



Making training more effective with Shared VR

Lanes Group plc improves training and employee retention



Case study - Igloo customer story



Lanes Group plc



Highlights

An Igloo Shared VR cylinder was introduced by Lanes Group as part of a wider programme of Learning & Development and Health & Safety initiatives. Overall, the aim was to reinforce the company's commitment to health and safety, fast-track the induction of new recruits, and improve employee retention.

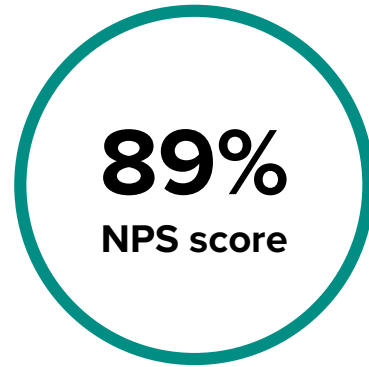
In combination, the initiatives led to:



57% reduction in employee attrition



9% reduction in employee feelings of unhappiness



Also, the company's training facilities have achieved a net promoter score (NPS) of 89%.



£1 million reduction in recruitment and training costs



About Lanes Utilities

Lanes Group plc is the UK's largest independent drainage and utilities specialist.

One of its most prestigious contracts is a wastewater network service (WNS) maintenance agreement for Thames Water. Lanes Utilities, set up to deliver the contract, unblocks, cleans and repairs drains and sewers on behalf of 15 million Thames Water customers.

It also delivers other specialist services, including wet well cleaning, tankering, and sewer rehabilitation. And, to keep the wastewater flowing across the 68,000-mile network, 1500 strong support staff handle 1,400 maintenance jobs a day.

One of the characteristics of the company is its commitment to health, safety and employee wellbeing.

It was one of the first firms in the UK to achieve ISO450001:2018 accreditation. For ten consecutive years, it has received the prestigious Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents RoSPA Gold Award. And it is consistently looking for new ways to enhance its performance.

The situation

A strong health & safety ethos + a competitive employment market + a tricky employee induction challenge

Lanes Utilities operates across the buoyant economy of South East of England, where the employment market can be fiercely competitive, especially for the type of roles that are vital to the Thames Water contract:

Field engineers – who can troubleshoot wastewater issues effectively and safely, apply the necessary remedies, and deal confidently and courteously with Thames Water customers and the general public.

Scheduling and planning representatives – who can provide a top-quality response to Thames Water customers, many of whom may be facing a stressful situation (like sewer flooding to their property or sewerage leaks).

At the same time, the nature of the work had always presented some tough challenges to the company's learning and development team:

A strong emphasis on health, safety and employee wellbeing – these are truly mission critical considerations, which need to be deeply embedded in the company's training programmes as well as its everyday working practices.

A tricky employee induction dilemma – before they are allowed to enter potentially hazardous situations, newly-recruited field engineers need extensive training. Yet, until they have direct experience of such situations, it is almost impossible for them to appreciate the true nature of their new role. So, the induction programmes need to resolve this paradox.



The company was therefore looking for ways to improve and accelerate its induction programme, and bring yet more engagement to its health and safety initiatives, whilst reducing the cost of its overall recruitment and training programmes.

The solution

A programme of innovative initiatives – including a commitment to Shared VR

The company embarked on a full programme of innovative and inter-linked initiatives, including:

A revamped approach to training – with an early emphasis on health and safety, plenty of re-fresher opportunities, a determination to invest in the latest technologies, and an aim to transfer the ethos of on-the-job training to a classroom environment.

An innovative wellbeing programme – which emphasises the 'health' in health and safety, and includes a new mobile app, that requires operational staff to log how they are feeling before the start of their respective shifts.

A new professional development programme – called Pathway to Success, to provide a fair and transparent pay structure, with full job checklists for every role, which enables employees to take more control of their own career progression.

As part of this wider programme of initiatives, Lanes convinced Thames Water to co-invest in an Igloo Shared VR system, in the form of a custom-built 7-metre Igloo Vision projection cylinder. Installed in its Customer Solutions Centre in Berkshire, this was to play a central role in the revamped approach to training.

“The Igloo acts like a giant virtual reality headset. Up to 15 people can receive sewer maintenance training that's as life-like as possible, without them getting their feet wet.”

Andy Brierley,
Director, Lanes Utilities



Why Lanes was attracted to Shared VR – taking the benefits of VR, and sharing it among entire teams

Lanes had considered the use of immersive technology in its revamped approach to training, but was put off by the solitary nature of VR headsets. An Igloo Shared VR system looked as though it would be an ideal solution:

Sharing the experience

Lanes wanted to retain the ethos of on-the-job training, including the ability for instructors to lead sessions, adapt them where necessary, and draw on the team dynamic, including:

- Facilitating group discussions
- Pointing-out potential hazards
- Making eye contact
- Reading body language
- Seeing what everyone else is looking at
- Arriving at a consensus opinion

With Shared VR, it would be possible to immerse trainees in true-to-life scenarios, whilst still retaining the group dynamic.

