Case Study – NHS East Midlands Strategic Health Authority (SHA)

The SHA was seeking to improve workforce flexibility and to take greater account of employee's views. It was perceived that this could, in part, be achieved by maximising the benefits of the Electronic Staff Record (ESR) system by encouraging the transfer of ownership of information to individual employees. The SHA joined the Acas-managed Innovative Workplaces project and as a result improved the communications between various end user stakeholder groups. This enhanced employee communication and participation and reshaped training and development initiatives all of which assisted the implementation of the new electronic records system (ESR). The outcome was improved communication and participation together with improved reliability, productivity and efficiency in the handling of personal data.

Case study organisational background

NHS East Midlands is the strategic health authority providing leadership of the NHS provision for the region's population of 4.3 million, spread across the counties of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Rutland, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Nottinghamshire. Overseeing a budget of £6 billion, and established in July 2006, the SHA have specific responsibilities for relaying and explaining national policy, setting direction and supporting and developing the region's NHS Trust bodies. At the commencement of the initiative, the East Midlands SHA had a workforce of 350 employees, spread across three sites including the Headquarters located in Sandiacre, Nottinghamshire.

The SHA was one of ten organisations that participated, during 2009/10 in a project managed by Acas, known as 'Innovative Workplaces – Developing Organisations for the Future'. The project was funded by the East Midlands Development Agency (*emda*).

The issues

The organisation sought to improve workforce flexibility and to take greater account of employees' views, including any issues or concerns. One aim was to promote a greater sense of fairness and consistency. It was believed that one route to achieving this would

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be by maximising the benefits of the Electronic Staff Record (ESR) system, in particular by transferring the information ownership to the individual so providing higher quality information. This was to be achieved through the implementation of an innovative self service functionality which adhered to governance standards on information access and data protection. The Oracle Learning Management System (OLM) database would be available through both Management and Employee Self Service. Consequently, there was a need to train all staff to be able to access the database to enable all employees to access their learning and development details, and book themselves on internal courses with the authorisation of their line managers. It was believed that this kind of change to organisational practice had the potential to increase employees' sense of value as they become increasingly responsible for their training and development. The intended outcome would be to help move the organisation towards a culture where everybody would be encouraged to learn new skills in line with the organisation's vision.

The opportunity to participate in an Acas supported initiative was seen as a possible catalyst to assist the organisation's representatives to help engage staff and facilitate enhanced communication.

How Acas helped – 'The Innovative Workplaces Project'

This innovative project was designed to stimulate organisational change, be workplace focused, provide customised organisational support, and develop management and leadership skills through a practical rather than a theoretical approach. It offered in-depth support to a number of organisations in the East Midlands region that were seeking to change workplace practices and increase employee engagement as a means of improving organisational performance.

Over an initial twelve month period during 2009 - 2010, the Innovative Workplace Project (IWP) provided a number of interventions to ten participating organisations. The IWP began in April 2009 with the recruitment and selection of organisations seeking to participate in the IWP. The participating organisations' nominated representatives participated in three core elements of the initiative commencing with an initial three and half day course to develop management and leadership skills, to build trust and dialogue between nominated representatives and to establish the group relationships necessary for action learning. The programme provided nominated representatives with the optional opportunity to gain a recognised management and leadership qualification.

This initial intervention was followed by monthly participant network meetings, which included action learning sets. Both the short course and the network meetings were facilitated via Acas' delivery partner UKWON. The third core element of the IWP was customised workplace facilitation provided by Acas Senior Advisers. Additional support was provided where there was an identified need, for example through Acas short training courses. Each organisation drew up an action plan and these were presented at a launch event in September 2009. These plans informed the projects within each organisation.

The SHA

In this organisation an Acas Adviser, in the first instance, worked closely with the organisation's nominated representatives to crystallise the focus of their action plan. It was believed that the changes in working practice set out by the action plan would boost employee engagement through better communication in turn improving workforce flexibility. The action plan highlighted the importance of integrating the Acas Innovative Workplaces Project with the wider SHA ESR project. The organisation's representatives were operating in two pilot areas which would increasingly be looking to enhance engagement of staff and line mangers with the new ESR system. Consequently, the organisation's representatives with the help of the Acas Adviser identified at an early stage in the project plan that communication was a key issue and this became the critical focus of the internal project and facilitation process.

Several meetings took place during which the Acas Adviser helped the organisational representatives to fine tune their terms of reference for the project. This process culminated in the establishment of three focus group meetings which took place over the duration of the IWP programme and which brought together the organisational representatives of both pilot areas with various end user and other stakeholders. These focus groups were facilitated by the Acas Adviser and they enabled 'voices' to be heard and highlighted issues to do with perceptions of the workplace, engagement, communication, direct consultation, line manager training and development and the implementation of the ESR system.

Both the organisation's representatives also attended the 'Meetings, Consultation and Forums' and 'Having Difficult Conversations' training events and one of the representatives attended each of the following training events, 'Facilitation Skills' and 'Developing Mediation Skills'. These opportunities were welcomed as evidenced by this comment from one of the organisational representatives:

"I think those were very useful skills that you need to conduct any staff engagement project, you needed to do everything in order to make sure you have the right approach".

The outcomes and impact

By April 2010, significant progress had been made. Following some early communication difficulties encountered as a result of the involvement of the many different stakeholders, the ESR system became operational. Employee participation in the focus groups resulted in reshaping of training and development initiatives both of which assisted the implementation of the ESR System. It was the perception of one of the organisation's representatives that these facilitated focus groups help to secure the 'buy-in' of various key stakeholders as illustrated by the following quote:

"That's the part that if Acas wasn't in … if we hadn't participated in an Acas project, it wouldn't be as successful as it is. That's the sort of support that we got, the focus groups that

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were facilitated by the Acas advisers. The advice that we got when we had challenges, how to engage people, that was the part that was very helpful to have Acas supporting us".

Six months following the end of the project, an increasing number of employees were beginning to engage with the ERS up dating their own personal data. This had three major effects; staff took greater ownership of their data and their personal development; HR information was more accurate; and data handling had become more efficient. This had led to improved reliability, productivity and efficiency in the handling of personal data.

For further details please contact Acas Research and Evaluation at

research@acas.org.uk

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