

Engineering apprenticeships

For many youngsters, vocational training proves to be more beneficial than staying in education

Stefan Rduch faced the same dilemma as that of many school-leavers — staying in education or moving into vocational training. The choice he made has seen his career blossom. Having stayed in education to complete his AS Levels, Mr Rduch had the opportunity to continue his education to degree level, but something was pulling him in another direction.

“After all those years at school, I knew I wanted something different and to gain some experience in the ‘real world’.

“Apprenticeships had been discussed, but it was the offer from KMF (Precision Sheet Metal) Ltd in Newcastle under Lyne that really made my mind up. The company offered a well-rounded programme that involved shopfloor, office and business-development training. It was this latter element that really caught my attention, as I always had a desire to learn how a business functioned, the fact that this formed part of KMF’s apprenticeship was appealing.

“One of the first things that we did upon joining KMF as apprentices was to lay out our own five-year plans. I knew from the outset that I wanted to manage, but I had no idea what I wanted to manage or how it would happen. This desire was probably derived from watching my father, who worked — with great success — in the pottery industry in various management roles. Taking the apprenticeship route to further my education and combine vocational and academic experience into a single training package has allowed me to achieve my goals. I feel that the training moulded me into the person I have become and I am better prepared for the roles that KMF is asking me to fill.”

KMF, which now undertakes all of its apprentice training in-house, recognised Mr Rduch’s enthusiasm and guided him to a more analytical role within the business. Initially, this saw him working in the purchasing department as a company buyer, where he was responsible for managing a spend of more than £3.5 million. In addition, he was offered further training, completing both HNC and HND in Mechanical Engineering; he also achieved level five of the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply’s qualification.

“In early 2010, there was an opportunity to move from purchasing into a more ‘hands on’ production management role within KMF’s medical integration facility. This saw me over-

seeing the procurement and production of medical instrumentation, including mass spectrometers. Soon afterwards, additional responsibility for a major customer in the aerospace was given to me; this paved the way for my current position as Advanced Solutions Manager, where I am responsible for the new £1 million Advanced Solutions manufacturing facility, along with the 30 members of staff it employs.

“Managing this element of the business and its £5 million turnover — and managing the expected 25% growth in sales — is daunting, but I feel that my apprenticeship has prepared me well for the challenge. Being given this responsibility at such a young age is testament to the faith that KMF put in me; it is also testament to the structure of the apprenticeship programme the company has put together.

“My apprenticeship at KMF provided the foundations for me to develop as a person; and, while it wasn’t all plain sailing, I gained the confidence to achieve my goals and be respected as an integral part of what is a very progressive business. When this journey began 10 years ago, apprenticeships were definitely unfashionable but, with investment from businesses like KMF, they are certainly becoming more popular and, when well constructed, they provide the opportunities, whichever route through the business you want to take.”

KMF has been taking on apprentices at the rate of four per year since 2001, and it is proud of its retention rate (more than 90% of those apprentices are still

working for the company). In the early years of its apprentice programme, KMF used external training providers, but during 2006 it brought all apprentice training in-house.

Jenny Conlon, KMF’s training centre manager, says: “As part of our on-going commitment towards achieving the highest standards, we became aware that the content of the practi-



Stefan Rduch has gone from being an apprentice to managing a multi-million-pound manufacturing facility at KMF (Precision Sheet Metal) Ltd

cal training provided by colleges was not sufficient for KMF’s needs; colleges are generally under-resourced, unable to keep up with the pace of technology and not able to provide the specialist training and skills that we need to compete.”

The decision to bring training in-house is validated by the fact that the scores achieved by apprentices at KMF are significantly higher than the national average.

Bringing skills into a business

PEG Precision Engineering & Fabrication’s recent move to new premises in Plympton, near Plymouth, was prompted in part by founder Malcolm Ross’ decision to pass on day-to-day running of the family business to John Bailey.

Formed in 1981 as Plymouth Engine & Gearbox Co to carry out automotive engine and gearbox reconditioning, the company was previously housed in a purpose-built workshop at the rear of the family home in nearby Wembury. How-

ever, having been asked repeatedly by customers to produce piece parts, by the late ‘80s the focus had switched entirely to the precision machining of materials ranging from plastics to high-nickel-content alloys.

A long-standing commitment to quality has seen the ISO 9001:2008 sub-contractor grow steadily to 16 people and this, coupled with the earlier addition of welding and fabrication, proved to be the tipping point.

Works director John Bailey says: “We needed to install another machine, but there was no space available in our previous premises, so we moved to larger premises on the Langage Industrial Estate and bought a 9,000ft² unit there in 2008. We converted it to meet our specific requirements and moved in the following year.”

“A former PEG apprentice, Mr Bailey is a firm believer in the apprenticeship system as a way of bringing skills into the business and PEG Precision currently has two apprentices — one training as a welder/fabricator and the other as a machinist.

Now in his second year with the company, apprentice machinist Anthony Harper had been shown how to use an existing XYZ ProTURN SLX 425 CNC/manual lathe but was actually working most of the time on a manual lathe — a fact that restricted the type of work he could

be given. It was while visiting XYZ Machine Tool’s Burescombe HQ that Mr Bailey decided to invest in a smaller 7.5hp 50-4,000rev/min ProTURN SLX CNC/manual lathe.



Apprentice machinist Anthony Harper gets some helpful advice from PEG Precision’s works director John Bailey

“Our XYZ machines are all CNC/manual rather than full CNC, as this fits the type of work we do, which is not all long-production runs. Our operators are highly skilled people who write their own programs, set the machines and take responsibility for the quality of the components they produce. Looking to the longer term, I want our apprentices to learn these skills and the right way of doing things, so Anthony now has a new machine equipped with the latest ProtoTRAK SLX control, which is a good system to introduce someone to the intricacies of CNC machining.”

PEG Precision’s customer base is extensive and embraces oil and gas, automotive, medical, pharmaceutical, electronics, defence and even Super Yachts. There is a high level of repeat business, which is a testament both to the quality values instilled by Mr Ross and to the work of another ex-PEG apprentice, Paul Furneaux, who oversees quality control and ensures compliance with every aspect of the company’s ISO 9001 accreditation