

HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT CASE STUDY

Career development at Vantis plc – Steps 2 Success

ACCA

BACKGROUND

Vantis provides accountancy, tax and business advisory consultancy services to owner-managed businesses, listed companies and individuals. 'Steps 2 Success' is a suite of development programmes for employees at Vantis, to enhance their skills at key stages in their career. The programmes are modular to allow for maximum flexibility and are designed to provide support for the development of relevant skills sets and competencies in key areas. They include continuous, on-the-job learning by the employee, with support and coaching from the line manager and other designated people.

Before Steps 2 Success was conceived, there was a tendency to focus learning opportunities on the enhancement of technical excellence, with some ad hoc skills development. With the continued growth of Vantis since its listing on AIM in 2002, however, the company required a fresh focus on the skills needed to meet the new challenges of an ambitious and dynamic business. Research highlighted the key competencies employees needed in order to excel as business advisers and, through this, the importance of formal business skills development, better line management support and coaching, and clearer career paths for employees. Additionally, the business needed a means by which talent could be identified and succession planned.

DESIGNING AND DEVELOPING THE PROGRAMME

There are four Steps in the 'Steps 2 Success' suite of programmes – Step 1 (for first-line supervisors), Step 2 (for managers), Step 3 (for those earmarked for partnership/directorship within one to three years) and Step 4 (for partners). The programmes have differing durations; the modules within each programme take place once a month.

The modules are arranged across four competency streams (growth delivery, people delivery, task delivery and client delivery). These streams (together with a stream relating to technical delivery, which is covered by technical qualifications and a CPD programme) aim to develop those competencies that Vantis considers critical for success.

Programme candidates are nominated by their managers and supported by the head of the business unit or location. Each candidate signs a learning contract and agrees to participate fully in the modules and to undertake pre- and post-course work; the business unit or location head agrees to support the candidate, and the line manager agrees to coach the candidate. A coaching programme is available for those line managers with few or no formal coaching skills. The programmes have an assessment element so that post-course work is marked and written feedback given to the delegate, with a copy to the line manager.

The modules are delivered as intensive and challenging workshops. Simulations, case studies, role plays, forum theatres and active participation with real clients provide a stimulating learning experience, which delegates find memorable and which has practical application. Following each module, delegates are encouraged to create an action plan, using a personal development planning tool, and to implement what they have learnt with the support and coaching of their line manager. While some modules are delivered by external consultants, those in the task delivery stream, which relate to understanding the business of Vantis, use the in-house resource of senior managers. These managers deliver stimulating workshops on Vantis' business services and other key areas, such as client fulfilment and how to move from being an accountant to being a business adviser. Other senior managers have been used as assessors and advisory partners for some modules.

IMPLEMENTING AND OPERATING THE PROGRAMME

While the need for development was recognised at a senior level, it was also critical to establish line management and employee buy-in, and to demonstrate the value of the development versus the loss of chargeable time. This has been achieved in a number of ways: through the appointment of a programme sponsor from within the business for each programme; a communications strategy for business unit leaders, line managers and employees; feedback; and data analysis.

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The role of the programme sponsor is to work with the assigned learning and development professional on programme development, to introduce the programme, to be available as a support to delegates, to consider issues that may arise, to review programme feedback and to discuss delegates' personal development plans through one-to-one development review meetings held at the end of the programme. The programme sponsor also has a valuable role to play in promoting the programme, particularly at board and senior management level.

Communication about the programmes takes place at board level and through group and one-to-one meetings with managers and employees. Full information is published on the Vantis intranet, including key programme objectives, module content and schedules. Pre- and post-course work is also available on the intranet, as is programme feedback.

During the programme, line managers are sent periodical reminders of their employee's attendance at modules, and copies of their assessments. They are expected to meet the delegates to discuss the learning that has taken place and the delegate's personal development plan, and to work with the delegate to find ways to implement the latter. Gradually, this is helping line managers to understand better their role in the development of their employees, and importantly, the role of formal development as one element in the learning journey.

Employees are expected to be proactive in managing their own learning, both through the 'Steps 2 Success' programme and on the job, and to use the resources and support available to achieve this.

A post-course reception is held at the end of each programme to celebrate the commitment that employees have demonstrated to their continued learning and development, and the value that Vantis places on this. At past receptions, presentations have been given by both motivational speakers and members of the board.

CELEBRATING SUCCESS AND PLANNING THE FUTURE

The value of 'Steps 2 Success' has been quickly realised – employees are motivated by their development and have a better understanding of career opportunities at Vantis and how to progress, and managers have been able to see real benefits to the business.

The programmes have assisted in aiding retention and facilitating organic growth at Vantis. The 'Steps 2 Success' programmes have helped to reduce the attrition rate, with

a number of the delegates being promoted within the organisation, eight of these to partner positions.

Elaine Glass, head of learning and development at Vantis, highlights the key benefits of the programme:

- it makes it easier to identify talent pool
- networking and cross-selling have been more effective
- more internal promotions
- improved retention
- more of a 'buzz' about the need to learn – a definite 'feel good' factor
- greater understanding of the need to develop holistic (not just technical!) skills
- improved ability to attract good-quality candidates to Vantis.

Elaine is delighted with the success of the programme so far, while acknowledging there is further work to be done:

'It enhances our branding as an employer of choice, and has enabled us to recruit better-quality candidates because the 'Steps 2 Success' programme makes us more attractive than our immediate competitors. We are starting to see improvements in retention and our ability to grow organically, as well as more business being conducted through greater internal networking and cross-selling.'

ABOUT VANTIS

Vantis is the AIM-listed UK top-13 accounting, business and tax advisory group that specialises in helping growing businesses.

The Vantis group offers a range of specialist skills, including accountancy, taxation, business advice, corporate finance, asset finance, forensic accounting and dispute resolution, business recovery and personal insolvency services, restructuring and turnaround services, outsourcing, management consultancy, company secretarial, customs duty recovery and advisory services, independent financial advice, high net worth services and sports advisory services and solutions.

The Vantis group now has over 1,000 staff operating from 17 locations throughout UK.

For more information about Vantis, visit: www.vantisplc.com

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