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# PRODUCTION ENGINEERING SOLUTIONS

## The future's bright

KMF meets skills gap challenge head-on

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The **KMF** Training Centre

was officially opened on  
Friday 20<sup>th</sup> November 2009 by

Richard Noble, OBE

and

Michael Higgins

Founding Director of KMF

## SUBCONTRACTING

# The future's bright

**Solutions Report**  
Simon Lott



Meeting the challenge of the looming skills gap head-on, Newcastle-under-Lyme sheetmetal subcontractor KMF has launched a new £600,000 apprentice training centre. The building was officially opened last November by former land speed holder and architect of the current record, Richard Noble OBE.

**T**he general lack of skilled engineers in the sheetmetal sector, compounded by the sharp decline in the number of engineering apprenticeships being taken since the 1980s represents a serious problem to the future of companies such as KMF.

Having taken on new apprentices every year since 1989, the company typically employs around four each year, but to ensure the quality and value of its young employees' experience, the management team decided upon a more radical strategy.

Backing up this strategy is an apprentice retention rate of over 90%, which the company attributes to the progression and career opportunities it is able to provide.

Having committed to nurturing apprentices since 1989, KMF has

seen a good deal of success, the high point to date being one of its former apprentices - Peter Krynicki - receiving the 2007 Metals Industry Apprentice of the Year award, presented by MetSkill, a division of Senta (the Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies). Mr Krynicki is now employed in the production area as a bending department technician, has become a member of the purchasing team and has taken on responsibility as a mentor and assessor to the current intake of apprentices.

## Structured learning

The new state-of-the-art centre will deliver training to standards set down by vocational qualification specialist EAL (EMTA Awards Ltd), which the company says provides the closest match for its needs, especially for CNC skills. Though its position as an accredited training provider, KMF can also deliver training at NVO and VRO up to Level 4 in a variety of disciplines.

Business improvement manager Keith Nicoll expands: "In the factory apprentices follow a structured programme moving from skills that provide a good basic engineering grounding, from fabrication skills through to CNC tool setting and operation. Each of these tasks is supplemented by our own team of training staff who ensure that thorough understanding takes place.

"During the programme the apprentices also learn about people and organisation, production systems, quality systems and continuous improvement and during the fourth year, apprentices add to their skill sets by completing a module on computer aided design, linking engineering knowledge to the latest advances in modelling."

In the early years of its apprentice program KMF made full use of external training providers, but during 2006 the decision was made to bring all apprentice training in-house. Training centre coordinator 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 as they are under resourced and financially unable to keep up with the pace of technology. Therefore, they could not provide the specialist training and skills that we need to be competitive."

## Positive results

The results of this are plain for all to see. Since bringing its training in-house, the results achieved by apprentices at KMF have become significantly higher than the national average, which it puts down to the result of improved selection, training, working practices and a greater focus on individuals brought about by KMF's tailored solution.

Apprentices at the company are taught in classes of four, with its own lecturers having much more time to address any problems that may arise. Being onsite throughout their apprenticeship also allows a



greater involvement with the wider aspects of the operation and time spent in the commercial and production elements of the business are written into each apprentice's training program from the beginning of their employment.

The centre itself originally stems from the vision of John Booth, who had originally worked alongside KMF as the NVO assessor at Stoke-on-Trent College. When the College decided to move Mr Booth away from that role, KMF offered him a part time position working with its apprentices. As KMF's involvement in training increased, this became a full time role.

With his determination and enthusiasm, the company was able to establish plans for the development of the new building and since then, Mr Booth has also been responsible for training three new assessors and mentors who will be leading the training.

"John's involvement has been a great help," adds Ms Conlon. "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 now subjected to six monthly reviews by EAL, ensuring that we are maintaining the required standards," she continues. "Visits by its external verifier involve communicating directly with individual apprentices, checking their training portfolios and discussing their performance with assessors."

## Environmentally efficient

KMF's proactive and innovative approach to training is also matched by the new building itself, which has been designed to be as environmentally friendly as possible. For example, every room in the centre has heated floors, with heat coming from a ground source heat pump and rain falling onto the roof of the building is collected and recycled.

The centre has also been fitted with the latest metering technology to control demand for power throughout the building. Furthermore, wooden panels forming the main construction of the building have been sourced from manageable plantations and contain highly efficient expanded polystyrene insulation, with the company aiming for a 60% reduction in heating costs over more conventional constructions.

Managing director Gareth Higgins concludes: "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. 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."

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