

21. Evaluation of Professional Training

School of Management

Commercial assistant at an entrepreneurial baby food company

Introduction

As a student of the University of Surrey there is the option to complete a one year placement within an organisation to better equip and individual with new and relevant transferable skills. The professional training year aims to fully utilise the theories and practices applied in the first two years of study, and allow the student to gain a greater understanding of the workplace.

This essay comprises of an overall evaluation of my year as a student within a small business. It looks at my expectations before commencing placement as well as highlighting the personal and professional objectives I had set out for myself as well as highlighting some of the things I experienced. It also provides personal analysis of the Professional Training course and the placement itself.

The professional training year was focused on being a Commercial Assistant within a small innovative and entrepreneurial company, responsible for creating a brand new market sector within the baby feeding category. The role of a Commercial Assistant involved delving into the realms of Marketing, Sales and Customer Services, and assisting in any 'ad hoc' tasks.

The company has currently been operating in the UK for 7 years. It is the holding company for three pioneering brands in baby and toddler food, with an aim to "modernise and make infant feeding more of a priority, with products that break the compromise between convenience, taste and health".

My chosen placement was for a role as a Commercial Assistant, a job advertised through the university placement site. Preferences were immediately determined by my strengths and weaknesses in the different areas offered in the Business Management field including Finance, Marketing, Human Resources and Services within the retail sector. My initial thoughts were that Marketing would be the preferred area as mathematics based subjects have never had any appeal. I also believed that this subject area would compliment my naturally creative persona. I was fortunate enough to be accepted to my first choice company, which was the only company I applied to. My selection was determined by the following factors:

- Innovative and entrepreneurial company run by a working mum
- Gain greater insight into how a business develops, instead of being absorbed into the workings of a large established corporation
- A small company would allow real responsibility and an active contribution towards the business
- Face new challenges and alien concepts (i.e. baby food)
- Enable the comparison of theory in lectures to a real business situation
- Honest belief that a **real** professional training experience would be achieved

For me this placement was more about improving on my personal objectives more so than my professional ones. I believe that by becoming a more confident individual within, the professional objectives would inadvertently be achieved.

My Personal objectives

- Become more assertive
- Develop self confidence in my ability

- Improve on my time management skills and dissolve my nonchalant attitude towards tasks set, enabling myself to become self-motivated
- Become more concentrated and focused
- Develop skills already acquired (interpersonal skills within the workplace)
- Become clear and concise in written and oral communication
- Increase my work environment knowledge base to alleviate internal stress and unnecessary panicking

My Professional objectives

- Acquire new and useful transferable skills
- Be self sufficient and work independently
- Communicate professionally and effectively within the work environment
- Determine future job prospects
- Become a valued employee, actively contributing towards the standing and development of the business
- To succeed in tasks set
- Gain respect through achievement

Strengths, Weaknesses, Skills & Competencies

Strengths

- Good interpersonal skills and capable of communicating effectively within social situations
- Experience of working within a business environment since a child
- Highly critical of myself and work, which forces me to strive for success in business situations
- Creative
- Loyal

Weaknesses

- Sensitive to criticism, even if constructive
- Poor time management
- Communicating effectively within a work environment
- Lack of confidence and self belief
- Lack of concentration
- Shy and tendency to panic in new and alien situations

Skills and Competencies

- Very attentive and analytical
- Observant
- Good language skills
- Detailed

Expectations

I did have a number of primary expectations before commencing my placement. I expected the work environment and the application of business knowledge to be very different compared to sitting in a lecture theatre listening to how ideas and practices theoretically should be applied. I felt that a work placement should offer greater insight and a more realistic view of the working world. I also believed that a few months would be an adequate amount of time to settle into the company and job role. I did believe that having the support of two line managers would make the transition easier. Ultimately I believed that I would be forced to overcome my weaknesses (very quickly) in order to succeed, however I was unsure of how and when this would be achieved. In all honestly I did not believe that my placement year would be the most enjoyable time but I felt that the knowledge that I would gain would compensate for this.

My Placement experience

Job Role

My company was plagued with problems from the first day that I joined, a list so large it would be difficult to document within a 2000 word essay. For me my first day was not as expected. My two line managers (the Marketing and Sales Directors) were told that the decision had been made to outsource the Sales and the Marketing to an external agency. This in effect meant that there was no longer a role for them within the company. Naturally, both were quite upset upon hearing this news and exited the office and did not return for hours. I was left unsupervised and confused in the office with no work to do, and ended up spending most of the day wrapping parcels to be sent out to customers. My managers had to work their notice period before leaving, but because they now had such ill feelings towards the company, a month was spent imposing their negative views on me about the company and especially the Managing Director. This did not fill me with reassurance about my placement.

As my managers were leaving I was due to receive a hand-over. I did not receive this as expected, and it was very 'lazy' and informal. When they left I had to figure things out by myself as I was expected to know all processes. The external agency made no noticeable improvements for the company over the six months they were with us, except incur the company £250,000 worth of debt. They were released of their duties which meant that someone had to absorb their roles, and this responsibility fell to me. In my eyes I was no longer a placement student, but a full time employee, responsible for Sales analysis, managing the Home Delivery system, Customer Service and all of the Marketing. I did however have help from the Office Manager and the Graphic Designer.

