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Apprentices show resolve to learn technology and communication

A young Sheffield company is putting its trust and future in young recruits, reports Katherine Griffiths

All 25 employees at Resolve IT Solutions received an iPad this year as a “thank you” from the boss for their contribution to what had been the company’s best year. The gift was a microcosm of what Andrew Seaton believes has made his business a success — a thoroughly modern mixture of technology and communication.

The 33-year-old believes that the fast growth of his Sheffield-based technology support company, set up when he was 24 and just out of university, is because Resolve tries to give clients a good experience, rather than making them feel like a problem. He does this by persuading employees to focus as much on their communication skills as their technical ability.

Part of his business model is the recruitment of a large number of young people as apprentices, relative to the company’s size. They are trained quickly to become IT engineers dealing with clients, who stretch nationwide and range from small businesses to a trust that runs 34 schools. Resolve has hired a total of five apprentices, four of whom have stayed, and a sixth is about to join.

“I don’t see it as a pool of cheap labour. I think it is strategic to do this,” Mr Seaton said.

The advantages of recruiting candidates as young as 16 and 17 is that they don’t have the “bad habits” of experienced IT engineers, who can be offputting when a client calls for help, he believes. Enthusiasm for computers is important — Mr Seaton, who sits in on the interviews, likes to hear about applicants taking apart their own computers or loving gaming — but, more crucial is that they can talk about their favourite



Andrew Seaton, right, puts one of his apprentices through his paces at his Resolve IT Solutions business in Sheffield

film or football team, demonstrating strong communication skills. Resolve then invests in training the new recruits over several weeks, broken up with time in a classroom and stints in the office learning how the business works.

Alessandro Calamita was Resolve’s first apprentice, joining in 2010. Now 21, he is a member of the senior management team overseeing three other engineers.

“I had the interview with Resolve on the Thursday and I was already training on the Monday,” he said. “You can progress really quickly. Rather than just making the tea and

Andrew Seaton’s top tip

Decide what your highest-value activity is and delegate the rest — I’m really lucky to have a great team of fantastic people around me so that I can do this

coffee, you can take on real responsibilities. That is the whole culture and loyalty comes from that.”

The mixture of young and slightly more experienced staff has served Resolve well. Having started with two

schools and some individuals who came to the company thanks to an initial leafletting campaign by Mr Seaton, the business has more than 200 clients, some of which are overseas. Turnover has jumped from £15,000 in 2004 to £1.2 million this year.

As the business grows, one of its challenges is dealing with other aspects of running a business, including financial and risk controls. “When I started it was just me and a car,” Mr Seaton said. “Now I know it is not just me that gets frustrated and that I have a much larger network that I can chat to.”

Valuable help that you can’t afford to miss

Jason Holt

As the owner of Holts Group, a small but busy group of enterprises, I am often caught up in the everyday intensity and rigmarole of a demanding business. In that frame of mind, I can think of nothing else other than what is here and now.

How could I possibly take on an apprentice who can’t run with the job from the moment they start? How could anybody else in the team support and teach a youngster and take time out of their day? We’re all at breaking point as it is without risking our time on training a youngster. They’ll probably leave, anyway.

And if I didn’t have the advantage of knowing what I know, I would understand the majority of employers who say: “Apprentices, what do they have to do with me? Aren’t they just for manual trades?”

The vast majority of businesses fall into this trap. In fact, more than 90 per cent of small businesses in England do not take the leap of faith to take on their first apprentice.

But I wish they would and I will tell you why. In the course of leading and writing a review for the Government, I spoke with several hundred businesses that employ an apprentice, and not a single one said they wished they had not.

On the contrary, they cannot say enough good things, and every one has plans to hire more — and not one is in the manual trades.

This aligns precisely with my first-hand experience. It is why I have seven apprentices now (out of a workforce of 100) and why my most trusted lieutenants started as apprentices.

● Jason Holt is the chief executive of Holts Group

Business growth plan a key element of easing the way to success

Mark Hart

A business growth plan for an established enterprise has a dual focus: the strategic development of the business itself, which sits alongside an operational review of the competencies and capabilities of the entrepreneur and the management team.

The business growth plan is a powerful tool driven by the personal growth aspirations of the entrepreneur (including a coherent exit strategy) and is the means of assembling opportunities for growth into a plan that is possible to deliver.

It is a way to kick-start faster growth by tying down the

opportunities and prompting decision-making based on strategic discussions internally and externally that will crystallise vision and promote the required action.

To write a business growth plan you need to:

- have a clear vision and presentation of the core values of the business;
- present the growth opportunities for the business in terms of clients, products and services (for example, in specialist or emerging markets, short term, mid-term);
- develop sales and marketing plans for the business in response to these growth opportunities, setting out a clear value proposition, market

growth forecast, pricing strategy and competitor analysis;

- understand the business inputs necessary to achieve growth (for example, an organisation chart for growth, focusing on key personnel and skills required, key supplier relationships, operations review and modifications required);
- construct a financial statement of growth projections (ie, a three-year cashflow forecast) and how the growth will be financed;
- set out an implementation plan that includes action steps, resources needed and a timetable, including an exit strategy for the owner;
- develop a series of metrics critical to the successful implementation of

the growth plan, designed to allow the business owner to assess operations and proactively make adjustments to keep the business on track — a business growth dashboard working alongside a risk audit for the business.

Developing a business growth plan with the input of external scrutiny and challenge is an essential part of the process and it is important to get connected to networks of like-minded business owners and business advisers and mentors who can add significant value. Rapid business growth cannot normally be achieved without the injection of external financial resources in whatever form, whether it be debt-and-equity finance (formal

venture capital or informal angel investment) or support from a variety of government schemes (eg, UK Trade & Investment, the Technology Strategy Board and the Regional Growth Fund).

Experience has shown that the possession of an up-to-date business growth plan has made it easier for a range of small business owners to attract the external resources, including finance, to transform their businesses from profitable growing regional businesses to ones with a faster growth trajectory servicing national and international markets.

● Professor Mark Hart is chairman of Small Business and Entrepreneurship, Aston Business School