

Basingstoke College of Technology

Interview with Alan Gwyer by David Mathew of the Workplace Basic Skills Network

Alan Gwyer is the Strategy and Partnerships Director at Basingstoke College of Technology, with the responsibility for curriculum planning and the management of projects that are primarily funded by sources other than the LSC. It is a large provision, which generates between one and two million pounds per year. In addition to piloting a new procedure for the monitoring of retention and achievement, Alan has been active in working with schools on the 14-19 year old agenda.

Sector-specific work is high on the college's list of priorities. Alan is responsible for managing the relationships with up to 1100 construction companies each year. NVQs and short courses are delivered. The college also works closely with the NHS, with approximately 1300 learners on role at most times, taking a mixture of IT, and Literacy and Numeracy to the national curriculum framework.

The services that Alan and his team offer are extremely flexible. Any requirement that a company has can be catered for. For example, ESOL classes are very popular in the NHS and in distribution centres (27% of the workforce in distribution have ESOL requirements). The classes are delivered in the workplace, rather than at the college, as it was recognised that if an adult worked 45-50 hours a week, with the rest being for leisure and family, it was unreasonable to expect that adult to go to college as well. The arrangement is that the college will provide free courses on the proviso that the company releases the member of staff, which of course raises several issues.

Key partnerships include work with Sainsbury, Boots and Bookers.

Boots Distribution, for example, serves the whole of the south of England. The staffing level is at approximately 150, split across three shifts in a twenty-four hour period. To make a class viable, approximately 10% of a given shift must be released. One question that is raised is: if 10% can be released, is that 10% actually necessary to the company? Alan accepts that this can be a very thorny problem.

Nevertheless, the classes offered under Alan's management are usually extremely successful. Trade Unions will help to identify need, and the learner is assessed and assigned a class. Some programmes lead to a final exam, but the model changes depending on the company's requirements. Retention of learners is good, and what is more the learner remains with the company. Alan disagrees with the oft-quoted theory that a learner, having been trained up, will start looking for a different job. Quite the opposite, in fact: his opinion is that by empowering Entry 1 and 2 learners, a sense of security is provided and the employee becomes more loyal, and might strive with more confidence for *internal* promotion. There is also the simple satisfaction of having earned new and better qualifications. All the same, the

programme is monitored carefully. Each learner receives an exit interview in the form of a one-hour debriefing, at which glitches – if there are any – can be acknowledged, with a view to improving service for the next time.

There is also some brokerage work happening. Alan has been working to establish partnerships in Hampshire with local colleges. By employing this strategy, there is good access to a large number of specialist tutors. This brokerage scheme has been active for the last two years, and as with all of the work within the department, a keen eye is kept on quality and consistency of service.