

Views from the Bridge: 1

R.G. Aspray

Chief Executive, Norwest Co-operative Society

Co-operative societies should currently be examining their employment policies and practices very closely in order to meet the changes within the employment market over the next few years. Known demographic changes will see a reduction of 25%-30% in the numbers of young people aged between 19-22 over the next 3-5 years. The implications to Societies are indeed most serious particularly in relation to the past five years, when there have been considerably more young people in this age category than there were jobs available, thus resulting in unemployment and widespread training initiatives of varying standards.

Consequently, in an environment where employers are going to be vigorously competing for young people, the image, reputation, and public perception of the employer becomes an even more vital tool of recruitment. Employers need to attract young people, they cannot afford not to, as they represent the life blood of the employers' future prosperity. Each Society must give serious consideration to how they are perceived by young people. What role has the Society played in the community it seeks to serve and how well publicised has this role been? The Society needs to be aware of how well it has attracted young people of quality in the past, and how well they compare with their competitors in this respect.

Co-operative Principles - and Youth?

In considering Co-operative principles, we must ask ourselves how relevant those are to young people today. Are they interested in open membership, in democratic control through "one member/one vote" etc.

We must be aware that young people's ideas, thoughts, and perceptions are changing considerably. Does the Co-operative Movement mean anything to young people today? Does it represent change, modernisation, growth, development? If it does (or is progressively moving that way) then the Society has a chance, particularly when it enters the market to sell jobs.

The Movement can point to some positive achievements in the education and training arena. Societies have been and still are heavily committed to the Youth Training Scheme and other training initiatives and have the benefit of being able to offer multiple choice across an ever-widening range of retailing skills. This is certainly a distinct advantage over many competitors and one which needs to be fully exploited in the future.

Most Co-operative Societies work through their Member Relations Departments in establishing firm community links. The all-important factor is whether such activities are fully marketed and publicised, and whether the public perception of the Society as an employer is matched by the services it provides to the community.

Establishing the Links

Societies must establish and maintain close links with schools/colleges etc. and keep in touch with young people, as this is the first and most positive contact for gaining an appreciation of Co-operative principles and why we are different. They should have a well publicised training and development policy, and be seen to be involved at careers conventions, both in conjunction with local authorities, and separately at schools. Societies should perhaps take the initiative and contact individual careers officers at local schools, or groups of career officers and invite them to the Society, pulling on effectively a Sales Campaign of Society employment benefits, together with basic principles of Co-operation.

Other suggestions may include an 'Open Day' at the Co-op, which on face value may appear to be a problem we could all do without but would be an example of the Society taking the initiative to make contact with prospective employees rather than hoping they will get in touch with us, as previously.

In the immediate past simply getting a job was often the important initial criterion which the individual applied; now and even more so in the future it will be whether it is the right job for the individual who will have a choice. Part of that process of choice ideally should include an appreciation of the Co-operative Movement, its ideas, and principles and though it will be no easy task, ideas and initiatives must be found and explored to present our case as a prospective employer with a special background.

Views from the Bridge: 2

R. H. Burlton

Chief Executive Officer, Oxford, and Swindon Co-operative Society

Yes - basic Co-operative principles do have implications for societies' employment policies and practices in at least the following major areas:

Rewards - we understand and have sympathy with the concerns and aspirations of our employees with regard to matters such as security of employment, remuneration, and benefits and do not regard our employees as mere units of production.