Incorporating field equipment

As part of the induction process, Lanes needed to introduce new recruits to the type of equipment they would be using in the field, such as protective clothing, specialist tools, and safety monitoring equipment (such as hazardous gas detection units).

Using Shared VR it would still be possible for participants to see, carry, and use exactly the same equipment they would have with them in the field.

Working with several types of immersive content

Lanes could see an opportunity to work with a wide variety of immersive content, starting with basic films and, over time, incorporating more sophisticated content. For example:

- Display immersive 360° videos
- Develop its own interactive 360° training content
- Incorporate conventional presentation tools (like PowerPoint)
- Explore the potential for the gamification of training

The content-agnostic nature of the Igloo system, and its ability to integrate with game engine-based content, made all of this possible – and more.

Facilitating sessions for different numbers of participants

Lanes wanted to cater for a typical group size of around 16 people. It was therefore able to specify a 7-metre Shared VR cylinder (standard solutions range in size from a 2.5-metre cube accommodating two-to-three people, right through to a 21-metre dome accommodating up to 750 people).

In addition, research had confirmed that newly-recruited field engineers often had low levels of literacy and felt uncomfortable in traditional classroom style training environments. Lanes was therefore keen to find training solutions that were different and engaging, with plenty of visual stimuli - instead of relying on the written word.

“Traditionally, staff induction and training has involved recruits doing a lot of sitting and being presented to. The Igloo breaks that mould. It brings wastewater training into the 21st century, and is perfect for the millennial generation, brought up on gaming and digital TV.”

Mark Grimshaw,
Head of Wastewater Networks North London,
Thames Water





How Shared VR was integrated into the revamped Lanes training programme

Lanes established a long-term content strategy for Shared VR, starting simple (yet high-impact), then learning as it went along, and adding in more sophistication. So far, this has included:

The “wow” video

Lanes started by commissioning a high-impact 360° video, complete with spatial-surround sound, to introduce people to the scale and nature of the Thames Water wastewater operations, and some of the typical maintenance tasks. Intended primarily for field engineers, it is also a useful resource for scheduling and planning representatives (so they better understand the work of their colleagues), and other stakeholders (such as Thames Water representatives, and other visitors to the Lanes offices).

The permutations

Lanes invested in its own 360° camera and editing software. And its in-house team has created around 40 different training scenarios. These are used for specific training modules, to give new recruits an in-depth introduction to the type of environments they work in, the challenges they may face, and the remedies they will need to apply.

They are also used for refresher training among more established employees, to help Lanes emphasise its health and safety ethos, and transfer skills and knowledge from highly experienced engineers to younger counterparts.

With so many scenarios available, training leaders are able to assemble bespoke programmes, and also to link them together using conventional presentation tools (like PowerPoint).

The gamification

More recently, Lanes has worked with Myriad Global Media, a specialist in VR training programmes, to develop a fully-interactive mixed reality training application.

Again, the aim is for an instructor-led session, and for a group of employees to participate, but gameplay is introduced. This takes employees through a complete call-out scenario, and enables them to interact at each stage, including:

- Initial customer call into contact centre agents
- Assigning jobs to field operations employees
- Carrying out vehicle and equipment safety checks
- Complete tasks safely and successfully to solve a sewer flooding issue
- Report back to a technical specialist to close the job

The system requires each user to login, entering their employee identification number, so all actions can be tracked via background analytics. This enables Lanes to track the progress of individual employees, and highlight any areas of training that people struggle with.

The aim is to continue to supplement this content, especially the new gamification content, by progressively adding in more scenarios. There are also plans to address forthcoming corporate priorities and regulatory requirements (such as a new initiative to minimise the risks of pollution in watercourses).

The key point is that Shared VR will be deeply integrated into the way the company trains its employees, and that the content is continually added to and refreshed. This means that employees stay engaged, the team dynamic is always drawn-upon, and training managers are able to specify new content and address any learning gaps.

“If your people are expected to work in a high-risk environment, and you need them to be aware of their surroundings, this is the most perfect way to get them up to speed.”

James Brewer,
Learning & Development
Specialist, Lanes Utilities



Evaluating the impact

Significant shifts across several dimensions

The programme of initiatives introduced by Lanes have enjoyed considerable success. And the team is convinced that Shared VR has made a strong contribution

57% reduction in employee attrition

– a key consideration given the competitive employment market, which makes a significant contribution to the company's overall operational efficiency and effectiveness.

9% reduction in employee feelings of unhappiness

– employees are actively encouraged to seek support that may improve their feelings of wellbeing, including the option of further training.

£1 million reduction in overall recruitment and training costs

– a significant bottom-line saving that more than compensates for the relatively modest costs of the Shared VR system and content.

Also, on each visit to the training centre, employees are asked to evaluate their experience, leading to a net promoter score (NPS) of 89%. And focus group research demonstrates a wholly positive attitude among users (see indicative comments following).

Overall impressions of the Igloo

“Overall, I think it's a good tool to have for our people and new starters. It's a different way of learning.”

