

Deep commitment *to skills*

Semta's Bill Twigg explains why manufacturing's future prosperity will rely on effective skills development

According to The National Skills Academy for Manufacturing – part of Semta, the sector skills council for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies – its sponsorship of this year's Best Factory Awards demonstrates a key and critical factor: the organisation's commitment to supporting manufacturers to invest in their most valuable asset, namely their employees.

Sponsorship of the People Management and Skills Development Award also recognises the efforts many businesses have made to improve their competitiveness through effective skills development, while helping to raise the profile of the manufacturing sector in general and highlight its important contribution to the UK economy.

Bill Twigg, development director at Semta, explains: "Despite public perception, manufacturing still remains the backbone of the UK economy, although it has changed enormously since the 1960s and 1970s. A lot of the huge industrial plants of yesteryear have been replaced by highly innovative, small, energetic and very efficient companies that add significant value to the GDP of this country. In the UK alone, we have almost 50,000 manufacturing companies employing less than 10 people."

Twigg argues that the recent economic crisis has really highlighted how important manufacturing is to the UK economy, with some experts predicting an export-led recovery. Moreover, to remain a real economic power, the UK needs to retain a solid manufacturing base, he states, "one that is not just based on volume, but on innovation, new technology and the very latest manufacturing processes that add value to the end product".

The myth still pervades that manufacturing is a lower skilled industry than many others, he adds. "This is simply not the case. To support this vital sector, we need skilled people who are capable of working with today's technology, as well as the new and emerging technologies of the future."

A recent survey by the Skills Academy found that a third of manufacturers feel they don't have the right skills to face the challenges ahead and 21% say the markets in which they operate have changed significantly.

The Skills Academy is dedicated to raising skills standards within the UK and thus helping to enhance the nation's global competitiveness. To achieve this, its programmes are designed to

ensure significant return on investment through its 'Learning Engine' approach, which aims to: analyse impartially; prepare collaboratively; deliver powerfully; follow-through thoroughly; and evaluate honestly. Companies benefiting from this approach include Lotus Cars, which generated £1.25m of cost savings as a result of training programmes developed by the Skills Academy.

The Skills Academy has also been instrumental in improving training quality through its training provider accreditation process and has worked closely with academics at Warwick Manufacturing Group to develop a new evaluation tool to measure return on investment accurately.

In line with the ethos of the Best Factory Awards, the Skills Academy believes that one of the best ways to make UK manufacturing more competitive is by sharing best practice and manufacturers are actively encouraged to help shape the development of skills training to meet their needs.

Looking to the future, it is at pains to point out that a lot of work remains to be done to ensure that the UK remains a world leader when it comes to manufacturing. Indeed, a recently published report by Semta indicates the need for around 205,000 skilled workers between now and 2016 across the science, engineering and manufacturing sectors. These highly skilled workers will be needed to replace people who are due to retire and also to meet new demand from rapidly growing sectors like bioscience and advanced manufacturing. Adds Twigg: "It is also vital that we improve the skills of the existing workforce, many of whom are operating below their potential, and at the same time encourage a steady stream of young people into science, engineering or manufacturing."

Semta's UK Skills Report is based on detailed surveys of 5,469 employers, covering nearly 257,000 employees from the aerospace, automotive, bioscience, electrical engineering, electronics, marine, mechanical engineering and metals industries. ■



The National Skills Academy
 T: 0845 463 9001
www.nsa-m.co.uk

