



Building a learning business

**STAFF TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT:
HOW IT'S DONE AT KNIGHTS
GARDEN CENTRES**

Knights Garden Centres

We talked to Knights Garden Centres about their approach to staff development, to get the most out of their skills. Here we share examples of how they are going about this and what's working best for them.

About Knights Garden Centres

Knights is a family-owned business of two garden centres in Surrey. It began in 1945 as a smallholding market garden. Since then it has grown to employ around 110 full and part-time staff across the two sites. Garden ranges are still central to its offer, but Knights also provides catering and other ranges such as aquatics, homewares, furniture and Christmas.

“We believe that effective staff lead to happier customers and a more profitable business in the long run. As such the investment in the workforce is a way of protecting the legacy of the last seventy years”

Richard Knight
Director

The ongoing work at Knights covers:

- > Formalising its management structure
- > Identifying the skills to invest in
- > Looking at staff learning styles
- > Doing and applying learning activities.

Management structure

With so many staff to manage, it was clear that a formal line management structure was needed. To ensure this, the business has a leadership team of directors. They're accountable for the strategic plan and big picture. There's also a new management team who are accountable for operational delivery.



The management team are based around the departments. Each manager is accountable for the performance of their department. They're expected to be experts in their fields, but also to work with other managers to make sure consistent standards are applied. The change is delivering a more homogeneous customer experience than the old system of supervisors.

Alongside the new structure, management by objectives is being introduced. The leadership team looks at the business targets, and works through what each department manager needs to achieve to deliver them. These objectives for managers are then turned into objectives for all staff in the department, and as a result, staff increasingly see how they and their team effect the big picture. So far, better teamwork, motivation and performance have been observed.



Founders Charles John Knight and his wife Jessie

Developing your staff skill set

Budgets may be limited and so a way of finding what training and learning to prioritise may be needed. To help them, Knights used a skills matrix and a skills pyramid.



The skills matrix

A skills matrix is a way of finding skills gaps across a business. Firstly the leadership team review the business plan and agree what skills are needed to succeed. One way Knights do this is to benchmark their department sales against national averages reported in the GCA's barometer of trade and the HTA's Garden Retail Monitor. Where it's agreed that a department could grow, developing knowledge and skills in that area is flagged as a key skill. Key skills include line management, health and safety, customer service, financial awareness, for example.

Once the key skills are agreed they're plotted on one side of the matrix in a spreadsheet, with staff names on the other side. Skills and training of staff are regularly recorded by managers. The resulting reports show which staff have or need training in the key skills, and a second report alerts when refresher courses are needed. The reports show where there are gaps (e.g. only a few people) who have a key skill too.

This enables the management and leadership teams to plan not only what training is needed, but also who might benefit. There's also the advantage in terms of planning staff cover, for instance making sure that there are enough staff with forklift skills to cover holidays, sickness etc.

The skills pyramid

Knights have also structured the skills needed into a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid there are the general skills that all staff need. These are the basics like health and safety and customer service. At the top are skills like management and leadership, and knowledge of strategic changes to the market or consumer behaviour.

The pyramid levels link to staff grades. For instance, directors' development tends to focus at the upper levels, whereas new starters and shop floor staff tend to have their development focused on the lower levels. The pyramid therefore helps Knights develop, retain and progress talent throughout the company.

Below: An example skills matrix template can be easily set up in a spreadsheet

	Safety					Customer service
	CoSHH	Fire warden	Manual lifting	First aid	Health & Safety	Till trained
John Daniels	Y		Y		Y	Y
Dave Johnston		Y	Y		Y	
Claire Weeks			Y	Y	Y	Y
Sanjib Kaur			Y		Y	Y
Des Buckingham	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y

Learning styles of staff

Before training begins, staff are given the chance to state how they learn best. Some people prefer reading whilst some learn best from doing or watching others.



Staff learning styles

As training is an important investment, Knights work with a training co-ordinator who ensures that learning gets applied. For any training that's given, managers and trainees at Knights talk about how what is learned will be put to use on the job. A discussion about how the staff member learns best takes place, and managers are briefed on how to take account of how their teams learn. As a result, Knights is seeing skills applied more consistently to the day-to-day job to improve the customer experience.

How Knights chooses training

Knights' approach is to 'pick-n-mix' what it uses for training and development. A one-size-fits all approach wouldn't work given the need to take into account different learning styles, levels of experience and subject matter.

For example, the business has invested in Cedar Associates' 'people management' training for its management team. Directors attend conferences like Cultivating Retail and the GCA Conference for their 'big picture' updates on the market and networking opportunities.

At the 'shop floor' level Knights have sent staff on HTA training workshops for subjects such as visual merchandising. These types of training sessions lend themselves well to the foundation levels of the Knights' pyramid and for people who learn from doing. They feel e-learning's multi-media and interactivity could make it very engaging for staff, provided it's done well.

Advice for other businesses

Knights is still learning what works best as it changes its approach to learning and staff development. But some things they've found useful are as follows...

- > For all learning and development, ask yourself how it will help your business get to where you want it to
- > Try a skills matrix to see what areas you need to invest in, and what staff knowledge already exists
- > Before spending money on a course, have a look online for free materials to support learning and keep a record of good ones. There are good plant-care videos on YouTube, and businesses like Google often provide free online tutorials
- > Make sure your managers take staff learning styles into account when they're planning training, so they're aware not everyone learns in the same way
- > Don't be afraid to set aside budget to invest in quality training, learning and conferences . . .
- > . . . but make sure you've identified with participants how what they learn will be applied and shared before hand, and follow this up afterwards



Knights coffee shop

The HTA view

We really enjoyed visiting Knights and hearing what they're doing, and we hope you've found it useful too. If you're looking for a starting point for staff learning and development, then please have a look at the Learning and Development section of our website. It has the following for you...

HTA Academy

- > 1 day workshops
- > Evening seminars
- > E-learning
- > Business Improvement Schemes

> Bespoke training options

We can tailor all our training options to your needs

> Annual conferences & seminars

Dates and programme details for our annual conferences along with information from past conference presentations

> Resources

These include booklets, videos and case studies like this one on getting the most out of learning and development



The Horticultural
Trades Association

Horticulture House
Chilton, Didcot
Oxfordshire
OX11 0RN

W: hta.org.uk

T: 0333 003 3550

E: services@hta.org.uk

To find training options for your staff visit:

hta.org.uk/academy