

OffPAT switches on to e-learning with Information Transfer

Introduction

You may be forgiven for asking what OffPAT is. The Office of Project and Programme Advice and Training plays a key role in supporting and developing its member organisations as they appraise, deliver and evaluate projects and programmes. They aim to provide an efficient and effective means:

- of identifying central government project requirements and project and programme best practice
- to avoid duplication of effort, maximise the use of resources, time and cost of checking the many sources of advice and in developing and disseminating good practice on a common basis across the Regional Development Agencies, London Development Agency, The Homes and Communities Agency, the Welsh Assembly Government (DE&T) and the 3 Urban Development Corporations
- to collaborate for a common understanding of the project and programme topics, to adopt common practices, to learn from one another and develop collective responses.

OffPAT recently teamed up with Information Transfer to develop a delivery system and set of e-learning materials to assist in the achievement of the above aims.

OffPAT at work

OffPAT's remit covers those projects and programmes that support the delivery of the members' Corporate Plan activities that contribute to the delivery of government targets and Regional Economic Strategies.

As Doree Moretti, Communications and Office Manager at OffPAT, put it:

"H M Treasury provides 'The Green Book', which sets out the core principles on which all public sector economic assessment is based. Part of our role is to provide digestible information for our members. One of those ways we do that is by providing courses to introduce users to key topics such as State Aid and Project Evaluation."

Projects can range from helping small rural companies to diversify, to setting up large-scale infrastructure development to attract overseas investment.

The challenge

Trying to get to grips with the rules and regulations concerning, for example, State Aid, is quite a challenge. Moreover, staff in each region possess differing levels of knowledge on the subject which adds to the training challenge. Doree explained:

"We provided our members with a PowerPoint pack of materials on a range of subjects, including State Aid, which they could use to deliver training. There were several downsides to this approach: the material was quickly out-of-date, it did not engage the learner, and each trainer would interpret the material in a different way."

A new approach was needed and it was through its network that OffPAT discovered a viable e-learning system. One of the Regional Development Agencies, Yorkshire Forward, was already

using Information Transfer's Knowledge Centre LMS to deliver e-learning induction training for their staff on policies and procedures.

Liz MacDonald, Director of OffPAT, was given a demonstration of the system at an OffPAT Practitioner's Group meeting. She immediately realised that a similar e-learning system could provide a cost-effective way of delivering training and support to OffPAT members, and in doing so, to deliver consistent and accessible advice across the UK. She set about putting together a business plan to implement what became the OLC - the OffPAT Learning Centre.

OffPAT reviewed several different e-learning providers before deciding on Information Transfer and a centrally hosted bespoke Learning Management System. Doree explained why:

"The decision to choose Information Transfer was made on the basis of their knowledge and expertise and impressive list of existing clients, plus the fact that they had already worked with two of our member organisations."

As well as developing the content for each module, the delivery of that material through a central system was crucial to the success of the project, as Debbie Ganz, Consultant at Information Transfer explained:

'Unlike Yorkshire Forward, this was not simply a question of delivering and tracking e-learning courses on one site. We had to think very carefully about how each member organisation would access those courses and track only their staff's course completions. Our web based Enterprise Knowledge Centre provided the solution.'

Introducing the OffPAT Learning Centre

In June 2006, with approval from the OffPAT Training Group, work started immediately to build the OffPAT Learning Centre (OLC) and deliver the first course on State Aid.

Initial courses included:

- An introduction to State Aid
- State Aid – What is an SME?
- An introduction to Project Evaluation
- An introduction to the *de minimis* regulation.

Each course consists of a learning section, an assessment and an online survey to gather feedback. They are designed to give staff an introduction to the subject and be used in conjunction with teacher-led sessions.

The content for each module is approved by subject matter experts and material is updated regularly as regulations change. Therefore the material and advice available across the UK is never out of date: something which was difficult to achieve before the OLC. In addition, courses are validated with CPD certification which has added value to the training package, making them easier to promote to staff.

The OLC is accessed via the OffPAT website; staff log in with their password and complete the modules assigned to them. Having access to the courses from any PC with an internet link has proved highly popular with member organisations.