My work load was intense and I had no line manager to turn to in times of need and extreme levels of stress. There were rare occasions when I did 'crack' and would spend my day crying in the office whilst completing my list of tasks. If I did not complete the work, it would not get done, and that was the bottom line. There were not enough resources available as the company could not afford them. I had to force myself to think logically and prioritise work to get through it, as I knew that there was no time for stress. I did on one occasion tell my manager that the work load was too intense and was told that I should say if it was becoming too much to handle. Although a nice sentiment at the time, ten minutes later she handed me another task list which I had to complete. I never spoke up again.

Self Motivation

Another serious problem that I encountered was self motivation at times when company morale was extremely low. We suffered massively at the hands of retailers. We witnessed corruption from one of our competitors who were 'buying' a grocery multiple to stop our company from rolling out to a larger number of stores—an action which would in turn put the company out of business, and funding dropped to an all time low. We were forced to cut costs by giving up paying monthly rental of our office and move to 5x5 metre 'Swedish Lodge' on the Managing Directors property, located next to her garage – a garage which was larger than our entire office – and in another city. It was very disheartening to get up so early in the morning and do a 4.5 hour round trip to and from a shed (as we nicknamed it), and at times I felt like my placement had no worth. In an ideal world I would love to say that I overcame this and learned to love it, but unfortunately I did not. Things only got worse when company finances became so bad that at one point the company called in an auditor to assess the company and its financial value. The company was one week from administration when a chance television appearance by the manager secured our company a one of a kind financial investment from the Royal Bank of Scotland. It turned out the Managing Director of RBS, who was on the programme with our

manager, weaned his child with our baby food products and said, 'I will not allow such a company to die'. If it was not for this then my placement may have finished earlier than expected.

Despite my negative views of the company, I do believe that the product and concept is good and regardless of what may happen, or how bad things may become the company would always survive and ultimately succeed, and I think that this time will come with the relaunch scheduled for October 2008.

Responsibilities and Achievements

As stated before, my job role was very varied because I worked for such a small company. Job roles always overlapped and as the 'Commercial' Assistant, if there was no one to do a job it would always be given to me; nightmare at times but also a massive benefit, especially when it comes to writing my CV.

For me, my number one achievement was a campaign I had to launch to find new babies and toddlers for the packaging redesign. I was a long and time consuming process which took me a period of seven months to complete. It very loosely involved me writing adverts and newsletters, screening and short-listing images of our customers' children, organising, co-ordinating and managing photo-shoots of food and babies and sending out prizes to those who attended. I am very thankful to have been given the opportunity and my hard work can be seen on the brand new baby food packaging – as well as one of the babies being my niece.

Evaluation of Personal & Professional Development

Personal Objectives

I am happy with my development over my year in industry and I believe that most of my objectives have been fulfilled. In order to survive within such a company you have no choice but to change detrimental qualities. For me, to be described as calm and organised by the MD is a great achievement. My level of assertiveness increased through organising and conducting meetings, which in turn allowed me to improve on my communication skills within a work environment. To achieve tasks I had to be focussed, organised and motivated, and working with such a small team allowed me to develop my interpersonal skills. I am still overtly critical of myself and do still lack in self belief but not as much as before. As a whole I am a much more confident and well rounded individual.

Professional Objectives

As stated earlier in the report, I believe that by achieving my personal objectives most of my professional objectives would fall naturally into place. From reading my employee evaluation I do believe that I was successful with my objectives, even if I did not realise that I had been. My critical nature pushes me forward and forces me to strive for success to alleviate a fear of failure. I had no choice but to learn to work independently as there were no other individuals to assist me, and the acquisition of new skills came with the territory. I was exposed to countless things which many people would not see within their working lifetime. I gained respect through work and in my final leaving interview was offered the job as the company Marketing Manager after graduation.

Career Goals

Even though I did not enjoy my placement at this baby food company I am very grateful to have been able to work as a part of such a company. Working as the Marketing team, and as part of the Sales and Customer Service team has not necessarily mapped out what field I do want to

enter into when I graduate, but it has adjusted my preference selection criteria needed for the selection of future jobs.

I no longer want to go into Marketing, unless the emphasis is on the creative and I am now thinking delving into Buying or following my natural, creative roots by looking into Interior Design.

Conclusion

I believe that a PT year is a valuable tool to help a person decide on future career plans as well as aid an individual's development. Even though my experience was not the best emotionally, professionally and personally it has forced me to become more like the individual I have always aspired to be. In my work life I am more confident and independent, something I thought I could never be. After my thirteen months within such an unstable working environment, and where by the end I was regarded as a valuable member of the team, I feel very proud of what I have achieved. I have also come away from placement with three very good friends.

In my opinion a professional training year should not be optional as any student who 'cannot be bothered' to look for a job is missing out on an important learning experience, but then again it could be said that a person forced to go on a placement may not fully utilise the opportunity and try to gain from it as much as they can. I have learnt that the 'real' working world is not as easy or a peachy as I had once assumed a long time ago. Working life is hard but you have to actively take steps to allow yourself to take away the positive from a situation and treat it as a learning curve. Over my thirteen months on my placement, I had never been so consistency miserable in my life, but if that had not happened I would not be thicker skinned, increased my tolerance level and equipped myself with such a massive amount of knowledge and skills. I decided to opt in for the experience rather than having the name of a larger company on my CV, and I still believe that I made the right decision when picking a first time office job. I now feel that I am fully equipped with a positive working mindset which can only help me to succeed in any future career plans, and without this professional training year I would not have gained so many transferable skills for the future, so early on in life.

I always hold onto a comment which the finance controller said to me before I left, 'I honestly believe that this is the worst experience you will have in your working life. If you can survive this, which you did, then you can survive anything'. I don't know how I survived but I did, and I'm very proud to say I did.