



Creating the business-focused consultants of tomorrow

Innovative training is providing graduates with valuable business insights along with excellent SAS skills – ensuring a sustainable pipeline of experts able to deliver higher value solutions and services for clients.

Industry

Education

Business Issue

Rapidly training graduates in essential SAS skills and hands-on business experience – to tackle a skills shortfall, address rising costs and ensure a strong pipeline of talented consultants.

Solution

A unique SAS ‘boot camp’ that includes SAS public courses, bespoke Business & Decision case study content, role-playing, ‘softer’ skills such as team-working and time management, and SAS certification.

Benefits

Sustainable resourcing - addressing the skills shortfall and inflation in personnel costs, attracting high calibre applicants, speeding up the journey from graduate to consultant, enabling staff to become chargeable and start delivering value for clients faster, improved graduate retention.

With more than 2,700 employees worldwide, Business & Decision is one of the leading SAS partners, providing consulting, integration and data management services. The firm is known for the quality of its consultants and the expertise they bring to client engagements. By late 2008, however, Business & Decision had recognised a SAS® skills shortfall emerging and decided to take action with a new strategic training programme, developed with SAS. This not only provides high levels of SAS technical know-how but also puts those skills into a real-life business context and develops essential ‘soft’ skills around team working. “We are a market leader so it’s our responsibility to ensure the market has access to enough expert, business-aware SAS consultants in large enough numbers so we can deliver high-value services to clients at a reasonable cost,” says Jacqueline Hoey, Sales and Marketing Director, Business & Decision. “Hence our decision to invest in this training – this is about responsible and sustainable resourcing for the future.”

A sustainable resource of SAS and business expertise

“We hire up to 20 graduates each year,” says Sandra Graddon, Head of HR, Business & Decision. With the UK business already employing 150 consultants, demand is growing. “We prefer to ‘grow our own’, hiring graduates with possibly no experience of SAS but who are interested in consultancy work, coming from a statistical, operational research and analysis background as well as computer science. We want to employ ‘all rounders’ because that’s what makes a good consultant: someone who

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balances an interest in technology with a natural client-facing persona. We can then add SAS and other skills, bringing people up through the business and ensuring they’re a part of the Business & Decision culture.”

Hoey says Business & Decision already employs more SAS consultants than any other BI consultancy in the UK. “We saw a skills shortfall emerging, and fewer people meant that resource was becoming scarcer and as a result, more expensive. We want to provide services at a reasonable market rate our clients can afford.” This led to discussions with SAS on a ‘strategic resourcing plan’ to create a pipeline of talented consultants. The result was a graduate ‘boot camp’ that, following Business & Decision’s induction, combines ‘fast-track’ training at SAS with bespoke Business & Decision content and SAS certification. “In five years we want the supply of such people to be much healthier,” Hoey says, “to prevent SAS skills from becoming a rare commodity. This can only benefit our clients and the market in general.”

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Ensuring quality – and building ‘the intelligent practice’

Graddon continues: “Business & Decision is known for quality, in the people and services we provide – clients have come to expect it. Much of that is based on nurturing our graduates, and the right kind of training to give them the skills to go to client sites and represent the company.” From a HR perspective, the business wanted a far more structured training programme that took advantage of the facilities available through SAS, and including content above and beyond public courses. The four-week training was created with the SAS® Partner Academy with a role-based case study approach at its centre, with specially commissioned materials bridging the gap between ‘standard’ product training and other skills identified as essential for a Business & Decision consultant. “This wasn’t only about training and testing but also putting those skills into a business context,” Hoey says. “This meant using business terminology and industry best practice, and looking at ‘softer’ skills. Graduates not only learn SAS skills but also benefit from real business insights. That was the key – and the boot camp’s been very successful in providing what we wanted.” The training is designed to:

- Ensure high levels of competency and product knowledge: functional, technical and business-related
- Raise skill levels and help align delivery with business challenges and requirements: from architecting solutions through project planning and execution to risk mitigation

- Develop attitudes and behaviours, including team-working and Business & Decision’s client-focused ‘can do’ culture
- Create increased capacity and capability for the future in terms of resources available to deliver solutions.

The most tailored element from SAS is, Graddon says, the case study. “What you learn in the first week about SAS you put into practice in the second. We didn’t have features like that before. Some graduates have never been in a business environment, but have to apply that SAS knowledge in role-playing, behaving as they would at a client’s site: getting data, doing analysis and running reports using SAS.” She says this takes attendees out of their ‘comfort zone’ by, for example, making them take part in a requirements gathering role-play where the client character can be portrayed as exceptionally vague or even rude. “Graduates have to ‘think outside the box’ at a really early stage.”

Teaching skills, building confidence

So what of outcomes for individuals and the business? “The training helped me use SAS in ways I never thought possible,” recalls Kishan Dattani, class of 2008. “The most valuable experience was how to cope under stress when working on a project.” According to 2009 graduate Andrew Harrold, “The course provided experience and knowledge of SAS, project planning and an overview of my job, with the team building exercises particularly important. Afterwards I felt I had the confidence and skill required to do the job.”

Jacqueline Hoey also points to clear business gains. “What Business & Decision and its clients really want is a high level of SAS skills plus business knowledge. We want graduates to start working more effectively more quickly; to hit the ground running. Business & Decision graduates go out ready-made and confident; they start delivering value immediately. The training supports that.” The time required to move people from ‘talented graduate’ to ‘market-ready consultant’ has speeded up. “This means consultants become chargeable and can start delivering value to clients far quicker,” she says. Staff turnaround is also lower – with less than 5% of graduates leaving. Experienced graduates are a very saleable commodity, they often leave after a year or two. “We’re not seeing that because, I think, our people can see the investment we’re making in them and value our commitment to them. So lower graduate turnover is another big win. We are absolutely seeing a good return on our investment in this training. I’m very happy with the results.”

Sandra Graddon adds, “Sometimes it’s very difficult to recruit good SAS consultants. But with an ongoing intake of graduates, moving through the business and developing their careers quickly, we can build the practice without always needing to recruit senior people. So the training not only helps with recruitment, marketing our graduate intake with a structured programme and setting out what graduates need to achieve, but we can also offer them a real career path through the company.”



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