“It doesn't fail to give me goosebumps when I go in the Igloo. It's fascinating and exciting. It's a great opportunity to engage everyone from new starters to existing staff.”

“It's different, in a good way, from anything I have ever seen before in a company that I have worked with. It's fun, very interactive, and a new way of learning.”

“Outstanding technological achievement. It's user-friendly and a game-changer.”

Success of the Igloo in giving a feel for the type of environments Field Engineers work in

“It's hugely successful. Historically it's been hard to explain to Field Engineers what the day-to-day reality will be. The Igloo gives a realistic feel to what the role will entail.”

“It's good preparation for the engineers. It's never going to be the same as real-life, but it does give a good insight into what it would be like. And I think it gives new engineers an air of excitement – rather than just listening to someone in a classroom or reading a book.”

“It's very successful – as close to reality as you can get.”

“There is no substitute to the real thing, but this is as close as it gets – and provides a safe environment to do it in.”

“It gives us a different view that challenges assumptions. It also gives an insight into what the engineers need to do onsite.”

Comparison with traditional training methods (like videos and PowerPoints)?

“Far more engaging, exciting and interactive than videos and PowerPoint could ever be.”

“You can't get away from it – it's there in your face. It's loud, it's bright, and it grabs your attention straightaway. Whereas with classroom-based learning you are easily distracted, which from a personal point of view isn't as fun.”

“It doesn't really compare, to be honest. It's completely different.”

“It trumps them all, as it offers elements of all different types of training methods – you get the interactivity with the technology, as well as with the tutor, and the practical exercises.”

“It's interactive and immersive.”

The impression it gives regarding Lanes as a company – and its commitment to training

“That it will do what is ever necessary to ensure its people have the necessary tools and knowledge.”

“Lanes are committed to developing people. They're happy to spend the money if it means people will have more job satisfaction. It gives people an insight into what we do, and shows new recruits we care about their welfare.”

“It makes it really clear that Lanes puts peoples' learning experience, training and development at the forefront.”

“It says Lanes are innovative and at the next level. Also, the investment in the technology and content shows the company cares about learning and development.”

“Second to none. It shows the company is willing to invest in its people so they are well prepared before they start the role – and that also shows commitment to the client and their customers.”

With the introduction of the gamification initiatives, Lanes is also considering how best to formally evaluate the respective modules and calculate the return on investment – in order to provide a strong business rationale for the creation of further modules.

Keys to success: The Igloo perspective

At Igloo we have worked on many deployments of Shared VR technology. And we are always keen to advise customers (and also to learn from customers) about the factors that enable an Igloo to become an effective enterprise tool.



From our perspective, the Lanes deployment has five main keys to success:

1

A solution to an existing problem

Delivering the right type of training to new recruits had always presented a real dilemma to Lanes. Before they are allowed to enter potentially hazardous situations, team members need extensive training. Yet, until they have direct experience of such situations, it is almost impossible to appreciate the true nature of their new role. So, to get past this catch-22, Lanes wanted a way to immerse people in life-like scenarios as part of their induction. **By solving this dilemma, Shared VR has delivered tangible value, and Lanes has benefitted from more effective training and improved retention of new recruits.**

2

A commitment to training

When it took delivery of its Igloo, Lanes put its key Igloo operators through an extensive training programme. So, from day one, they understood the capabilities of the Igloo and how to get the best out of it. **With a cadre of power users, Lanes has an on-site team of Igloo experts, who act as rainmakers and trouble-shooters for the wider team.**

3

A senior-level evangelist

From the outset, a member of the Lanes executive team (the Technical Director) has been a strong advocate of the Igloo. In particular, he has been keen to talk publicly and passionately about the business rationale for Shared VR and the benefits it can bring. **Senior-level support secured plenty of visibility for the Igloo via social media, traditional media, and internal communications channels.**

4

Tight integration into wider processes and workflows

The Igloo is used as the centre-piece of the Lanes induction programme, which is mandatory for all new recruits. It is woven into the fabric of this programme, so is used on an everyday basis. And it has subsequently been used for on-going training requirements. **Shared VR is not an add-on. It is an intrinsic part of the way the company trains its people.**

5

A long-term content strategy

At the outset, the company commissioned a basic yet high-impact 360° training film, to give new recruits a sense of what it is like to work within the wastewater network. From here, it plotted-out around 40 different interactive training programmes. It went on to develop complete VR training 'games'. And has a full roadmap of future enhancements. **The company has a disciplined approach to content creation. Starting with a basic film, and moving on incrementally, it has been able to apply its learnings. And, with a steady stream of new content coming online, there's plenty to keep everyone interested and engaged.**



For more information

Igloo Vision is the immersive workspace company.

From bases in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia, we work with clients worldwide. Increasingly, companies and institutions are turning to Igloo Shared VR for simulation and training applications, including:

- BP
- Medtronic
- Hong Kong Academy of Medicine
- UK Ministry of Defence
- University of Brighton
- University of Loughborough
- UK Fire Services College
- Incident Command Training Centre
- Qinetiq
- Cubic Defence
- NATS
- Lanes Group with Thames Water

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