

KMF GUARANTEES ITS FUTURE WITH INVESTMENT IN TRAINING TODAY

The 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, KMF is investing in its own future with the opening of a dedicated training centre.

As a manufacturer of precision sheet metal components, Newcastle-under-Lyme based KMF is faced with a real challenge when it comes to finding the skilled people required as it continues to grow. The general lack of available skilled people in this manufacturing sector, combined with its location in the heart of the Potteries, has led the management team at KMF to radically rethink its strategy for training. The result of this strategy is a state-of-the-art £600,000 apprentice training centre which was officially opened by the company's founder, Michael Higgins, on the 20th November 2009.

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

In the early years of its apprentice program KMF made full use of external training providers, but during 2006 it made the decision to bring all apprentice training in-house.

The success of this decision is borne out by the fact that the scores achieved by apprentices at KMF now are significantly

higher than the national average, as a result of the combination of improved selection, training, working practices and a greater focus on individuals.

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 training at NVQ and VRQ 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 needed, particularly for CNC training.

"What we have achieved up to now is a credit to the foresight of the whole management team at KMF," says Gareth Higgins, KMF Managing Director. "But we have one person in particular to thank for his vision and drive, and that is John Booth."

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

Since being approved as an accredited assessment centre KMT are now subjected to six monthly reviews by EAL's external verifier Mark Haig, who ensures that they are



maintaining the recognised standards required. Mark's visits involve communicating directly with individual apprentices, checking their training portfolios and discussing their performance with the assessors.

As a result of his most recent visit Mark 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, which will benefit both the apprentice and the company. They will receive training in disciplines which reflect the company's long-term business requirements, and gain National Vocational Qualifications, Vocational Related Qualifications and Key Skills to support their Apprenticeship Framework."

However KMF still struggles to encourage young people into apprenticeships, a situation which culminated in turning an idea into reality with the decision to commence the building of a purpose-built training centre.

"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," says Gareth Higgins. "It has been a significant investment but one that we can happily justify through the quality of apprentices that 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: this makes it 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 ourselves."

The last word on this goes to John Booth: "What Gareth and his team have achieved here is fantastic, in my 40 years working with apprentices I have not seen anything like the level of commitment to training shown at 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 will be second to none."

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MTA PREDICTS MARKET GROWTH

The MTA's latest industry forecast for the machine tool sector predicts that UK orders will start to pick up in 2010 - welcome news for manufacturing technology companies across the UK. The UK market is forecast to match the wider economy's steady recovery as we move into 2010. That's a more positive picture than can be painted of some other countries with global demand for machine tools tipped to trail the global recovery, mostly due to the historic highs in consumption we saw in 2007/8.



There is solace too in the UK market figures and survey data, which present a more optimistic prospect. In the words of MTA President Bob Hunt "We are on the way back. The panic has subsided. Confidence is returning and the second half of '09 was much better than the first."

Such optimism bodes well for MACH. Recent manufacturing sector surveys show an upswing in investment intentions and the wider forecast for the UK predicts growth for the vehicles and metals sectors, which could see a fairly strong recovery in 2010. That leaves MACH 2010 (which takes place from 7-11 June) well placed with the show's, mainly UK based, visitors likely to be seeing the green shoots of recovery

The forecasts were presented at the annual MTA Forecast Seminar. The event last week at Duxford Imperial War Museum attracted a full capacity turnout.

The full annual forecast is available to members of the MTA, for more information on membership visit www.mta.org.uk.