



Qualified success

Citigroup cites its focus on staff training and development as a key factor in its success. Nigel Ash speaks to **Vicky Shafran** about the changing philosophy behind the training and advancement of graduates and newly qualified staff at the firm.

Pass masters

At any given time, 125 of Citigroup's finance division's 400 staff in London are in the process of taking their accountancy exams.

In 2000, Citigroup's pass rate for accountancy exams was unimpressive, at around 50%, but a change in culture has boosted pass rates. Citigroup students now boast a 93% success rate in CIMA exams.

A forward-looking business is only as successful as its next generation of leaders, and the Citigroup Investment Bank is no different. The bank prides itself on investing in new talent, and in 2006 it was named Employer of the Year at the CIMA Financial Management Awards. Vicky Shafran, Director EMEA, finance division, ascribes the success to the bank's consistent focus on the professional development of a young, high-achieving graduate and newly qualified intake.

In fact, at any one time, some 125 of its finance division's 400 staff in London are taking accountancy exams, the majority of them CIMA. 'It is very important for us that

our graduate intake study for a professional accountancy qualification,' says Shafran.

However, this has not always been the case. 'In 2000, after a series of mergers, we looked and saw that there was no single focus on training, but rather a disparate approach,' she continues. 'We also had quite a poor pass rate for exams, something like 50%. There was actually not much focus on sitting the exams. If people wanted to take them, it was up to them. Unfortunately, they were taking them and failing them and then taking them again.'

'The reality was, this process took up a lot of time and, more importantly, people

were having to cover for staff sitting exams. We have always had high-quality recruits from good universities with good degrees, so in our view there was no reason why they should not be passing their exams. I thought that it was more an attitude than an ability question.'

As well as the need to support employees to achieve higher success rates in training and qualifications, Citigroup recognised that it was essential to standardise its training. Shafran recalls that the company sought proposals from training houses on how this could be managed, eventually settling on FTC Kaplan as an external training partner.

'We felt that FTC Kaplan offered us the best combination of training and the most cost-effective way of doing the training. They were keen to produce a programme for us, which included one-to-one counselling when necessary.' Initially held outside the finance division, courses have been conducted in-house for the last two years.

Range of qualifications

CIMA qualifications in particular have also experienced a resurgence at Citigroup in recent years. 'A few years ago, our students were taking either Association of Chartered

Employee support

Support at Citigroup is far more than simply a pat on the back and the granting of study leave. From the minute a staff member embarks upon a course there is consistent formal support from the company, initially in the form of senior accountant and CIMA coordinator Evelyn Morris.

There is also the more subtle support of peer groups. Staff who are going through the same courses support each other while the challenges being faced by students are generally known in the wider office.

'Training together in a group forms a bond,' says Shafran. 'Students create very strong learning networks and we back these up with a great many social events for them, where there is a lot of discussion about CIMA.'

Shafran points out that an important added value from FTC Kaplan's training is the ability to allow the bank to monitor each student's progress via special software. This provides more feedback than would be available from the two mock exams held halfway through each course.

Vicky Shafran

Vicky Shafran joined Citigroup in 1993 after qualifying as a Chartered Accountant. She is now a Director within the finance division of the bank, and has responsibilities for a wide range of functions, including recruitment for the finance division and professional accountancy training for over 100 students.



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Certified Accountants (ACCA) or CIMA exams, but over time we have felt that the CIMA qualification and the training that CIMA provides is best suited to our students,' explains Shafran. The training is now focused exclusively on the CIMA qualification. Indeed, Citicorp finance division in London is now a CIMA Training Quality Partner.

If they can prove that it is relevant to their daily work, Shafran says that staff are also supported in working for some other qualifications, such as treasury or international audit exams. MBAs can be undertaken in people's own time, but PhD students are less likely to be accepted, unless an individual has reached their dissertation and the greater part of what Shafran points out is effectively the full-time work of a doctorate, has been completed.

If a student fails one of the exams, or is struggling in a particular area, one-to-one counselling is organised to overcome the problem. In the event of a student failing a CIMA exam twice, Citigroup uses another trainer that runs an intensive week-long cramming course in the Cotswolds. However, such measures are used very sparingly, since Citigroup students currently boast a 93% success rate in CIMA examinations.

