



Walkers Snack Foods Ltd

Walkers Snack Foods factory in Peterlee, County Durham, in 2001 opened a Skills for Life Learning Centre offering its 430 employees a range of training and development opportunities. Walker's high profile in the area means that many people want to work for them, but not all have the necessary skills levels. Following business growth Walkers committed to learning and development as a key strategy in supporting its loyal staff and unlocking their potential as well as a method for improving relations with their local community.

In 2003, the centre became a full time Learndirect centre and is now a key element of Walkers' organisational commitment to learning and development. Although a total of 500 courses are offered, Skills for Life courses play a central role in the centre's strategy. Changing business practices in the Walkers factory mean that all staff require skills to interpret key performance indicators ensuring efficiency. As they progress within the organisation employees find they need to use literacy and numeracy skills that they may not have needed since they were at school. Skills for Life training provides opportunities for these skills to be brushed up and improved. Recognised as an employer of choice, the centre is open to employee's families, other members of the community, schools and local enterprises drawing them into the learning culture. Walkers have also worked hard to ensure learning is accessible to all. Any employee who finds it difficult to physically spend time in the learning centre can undertake online courses at home, and laptops are available on loan for those who do not have their own computer.

"There is a huge need for numeracy and literacy training in the District of Easington but the hardest thing to do is to take that first step and come through the door. Once people do they are glad they did and go on to do course after course."

Geoff Spuhler, Manager of the Centre

50% of employees are now registered at the centre and more members are registering from the local community. 1070 courses have been enrolled on so far, of which 329 have specifically been Skills for Life.

In July 2005, Walkers Snack Foods were awarded the first Business in the Community Skills for Life Award for Excellence celebrating the initiative's success in demonstrating the benefits to business and society of addressing literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace. In June 2006 they received their Big Tick 2004 re-accreditation in recognition of their continuing commitment to supporting their employees' essential skills development.

Staff who have completed courses and gained national qualifications in literacy and numeracy skills have gained confidence and have been inspired to go on to take further courses. They have also reported a difference in the way they work.

Since the centre opened, absence rates have fallen to their lowest in many years. And in Walkers' recent staff survey, staff reported significant improvements in their understanding of the direction and progress of the company, their communications with managers, and in having the training and tools to do their jobs. Walkers managers believe that the introduction of the learning centre has made a major contribution to all these improvements.

The success and importance of the programme is clearly reflected in its take up by senior management across the business as a key initiative. The award winning Peterlee model is now being rolled out to other Walkers Snack Foods sites across the country.

“The learning centre project has exceeded all of our expectations. We are now a long way down what at times has been a difficult road, but we acknowledge that it is an ongoing journey that we will never finish. It gives us great satisfaction knowing that we are helping people and will keep on helping people develops their basic skills as well as giving them more self-belief and esteem which in turn can only benefit both the community and our business in which they work and live.”

David Wheatley, Peterlee site leader.