

Could you join the top table?

Investors in People (IIP) recently unveiled a new version of its standard, designed to boost an organisation's performance through staff training. But the revised framework, launched during Investors in People Week, was immediately condemned by one critic.

The standard has been devised after a consultation and development process involving employers, business advisers and other organisations. Among the contributors to the debate were the Confederation of British Industry, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative and the Trades Union Congress.

The structure of the standard, says the IIP, has been simplified. The changes focus on the crucial role managers have in training and development. It also claims the standard encourages organisations to involve employees in corporate decision-making processes. Since its formation in 1993, around 34,000 organisations, including household names such as WHSmith, Sainsbury's, Nationwide Building Society and HMV have adopted the IIP standard.

HMV, for example, already had a well-established management development programme. Day to day learning was, however, less structured and lacked coherent application across the business. A new staff development programme based on the existing IIP standard was set up to provide a structured framework and comprehensive development materials for in-store learning.

The project, called the Continuous Development Plan, aimed to increase the knowledge and skills of management and staff in the critical elements of HMV store operations. Four key knowledge areas were identified and the minimum knowledge for each staff level was defined. A national assessment was carried out to identify existing levels of knowledge, which resulted in every person receiving an individual development plan and workbooks to support their training.

Steve West, head of learning and development at HMV, says: "This has been critical for developing our future managers and supporting our expansion plans."

However, the IIP-led training and development schemes were condemned as flawed and unlikely to account for serious productivity gains by John Seddon of business consultancy Vanguard Consulting.

He says: "The IIP standard is based on the flawed assumption that people make the difference. The new standard amounts to no more than doing the wrong thing righter. The fact is 95% or more of performance issues are governed by the system, the way work is designed and managed - people can't make a significant contribution if their system won't let them."

Mr Seddon is a rising management thinker after writing a series of books that highlight the shortcomings of human resources management based on the tyranny of tick boxes, targets, appraisals and an array of inspections, all components of what he has termed the "command and control" mind set.

He has adapted the principles behind the runaway success of carmaker Toyota's production system for service organisations, and argues that when managers' eyes are opened to the opportunity provided by re-thinking the way they design and manage the workflow, they give up the notion that they need to work on their people.

"The claims made for IIP pale into insignificance when compared to the achievements of the Toyota production system. IIP just reinforces the problems our businesses have today, and should be avoided," he concludes.

· Investors in People UK, 7-10 Chandos Street, London W1G 9DQ, tel: 020-7467-1900 John Seddon, Vanguard Consulting, Villiers House, 1 Nelson Street, Buckingham MK18 1BU, tel: 01280-822-255.