Janet Moore, Training Manager at Northwest Development Agency, commented:

"The success of the OLC is partly due to its accessibility; it is excellent to have web-based access 24/7."

Whilst there was little resistance to the introduction of e-learning, initial uptake was slow. To encourage partner organisations to use the OLC, OffPAT set up a networking day for representatives from each member organisation. This group now meets every 6 to 9 months and as well as supporting each other, members have put forward suggestions for future e-learning courses.

Feedback from across the regions

Northwest Development Agency's (NWDA) Training Manager Janet Moore, and Derek Francis, Training and Development Manager at Advantage West Midlands (AWM) explained the benefits the OLC is delivering to their organisations. Both started by commenting on the ad hoc and 'sparse' nature of training for staff in these areas before the implementation of the OLC. As Derek explained:

"Having the OLC has formalised our approach to training in State Aid and de minimis regulations. The information available is consistent and the system very robust. We now package the e-learning modules with face- to- face training in the available subjects."

Janet commented on the effective use of staff training time that the OLC has delivered:

"In order to attend the Project Evaluation course staff must first complete the online module. This has reduced a one day course to half a day. This means more time can be spent on practical case studies as delegates now arrive with a basic understanding of the subject. While the cost comparison is difficult to ascertain, there is certainly a direct correlation to a reduction of staff down time."

With over 800 registered users, 400 course completions to date, and a further 200 underway, things are going well. The surveys also provide useful feedback on the effectiveness of the material and suggestions for future development.

Over 75% of users who completed the *Introduction to State Aid* felt the course had significantly improved their understanding of the material. Many delegates also appreciated being able to manage their own training time and access material when required to refresh their knowledge.

As well as the online modules, Information Transfer has created an e-library to support each course. Here delegates can download case studies or access government papers and recommendations on project delivery or appraisal. In the words of one delegate:

"It's great as a resource for looking at case study examples and will hopefully continue to add value to what the RDAs do."

An unforeseen benefit is the knock-on effect the OLC has delivered to member organisations' partners. Janet from NWDA enthused:

"One of our targets for 2007 was to improve communication with the organisations and companies that use our services. Being able to provide them with access to training on State Aid and the de minimis regulations has been fantastic. Improving their understanding of the regulations has cut down on misunderstandings and has greatly improved our support to them."

For all OffPAT member organisations the OLC has delivered an innovative and effective e-learning system generating significant training benefits to their staff. For the training team at AWM the cost of building a bespoke professional e-learning system is not normally within their budget. Derek Francis is delighted that through OffPAT they can access this 'professional' training and is hoping for more module development in future.

What lessons have been learnt?

Janet and Derek both suggested planning ahead and thinking about how e-learning would fit into the overall training strategy within the organisation. Francis also suggested setting up a PC in a quiet area or room within the office where staff can access e-learning away from their desk. Both also recommended appointing a dedicated person to administer the system, and using all available internal communication channels to get the message across. At AWM the staff messaging board, intranet, team meetings and internal emails have all been employed to promote the new e-learning modules.

Both Janet and Derek advocated tying the courses in with face-to-face training, which has improved uptake. The worry with any e-learning system is that after the initial buzz enthusiasm wanes and the modules sit unused. To combat this NWDA now tie in course completion with individual performance appraisals, again increasing visibility of the resource.

Where next?

With only three staff at OffPAT and 14 member organisations to support, the OLC has had a huge impact on the effective delivery of training and support to the regions. As well as having motivated and informed staff, it has reduced costs and promoted communication and understanding of the funding process and project evaluation.

With endorsements from OffPAT's members and enthusiastic delegates across the UK, OffPAT is currently developing new modules with Information Transfer on Project Appraisal and the General Block Exemption Regulation.

When asked what advice she would offer other organisations thinking about e-learning, Doree Moretti was unequivocal:

"Go for it! E-learning is motivational and easy to set up and use. I can't think of a downside."

de minimis Regulation. The European Commission sets out the basis under which small amounts of public aid given to an undertaking do not count as State Aid.

State Aid. An advantage, in any form whatsoever, conferred on a selective basis to undertakings by national public authorities.

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