

Leadership and Management Essentials  
Case Study

*“Best Practice Guide for motivating and  
engaging employees on Fixed Term  
Contracts”*

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## **Aims of the Case Study**

The purpose of this case study is to examine the issues encountered when employing staff on fixed term contracts, with specific focus on motivation and staff engagement. Gaining a better understanding of the thoughts, attitudes and motivators for employees on fixed term contracts was the main objective of this study.

Across the organisation there are many departments who rely on utilising staff on fixed term contracts and this forms an integral part of their departmental resourcing plans. The most common reasons for employing staff on temporary contracts are for specific project work, students on placements or internships and cover for employees on maternity leave or secondments. The key focus of this case study is the group of staff who are employed on internships.

## **Expected Outcomes**

The expected outcome from this work was the production of some practical guidelines which both line managers and employees on short term contracts can utilise, making the role a success for both the employee and the organisation.

## **Methodology**

The main method of research was based on appreciative enquiry and focused on examining the positives with the ultimate aim of understanding what works, rather than trying to fix what does not work.

Feedback was gathered from three different groups of staff during which they were asked what they would stop/start/continue in terms of how the role was managed.

The three groups were;

1. Group 1 - Individuals who were previously employed as staff for a fixed term on an internship basis but have now left the organisation. All were employed for periods which varied from 4 to 12 months and after leaving BU they moved straight into alternative employment. It is 12 months or more since they were employed by BU.
2. Group 2 - Individuals still employed by the university on an internship basis who knew that their fixed term contract would be coming to an end and not go past a defined date.
3. Group 3 - Line managers/supervisors who employ staff on placements or internships.

In addition, prior to leaving the organisation Groups 1 and 2 were asked to provide feedback and thoughts on which elements of the role could be should be changed to make it more effective for the university and a better experience for employees.

## Analysis

The research showed that there are many commonalities between the first two groups as follows;

### Groups 1 and 2

- Virtually all of the individuals in this group recognised that on the whole they were presented with numerous opportunities to develop but they did not always take advantage of them since they often did not realise the potential benefits for the future. It was felt that their lack of experience in a working environment was the main reason behind this.
- The individuals wished they had embraced more opportunities to build on transferable skills and not just focus on the detail of the job they were doing.
- Another significant point raised was the need to be proactive and not just do the bare minimum. Commitment, ownership and taking responsibility were the common themes that emerged across both groups.
- There was some regret expressed that they hadn't taken the initiative to make better use of the Careers Service, but would have done so if there has been more encouragement from line management to do so.
- They also wanted to understand 'what's in it for me' and to clearly see the opportunities and the benefits the role brings. They will usually look to the organisation or line manager to articulate this clearly.
- All had exposure to numerous opportunities to increase their employability and gain valuable experience, giving them a head start over other graduates after they leave.
- Some demonstrated a good awareness that this contract could open up the possibility of gaining employment at the university through effective networking.
- A small number stated that prior to leaving were that they were feeling a rather jaded which may have impacted on motivation. Their primary focus was on securing another job and were not always engaged with the organisation in the wider sense, although motivation at team level remained.
- A comment raised from both groups was that they did not like being referred to as 'the intern' as it made them feel de-valued.

It should be noted that Group 1 left their role at BU more than 12 months ago and have had the advantage of being able to reflect on their experience in a way that Group 2 have not yet had. A key finding from Group 1 is that they realised it is a safe and supportive environment to try out new things; however this was only apparent once they had left and gained alternative employment.

### Group 3 – Line managers

The feedback from Group 3 uncovered a perceived issue with motivation tailing off as the contract comes to an end. In particular it was noticed that motivation drops off significantly in the last two months. However, it should be noted that if the employee was undertaking the role as their placement year, they remaining more focused at the end of the contact. The feeling was that placement students were more conscious they were being assessed and the success of the placement was linked in some part to their final assessment for Level P.

