

## *PALATIN Kongresshotel und Kulturzentrum*

### INFLOW Project

The Inflow project is an exploration of informal learning as it is found within the workplace. Its purpose is to explore the hospitality and manufacturing (engineering) sectors in order to acquire empirical evidence of informally-acquired learning.

This case study provides an insight into the hospitality sector and how **PALATIN Convention and Culture Centre** effectively uses various methods of informal learning during the day-to-day running of its business.

### The Company

“An excellent service can only be provided by a staff that is as good informed and skilled as possible. The inflow-project taught us, how important informal learning is for the success of an organisation.”  
(Dr. Bernhard Odenkirchen, managing director)

PALATIN Convention and Culture Centre in Wiesloch near Heidelberg is an event location with capacities up to 1250 persons, a 4 star hotel with 115 rooms and an underground parking garage with 420 bays.



The hotel is privately financed, the ownership of the convention center is the estate of the sub-company „PALATIN Kongresshotel und Kulturzentrum GmbH“, which carries on the whole business

today. Until January 2007 the company was managed by Dr. Bernhard Odenkirchen who took active part in the Inflow-Project.

The company employs 120 staff members.

### Quality Management

PALATIN has a very sophisticated quality management, certified according to ISO 9001.

Mr. Odenkirchen stressed that “hardly ever a customer or guest ask for a certification, so it was clear that the reason to establish and continuously improve the system since 1997 was to ensure the stability of the organisation itself. They established a system of horizontal auditing from the beginning on. They qualified the executive staff as internal auditors, who started auditing the departments they had the most interfaces with, according to a predefined plan. During the years the attribution rotated, so after a few years every auditor got to know each department.

This made for example the event-department understand why and when the technical department needs the information on attendance, technical requirements and operational and organisational structure. The technician understood that certain records are needed for a correct accounting.

This proceeding has been retained unchanged until the take-over of the hotel in 2001. As PALATIN had to extend the quality management system over ten times, they switched to vertical auditing. After participation in the project “inflow” PALATIN Management recognised the meaning of informal learning and decided to return to the horizontal auditing right after the certification of the whole company in 2007, and thus to promote a wide range of informal learning opportunities.

The PALATIN has a traditional high proportion of apprentices. Approximately 30-40 % of the staff members are apprentices. They begin there apprenticeship without any working experience and mostly directly after school.

### Methods and Opportunities of Informal Learning at PALATIN

- *Induction Process*

It is the duty of the department managers and elderly employees to explain the tasks and workflow in detail. After the management realized that this task was fulfilled in different ways, an **instruction sheet for apprenticeships** was created, which is binding for everyone. Beside this procedure it is also arranged that the apprentice has a **formal appraisal interview** at the half term in one department in which the apprentice is informed about his/hers strengths and weaknesses. Thus the apprentice has the chance to improve skills until leaving the department. Another interview has to be held in which they will discuss how far the apprentice actually improved compared to the last interview. Also two monthly in-house-trainings are offered, in which executive staff members or other employees work up themes. These trainings are accessible for all employees interested in.

Every apprentice has a “**gossip**”. This is an older apprentice who has more experience and is able to help and guide the younger apprentices. As for the high fluctuation in the hotel business it is planned to extend this system on all employees.

- *Meetings*

The improvement process is taking place in all ranks and is of course one of the prior jobs of the executives. They work on it during their **weekly meetings** and when they plan their aims for the next year.

To collect the staff members' ideas, there are post boxes at highly frequented areas. Awards are given to very good suggestions. As only few people make use of it, PALATIN developed a new type of event and called it “**Ideas-Party**”.

After an introduction of EFQM-criteria and deriving requirements which are “translated” into hotel-language and the language standard of the employees, they are asked to get together in working groups and work out concrete suggestions of what they can do better. Every staff member can switch between the groups or take a break and talk to his colleagues at the buffet whenever she/he wants. This proved to be a very effective way of communication between the staff members. Due to the company's size some staff members do not know each other well. Normally, an event technician does not work with a cook - neither does a maid with an event organizer. During this event they discuss and try to find solutions, no matter what they are responsible for. They find out that problems still exist in some departments while they are already solved in others in a way one could easily copy. During the first “Ideas-Party” 2002 more than 100 suggestions on improvement could be found. Mr. Odenkirchen noted “The most important fact from my point of view was that the staff members developed the feeling of being a team. They had the good feeling that they are important for our company and that they made an important contribution to the company's development.”

In 2006 it was decided to establish a **Business theatre** for the staff meetings in co-operation with two professional actors.

Before, topics and problems have to be defined by executives, employees and apprentices in a brainstorming meeting. These could be for example the dealing with “difficult” guests, dealing with complaints, the cooperation with colleagues or just “how to be an excellent waiter/waitress”.

Apprentices and employees are invited to take part in a crash course with the actors. Within half a day six to eight staff members work out scenes on the given topics. In the afternoon the staff meeting takes place and after a theoretical introduction the scenes are performed. The attending staff members analyse them and derive from them a standard for the company. The staff members have a good time watching the actors and their colleagues and learn a lot about the interaction between colleagues and with guests. As the theatre utilizes verbal and non-verbal communication/body-language, the message is understood by everyone, irrespective of position, nationality or cultural background. The combination of acting, having fun and practical exercise seems to be very successful and provides a long lasting effect. The staff members remember well the scenes they were playing as

actor or creating as directing spectator and are able to recall them in real situations. In addition the performances are video-typed so that the scenes can be used for later in-house trainings.



- *Staff's Newspaper*

As **Staff-parties and work meetings** can only be arranged three or four times a year, PALATIN created a monthly **staff's newspaper** called "PALATIN live". The manager usually adds one leading article to it, the so called "Chefletter". The most part of the newspaper containing for example reports of several trade magazines, results of in-house trainings or new regulations of employment law, is created by the management assistant in cooperation with staff members.

### Case Study Interviews

The manager and his assistant, who is also responsible for the Quality management, were interviewed several times, face to face and by telephone. The Inflow-Project team had the opportunity to watch the PALATIN Business theatre in practice. Five members of the staff were consulted in a face-to-face interview and additionally asked for written statements and - as far as possible – the provision of documents: the management assistant and QM-commissioner, a cook (apprentice), a waitress (apprentice), the head of purchasing department and a member of the event management (newcomer). All staff members involved seem to be highly motivated and their statements proved that the PALATIN learning system is working well. They agreed that especially the PALATIN Quality Management, i.e. the continuous improvement system, offers a lot of informal learning opportunities, and they identified the communication culture at PALATIN as an important pre-condition for self-directed learning.

## Conclusion

Informal learning is already actively supported by PALATIN Management. In this respect their quality management system is playing an important role. As for example the employees are systematically included in continuous improvement processes, they can actively contribute to the business success and regard themselves as important and as a self-responsible part of the company. The implementation of innovative instruments, such as the “business theatre” or the “ideas party” is particularly suitable to reach these goals. As a consequence of the participation in the Inflow-project, the management is going to foster informal learning activities in the company by pointing out the various learning opportunities and intensify the recognition of informal acquired skills in the personnel development processes.

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