Financial rewards

Success is recognised financially, but, says Shafran, qualifications do not necessarily mean a person is good at their job: 'Some people can be very good at passing exams, but if they are not doing very well in their work, they will not get the financial benefits of someone who has not taken all their exams but is doing exceptionally well in their work. We are very focused on providing market salaries to our trainees.'



Peer-group support: a student's perspective

'You get more out of the classes and get to know the other guys across the floor who are sitting with you. At college you might have missed them if they were on a different course.'

'Here, everyone knows who is sitting the exams. When the results come in, everyone is interested – including managers as well as other colleagues – so you feel there is support from everyone.'

'The study leave we get helps enormously. The whole culture is focused on getting us through our exams.'

There are, she says, two or three people in the finance division who are outstanding performers but have never, for one reason or another, taken a professional examination. It is partly for this reason that sitting CIMA exams has not been made mandatory. The key is to turn the acquired and attested knowledge into excellence at work. Shafran sees the CIMA qualifications as highly functional teaching methodologies and techniques, but a crucial part of the educative process, in her view, is the ability to give the student challenging and rewarding work.

'The advantage of a career in Citigroup as opposed to any other bank,' explains Shafran, 'is the wide range of roles that we offer, from product control to management and financial accounting, regulatory reporting and treasury. We also have a lot more planning and analytical work. People who join Citigroup can focus on analysis because a lot of the more routine work is now done by technology. People can challenge themselves and have an intellectually demanding job.'

There is also no question of staff members staying in the same role for year after year. They are given the opportunities to rotate within the finance division or within other parts of Citigroup worldwide.

Loyalty and turnover

Staff turnover within the finance division is around 25%. Half move to other jobs within Citigroup, but the rest move to competitors or leave the bank because they discover that it is not the job for them. Those who depart with the qualifications and knowledge Citigroup has helped them to gain represent a loss, but Shafran says it pays to be philosophical.

'Of course people are using us,' she says. 'We are not a charity, so we don't expect them to be charitable towards us. We provide them with interesting and challenging work, but there will always be people who take what we give them and then move on. That is the reality. We do not expect people to work for us for the sake of it. We must make sure we provide them with the work and the support so they do not want to leave us.'

While the CIMA education provided by FTC Kaplan is functional, the inspirational training is part and parcel of management within the finance division. 'Part of the management ethos

that we push down is to get people to see things in different ways and to ask the right questions,' says Shafran. 'An accountancy qualification by itself would not get people to think in that way.'

Alternative thinking

It is the emphasis given to getting people to think outside the box that underpins Citigroup's regular Achievement and Innovation Awards. 'These are provided by our CFO,' explains Shafran. 'If someone has taken a process and looked at it and changed it and improved it in a measurable way, this is a recognised in a public forum within the finance division. This is a very strong ethos with us.'

'People always have to think about better ways of doing things. With obligatory changes such as Basel II, it is incumbent on us to make the changes in the right way and as smoothly as possible. We work very much on the basis that we can always make things better.'

This applies equally to training. Shafran says that Citigroup eschews gimmicks such as the football-style 'Red Card' system that she had to survive when she was training at a leading firm of accountants.

She observes that young people currently joining the finance division are far more confident in their abilities than new entrants to banking would have been 15 or 20 years ago. There is less deference to authority and less automatic loyalty. 'This is not in itself a bad thing,' she says. 'It does mean, however, that you have to offer them the skills and tools to develop their careers.'

There is one immutable principle everyone in the division, including trainees, must subscribe to. 'Our goal is to be the most respected financial services company in the world and each member of staff has three responsibilities,' Shafran explains. 'The first is a responsibility to our clients, the second is a responsibility to each other and the third is a responsibility to our franchise. That really is the message we get across to everyone in the finance division.'

'What we need to do is make sure our objectives are in line with Citigroup's objectives. And this carries over into our graduate and newly qualified training programmes. We actively embrace young people who are enthusiastic and want to learn and develop their careers.' ■