pilot a language training programme, tailored specifically to the needs of the tourism and leisure sector in Kent, but which would ultimately have wider relevance.

Open Learning was an ideal solution to the challenge of training a workforce made up of a large number of seasonal staff and weekend and evening workers.

### **Creating an Open Learning Solution**

Before any steps were taken towards devising the learning materials, the Kent Languages Consortium was called in to assess the needs of the potential trainees and their employers. This research generated several key findings, most importantly that:

- the priority language should be French
- training should take place in-house
- the emphasis should be on oral communication and on the acquisition of an industry-specific vocabulary.



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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY

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

These conclusions were used to create a basic syllabus. An assessment programme was devised at the same time so that the effectiveness of the system could be monitored before it was released for wider use.

### **The Open Learning Solution**

The programme used well-established Open Learning methods in tandem with state-of-the-art computer technology and comprised:

- an interactive computer-based training (CBT) component, using CD-ROM technology
- workbooks
- audio cassettes.

The emphasis of the materials was primarily on developing conversational skills relevant to the hotel environment. Comprehension and basic reading exercises were also included.

Twenty units were created, each requiring up to three hours study and covering customer-contact areas such as reception and the restaurant, both face-to-face and on the telephone. At the heart of the package was the CBT programme which combined voice, pictures and written text in a way that enabled the trainee to build up a vocabulary by assimilation.

The interactive component of the system encouraged rôle-play, with the user playing the part of either the guest or receptionist. The trainee spoke to the computer in French as the relevant text appeared on the screen

and his or her voice was recorded and stored in the system to allow the recording and the 'model' version to be played back.

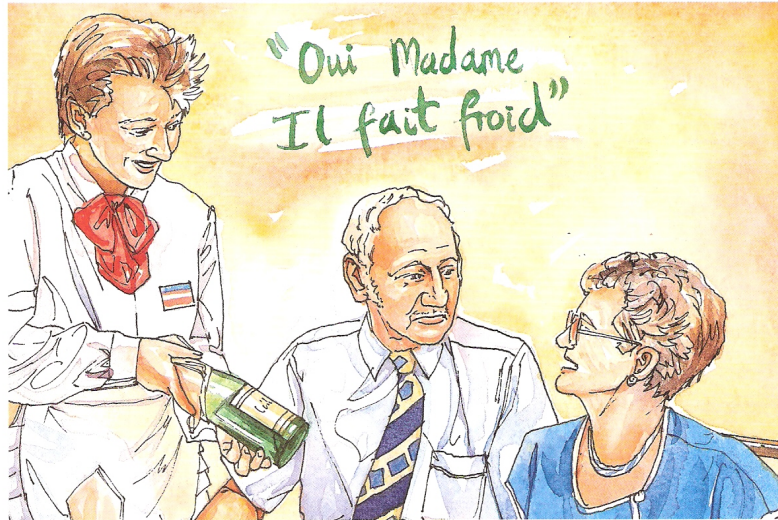
The programme aimed to enable trainees with no previous language training to cope confidently with:

- introductions and greetings
- giving and asking for information
- replying to guest enquiries
- dealing with requests and complaints
- taking orders
- service and selling skills.

Regular tutorials and an on-site mentor were an important feature of the programme, whose success depended largely on the commitment and enthusiasm of the trainees. To this end, the course was designed so that trainees would be working towards a nationally recognised qualification, the RSA Certificate of Basic Language Competency, which could also be used as credits towards a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ).

### **System Trials**

Over a 12 month period, 124 trainees used the system. The first phase of these field trials was carried out at ten EKHO hotels, followed by a second phase which added South Kent and Mid Kent Colleges. These offered a 'drop-in' facility to small hotels and guest houses in the area. Mentors and tutors attended a one-day workshop and were briefed on providing students with feedback and support.



### **Evaluation**

At the beginning of the project, hotel managers agreed the criteria by which the success of the programme was to be judged. The emphasis was on the business benefits achieved and statistics such as the volume of repeat business and the usage of hotel facilities by French guests. The rate of conversion of enquiries into bookings was monitored by each hotel at the beginning and end of the project. Hotel managers were also asked to assess whether there was any significant reduction in staff turnover in the course of the pilot project.

In many cases, statistical information was an adequate indicator of the effects of the programme. However, when it came to assessing the less tangible area of guest satisfaction a more innovative method had to be devised.

One of these was a series of 'mystery calls' made to participating hotels. The aim of the calls, all of which were made by native French speakers, was to assess how well and how speedily reception staff were able to progress enquiries. French hotel guests were also asked to complete questionnaires at the end of their stay and comment on levels of customer care. Comments from trainees were used to gauge the extent to which work performance and motivation had benefited.

### **Improved Business Performance**

The 'mystery calls' and guest questionnaires yielded two significant and decisive findings. Most dramatic was the fact that response times to telephone queries were reduced from around nine minutes before the training programme to an average of less than two

afterwards. One hotel saw an 800 per cent increase in French bookings, a reflection of the ease with which enquiries were handled. Many hotels also reported a switch from bookings by letter to telephone bookings.

The analysis of guest questionnaires showed that the incidence of staff being unable to help a guest with an enquiry had fallen to 13 per cent (around one third of the pre-programme figure).

#### **Trainee Feedback**

The response of staff to the programme was positive. Eighty two per cent enjoyed the programme, 88 per cent said that they felt that it met their workplace needs and 71 per cent of those who completed the programme passed the final assessment test.

Successful trainees were sponsored by their employers on a one-day visit to France, designed to consolidate what they had learnt.

#### **Cost Comparisons**

The final element of the evaluation was to compare the costs of the Open Learning initiative with an equivalent tutor-based training programme. It emerged that after initial set-up expenditure, the run-on cost per trainee was 59 per cent of that of a traditional training programme.

#### **From Strength to Strength**

Since the end of the pilot project, the Open Learning system has scored several major successes. The programme won an award in the British Tourist Authority's "Winning Words" scheme and interest is being shown by other hotels and leisure organisations, as well as by colleges offering related courses. The 'drop-in' facility at Mid Kent College has been extended due to demand and now comprises three terminals.

A series of demonstrations to each of the ten Regional Tourist Boards has created considerable interest in the system and further field tests are being carried out at several central London hotels.

EKHO's language training project is one of many Open Learning initiatives currently underway in the UK's hospitality and leisure industry. As any participating hotel will testify, the ability of staff to communicate confidently and professionally with foreign guests is directly related to customer satisfaction and so to business performance. In the words of the manager of one Kent hotel:

"We are now better placed than ever before to improve our share of the French market, as we have the confidence that comes from knowing we can really look after our visitors by communicating with them in their own language."