

The 1980s saw a dramatic decline in the number of engineering apprenticeships. The consequent skills gap threatens the future of UK manufacturing; KMF is investing in its own future.

Power to the people



Richard Noble and Michael Higgins open the new training centre - which has been designed with environmental considerations in mind.

Every room has under-floor heating delivered by ground source heat pump; while rain falling on the roof is collected and recycled as 'grey water'. With an eye on reducing the carbon footprint, the centre was fitted with the latest metering technology, which will control demand for power within the building.

The main construction is made from wooden panels, in timber sourced from managed plantations. These highly thermal efficient panels contain an expanded polystyrene (EPS) layer of rigid insulation that achieves U-Values as low as 0.22W/m²K (Watts per Meter Squared Kelvin) or better - 37% below the Government's latest legislation figure for the thermal efficiency of buildings. The heating costs of the centre will be 60% less than of those of a conventionally constructed building.

Investment in advanced manufacturing technology at KMF is running at £1 million pa

growing business. In the early years of the programme KMF used external training providers, but during 2006 it made the decision to bring all apprentice training in-house. Training Centre Co-ordinator Jenny Conlon explains: 'As part of our ongoing commitment towards achieving the highest standards we became aware that the content of the practical training provided by the colleges was not sufficient for KMF's needs.' This is not a direct criticism of the colleges, which she observes are under-resourced, therefore unable to match the technology and specialist skills needed.

The scores achieved by KMF apprentices are now significantly higher than the national average, a result of the combination of improved selection, training, working practices and a greater focus on individuals. They are taught in classes of four, with in-house lecturers having time to address any problems. Being on-site throughout their apprenticeship allows a greater involvement with the wider aspects of the business - which has huge implications for career progress - and time spent in the commercial and production elements of the business are written into each apprentice's training programme. All training is delivered to standards set down by EAL (EMTA Awards Ltd - the leading awarding body for engineering vocational qualifications) and as an accredited training provider KMF can deliver training at NVQ and VRQ up to level 4 in a variety of disciplines. www.kmf.co.uk



It's refreshing to visit a UK company that knows where it's going. Precision sheet metal components manufacturer KMF is one such organisation, investing in manufacturing technology (running at around £1million annually) and infrastructure, and taking an innovative and imaginative approach to market and customer development. It's also a great example of making 'investment in people' a key part of the business strategy, a reality rather than just a fuzzy aspiration. The evidence is there in abundance - in the enthusiasm and expertise of the people you meet as you walk around the factory, and now with the opening of a dedicated training centre.

The family-owned business was established 37 years ago in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and has seen turnover grow from £9 million to over £20 million during the past five years, becoming arguably the UK's leading supplier of precision sheet metal components and assemblies. The increase in business has been partly driven by the decision to consolidate all manufacturing activities on one site. The modern factory operates 24/7 with 250 permanent staff working a mix of conventional day/nights and continental shift patterns. This gives KMF the flexibility it needs to deliver the high levels of service expected by a diverse customer base.

One of the greatest challenges has been to find the skilled people locally to support continued growth, and this has led the management team to radically rethink its strategy for training. The latest fruit of this is a £600k apprentice training centre, officially opened by the company's founder, Michael Higgins, in November. Guests included Richard Noble OBE, the former land speed record holder, the driving force behind Thrust SSC - and project Bloodhound SSC, which aims to break the 1000mph barrier.

KMF has been taking on four new apprentices per year since 2001, and over 90% still work for the company, a consequence of career progression opportunities within a