NEW THINKING, SKILLS AND SOLUTIONS

Continuing our manufacturing coverage ahead of Insider's 2023 Made in Yorkshire Awards, we look at the importance of apprenticeships to solve challenges around the talent pipeline. **Ian Leech** reports

Engineering at Calderdale College

Willerby might be one of the largest employers in Hull with more than 1,000 staff, but even it hadn't fully embraced the potential that apprentices can bring to a business until recently.

In September 2021, the UK's largest manufacturer of holiday homes and lodges recruited its biggest intake of apprentices when it brought in 29.

Susan Pender, its head of people, tells *Insider*: "Although we'd had apprenticeships before, it was relatively small numbers and very much in the traditional trades on the production side, like carpentry and joinery and electricians. But last year was the first time we went away from traditional trade apprenticeships."

Willerby was experiencing recruitment difficulties in areas of the business such as marketing, finance, IT and business administration so it expanded apprenticeships there too. Another reason for increasing the number of apprentices in an organisation may be the government's Apprenticeship Levy charge on larger businesses to contribute to a national skills need. Pender says Willerby definitely has more apprentices than it did pre-levy. "Personally, I probably wasn't in favour when it was introduced. But why would you not utilise the levy to provide learning and development?"

In West Yorkshire, high-tech manufacturing has been placed at the heart of the future of Brighouse with the creation of an Industry 4.0 Hub where SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) can explore how digital technology can improve their productivity.

Calderdale College is leading the delivery of the project at the newly established Engineering Centre on the Armytage Road Industrial Estate, replacing the former Kirkdale Industrial Training Services (KITS), which closed in the Covid-19 pandemic.

The centre now has around 160 apprentices and works with 120 organisations across all programmes. Engineering centre manager Spencer Belson says of the new hub: "It will allow us to create a new facility for robotics, 3D printing, augmented reality, enhanced computer-aided design (CAD) and Internet of Things work around sensor technology. It will enhance the apprenticeship programme and give us access to additional schemes. The real want is that an apprentice will come in, spend time using facilities then go back to their employer and say 'that part that you said we can't manufacture, well there is a way that we can'. They go back to employers with new thinking, new skills and new solutions."

Calderdale College is OFSTED rated 'good'. Its apprenticeship standard is 'outstanding'. Typically, apprentices are on day release, split evenly between theory

Production at Willerby

Willerby new starters with Susan Pender and chief executive Peter Munk

and workshop. Most are working toward a Level 3 engineering apprenticeship. The centre also specialises in fabrication welding, motor vehicle engineering and electrical engineering, for which there is a much greater interest among women and girls now too. Belson says: "Engineering is just one word but it's a million different skillsets. We are working with textile company AW Hainsworth to develop a new way of delivery. They have operatives and sub-contract maintenance out of an ageing workforce, but want to bring skills into their setting and have engineers that can develop and improve their operation. So, we are working with the Textile Centre of Excellence (TCOE) in Huddersfield to give the engineering training, and TCOE will provide a textile context."

The college works with the employer to make sure the course is configured to meet their needs irrespective of what part of the supply chain they sit in.

In South Yorkshire, Advanced Manufacturing Ltd is a market leader in the machining of complex gas turbine products. A £2m investment from South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority will see it create 32 new jobs, including 12 apprenticeships.

Dr Gareth Morgan, who founded the company as a spin-out from the University of Sheffield's Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) in 2008, says: "We have had really good experiences of recruiting apprentices and developing them into machinists. The AMRC Training Centre takes them through the basics and into a Level 3 scheme. It uses very similar machines to us and, because of that, you get a really relevant set of skills. I can't praise the AMRC highly enough.

"There is a view now that advanced manufacturing is a long-term opportunity and role. When I started, manufacturing was a dying industry to me. You went into IT and finance if you wanted a career. But now, with the UTCs, feeder systems, the hotbed around the AMRC, I think everyone realises that manufacturing in this region is a long-term stable industry."

And is the generation of young people coming through ambitious enough? Belson says: "The apprentices we have here this year are genuinely among some of the best young people I have ever met. I get what people say about them having a sense of entitlement or they don't want to come off their games consoles but that's why we offer full-time programmes as well so we can shape them a little better and get them away from their bedrooms and compensate for the lack of socialising over the last couple of years."

His centre invites schools in for taster days to view the facilities. Belson says some schools are better at preparing youngsters for work than others but sees a whole range of different young people come through the door.

"Because of the offer we have and because it is a technical subject we do attract 'A*' students. But also, because it is a hands-on subject, we attract students who didn't enjoy school – but put them in a workshop and they will be happy."

AML tries to attract potential new apprentices via recruitment fairs and Morgan says the fact that it makes high-end parts for the likes of Rolls-Royce and Siemens and exports around the world is exciting for new recruits. He is already seeing

LOCAL SKILLS IMPROVEMENT PLANS

The Skills for Jobs White Paper set out the government's blueprint for reshaping the technical skills system to better meet the needs of employers and the wider economy. As part of this new approach, the Department for Education has introduced local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) and a strategic development fund (SDF).

