



Case Study

Serendipitous Moments and Coffee Culture: RCTs at Ashridge Executive Education

Randomised Coffee Trials (RCTs) randomly pairs staff with a co-worker whom they might not have the opportunity to meet, or strike up conversation with otherwise. Taking place at regular intervals, the short meetings happen both face-to-face and virtually. There is no set agenda for the meeting which provides the legitimacy to talk with people about topics that are not directly work related, however RCTs are often proven to have direct beneficial impacts.

In 2015, Ashridge was an organization in transition: it was mid organizational re-design and there was a shift towards a stronger, customer-centric strategy. It was recognized that there was a need to find ways to break silos, create space for new ideas and teamwork, share knowledge and harness the energy for innovation. Working in partnership with Spark Collaboration, Ashridge introduced the concept of Randomised Coffee Trials (RCTs) to specifically address these issues, as a way of connecting people in one-on-one situations to foster greater collaboration, innovation and knowledge sharing across organizational boundaries.

The RCTs were gradually rolled out to the whole staff population. There are members from every area of the business: the president, business directors, professional services, faculty, administrative and logistical teams. In a recent survey, the results are positive with over 50% of participants feeling they had formed new connections and built a network that spanned the organization as a result of the meet-ups. More interestingly, staff are engaging regardless of how long they have worked at Ashridge; respondents articulated the benefit of meeting colleagues they have not yet had the opportunity to meet (90% have met someone that they would not meet in their daily Ashridge lives). The informal meetings are seen to facilitate both social activity and business networking enabling a chance to gain a better understanding of the business as well as the individuals behind the job titles.

In times of change, individuals are generally resistant to new initiatives that are not business critical, and without the Spark online platform, Ashridge would not have been able to benefit so successfully. Investment into the success of the initiative was through a small team of well networked and enthusiastic champions who represent several different interest groups from across the business.

“I get to learn about where people live, what they like to do in their free time, and get a fuller appreciation of what makes them tick. I have shared my stories of sleepless nights with parents of newborns, been given a preview of life with teenage children, and learned which of the local pubs have the best food – all the important stuff.”

Jason, President
Ashridge Executive Education

This team meet every month to ensure the momentum and success of the initiative is not allowed to wane or become stagnant, and instead thinking of ways to continually keep the energy and interest in the RCT project. Minimal resource was invested in internal marketing which enabled the team to deliver an engaging video launch. This was sent to all staff in the first roll out and was subsequently used for the next three stages. Explanatory posters were prominently displayed in staff areas to create awareness.

Since implementing RCT company wide, Ashridge has also included it in the staff induction program to showcase its value. There are not many organizations that can boast that within a month of joining, individuals can be having a relaxed cup of coffee with the President of the company, a member of staff that has 18 years' experience, the Head Chef or a member of one of the administrative teams.

A huge 98% of RCTs participants would recommend them to other organizations which reflects just how important staff feel the initiative is; colleagues highlighted how the trials have helped them see the bigger organization picture and how they fit into it. Perhaps more importantly, participants said they have formed connections, developed relationships and built internal networks. RCTs have thoroughly exceeded Ashridge's expectations.

“It takes us beyond names on emails and cogs in machines; we become people with lives, relationships, wants and needs.”

Trudi, Staff Member
Ashridge Executive
Education

