

We love learning

IT SEEMS KEN BEETON'S strategy is quite a simple and very logical one. When he was asked to introduce the e-based learning modules across the DfT, the first step he took was to complete the modules himself. "I wasn't prepared to recommend it to anyone until I knew what it was about, what it looked like and how it worked.

Once I realised how good it was, I found out what the proposals were for rolling it out, and then we decided, within finance, who should be next to try it." Beeton's way of leading by example was then extended when he asked Permanent Secretary David Rowlands to complete the modules. Knowing that people are far more likely to be encouraged and listen to recommendations when they are coming from someone who knows what they're talking about was key.

"When we asked David Rowlands to have a go at the e-learning module he did it very quickly. He thought it was very helpful, and he could see that it would benefit everyone to complete it. So he then encouraged the Board members to give it a go too," says Beeton. "We have a very enthusiastic and energetic team within finance who have been looking at these modules and finding out how best to encourage other people to do them. It's all about the leadership example. So once the Permanent Secretary and the Board had completed the modules themselves, it became easier to convince everyone else to have a try. We particularly wanted the senior civil service (SCS) to complete the e-learning as it sets a great example to the rest of the department. If they haven't bought into it and shown that they think it's valuable, then they can't really ask other people to."

Getting people to take financial management

The Department for Transport is leading the implementation of the new finance skills training scheme devised by HM Treasury and the National School of Government – it's doing better than any other department. We meet director of finance Ken Beeton to find out why DfT are ahead of the game

seriously can sometimes be problematic. The key is to convince people that basic financial knowledge isn't just relevant to those in the finance department, but that it impacts across all areas of every organisation, and is useful within all roles with any financial aspect. As Beeton puts it: "Financial management is integral to the way you do business". So how is he driving financial management culture through the DfT? "We've been doing quite well over the last few years," he asserts. "Year on year we've been improving. We have a strong central finance capability, and we've been taking on and training people with new skills. We are now in a position of strength. And so our strategy over the last year has been to roll finance out across the central department, so that we can have a smaller central finance team. They look more at strategic issues, set the framework and set the standards. And then we have accountants who look after the decision-making on a local basis. So we're trying to embed finance into the business, so it isn't dependent on a central capability. So now there are people to advise directors on finance issues on the spot."

Beeton has been instrumental in linking the financial management agenda with DfT's transformation across the core department and Agencies. "We've been improving the way we deal with our long-term spending plans," he explains. "We have some good people, and

some good methods. We make spending review proposals that are soundly based, and understood, against benefit cost ratios so that we can prioritise our projects. We look at which ones will deliver the most benefit for an equivalent amount of money. We have been building financial management into our forward planning. We don't get surprises, and when you don't get those, you can really plan and rely upon the people that you've got to make the right decisions."

Beeton is convinced that the Love Learning scheme is a very worthwhile process. Although he admits that initially, some of the SCS members were slightly sceptical as to the value they would get from it, and whether the learning modules would be a good use of their time. He feels that the strong encouragement from the Permanent Secretary and the Board – who were able to put their money where their mouth is, having completed the modules themselves – has meant that most of the SCS are now embracing the learning process as strongly as Beeton is. "To date, 83% of SCS members in the DfT have registered on the website to complete the modules, with 69% having finished the course," he says. "And among the Agencies a further 88% have registered and 45% have completed. I think these are very encouraging figures and due to this I'm sure this trend will filter down throughout the organisational structure of the DfT."

Successful steps to roll out e-learning across your department

■ Do it yourself

You can't expect your staff to be enthusiastic and keen to complete it if you haven't bothered yourself.

■ Take it to senior level

The top leadership should set an example – persuade them to have a go at the modules.

■ Good monitoring

You need to know the facts – it helps if you know who has signed up and who hasn't in case there's a pattern. If there is it will be easier for you to investigate whether there's a problem in a certain area.

■ Request feedback

Give those who are completing the modules a

chance to let you know what they thought of them. This can help shape future e-learning schemes.

■ People to be encouraging

The best recommendation for anything is word of mouth – once you get people talking about it, they'll be more keen to see it for themselves.



'I've always been working on things that are at the top of the public's agenda'

might not be as well informed about how Government finances work, you'd expect that the amount of people finding their job performance improved would increase," says Beaton. "In fact I would expect that at least half of the people who do this will find that it impacts positively on their job performance quite quickly. And it's easy to use – and quite fun," he points out. "I think people will be surprised at how good the training is – and that it isn't that difficult, or the obstacle they might have thought it would be. It's worked quite well. The only surprise for me in all this is when you look at the figures across Government and the DfT has such a high proportion of people who are making use of the e-learning scheme. Once people start to use it, they see the value of it and they encourage others, so I suppose that needs to happen more in the other departments. It sells itself once people start using it."

Ken Beaton has been director of finance for the DfT for four years now; before that he worked within finance in the Department for Education and Skills. Previous to this he was in the private sector, where he worked for a building societies and insurance companies. The move across to the public sector was following an advert in the FT that caught his eye. He was very much impressed by the people who interviewed him, and was the successful applicant. Talking of his move to the public sector, Beaton says he finds his role engaging and enjoys having a sense of real purpose. "You're helping things to get better," he enthuses. "Wherever you're working, you want that incentive. Transport is fascinating, everyone has an opinion and everyone uses it. It's important to the economy, how people live and relate to each other. It's a privilege to be part of the decisions on how our transport system develops. It's great to see things go well. For example the Channel Tunnel rail link is opening later this year. There are plenty of transport projects being delivered up and down the country which are of benefit to communities and the economy. It's great to be part of that."

Beaton and his team seem to be going from strength to strength, both in encouraging a better understanding of financial management and being keen to lead by example when it comes to learning and improving their job performances. If other departments take the DfT's lead, it shouldn't be long before everyone who will benefit has taken part. After all, you don't know what it's like until you try it... ■

Beaton praises the way the modules are structured – citing the fact that much has been done to make sure the process is not too technical, and the emphasis is on it being user-friendly. There's no paperwork involved as the modules are all online, and it will save your progress. So you can work as quickly or as slowly as you like, and break it into as many chunks as you like. "If you're enjoying the process, and it's fun, and it's interesting – you'll learn," he says.

Monitoring the process and encouraging feedback has also been essential to the e-learning

scheme. The SCS members who completed the training were asked what they thought of it – and as far as ease of use was concerned, 84% felt that it was satisfactory or better, and 70% said it was good or very good. In terms of knowledge gained, nearly 90% said that it was satisfactory or better, and 50% said it was very good. Those who had completed the modules were then asked how that learning had impacted on their job, and over a third said that already, their performance in their job had improved.

"So in rolling this out to other pay bands who

Beaton: 'Financial management is integral to the way you do business'