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Service excellence

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Robinsons, the grand old dame of Singapore's retail scene, started its operations in 1858. Acquired by the Dubai-based Al-Futtaim group in 2008, the company's current stable of stores now include John Little, Marks & Spencer, River Island and Fat Face.

As a major retail organisation, the Robinsons Group's primary focus is what it terms "service excellence". Chee Nian Tze, General Manager,

Group HR, Robinsons Group of Companies, says that means learning and development strategies are paramount in the HR mission.

"We aim to add value through our people and therefore training and development will always be a core area of focus," she says.

All new employees undergo a three-month training programme where they are taught essential skills like selling, service processing and cashiering. They also gain important product knowledge according to specific departments. They don't just direct customers to their products, they are able to advise and make recommendations. For example, an employee within the ladies' fashion section at the Robinsons flagship store would be able to advise customers on different types of fabrics and how to care for them.

Still, store employees are also trained to be multi-taskers. Each one could be performing the role of a sales assistant on one day, and a cashier the next. "Staff members who are well trained to multi-task will be better able to provide a seamless shopping experience for our customers," Chee says. "Being a multi-tasker also translates to better productivity."

Training is also an important form of employee retention – an important HR task in the retail industry. Chee says is not always easy to attract good calibre candidates due to the long hours and shift duties that Robinsons staff are required to put in. "The industry is also fast-paced and demanding, so it is very important to keep the staff motivated and engaged."

Staff Training

The Robinsons Group spends around 1% of its total payroll on training and development programmes. To keep these costs low, most of its programmes are conducted by in-house facilitators, Chee says. The company's status as an Approved Training Organisation allows it to tap on to a number of Government-sponsored subsidies and grants.

Two years ago, Robinsons also introduced its "Service Ambassador Programme", aimed at helping employees to develop a greater sense of pride for the company. Under the programme, employees are trained to engage customers, anticipate their needs and handle objections smoothly.

"We want to change mindsets so that they do not see themselves as doing just a sales job. They are representatives of the store," Chee says. "Our staff became more confident and we have seen an increase in the number of compliments from our customers."

Other learning programmes offer a great deal of flexibility for staff, giving them greater control over their own careers. Adopting a self-directed approach to learning, the company lets employees choose the type of training programmes that they would like to attend. Each session is delivered in "bite-sized" portions of not more than two hours so that it does not interfere with other work commitments, Chee says. Each employee attends an average of three days of training every year.

Leadership development

Robinsons keeps an active lookout for high-achieving employees and grooms them to become future leaders in the organisation. Those who do well on the sales floors are often moved to the buying office where they learn more about merchandising. Subsequently, they can be trained to take on management roles. "We would like to provide our staff with not just a job, but a career," Chee says, noting that staff should have every opportunity to rise as far as they can within the organisation.

Managers and potential leaders are trained in core areas such as service quality and retail knowledge. They also learn how to interview job candidates and conduct performance appraisals. But they aren't just students all the time. Managers are also asked to become internal facilitators for lower level training programmes. Chee says this allows them to acquire knowledge and become well-versed in their own work areas.

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High performers are given opportunities to raise their qualifications through certificate programmes, sponsored by the company. They can also tap on company scholarships and further their education externally, through diploma and degree programmes in retail management or similar fields.



Learning Festival

These management development efforts were highlighted during the Robinsons Group's inaugural "Learning Festival", held just last month. Chee says a number of professional and specialist speakers were invited to speak at the exclusive two-day event, giving staff the opportunity to hear and learn about a wide range of ideas and management concepts.

Khoo Swee Chiow, a member of the first Singaporean team to conquer Mount Everest, was one of the highlights. He gave an inspirational talk on the lessons he had learned as a world-travelling adventurer.

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Another session led by Josh Goh, Assistant Director, Corporate Services, GMP Recruitment, focused on the challenges involved in managing multi-generational teams. Chee told HRM that this talk was highly relevant for managers and potential managers of Robinsons – with employee ages ranging 20 to 70 years.

Key Media sites

Younger employees have a different philosophy to life compared to those in their sixties and managers need to understand this, Chee says. "(For example,) Generation Y employees are more aware of work-life balance. If they need to do overtime, you need to explain the rationale behind it and they are more likely to do it - it is not that they are less committed," she explains.

Other Learning Festival sessions focused on presentation skills and the "art" of conversation. Chee says the event was a resounding success with all 200 seats taken up within a week of the schedule being announced.

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