

**Investors in People/Profile Case Study:**

**Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) – Swindon Office**

**Background**

Size: 350 staff

Sector: Public sector

Locations: Swindon – but with teams at Wallingford, Nottingham, Oxford, Kidlington, Cranfield and at Herstmonceux, Sussex.

Status: Recognised as an Investor in People in 2001 and successfully reviewed in 2004. More recently in May 2007, NERC was also successfully assessed against the Profile version of the standard.

**Overall impact**

“Investors in People, with its focus on achieving success through training, communication and teambuilding, is central to the culture of our organisation and the way we work.”

*Cheryl Kent, Learning and Development Manager*

**The organisation**

NERC was founded in 1965, when a range of environmental research organisations were brought together. These included the Nature Conservancy, the Geological Survey of Great Britain, the National Institute of Oceanography, the Hydrological Research Unit and the British Antarctic Survey.

NERC'S original responsibilities ranged from the awarding of grants and the funding of postgraduate studies to the provision and operation of ships, equipment and other facilities for environmental research.

More than 40 years later, NERC is established as the UK's main agency for funding and managing research, training and the sharing of knowledge in the environmental sciences.

An annual budget of around £375 million enables NERC to fund research in universities and in its four wholly owned research centres, as well as in 15 other collaborative centres around the UK. NERC also funds the key 'national capability' that the UK needs to deliver environmental science such as research infrastructure, shared facilities and services, and skills and expertise.

NERC proudly delivers financial support for the full range of atmospheric, earth, terrestrial and aquatic sciences *"from the deep oceans to the upper atmosphere...from the poles to the Equator."*

Publicly funded, but independent of Government, NERC aims to harness knowledge and understanding of the environment to raise the quality of peoples' lives. As such, NERC actively encourages *"public engagement in environmental science and its outcomes"*

The Swindon office is effectively the managerial hub of NERC.

Its administration, human resources, funding and corporate activities are all run from the Wiltshire centre, under the leadership of Chief Executive, Professor Alan Thorpe, who was appointed in January 2005.

Since its opening in 1975, the Swindon office has continued to grow to meet the needs of a constantly developing organisation. Staff numbers alone have increased by up to 15% in the past four years.

### **The challenge**

NERC Swindon Office originally committed to the Investors in People process as part of a Government drive to encourage all public sector workplaces and departments to achieve accreditation.

"The approach we took was that we actually wanted to do it properly," Cheryl Kent says.

"Rather than just having processes in place to tick boxes, we actually wanted to improve our processes, so that year-on-year we continued to raise our performance as an organisation."

“For us, the major challenge has been to try to keep up with best practice in all the major areas of training, team-building, induction and communication, in order to best serve our principal customers, the universities and Government departments.”

### **The Strategy**

Since the first successful Investors in People assessment in 2001, NERC Swindon Office has worked hard not just to comply with the requirements of the standard but to develop a culture of continuous improvement in the way that it values and encourages its employees towards greater achievements.

Committing to Profile in November 2006 was a further stage in this process.

“We wanted to know where we stood and how well we were doing in comparison with other Investors in People organisations,” Cheryl Kent says.

“And of course we wanted to know whether there were areas that needed improving.”

Natalie Hunt and Terry Gibson, who carried out the Profile assessment on behalf of Quality South West, were able to identify a range of strengths and areas of good practice, including *“good quality recruitment selection and induction.”*

Cheryl Kent says:

“We have improved our induction processes quite significantly over the past few years. We radically revamped the type of induction that people receive in their first week with us by looking at what we were providing and how much of it was relevant. We asked people who had been through the process what they found useful and timely.”

“We also introduced an induction `half-day` for people who have been with us for about three months, to enable them to share experiences with people who`ve started around the same time. We invite some of the longer serving staff to lunch so that new arrivals can absorb more of the culture of NERC.”

Swindon is also proud of its long-standing tradition of `work-life balance` strategies.

As well as generous annual leave allowances and flexible hours, NERC offers special leave to help staff cope with occasional domestic crises.

In consultation with staff, the Swindon office has also refined its systems of communication. As well as regular briefings and question and answer sessions with the Chief Executive, the office cascades information through team briefings.

Most importantly, Swindon was also able to demonstrate a deeply embedded culture of training and learning.

Staff have opportunities to pursue external qualifications that range from Masters degrees in Management to A Levels in Business Studies. Staff are encouraged to raise their performance through training programmes in topics such as Time Management and Presentation Skills.

The Profile assessors made particular note of *"the sheer volume of development, often at very high levels"* and of *"people`s confidence that they have the knowledge and skills to help them be effective and successful."*

Additionally, Swindon`s management has promoted a sense of ownership and responsibility through the introduction of Forward Job Plans, with staff encouraged to become more closely involved in decision making through `one-to-ones`, team meetings and working parties. *"I have a sense of knowing the part I play,"* one employee reported.

### **The results**

NERC Swindon Office has continued to grow and develop. The office remains within budget, while investing more than £322 million in scientific programmes during 2006-7.

At the same time, the office has been able to maintain staff turnover at historically low levels.

A Swindon Office Business Plan has helped the team to shape its future, while developing a clear identity for itself.

"We`re now recognised as an independent area in terms of the way in which we manage our staff," Cheryl Kent says.

"The planning process has helped people to identify Swindon office as having a particular function and worth within NERC. What we do fits with the whole ethos of Investors in People."

November, 2007