



## Engineering apprenticeships — investing for tomorrow

### KMF guarantees its future by opening its own dedicated training centre

**T**he 1980s saw a dramatic decline in the number of engineering apprenticeships; and even though this reduction was 'camouflaged' by the rise of the modern apprenticeship, the skills gap left by this lack of training is a serious threat to the future of the UK manufacturing sector.

Recognising this, precision sheet metal components manufacturer KMF is investing in its future with the opening of a dedicated training centre. The Newcastle-under-Lyme company had faced a real challenge when it came to finding the skilled people required to maintain its growth. The lack of available skilled people in KMF's area of manufacture, combined with the company's location in the heart of the Potteries, led the management team to radically rethink its training strategy. The result is a £600,000 'state of the art' apprentice training centre that was officially opened by the company's founder, Michael Higgins, on 20 November 2009.

Guests at the opening gained an insight into the world of land speed records, as Richard Noble OBE — the former land speed record holder and the driving force behind the Thrust SSC project (which broke the sound barrier with a wheeled vehicle) — explained the intricacies of his attempt to break the 1,000mph barrier with his new project — Bloodhound SSC.

KMF has been taking on new apprentices

at the rate of four per year since 2001, and the company is very proud of its retention rate, with over 90% of its apprentices still working for the company. The key to this level of retention is the progression and career opportunities that, as a growing business, KMF can provide.

In the early years of its apprentice programme, the company made full use of external training providers, but during 2006 it decided to bring all apprentice training in-house. Jenny Conlon, KMF's training centre co-ordinator, says: "We are committed to achieving the highest standards, but were 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, but they are under-resourced and financially unable to keep up with the pace of change in technology, which in turn means they can not provide the specialist training and skills that we need if we are to remain competitive."

The success of this decision is borne out by the fact that the scores achieved by apprentices at KMF are significantly higher than the national average. Apprentices at KMF are taught in classes of four, which means the

in-house lecturers have much more time to address any problems that may arise. Being on-site throughout their apprenticeship also allows a greater involvement with the wider aspects of the business, and time spent in the commercial and production elements of the business is written into each apprentice's training programme from the beginning of their employment.

#### Certified standards

All of the training provided by KMF 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 NVQ and VRQ training up to Level 4 in a variety of disciplines. KMF chose to use the EAL

route as opposed to City and Guilds as, in its view, EAL courses provide a much closer match to what the company needs, particularly with regard to CNC training.

KMF's managing director Gareth Higgins says: "What we have achieved is a credit to the foresight of the whole management team at KMF, but we have one person in particular to thank for his vision and drive, and that is John Booth."

Mr Booth had been working alongside KMF as the NVQ assessor at Stoke-on-Trent College, and when the College wanted to move him away from that role, KMF offered Mr Booth a part-time position helping with its apprentices; this role grew into a full-time position when the company's training was moved in-house. His infectious determination and enthusiasm resulted in plans being laid for the development of the new training centre. He was also responsible for training the three new assessors and mentors who will be responsible for apprentice training at KMF.

Jenny Conlon says: "John's involvement has been a great help. As an accredited assessment centre, we had to go through a multitude of approval processes. All of our lecturers/assessors have to be qualified, and the facilities have to meet certain standards. With John's help and his understanding of the EAL way of working, this was a relatively smooth process. Since being approved, we are subjected to six-monthly reviews by EAL's external verifier, Mark Haig, who ensures that we are maintaining the required standards. Mark's visits involve communicating directly with individual apprentices, checking their training portfolios and discussing their performance with the assessors."

#### Inspiring comment

As a result of his most recent visit, Mr Haig had this to say about KMF and its commitment to apprentice training: "It's inspiring to see that a company such as KMF recognises the importance of investing in the future, and providing its apprentices with top-class facilities that will benefit both the apprentice and the company. They will receive training in disciplines that reflect the company's long-term business requirements — and gain National Vocational Qualifications, Vocational Related Qualifications and Key Skills to support their Apprenticeship Framework."



The management team at KMF is rightly proud of what they have achieved so far with regard to apprentice training. The high point to date was the recognition gained by Peter Krynicki when he achieved the honour of *The 2007 Metals Industry Apprentice of the Year* award (presented by MetSkill). Mr Krynicki has now finished his apprenticeship and works in the production area as a bending-department technician. He has also taken on responsibility as a mentor and assessor to the current intake of apprentices.

Similarly, Stefan Rduch made full use of the training provided by KMF and is now a buyer in KMF's purchasing department, where he is responsible for managing a spend in excess of £3.5 million. Mr Rduch also took up the com-

pany's offer of further training and completed HNC and HND courses in Mechanical Engineering; he is currently well on the way towards completing his academic qualification for the Chartered Institute of Purchase and Supply.

Despite the encouragement provided by the success of these young men, KMF was still struggling to encourage young people into apprenticeships, hence the decision to build a purpose-built training centre. Mr Higgins says: "With the groundwork already done in developing our in-house training, this new facility will help to guarantee the future of our business for the foreseeable future. While it has required a significant investment, it is one that we can happily justify with the quality of apprentices the team is producing."

"That said, I am disappointed at the total lack of enthusiasm and funding that is available from Government sources for projects such as this. KMF, like many other businesses, is facing the problem of an ageing skills base, so it is vital that we generate high-quality apprentices who are fully conversant with the latest technology. This is why we feel that it is important to be able to control the content and quality of the training provided by ourselves."

In conclusion, Mr Booth says: "What Gareth and his team have achieved here is fantastic. In my 40 years of working with apprentices, I have not seen anything like the level of commitment to training shown by KMF. They have managed to seamlessly blend the teaching of traditional skills with modern technology, and the quality of the facilities with the opening of this new training centre is second to none."

### Environmental considerations

As well as looking to the future with regard to its skills requirements, KMF's new training centre is also 'future-proof' in that it has been designed with the latest environmental considerations in mind. Every room in the centre has under-floor heating provided via a ground-source heat pump, and any rain falling on the roof of the building is collected and recycled for the centre's 'grey water' use. Furthermore, the centre is fitted with the latest metering technology, which will help to control demand for power within the building as a whole.

The main structure of the training centre comprises wooden panels made from 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/m<sup>2</sup>K or better — a value that is 37% lower than the Government's latest legislation figure for the thermal efficiency of buildings. As a result, KMF reckons that the heating costs of the training centre will be 60% less than those of a conventionally constructed building.

