

## British Airways - The Wings of Learning

### August 2005 - Brian Summerfield

British Airways, the largest airline in the United Kingdom, has always been in the vanguard of innovation: It was the first company in the world to provide scheduled international service for travelers (between London and Paris), transport passengers in airplanes equipped with jet engines and offer commercial flights at supersonic speeds. The organization is a leader in commercial aviation as well, as it presently flies to more than 550 locations around the globe. Like the British Empire of old, this company can claim that the sun never sets on its operations.

Janet Windeatt, British Airways' head of training, and her team are responsible for making sure that the organization's 46,000 employees—6,000 of whom are based outside of the United Kingdom—are equipped to carry on this tradition of excellence. "Training matters to us as a business," Windeatt said. "We invest in it, and we believe that it's key to delivering the levels of service that our customers expect from us."

Some of the main components of British Airways's business strategy include investing in its people and products, and continuing to build a competitive cost base. These objectives, along with other strategic goals and values, have been delivered through a program called "The BA Way," which was launched last year. "This was in response to our people wanting real clarity about where we're positioning ourselves in the marketplace," Windeatt explained. "What we've done is tried to clarify for our people what the key things are that will make us successful in the future and what we really need to focus on for the business. With all the low-cost carriers, we wanted to be very clear on what we think our strategic direction is. The way we describe our company is we're a networked British airline that delivers service that matters for people who value how they fly. We've communicated these over the last year or so through several different vehicles for our people, so now it's in the culture."

The BA Way has five factors for success: be the best U.K.-based network, understand the customers better than the competition, be a powerful brand that people know and trust, foster a competitive cost base and work together as one team. "We have a little diagram where we have five airplane windows with an X between each of them," Windeatt said. "The point is that these five things are multipliers and underneath them is an equal sign that says, 'Service that matters for people who value how they fly.' The reason they're set out as multipliers is that if any one of those isn't right, you're not going to get the result that you want. That's particularly important when you're talking about working together as one team. If we do these five things well, we'll deliver the service that matters."

Another method British Airways' learning division has used to promote organizational values is its "Owning Our Future" program, which every employee across the enterprise—from in-flight crews to customer service staff—must go through at some point. "We run it every day," Windeatt said of the initiative. "It's delivered by our own internal senior management teams. It's about helping people understand the business direction, the environment that we're operating in and the way we're positioning ourselves in the business. By understanding that, they'll understand the actions we're taking in driving the business forward."

Correlative to Owning Our Future is a session called "Leading Our Future," which is for senior managers who will take a turn in running the former program. Leading Our Future teaches senior managers about the objectives of the Owning Our Future course and how to lead groups in an interactive way. "We really like this concept of our own people leading the business discussion," Windeatt said. "We've found it has a double benefit: Our employees are very pleased to be able to talk to some of the senior people in the business, and our senior people in the business get to hear the grassroots views of what matters to people."

"They sit at tables of about eight to 10 people, and they have very involved and dynamic discussions," she added. "Our very top executive team, including our chief executive, takes turns coming down and doing a slot on each day. It's not only run by our senior managers, who deliver the content and manage the discussion, but there's also a time of the day when one of our executive team is there to answer questions and present the BA Way. It is clearly helping people understand the business issues. They feel more informed as a result of being on it. It's encouraging the leaders of the business to continue to invest in the program and take time in sharing the delivery of the program."

Metrics from both of these programs have corroborated their value, Windeatt said. "In our employee research, we were able to distinguish between those people that had been through it and those that hadn't. Those people who had been on it were significantly better on a number of dimensions. On (statements) like 'I have specific information about BA's business performance' and 'I'm motivated to make change happen,' people who had been on that program scored higher. On certain dimensions, there's at least a 5 percent improvement in the scores of the people who attended the program."

With the exception of pilots and engineers who require highly specialized and technical training, Windeatt is responsible for delivering education content to personnel in every department in the company. "We have operational training, customer service training, management development, professional development—it kind of spans the whole gamut," she said. "Then we have the corporate initiatives. Those range from workshop to classroom. For most of those, we try to keep them in short, sharp packaging, because our people want snappy training over a day or two."

An interesting example of the live learning British Airways offers is an exact replica of an airplane interior that the in-flight crews conduct training exercises on. "They go to the mock-up of an aircraft and actually physically go down the chute off the aircraft," said Alison Walker, British Airways' learning innovations manager. "Lots of times, the mock-up will be used for safety training, but it also could be used for the galley where they prepare meal services."

"They practice a number of their training courses in the mock-up," Windeatt added. "Once you're on it, it's like you're in a real aircraft, with the same size, dimensions and seats."

E-learning, which currently comprises about one-third of all the company's training offerings, has made educational content more accessible for employees in various functions and locations, Walker said. Much of the e-learning subject matter is asynchronous refresher training that supports face-to-face learning events. "We have to have refresher training every one to three years," she said. "The online learning can be good for that. It allows people to refresh their information there, and also take electronic tests."

"We've recently brought on board a new duty-free sales system, which our cabin crews use. The online learning on that allows people to practice the kinds of conversations they'll have with people and the transactions they'll have to make on their handheld device. We also have quite a large range of off-the-shelf online learning for IT departments. We also have a lot of training for project management, facilitation skills, leadership skills—those types of things. So we have actually got a wide range of e-learning, but the majority of the volume is in that first category." Walker also said the company is looking into an online virtual classroom setup for certain areas of IT training. "We do recognize that for our IT professionals, online learning without being able to access the experts is only of a certain amount of value," she said. "The feeling is that having a virtual-classroom model will work better for those people."

British Airways' learning programs will figure heavily in the organization's plans for the next couple of years, Windeatt said. "Our business plan, which we just launched a few months ago, covers a two-year span, and training is featured significantly in it under this theme of investing in

our people. For all of us, that's great news. The company continues to very publicly state that they believe training and development is important."

In particular, employee education will be a crucial component of British Airways' "Getting Fit for 5" initiative—as in Terminal 5, its future hub at London's Heathrow International Airport. "We're going to be moving into a beautiful new terminal in 2008," Wendeatt said. "We're in the process of developing the training plans for Terminal 5, which is incredibly important to us. My team is currently working with our line colleagues in the terminals to scope out the range of training that will be required to operate effectively in the new building. It's going to be a wonderful opportunity for our customers and a great opportunity for our employees."

*—Brian Summerfield, CLO Magazine*

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