

# Getting employers on board

Robert Nurden from The Workplace Basic Skills Network describes the initiative taken by two companies to develop the skills of their workforce.



**T**he success of any project to improve basic skills in the workplace depends to a large extent on employers giving their backing. Many initiatives have failed because managers have not provided support, or do not see the importance of improved levels of literacy and numeracy in today's rapidly changing workplace. What's more, senior staff often need to upgrade their skills base as much as their employees do.

However, the message seems at last to be getting through. And when the concept is embraced, the end result is invariably much more positive than expected. Better literacy and numeracy benefit not only the individual employee but the whole organisation.

The Workplace Basic Skills Network at Lancaster University has been gathering data on this topic for a number of years and now maintains that this easily accessible and effective training could be the route forward for many more organisations.

It is time to disseminate the little-known good practice going on throughout the coun-

try. For example, take Vitacress Salads, based near Andover in Hampshire, who last year produced over 42 million bags of specialist salads. It grows, crops and packages its own product, which has to arrive at the supermarket at peak quality, in correct volumes and "just in time" to go on the shelves.

## HOW IS TRAINING PAID FOR?

"We do the hard stuff best and are a low-volume, high-value producer," said Tony Alcock, human resources manager at Vitacress. "How do I pay for training? Well, to cut £100,000 off the bottom line, we only have to save 20 reworks on the production line in a year.

"For example, by not putting the wrong sell-by date on a run of 30,000 bags of salad and thus saving say £5,000 that day in keeping the shift behind to rebag the salad. Of course, 100,000 on the bottom line at 10% margin is equivalent to generating an extra £1m turnover.

"Basic skills training definitely pays," he said. "We started with ESOL for our production

staff and are happy to pay them for the hour a week that they come to the conference room to improve their English with a tutor from Cricklade, our local college.

"It's obviously important for us to get things right first time, for staff to be able to read, understand and follow our very stringent hygiene standards. But the savings don't stop there, investing in training also reduces absenteeism and improves staff retention and that saves again. If you want to know the theory, it is about raising self-esteem, do that and people will stay with you."

#### LEAVING SCHOOL WITH NOTHING BUT ATROCIOUS MATHS AND SLOW READING

Julie is Vitacress's twilight, high-care shift supervisor for the section where hygiene is at its highest levels. She takes up the story: "I left school with nothing, slow at reading and atrocious at maths. I've had many jobs, worked for McDonald's, hotels and retail companies. So my friends ask why I do a job that starts at 2pm and goes on till 11pm, where I have to wear three layers of clothing to keep out the cold, and ear defenders to keep out the noise, and then have to change in and out of boots and protective clothing 20 times a day and

wash my hands twice every single time I go on the floor. The answer is because Vitacress has given me the opportunity to do something with my life.

"Part of being a supervisor means having to use email and use the computer order board and write reports. But I have never written a report. So the course was really useful. It was also excellent fun, all of us enjoyed it and it has been so useful. Learning gives you the confidence, real self-confidence."

This case study shows the importance of careful strategic planning so that perennial pitfalls are avoided. One of these is treating staff as needy or lacking in the area of basic skills.

"To be really effective, we must get away from the deficit model or remedial action associated with literacy," says Jaine Chisholm-Caunt, operations director of the Workplace Basic Skills Network. "Many providers and practitioners are unaware of the different professional skills necessary to develop successful workplace provision. We see it as important to stop the stigmatisation and separation of language, literacy and numeracy provision from other workplace training and development."

In the UK, basic skills have generally been offered as a "bolt-on" provision, separate from

other training. To counteract this, the provider must help companies develop whole organisational needs analysis. Focusing on workers' shortcomings can reinforce a culture of individual blame and responsibility when in reality this is a matter of shared responsibility. Avoiding the use of deficit statistics about individuals enables the provider and the employer to focus on a more holistic approach to training and development.

In practice, this means making lit-



eracy and numeracy relevant to the demands of the modern workplace. That could involve meeting health and safety requirements, use of metrication and the euro, introducing and using new technology, new international standards and working practices, new demands for quality and flatter management structures.

