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## **BEST SMALL FIRM, AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT CATEGORY WINNER**

### **CORPRA – With the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT)**

Walk into the Association of Accounting Technicians' shiny new premises, on Aldersgate Street in central London, and you'll be greeted by a wall plastered with pictures of every member of staff. But here's the fun part - each face is made of movable parts, so you can swap the CEO's forehead for the secretary's chin, or the PA's nose for the marketing manager's grin.

It's more than a bit of fun. It's a powerful symbol and leveller, giving every employee a face and personality, reminding them every morning that they are all important. This gives a small insight into the remarkable culture change that has taken place at the AAT, which only a couple of years ago was stuck in a rut, working in safe, staid old ways. It dotted the i's and crossed the t's, but struggled to see beyond ticking boxes.

The Association helps students who have not been to university or can't afford to train for accounting qualifications. But its membership was stagnating and thousands of potential candidates were missing out because they didn't know about the organisation. Meanwhile, its managers were pre-occupied with pleasing the AAT's ruling council rather than nurturing their staff.

Corpra was engaged to advise on the AAT's relocation and growth plans. The AAT's council thought more floor-space was needed to expand services, but Corpra saw the move as an opportunity for a more significant shift - a cultural change throughout AAT. So what began as a simple lift-and-shift job turned into a wholesale review of the way the organisation worked.

The consultants suggested that, rather than buy a big new freehold property, the AAT should move into smaller leasehold offices and release substantial capital by selling its old HQ. Staff would work better as a team in open-plan offices on a single floor.



Council members were wary, and when the pounds 6m sale of the old building fell at the last hurdle - not once, but twice - they could have abandoned the idea. But they realised that pressing ahead would give its employees the chance to work differently. By introducing flexible working (welcomed by staff) the AAT was able to reduce its office needs from 22,000ft to 14,000ft. Corpra then clarified its raison d'etre by setting out four key aims: acquiring students, deepening their knowledge, retaining members, and providing fulfilment through continuous learning and professional development.

The recruitment and development departments were brought together to provide better service to new and qualifying members. The marketing team was refreshed, giving the Association a far better chance of attracting new students from areas of the country that were under-represented. A leadership programme challenged managers to become more customer-centric. And a specialist agency (17/7) was brought in to improve the AAT's branding to the outside world.

Has it worked? The AAT now has a clear set of values, powerful branding, more money and more members - since the changes, the organisation has attracted another 16,000. And employees (the ones you first meet on the lobby wall) seem genuinely enthused about their jobs, working for a dynamic body that now stands to benefit generations of young people.

'Corpra opened us up into being more radical,' says CEO Jane Scott Paul. 'They made us more adventurous. They gave us the confidence to go for it.'

## **TAKE-HOME TIPS**

Languishing in unsuitable premises, the AAT had become bureaucratic and lost focus on helping its members. Advice from Corpra helped it achieve workspace economies, release capital and develop a stronger brand - all grist to the mill in better serving the membership (up by 16,000) and raising the morale of staff.

- Open your mind. An office move is an opportunity to do more than shift furniture.
- Engage every member of staff in the changes.
- Use feedback from employees to inform your actions and choices.
- Let managers lead the process, not consultants.

