

Professional skills

“There is no-one skilled to use all the features of the new lathe.”

We live in a fast-changing world of technological and regulatory developments. To meet the new challenges that they pose, it's vital to keep your expertise up to date.

Using inexperienced temporary staff to replace permanent employees who've gone on holiday can cause problems. For example, temporary staff won't always have the expertise to know what to do if your customers have questions or problems.

New information technology, machines, devices and materials can weaken your competitiveness if a competitor has the expertise to use them before you.

Tips

- Maintain your employees' expertise through continuous development, including training, teamwork and task rotation.
- Compile and provide a training programme (including induction) for new employees.
- Increase your competitiveness by monitoring developments in your market or sector.
- Read industry and trade publications to keep in touch with new innovations, and attend events such as conferences, seminars, workshops and trade fairs.

Useful links

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development – Learning, training and development
www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/lrnanddev

Using consultants

“The loss would have been avoided if a professional design firm had been used to plan the structure.”

It's not possible or necessary to do everything yourself. It's worth considering subcontracting tasks that need special expertise to an external source. Even though specialist services are often expensive, they can pay for themselves by saving your own work time. By using a specialist, you can concentrate on carrying out your core activities.

Areas where external specialists may be of use include risk assessment, accounting, taxation issues, improvement of the work environment, product development, the planning of brochures, and marketing, agreement and legal matters. However, an incompetent specialist can do more harm than good, so check their credentials carefully before hiring them.

Tips

Information about specialists in different fields is available through the Small Business Service (DTI); professional bodies such as the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health; and trade and employers' associations, for example the Confederation of British Industry and Chambers of Commerce. If you run a small business, you might want to use the services of a consultant who has special expertise in this area.

When choosing a specialist, it's worth finding out about their 'track record' by asking previous customers about their services. Make sure you draw up a written agreement with a specialist that spells out the work you want them to do for you and so on.

The enforcing authorities – for example the Health and Safety Executive, your local authority and fire service and the Environment Agency (or Scottish Environment Protection Agency or Northern Ireland Environment Agency) – and insurance companies can provide some services for specialist areas.

Useful links

IOSH free publication, 'Getting help with health and safety: practical guidance on working with a consultant'

www.iosh.co.uk/information_and_resources/idoc.ashx?docid=51a406a0-a262-4827-a832-a517f8023a77&version=-1

Health and Safety Executive

www.hse.gov.uk

Association of British Insurers

www.abi.org.uk

Business Link

www.businesslink.gov.uk

Confederation of British Industry

www.cbi.org.uk

British Chambers of Commerce

www.britishchambers.org.uk

Small Business Federation

www.fsb.org.uk