Sceptical - and time-conscious - managers are often persuaded of the argument by being reminded of just how ICT has radically altered the workplace in the past 10 years. The impact



Vitacress - Julie Pitt (right) Trainee



Just one of the 'prepared salads' Vitacress

that its existing premises were not suitable for modern manufacturing methods. That meant it had to move to another £2m site, which would require more staff training and a radical shake-up of procedures.

Not only that but the company had to make redundancies, and with that suffer the loss of key skill sets, as well as tackling the problem of low staff morale. In addition, there was a need to retrain its 400 UK staff, who have widely differing ethnic backgrounds. Not surprisingly, there was also the problem of staff retention and how best to manage the transition from one workplace to another, and the

has been no less for them than for the rest of their workforce.

Being literate and numerate now means more than writing good English and adding up accurately; it also means being conversant with an often baffling range of electronic equipment.

### NEW SITE EQUALS MORE STAFF TRAINING

Long-established electrical engineering company W Lucy of Oxford makes lampposts, railings, street furniture, library shelving and manhole covers. Despite years of good performance, it recently became clear



Vitacress - Taryn Jerling (front 2nd from left) at presentation to Chamber of Commerce. Andover Advertiser



**Vitacress - Tony Alcock - HR Manager**

culture change that went with that.

Carol Clark, human resources manager, said that because the task was so great it had to be tackled with extreme thoroughness. Q&A groups, story boards describing progress, working groups and project teams all contributed towards keeping staff informed.

"Very soon it was clear that there was a need for basic skills training, which we treated as part of an overall programme of training and development," she said. "Literacy and numeracy provision became an essential part of our business improvement programme."

### ALL STAFF INVOLVED IN TRAINING

The programme proved to be highly democratic. Every staff member was involved in re-training. All operatives below management level were required to attain an NVQ2 in performing management operations; team leaders worked towards an NVQ3 in supervisory management; all managers were expected to get an NVQ4 in management; and all senior managers were required to obtain the equivalent at NVQ5 level.

The human resources department detected a particular need for basic skills training in the logistics department. It was here that "underperforming employees" were having a negative effect on the performance of the department and on colleagues. "The bottom line was that two staff could not read, write or count and that was affecting stock reconciliation and business performance," said Ms Clark.

Following a training needs analysis by a local provider, the main priorities were for English and maths and a pilot programme was

instituted. Then this formula - report writing, reading skills, literacy and communication etc - was offered to other departments. Before long, individual employees were coming forward of their own volition.

"The commitment of all stakeholders is vital," said Ms Clark. "Management support is critical and they must allow time off during work hours as well as being able to address the production issues that arise as a result."

"It is important to build relationships and trust with staff. Employers must not deny there is a problem; they must participate and realise that such initiatives are rewarding for all concerned not just for the student."

"We are now experiencing a change in attitude to learning among employees. They are gaining in confidence, but we have learned too that it is important not to aim too high. We may lose one or two staff as a result of this training but the overall benefits far outweigh the disadvantages. There is nothing more satisfying than giving someone the opportunity to change and enrich their lives."

### NO SHORTCUTS

Persuasive arguments indeed. One thing is clear: there are no shortcuts towards improving literacy and numeracy in the workplace. It may even be the case that piecemeal, ill-thought-out projects actually cause more harm than good. But seeing the upgrading of individuals' basic skills as part of the company's

overall development strategies can have astonishing and far-reaching results.

Robert Nurden is press officer of the Workplace Basic Skills Network, which is based at Lancaster University. He also writes on further education for the Independent newspaper. The Network is a membership organisation dedicated to workplace language, literacy and numeracy provision. Founded in 1993, it supports "Skills for Life", the government's adult literacy and numeracy strategy. The Network builds professional capacity in workplace basic skills through sharing and dissemination of good practice and continuing professional development, supporting basic skills professionals to meet the language, literacy and numeracy needs of today's changing workplace.

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**W. Lucy - Carol Clark - HR Manager**