

Analyst

A project at Liverpool Victoria insurance company won an award for the way it trained up six novices. **Ravi Chandiramani** reports

When insurance group Liverpool Victoria advertised for people to train up as PL/1 programmers last year, the response was overwhelming. More than 400 hopefuls wrote in wanting to get their feet on the IT ladder, all competing for just six valuable vacancies.

Of the 400, 150 were put through psycho-metric, numeracy and reasoning tests set by the company's personnel department. Gordon Frampton, business programming manager at Liverpool Victoria (LV), saw a shortlist of 80 CVs, from which he plucked out 16 to be interviewed for the six places.

Now the training could begin.

LV chose the training company Stehle Associates to carry out the task, and the project turned out to be so successful it scooped the IT Training Council's prize for the External Training Project of the Year last February.

So what was it about the programme that made it special? A successful training project has to take place in the real world. This means that trainees need to be properly infused into a company's culture and objectives if they are going to be immediately productive, and calm the jitters of IT managers. From the start, Stehle's three-month programme to train up the six analyst programmers for LV placed great emphasis on that aspect. The course - which lasted from April to June 1997 - took the form of a systems development project to design and implement an online travel insurance system written in PL/1 and running on IBM CICS.

The system they would build was based on the real application that (LV) had

been running for some years. Stehle Associates' job was to design, organise and administer the course, as well as provide and present training material. LV specified that the course should be suitable for delegates with no experience of programming in mainframes.

"The beauty of the case study approach is that people know what it is like to work on a project," says Grahame Stehle, who managed the course, helped by a mixture of partners, freelancers and LV staff. "It avoids the problems of just giving them training in separate modules that are unrelated to real life. So we tried to simulate the project environment as well as we could. As well as teaching them things, we make them work to the company's standards, which means that when they finish the course they have been prepared for what it is going to be like sitting at their desks."

New recruits

Although existing LV employees were invited to apply, all six were brand new recruits educated to degree level with a minimal amount of programming experience. Their ages ranged from 21 to 29. "My interviews tried to focus on whether the applicant had really considered what the job entailed given that they didn't necessarily have any experience, and the longer term career they believed they were entering into" says LV's Gordon Frampton.

"We've always been inclined to bring trainees in from outside the organisation. At times we have bought experienced staff at high levels, but motivationally that sometimes gives you problems. Raw

programmers in three months

trainees can be a burden on others for support but we've taken a hit on that because we believe it's the best way."

The course kicked off in the form of a bonding session, between the individuals themselves and with their new employers. "We had the first week off site in a hotel to get away from the environment here and foster some team building among the individuals," says Frampton. "During that week, they were given an overview of the computing world, and they also got their formal LV induction training covering the company's rules and regulations, which every employee has to go through." There

was no beating around the bush however; the trainees were introduced to the travel insurance application within two hours of their first day.

Continuous assessment

At the heart of the project was a rigorous programme of continuous assessment, administered jointly by Stehle Associates and LV. This included weekly written tests on all the subject matter covered in that past week, fortnightly reviews of work products, program documentation and code, and monthly reviews for trainees to give their views on the training process and career managers and facilitators to give feedback on overall individual progress. Every trainer and presenter was briefed and understood their role in the context of the entire course to ensure that trainees would not be receiving conflicting advice.

Also, each trainee was assigned a personal mentor to call upon, both during the training as "somebody who could put an arm around them if they were struggling at any stage," and after it, in case they found the training had failed to prepare them adequately for the job. All three mentors had done the same course the previous year (1996) - which was the first time it was run - so they could give advice and guidance based on their own experience. Being the guinea pigs that year, they had not received the same mentoring service.

Tailoring the course to LV's requirements was only half the challenge; it also had to be flexible enough to take account of the trainees' own abilities. "I

had to run some basic sessions in accounting principles," recalls Stehle. "This was never scheduled, but it became apparent that at least a couple of the people had very low knowledge of basic business practices such as how a company accounts for its money flowing in and out. So I cancelled their lunch for four successive days, we bought in some sandwiches, got some drinks out of the machine, and I went through with them what a balance sheet is, as opposed to a profit and loss statement, and so on. And they loved it."

Frampton describes Stehle as very much a "people-focused person". "His understanding of our organisation is good, and he was very understanding in how we could shape and evolve the course into something which is more productive for us."

And there is plenty of proof in this particular pudding. The class of 97 are all now fully integrated team members of LV's Information Services Division; a third very similar course which started in January has since been completed and, as Frampton reveals, the plan is to take it a stage forward to address LV's other systems.

"Because of the different platforms we have, we do need to start thinking about other than just the PL/I platform," he says. "We've got a lot of PC-based, Unix and client/server systems so we've got to start thinking about how we would want to use this training course as well. And Grahame is ready for that in that he has people with those skills."

Focus on training

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- The company opted for trainees outside the organisation
- All the recruits were educated to degree level with a minimal amount of programming experience
- The trainees were introduced to the travel insurance application within two hours of their first day
- At the heart of the project was a rigorous programme of continuous assessment, including weekly written tests and fortnightly reviews of work products and program documentation