

Raising retention

Skills shortages and the open-border nature of the cruise sector mean it is open to staff retention problems. Lucia Cockcroft talks to **Roberta Jacoby** of Carnival Cruise Lines, **Jeff Beattie** of Holland America, **Rai Caluori** of Princess Cruises and **Peter James** of Johnson & Wales University about how to retain staff.

In recent years, the cruise industry has woken up to the implications of an unengaged, short-term workforce that can be largely made up of a young, party-loving crowd with little loyalty to one job or employer.

At the same time, the travelling and cruise-going public has become far more discerning and well-travelled, putting more demands on the cruise industry to deliver a more memorable holiday experience.

A key way to deliver optimum service levels is through finding and keeping the best possible staff, offering effective training schemes and incentive packages, and providing attractive living conditions.

Many major cruise companies have formalised and improved their benefits packages, improving working conditions and instigating training schemes and schools aimed at attracting the best pool of employees.

Roberta Jacoby, senior VP of air and sea corporate training for Carnival Cruise Lines, says finding the right people, with the right skills and the right attitude is a pressing problem. 'Our industry has undergone a sustained pattern of aggressive growth, so the availability of qualified employees has taken on added importance,' she says.

Hiring people with the proper service attitude and predisposition to hospitality, as well as the adequate language skills and experience is an issue that affects

the entire travel industry, Jacoby says.

One solution has been to sharpen hospitality and skills training. 'With increased regulation and the demands of our guests and the vacation industry, training is an answer to the challenges we face,' Jacoby says. 'The proper training of our staff positions us well.'

With this in mind, Carnival has set out to formulate a retention strategy that includes the industry's first fully-funded retirement package for all levels of shipboard employees. The scheme is structured so that the longer the employee stays with the company, the better the end financial deal.

Jacoby has also established a shipboard crew training scheme, with multimedia labs available for the 'personal and professional development' of all staff, where they can learn foreign languages and even work on personal financial planning.

Other Carnival initiatives include employee opinion surveys asking for feedback about life onboard.

Customer care

Cruise operator Princess has also worked hard to improve and formalise its staff training and benefits. A ten-part quality management programme, C.R.U.I.S.E, rewards cruise members 'for going the extra mile' by placing emphasis on customer awareness, service and hospitality among shipboard and shoreside staff.



Rai Caluori, Princess' new executive vice-president of fleet operations, says customer care is critical to the scheme. 'Emphasising whether first impressions are good or bad will make a bigger impact on the customer than all the money we could spend on advertising, marketing and public relations put together.'

It is a bold statement, but Caluori says Princess' focus on customer care has enabled it to attract the best crew members with the knowledge that hard work will be rewarded.

There are several key components of the C.R.U.I.S.E programme. Passengers are asked to fill out comment cards for any employee who makes the customers' cruise special. Recognised crew members are entered into the 'Employee of the Month'

By introducing staff training schemes, cruise lines are looking to improve both job satisfaction and customer service.



programme, and passengers and fellow crew members vote on the best candidates to receive public commendation and cash rewards.

Feedback is critical. Suggestions for service and operational improvements are reviewed monthly, and winning suggestions are selected on the basis of positive impact, cost effectiveness and ease of implementation.

Princess' other recruitment and retention initiatives include opportunities to earn extra money based on passenger feedback, a crew newsletter and the chance to learn another language.

Pan-industry challenge

Jeff Beattie, director of human resources at Holland America, stresses that the

cruise sectors' struggle to attract and retain staff is part of a pan-industry and border HR challenge.

'This is a global issue, and some industries are impacted more than others. The basic issue is the baby boomers of the 1940s and 50s are starting to retire and the following generations have had much lower birth rates. Therefore there are not enough people to staff open positions from the traditional markets,' Beattie says.

Holland and America is now looking at the fast-growing Asian markets to plug some of the labour gap. Beattie says: 'We need to be able to quickly train and acclimatise staff so they are able to be assimilated into the onboard workforce faster,' Beattie says.

He also says the company's commitment to the recruitment, retention and training of staff has enjoyed 'significant' increases in resources. 'We have added people, technology, improved processes and taken a complete re-look at what we are doing.'

The bedrock of the firm's new training and retention plan is the Career Roadmap programme – a scheme that aims to provide benchmarks for employees in the area of promotion, pay and benefits, onboard facilities and feedback schemes.

A Learning Management System provides 24-hour access to online training on ships, in offices and at home via the internet.

A series of conferences brings staff ashore for multi-day training where they can learn about onboard operational pressures and meet other staff.

Training is not the only key HR area for the industry: good facilities for staff are crucial when they are living onboard for weeks or months at a time. Holland and America has introduced more telephone lines for its staff, improved menus, and established personal development schemes focusing on areas such as finances, spirituality and health.

Peter James, director of contract education services at Johnson & Wales University, has been helping to train cruise industry employees since 2003. In conjunction with the Philippines-based Meranti Magsaysay Institute, the university runs training schemes for a host of cruise companies, including P&O and Costa Cruises.

James says the industry battles to find qualified, committed people who are looking to stay with one firm for a reasonable length of time. 'There are a lot of younger people who will do work in this sector for fun. It's a very transitory career for many people, although there are those who do make it a life-long job,' he says.

Over the last two years, James has worked with Costa Cruises to develop a formal management training scheme – in common with many others, the firm had a history of promoting staff specialising in a particular skill, such as front desk, cooking or entertaining, but who had no management training.

In recent years, Costa has sharpened its game considerably: there are now six training schools located all over the world, five of which are dedicated to the training of shipboard personnel.

In addition, all of Costa's managers are now put on a ten-hour training course, introducing them to management skills, performance reviews, coaching, communication and cultural diversity issues.

The end result of all this training, James explains, is to end up with a polished, committed workforce which views the cruise industry as a long-term career path. 'It's about raising the level and quality of the cruises, and that means we have to invest in a lot of training. It's not a question of hiring just anyone anymore: we have to find, and keep, the best people.' *wc*

Human resources: the state of play

- A worldwide shortage of skilled staff has hit many industries. The worldwide shipping fleet will need 60,000 new seafarers every year for the next three years, according to Det Norske Veritas (DNV).
- Skills are in short supply: two-thirds of people joining the worldwide fleet of ships have never been to sea before, says DNV. Many experienced seafarers instead look for jobs in the offshore oil and gas industries, which traditionally offer better pay and conditions.
- But cruise companies are stepping up their training. In February this year, Italian firm Costa Cruises inaugurated a new hotel training school in Jakarta, Indonesia, for its shipboard staff. Run in conjunction with Meranti Magsaysay Institute the school will prepare around 1,300 new hires a year – to be employed in areas such as hospitality, housekeeping, and bar tending.