

CASE STUDY



First Aberdeen Ltd

“We believe in the principal and the quality aspect of Investors in People. We also wanted external validation for the work we’d already done.”

Joe Mackie, Commercial Director, First Aberdeen



BACKGROUND

Size:	550 employees: 430 drivers and 120 support staff
Sector:	Transport service
Location:	Aberdeen
Status:	Recognised since 1995

THE ORGANISATION

The company operates 22 routes in the city. The strength and foundation of our company is our people. With over 500 staff, we are one of the leading employers in Aberdeen. First makes around 20 million passenger journeys each year on a network of urban routes serving the City of Aberdeen.

It was originally part of Aberdeen City Council, but the bus industry was privatised through the Transport Act 1985 and in 1996 it became a limited company owned by the council. As such, Grampian Regional Transport, as it was then, had to start operating as a private company, which meant major changes. At the same time, the bus industry was deregulated meaning a “free-for-all” where permission to operate was very easily obtained – prior to this licenses were required and tight regulation meant that the services were, to an extent, protected. Grampian Regional Transport was therefore challenged with setting up a new business - one that would motivate and develop existing staff and also attract new recruits within a very new, commercial environment.

- **Provided a solid framework change**
- **Increased reputation and competitiveness**
- **Better communications platform with staff**

THE CHALLENGE

The challenges of becoming a “business” necessitated investment in extensive staff training in order to raise both customer and commercial awareness. Joe Mackie, First Aberdeen’s Commercial Director, explains: “A lot of time was spent on changing us from being proactive, not reactive, and on encouraging business awareness - to remind staff that there’s a big wide world out there that we needed to take notice of if we were to run as a business. “We thought we’d done a good job, and then we looked at Investors in People and saw that lots of things that we had done that ran alongside it, which encouraged us to go for it.”

THE STRATEGY

The period of change was a long process. First of all we had to get acceptance among staff that things were altering, that there was a need to do things differently, more efficiently - in some cases with fewer people. Once we had buy-in to that, it was a lot easier. We had to persuade, from the top down, that we had to look at our own business differently to become more efficient. The process began with every role being examined and looking for improvements. We asked ‘What do the staff in this section already do? What can the drivers do to be friendlier and more courteous? How can the buses be more reliable. There were lots of little things that made the transition a success rather than one big change,” says Joe. A large part of the process was in opening the channels of communication between staff and managers. We made sure we told all our staff what we were doing at every stage. And in turn we invited their thoughts, ideas and comments. We told them ‘at the moment we’re not making sufficient profit, the routes aren’t running on time’. It’s about getting buy-in from drivers, right through to the engineering and admin staff. Then people realised that their jobs were safer, more interesting and part of a successful company. There’s pride in Aberdeen - First Group started in there. There’s now the concept that if you work harder, smarter and better there’s the job security with it.

THE RESULTS

Investors in People has made us more competitive. We’re on the stock market and we work in a very competitive market. The main competitor, apart from cars, is Stagecoach whose routes partly eat into ours. We have to look at what we can offer that’s different – at the drivers for example – can we give them more training?” Joe says that more staff from Stagecoach leave to join First Aberdeen than vice-versa because of First’s reputation as a good employer. “On their first day here, I ask them why they left Stagecoach and they say because of better pay and conditions and we think that we’re better at talking to our staff than a lot of other companies.” We have a communications forum that meets every six weeks and is made up of different staff representatives. We look at different aspects of the business each time and how we can make improvements. We’ve also set up a learning bus, which is a coach that’s equipped with eight computers and is there for any of the staff to use – from cleaners to managers. People who might be reluctant to go to college are more inclined to come here.