

Atlas Copco: investing in skills

Atlas Copco is a world leader in compression equipment and gas compressors, generators, construction and mining equipment, industrial tools and assembly systems. This multinational company employs more than 27,000 people throughout the world and has 2,500 employees in Belgium. Quality, innovation and a client-focused approach are Atlas Copco's core values on which its growth is built. In order to fulfil its mission the company invests considerable means in human resources, for example via training. Atlas Copco called upon the expertise of Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School for two in-house management training sessions.

Springboard for new talent

Every year dozens of university graduates, including quite a few engineers, start a career with Atlas Copco. After 1 to 2 years' work experience they are given the opportunity to join the National Development Programme, to study the company's structure and processes – 'The Way We Do it at Atlas Copco' – in detail. However, the training covers other areas as well. "Every employee in our organisation is responsible for his own professional development and career planning", explains Pascale Penné, Division Human Resources Manager of the Portable Air Division. "That is why it is important for them to get to know the

organisation and discover which directions might be available in the future. In addition to this company-specific programme component, which we organise ourselves, we have asked Vlerick to handle the social skills and self-management module. This is particularly enriching for our employees who are often of a technical disposition. It gives them an insight into their way of thinking, interpersonal relationships, communication skills and also helps them to set up a personal development plan."

Confrontational

For Luc Maes, one of the engineers, the

training was a real eye-opener. "I always knew that my interests tended to be focused on technical matters. What was surprising though, is that my 'planner' mentality also has a huge impact on the way in which I carry out my job and react to situations. This insight helps you to focus on specific aspects and gradually adopt a structured approach." Annick De Bakker, a member of the HR department, summarises this as follows: "In a technical environment you rarely reflect on the way you operate, but this highlights your strengths and areas for improvement." "Knowledge of reasoning methods helps you to identify reactions better during contacts with colleagues or suppliers", adds Peter Smets of the purchasing department. "It teaches you how to win over a specific type of person during negotiations".

Participants are given a theoretical introduction but the actual sessions tend to focus on practical aspects. "Role play highlights how you react and sometimes talk yourself into a corner during a conversation", confirms An Heiremans of the production department. "It is confrontational but you discover that you can control a lot yourself."

Personal development plan

In view of the fact that employees are in charge of their own career planning within the Atlas Copco business culture, the company has developed the necessary people management processes to give its employees the opportunity to realise their ambitions. An internal vacancy board continually keeps the workforce up to date with vacancies and employees decide for themselves whether or not to apply. "In-house coaches, who provide support to employees if necessary, are equally important", states Pascale Penné. "Employees can discuss their personal development plans with their coach during assessment meetings, which are in fact intended more as 'development discussions'. To maximise the interface between a participant's training experience and his job, Vlerick coaches also talk to our in-house coaches about their role in this overall learning process. We specifically opted for an in-house programme because, at the start of their career, participants initially need to focus on themselves within the framework of

Pascal Penné, Division Human Resources Manager of the Portable Air Division (left) with some of the Atlas Copco young talent.



their jobs. Later on they are given the opportunity to benchmark their experience against that of colleagues in other companies in an open programme such as the Vlerick Middle Management Programme.”

Bert Candaele, of the production department, states the following: “During the training period we all prepare a personal development plan and significant action points for our specific goal. This plan is the basis for meetings with our coach.” “A personal development plan provides a clear insight into your career status and what needs to be developed further, with additional training if necessary”, adds Peter Smets.

Business game

Participants show great enthusiasm when it comes to the business game, a two-day residential module used by the Vlerick coaches to complete the National Development Programme. The objective of the game is to integrate acquired knowledge into a simulation in which participants are divided into groups each of which runs a company. “Each group starts with the same amount of capital and the same products, but the end results are totally different”, explains An Heiremans. “Different strategies and social skills are applied so that companies are sent in different directions.” “Because the pace is very fast, half a day represents a quarter, the effect of a selected strategy

soon becomes obvious”, observes Adriaan De Potter of the production department. “You learn an awful lot about the economic context in which a company operates. Engineers immediately start to build factories but soon realise that cash flow is equally important...”

Info

This programme was set-up in full cooperation with the Competence Centre People & Organisation of the Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School.
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Custom-made Service management

Atlas Copco has three business areas: Compressor Technique, Mining and Construction, and Industrial Technique. The largest business unit is that of Compressor Technique, which has 6 divisions. Atlas Copco has about 100 customer centres in more than 60 countries where all of those divisions are represented. Each customer centre also has an aftermarket business team which is in charge of aftersales services for all products. Atlas Copco has organised an international in-company programme specifically for the managers of the aftermarket, one in Europe (Antwerp) and one in Asia (Singapore and Thailand). The third edition of the Aftermarket Management Programme has started in March in Belgium.

■ Why did Atlas Copco need a management programme for its aftermarket managers?

Dirk Beys: “Extending the range of products and services we offer to include aftermarket services is a strategic choice and part of what we call our ‘service value ladder’. From a manufacturing company with a well-developed service package, we evolved into a real performance partner for our customers by offering preventative maintenance and total customer care. In close cooperation with our customers, we monitor and optimise the efficiency and reliability of their compressed air network, contributing to the productivity of their processes. In order to move up the strategic service ladder, our people, processes, products and presence need to be aligned. The Aftermarket Management Programme gives our aftermarket busi-

ness line managers the necessary tools and management competences to define and implement this organisational change.”

■ Why did Atlas Copco choose an in-house training solution?

Kris Vanhoof: “By organising the programme in-house, we could focus on our own development needs. Our objective was to create a common vision and culture, define a common implementation strategy and build up our own company-specific aftermarket concept, based on the sharing of experiences in a multicultural, cross-divisional environment.”

■ How did the participants rate the programme?

Kris Vanhoof: “We had a very positive feedback on most of the speakers brought in by Vlerick. After the first edition, we were able to customise the programme even further on the basis of participants’ feedback and the Vlerick and Atlas Copco trainers’ experience. The models and tools presented by Vlerick professors were adapted to our specific needs. During preparatory meetings, we clarified our expectations and our terminology. Atlas Copco managers contributed by providing practical examples and participants shared their experience in interactive workshops.

The participants were very enthusiastic about the training. Besides the competences they gained, they were also very pleased with the close network of aftermarket experts within Atlas Copco that resulted from the training.”



Peter Leemans, Aftermarket Manager Portable Air Division, Kris Vanhoof, Manager Air Academy Industrial Air Division and Dirk Beys, Vice-President Aftermarket Oil-free Division.

■ What tangible benefits has the training had on your company?

Peter Leemans: “Our participants came from very different backgrounds. Some had been in an aftermarket management position in their country for quite some years, while others came from service operations or from the marketing side. The strategic part was quite a challenge but thanks to a lot of interactive workshops, business games and the homework, most participants are now really able to implement the systems and models in an integrated way in their daily work.

The main difference we see is in the way people manage and analyse their organisation. People who participated in the programme perform a structured analysis of the situation and an integrated approach by streamlining people, products, processes and market presence to obtain profitable growth in their aftermarket services.”