It was also noted that staff often demonstrated greater levels of commitment with the exciting elements of the role and it was often their application to more mundane administration tasks that tailed off towards the end of the contract.

### **Lessons Learned**

The key findings were;

1. It was suggested by previous post holders that staff employed on fixed term contracts need to be proactive and be engaged with the role rather than just doing the bare minimum throughout the contract term. Training and development for a future career is essential so employees need to be proactive and use it as a stepping stone. The comments reinforced the view that on the whole you 'get out of it what you put in'.
2. For staff to demonstrate this level of engagement, the role needs to be a meaningful experience that enhances their employability and skills. They are much more likely to engage if this is the case.
3. Line managers need to take time to develop the skills of their team, not just to ensure they have the core skills to perform the role but also the transferable skills that will benefit them in the longer term.
4. As a line manager it is good practice to ensure your team members do invest time in personal development and don't expect others to take the lead for them. They will however need support with this from more experienced staff members.
5. It was suggested that employees on a fixed term contract need to take responsibility for their own personal development with the aim of improving their employability. 'Make the year what you want it to be' was a common phrase that emerged.
6. Due to the varying nature of jobs, not all roles provide staff with the opportunity and time to take advantage of personal development opportunities outside of the role they perform.
7. Feedback suggested that line managers should not take the view that temporary staff will not be here for long so there is no need to invest too much effort in them. Staff will pick up on this and repay you with a lack of investment in the role. In addition these members of staff could end up staying for a longer period of time and you will have missed early opportunities to get them engaged.
8. There are significant benefits to managing your temporary staff effectively, such as gaining a new and motivated member of staff, bringing new skills and perspectives to your organisation and potentially improving productivity.

## **Implementation of Improvements**

As stated in the original aim for this case study, the desired outcome was to produce some practical guidelines for line managers. The changes and improvements identified are being piloted on the new Student Engagement Coordinators with effect from September 2014. The improvements include;

1. A re-design of the role framework including staff induction and some core components of the job. The rationale for this is ensure that the job is enriched to provide more personal development opportunities and help to keep the staff motivated and engaged.
2. Ensure that team members are absolutely clear that this very much a training role and the onus are on them to make the most of the opportunities that arise. The key action here is to set the scene in their induction very clearly.
3. Invest the time in creating personal development objectives that will develop a wider skill set for the future and not just based around the tasks they will be required to perform.
4. Implement a group project to be delivered at the end of the contract with the benefit of keeping staff engaged to the end. The project is designed to maintain momentum and will be based on an evaluation and review of the year. I believe this will show the team that their input and views are valued and it highlights a strong commitment to continuous improvement.
5. Show commitment to job enrichment. Don't just focus on the task they perform, take some time to help them develop. Highlight the need for team members to immediately start thinking about the future and undertake a skills gap analysis in the early stages of their employment. It provides an opportunity to discuss ways that they can fill gaps in their skills, attributes and experience e.g. job shadowing.
6. If they haven't already done so, they will be encouraged to create an e-portfolio and a LinkedIn profile (or sector specific equivalent) and undertake a reflective review of their year.
7. Treat them with the same respect as you do your permanent employees. Making them feel like temporary, disposable resources increases the chances of getting below-average effort in return if the temporary employees feel included; they are more likely to be committed to performing well in the role.
8. When presenting new temporary employee to permanent staff, it is not good practice to introduce them as 'the intern' or 'just here on a temporary contract'. It can make them feel de-valued. Instead, tell your employees about the duties they'll be undertaking. You'll have introduced the temporary workers in a respectful and professional manner, which helps the temporary workers but also sends out a positive message.

## **Summary**

Although this case study was mainly based around employing less experienced employees on internships or placements, it is clear that many of the findings are applicable across other groups of temporary contract staff. Ultimately the desired outcome is to help establish a positive working environment to ensure that employees on a fixed term contract are an asset to the organisation.

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***8<sup>th</sup> September 2014***