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Name: **Northbrook Technology of Northern Ireland Ltd**  
Size: 1000 +  
Sector: Software Development, Administration and Call Centres  
Location: Northern Ireland  
Theme: Recruitment and Retention

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### **The Organisation**

Northbrook Technology was set up in 1999, and was one of the first companies to be established in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement. It is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Allstate Corporation, the biggest insurance company in the US, to which it provides IT, administration and call centre services.

"By being the first large company to successfully establish ourselves here, we have made a significant contribution to the Northern Irish and UK economy," says Rose Kelly, Director of Human Resources.

From a standing-start Northbrook has managed to build a skilled workforce of over 1,500 employees, working in three locations in Northern Ireland including Belfast, Derry and, since 2004, a call centre in Strabane, a location with one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe.

### **The Challenge**

The business targets laid out by Allstate required Northbrook to expand from almost nothing to 250 employees in three years.

"Because of these almost impossibly-challenging growth targets, we had to come up with an innovative programme for recruitment and retention if we were to demonstrate to our parent company that we could succeed," says Kelly.

The effort to persuade people to join a company is made difficult when it is a newcomer with unknown credentials as an employer, competing for skills with more established local rivals.

The company immediately encountered difficulty recruiting and retaining staff, particularly women. "Many were not enthusiastic about being paid a modest salary to work on outdated technologies. Mainframes are no longer on the university syllabus and so experience and interest was difficult to find," Kelly explains.

The company won more challenging business from its parent Allstate, being asked to establish a call centre in Strabane in 2004, marking a departure from its core business. Then, in the same year Allstate asked Northbrook to ready itself for yet another technology challenge: to build the capacity to maintain and develop the latest IT systems.

### **The Strategy**

"The company was guided by the Investors in People Standard right from its early stages," says Kelly. To manage the process it assembled a working group comprising different levels in the company.

Northbrook later opted to be assessed against the Investors in People Work Life Balance model in June 2003, a focus well suited to a company seeking to attract female employees who frequently need to juggle family and work commitments.

To overcome the skills shortage the company looked beyond the output of university IT departments, taking on unemployed non-IT graduates through a scheme called 'Bridge to Employment'. "It turned out to be a highly successful recruitment solution to the business needs in a skills short labour market," says Kelly.

The company has found one of the most effective ways to inspire staff is by giving them power and influence through participation in executive committees and working groups. The first one was responsible for implementing the changes needed to achieve its first Investors in People accreditation in 2000. But this was just the beginning. The committees now include groups on diversity and equality, work life balance, community action, pay, health and safety, the environment, communications, sports and social activities. "Our strong participation culture helps foster a sense of ownership, which is an intrinsic component of the company culture," says Kelly.

It is, the company believes, crucial that staff know what is going on. A highly-developed intranet site and email system provide invaluable sources of information, as does a regular newsletter and communications forwarded from the Allstate parent company. Managing Director Bro McFerran, meanwhile, holds quarterly 'state of the nation' addresses to all employees who are encouraged to ask him questions. More broadly familiarity is encouraged by senior managers adopting an open door policy, using their first names and working in the same areas as their staff.

The subsequent demand to retrain staff in new technology led to launch a major re-skilling initiative in 2005.

### **The Result**

By achieving the Standard for the first time in June 2000, Northbrook Technology became youngest company ever to do so in Northern Ireland. Later it became the first in the territory - and only the third in the UK - to be accredited against the Work Life Balance Model.

"In a region where a skills shortage has seen many IT companies fail to thrive, our business success has been a phenomenal achievement. It is attributable in no small way to the early decision to embrace Investors in People, which directed us down the path of best training, development and employment practice," says Kelly.

"Early alignment with Investors in People helped the company make measurable business gains," she adds. "By implementing business changes associated with the Standard we have significantly exceeded our original business target of 250 employees in three years, attracting 1,200 over five and subsequently expanding numbers to 1,547." The Strabane call centre, meanwhile, grew from nothing to 270 employees in the two years since it was established in 2004.

The cash cost of replacing a staff member who leaves is around £21,000, but it also has a significant, though unquantifiable, impact on customer satisfaction. Recognising this, the company goes to great lengths to retain staff, with some notable success. In 2004 the industry average turnover of staff in the territory's IT sector was 28 per cent, while Northbrook's was just 9 per cent.

Thanks to the company's re-skilling programme, carried out in 2005 to ready the company for the future, the percentage of staff with expertise in new technology rose from 35 per cent to 42 per cent. Around two thirds of those currently trained in this area are now working on related technology projects, with the remainder available for future needs.

Northbrook recruited and trained over 500 staff through its 'Bridge to Employment' scheme for employing non-IT graduates, an intake accounting for a third of the total workforce. "A spin-off benefit was that we brought in graduates from outside IT into the business, greatly enhancing the diverse culture and knowledge of the organisation," says Kelly.

The company's responsiveness and efficiency has enabled it to win significant new business from its Allstate parent, despite tough competition from low-cost competitors elsewhere, thanks in no small part to its ability to respond quickly to its needs. The successful creation of its call centre operation in Strabane was among the most significant recent examples.

Awards have flowed freely too, thanks to programmes with roots in Investors in People. The haul in 2006 alone included: Business Eye's 'Golden Eye Award' for Best Northern Ireland Training programme; the Opportunity Now Workplace Awards 2006 'Overall Best Employer' award and a high commendation for its health and well-being programme from the Belfast Telegraph and an award from Business in the Community for having a leading equality and diversity programme.

The company's leaders have also won their share of public recognition, with Managing Director Bro McFerran receiving a CBE in 2005 for his contribution to the software industry in Northern Ireland.