

SPAR AUSTRIA

Improving Competitiveness and
Motivating Staff in the Retail Sector

Background

SPAR Austria was founded in 1954 and is today the second largest supermarket chain in the country with almost 1,500 stores. In 2010, SPAR Austria achieved an annual turnover of over €5 billion and had a market share of approximately 29%. With over 34,000 direct employees in Austria, SPAR is also one of the largest national employers.

Why ECDL at SPAR?

Part of the 'Apprenticeship Offensive'

ECDL was introduced as part of its 'apprenticeship offensive' (a drive to attract apprentices to the growing number of supermarkets) that was launched at executive level in 2000. Senior management within SPAR viewed the training of its staff as an integral part of its internal Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Moreover, Chief Executive, Gerhard Drexel, recognises the importance of verifiable standards in education, stating: "We do not only want to invest in our human resources but also set a standard with our training". This focus on setting standards and maintaining them led SPAR to choose ECDL as the most appropriate ICT skills certification programme for its annual intake of apprentices.

ECDL at SPAR: A Certificate that Complements Apprenticeships

SPAR relies on education – and on ICT skills; the Austrian grocery supermarket chain offers about 900 apprenticeships a year, providing them with the opportunity to attain the ECDL certification.

Nobody trains more apprentices for the retail grocery market than SPAR: 2,700 young people are currently being trained for fourteen different professions at Austria's largest grocery chain. Approximately 900 of them finish their apprenticeship each summer, and approximately the same number of apprentices start their training early in the following autumn. The ECDL certificate is offered as an additional qualification – an option that about 700 young people avail of every year. The feedback is positive. "The young people tell us that the PC training is essential in making their daily job lives easier," says Ms. Maria Ossberger, who is in charge of the SPAR apprenticeship training.

Training Standards

SPAR is convinced that basic computer skills are an indispensable prerequisite for prospective managers. "The decision to offer the ECDL programme already to apprentices was taken based on our positive experience with the ECDL programme over the last few years," adds Ms. Ossberger.

SPAR relies on well-founded and high-quality training. "A special internal training lasting several weeks forms the basis for a career in the SPAR organisation up to management level," explains Ms. Ossberger. SPAR absorbs the costs of registration in the ECDL programme and any examination fees for the apprentices. For optimal motivation of the apprentices, the company relies on monthly tutoring talks with qualified trainers, monthly bonuses, and rewards for good reports.

The best apprentices will get permanent jobs with the company upon successful completion of the trainee programme. About 2,700 apprentices of the 34,000 employees of the SPAR organisation are trained in fourteen different vocations, such as the retail trade in groceries, retail trade in sports goods, cook, baker, wholesale merchant, logistics manager, office clerk, and insurance broker.

In order to set training standards, the necessary environment for learning is essential. SPAR relies primarily on the infrastructure of the company's own training structure, the SPAR Academy. The curriculum for commercial skills of the Academy classes is not only taught in the company's own school in Vienna but also in public vocational schools. This co-operation has been realised with local school authorities throughout Austria. ECDL, which has become an integral part of the training, is also embedded in the public vocational schools. Thus, the path for apprentice training and certification in commercial activities and in computer skills is simplified. This enables up-to-date training methods like blended learning – an integrated learning method consisting of e-learning and classroom teaching – to be built into apprentice training programmes within the standard hours of their working life.

Application in the Market and the Office

Not only young people, but also older employees in SPAR are given the opportunity to acquire and use the skills developed by the ECDL programme. The employees use their gained knowledge both in store, to handle inventory control systems, and in the office, to prepare presentations, statistics, correspondence etc. While an increasing number of young people bring their ECDL certificates gained in secondary school to SPAR, older employees who have some (but not all) of the computer skills defined in ECDL are able to use the modular structure of ECDL to develop the complementary skills to complete their full ECDL certification¹.

Impact

With 2,700 apprentices, SPAR is, according to its own account, the largest private trainer of apprentices in Austria. In order to guarantee the high level of education for the apprentices, SPAR relies on computer-based training and ECDL as a certified proof of skills. ICT skills are integral to the competitiveness of SPAR in the crowded grocery sector.

SPAR's growth to become the second-largest supermarket chain in Austria has been built on its significant investments in its staff and staff skills development. Senior management with SPAR have identified the implementation of ECDL as having had a direct impact on the efficiency and competitiveness of their operations, as well as being a key motivator of staff as part of their overall educational development.



¹ For a detailed explanation of the modules offered through ECDL certification, please visit: www.ecdl.org