

CASE STUDY



Acanthus Architects df

“Investors in People quickly became the foundation of our architectural practice and the way in which it is managed and run on a day to day basis. This has created a modern, informal but professional and purposeful organisation.”

Douglas Forrest, Director



BACKGROUND

Size:	14 employees
Sector:	Architectural services
Location:	Aberdeen
Status:	First achieved Investors in People accreditation in 1998

THE ORGANISATION

Acanthus Architects df was formed in 1981 and is involved in a range of work throughout the north of Scotland and further afield. Key skills and experience at the practice include the imaginative reuse and alteration of historic and listed buildings; design of new builds particularly in sensitive landscape locations or urban context; tourism related development and one off houses. The organisation aspires to cultivate quality and imagination in creative thinking and discipline and organisation in management. The overall aim of the organisation is to provide architectural services in a friendly, creative and professional office.

- **50% increase in financial turnover since accreditation**
- **Very high staff retention levels**
- **Excellent reputation in the industry for delivering results**
- **The practice has recorded the highest net profit in over 27 years in the business**

THE CHALLENGE

To be successful in a competitive industry, Architectural Practices must demonstrate professionalism, business focus and discipline. Acanthus Architects had always had a very good relationship with its employees but Douglas Forrest, Director, was concerned that the practice was becoming unclear about its objectives and undisciplined about management. The challenge facing Douglas was that while the organisation needed to become more structured and professional, he also didn't want to lose what was felt as a good and positive working environment for employees. There would need to be the right balance of encouraging profits, engaging staff and attracting the best talent.

Investors in People was seen as a possible solution; providing a framework for best business practice and empowering and engaging employees to drive business improvement. He explains, "I could see that the simple principles of Investors in People could be of high value to the business and make us much more organised in many areas."

THE STRATEGY

With a relatively small number of employees in the organisation Douglas decided that there would be a single lead working on introducing Investors in People in consultation with Investors in People Scotland's Specialist. The lead maintained the full support of the organisation through regular update meetings and the large open plan office encouraged information sharing and an open approach. A gradual introduction of formalised policies and procedures quickly gained momentum across the company, covering many areas such as contracts, employee induction, training and development and business planning. At each stage Investors in People brought clarity and value to the organisation, and empowered and encouraged staff.

"It was a very smooth process towards Investors in People accreditation for us," says Douglas.

THE RESULTS

Investors in People provided a complete structural change to the practice. Before Investors in People was introduced Douglas was sole principal (100% owner) but empowering and developing staff members has given him and key stakeholders such confidence in continuity of management that he was able to introduce two stakeholders within the practice and future opportunities for more – the practice now operates as a limited company.

"It brought a very simple clarity to the way in which the practice is run and the roles of every individual [in the organisation]," says Douglas, "It quickly became the foundation of our architectural practice and the way in which it is managed and run on a day to day basis. " Staff retention rates are very high, and new staff members and student interns have commented on the

practice being a highly desirable "employer of choice", both in terms of professionalism and in a positive and purposeful working environment. "We have no doubt that new personnel recognise an organised business with a friendly but professional atmosphere," explains Douglas, "This is undoubtedly an attraction to prospective employees."

The plan to improve management consistency and professionalism without compromising the good relations with staff has undoubtedly been a success. The company has been able to demonstrate to clients that they are able to take opportunities and carry out work successfully and profitably, resulting in an excellent reputation for value and service. The practice has also achieved major financial benefits.

Investors in People has enabled the practice to increase the volume of work and the magnitude of projects which they can undertake. "Our geographical area has expanded significantly and we now have a number of high profile, high value projects two hundred miles away from the office", says Douglas.

"Our financial turnover has been able to increase by approximately 50%. We are experiencing our highest net profit in over 27 years in the business!"

"Investors in People shows to yourselves and your clients that you are organised and disciplined. That's important. It shows you really do have a strong business view of performance, success and profitability."