



PPP HEALTHCARE



Radical engagement: Project Julie

To educate its employees about legislation and company procedure in cases of discrimination and harassment, AXA PPP healthcare, one of Britain's leading private healthcare companies, staged a radical training exercise which had its 1,800 staff gripped for ten days.

Co-designed with Steps, the drama-based learning specialist, and solicitors Synergy Employment Law, the simulation exercise followed a fictitious employee taking a claim for religious discrimination to an employment tribunal.

It featured professional actors portraying employees in 'live' scenes in the office, a dedicated intranet site which kept staff up-to-date with the latest developments, a film of the alleged discrimination instances and spoof coverage of the 'damaging story' in the local press. The events gradually unfolded over a two-week period and culminated in a mock employment tribunal which was staged live for 90 line managers.

"Providing this type of training is like running a fire drill: you hope it will never be needed but you have to be prepared in case the worst happens," said Matthew Newman, HR Projects Manager at AXA PPP healthcare. "It would be costly, intrusive into the working day and dull to provide blanket employment law training of this nature for all staff. Working with Steps and Synergy, we succeeded in creating impact with an unorthodox approach that fully engaged our employees, who followed it like a soap opera. It raised awareness of the issues and created much more interest than a traditional training course ever could."

The simulation was designed to show the damaging consequences of discrimination claims and how events can escalate into a tribunal. The principal character - an administrator called Julie - was shown as a committed Christian who felt that jokes and jibes about her beliefs, and the behaviour of her colleagues, amounted to discrimination. She also felt she was unjustly denied a promotion opportunity.

Professional actors from Steps portrayed Julie and other characters, including her manager and her husband, in 'live' action sequences in the company's head office in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. The simulation began when Julie's fictitious husband stormed through the office, demanding to see her line manager, and was confronted by several members of staff. Other 'live scenes' included a confrontation in the cafeteria and Julie being pursued and consoled by a real HR manager.

"The live action worked extremely well in generating interest in the exercise, as it took people completely by surprise, when what appeared to be real events started happening around them in the office," said Matthew Newman. "Steps were exceptional in their empathic understanding of what would work in our organisation. As well as providing the actors who played the fictitious characters, they wrote the scripts for the live drama sequences, facilitated and conducted the 'live' tribunal and were instrumental in shaping the whole story."



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AXA PPP healthcare created a dedicated section on its intranet site where employees could read 'blog diaries' for Julie and her manager, keep up with developments in the saga, take part in discussion forums and vote in daily online polls. Spoof newspaper pages were created, showing local press coverage of the story and the negative reaction of customers.

"Through our intranet, we were able to make the simulation exercise accessible to everyone," said Matthew Newman. "The site recorded over 16,000 hits over the two-week period. The story snowballed and everyone was talking about it in corridors and coffee areas."

Steps also produced a short film depicting the characters in each of the scenes that staff had read about in the blog diaries. This was shown during the tribunal.

"The film showed the reality of the alleged discrimination events, with all the nuances of the facial expressions, tone of voice and body language," said Matthew Newman. "Many people changed their minds about the validity of Julie's claim after seeing things for themselves. Beforehand they had only read about the details but when they saw what actually happened, they gained a very different impression. This was an important lesson because in a tribunal, it is how the case is described in writing that counts."

The half-day, mock tribunal ended with Julie winning her case and returning to work.

"This exercise got enormous numbers of employees considering and discussing aspects of employment law as well as issues relating to discrimination, harassment and bullying," said Matthew Newman. "It created a debate about what it means to be a responsible employer and a responsible employee. It also gave us the opportunity to highlight the advice, support and assistance that we offer should anyone ever face work or personal problems of this nature in real life. It was definitely one of the most successful training interventions we have ever run."

This intervention went on to win the People Management Award for *Business Impact through Learning and Development*.