A Calderdale College apprentice

former apprentices progress through the business. "I have three key staff members who are from intakes of a few years ago," he says. "Sometimes apprentices stay, sometimes they go, sometimes they want my job. But generally apprenticeships have been a really good route for us."

At Willerby, Susan Pender has found that paying above the apprentice minimum wage has been one attraction for recruits. From next May they will also go onto the National Living Wage when they are 18.

On the craft maintenance and engineering side, Willerby has partnered with East Riding College, which does its first round of recruitment for the business. While on the office side, its learning provider is Hull Business Training Centre (HBTC) and Kaplan for finance.

The apprentices aren't the only ones who have learned as schemes have developed. Willerby's business admin apprentices now spend time in production, administration, customer care, finance, HR and payroll departments to get a broad understanding of the business before settling into a role. Line managers spend a couple of hours a week with the apprentices and do a review of them once a quarter as well as a progress report with their college.

As Pender says: "We've strengthened the infrastructure that sits behind it. I think we've learned a lot along the way about making sure we've got the right structure in terms of internal mentorship and pastoral care for a larger number of apprentices. When you have a bigger cohort, like we introduced last year, it is very important."

MEDICAL, LIFESCIENCE AND HEALTHCARE

TRUE YORKSHIRE STRENGTH

Continuing the countdown to the region's premier manufacturing awards, Made in Yorkshire, **Alex Bell** lifts the lid on the medical and healthcare sector

Yorkshire's manufacturing history is rich in its nature. Like any other UK region, however, the challenges it now faces are plenty – supply chain issues and a steep rise in costs and prices are just a few.

Despite current economic headwinds, manufacturers across Yorkshire are facing them head-on. According to the latest CBI/Accenture quarterly industrial trends survey, employment in the region's manufacturing sector is expected to grow over the next quarter and faster than the UK average too.

The data also showed more positive signs. Yorkshire and the Humber's manufacturing output, it said, grew by +9 per cent in the quarter to July, above the +6 per cent national average.

Looking ahead to the Made in Yorkshire Awards, we shine a spotlight on companies that are innovating, investing in people and products and ultimately driving the sector forward.

From orthopaedic supports to mattresses to care environments – the key to unlocking future growth in the manufacturing medical and healthcare sector may already be turning.


GNG Group

"We aim to continue to be a great success story for the region."
Phillip Whittell
GNG Group

No rest for mattress maker eyeing £50m turnover

Rapid expansion is on the cards for the GNG Group. While it's forecasting £14m revenues for the financial year ending August 2023, its chairman and leadership team have bigger plans.

"In summary, the GNG Group is poised to expand rapidly, and become a company with a £50m-plus turnover," says chairman Phillip Whittell.

GNG Group employs 90 people and manufactures performance foam products for the healthcare, sports, safety, consumer, and contract mattress sectors. This year's turnover reached £10m – but the company now has a new 40,000 sq ft factory and warehouse. Following relocation from a 25,000sq ft manufacturing site in Wakefield to the refurbished base in Normanton, mattress production capacity will shoot up by more than 300 per cent.

The £1.75m investment at Normanton is expected to create at least another 20 jobs this year and a further 30 in 2023.

Having achieved carbon-neutral certification in 2019, GNG is planning additional investment in machinery to maximise production and efficiency in order to further reduce its carbon footprint. Solar power and electric forklift trucks will also be introduced soon. Whittell says: "One of our main aims is to become the leading foam mattress manufacturer in the UK. With a strong focus on the ever-expanding e-tail sector, we have brought about planned and rapid expansion of our consumer mattress division, including our own premium 'Komfi' and 'Sonlevo' mattress brands and now our purpose-built facilities.

"Ongoing R&D and the use of new technology such as our groundbreaking 'Ecofoam' sets us apart from the competition, and our investment in carbon-neutral initiatives makes GNG an industry leader."

Whittell says GNG's aim is to take this division to a £40m target in the next three years.

Blue-chip customers include Manchester United

Established in 1995, GNG Sport manufactures white-label branded sports equipment and has become the leading

UNIVERSITIES TIE-UPS ESSENTIAL

Chairman of Essential Healthcare Solutions Tom Owens tells *Insider* why partnerships with local universities continue to drive the business forward

Essential Healthcare Solutions has been sprung onto the radars of foreign investment houses and high-net worth individuals across Yorkshire. But why?

"It was when we became a Queen's Award-winning company," says Owens. "It seemed to certainly put us on their agenda."

Tom Owens

Owens says the enquiries from overseas investors and the wealthy wanting to invest in the company has rocketed this year.

"This wouldn't have been able to come about though," says Owens, "if we didn't tie in with local universities. These tie-ins with universities in Leeds and Huddersfield are very important."

Established in 1999, Essential Healthcare Solutions is the UK's leading support surface specialist. The company was honoured with the Queen's Award for Enterprise, for Innovation, across its Trezzo™ HS pressure area care support surfaces range.

"On average we grow top-line revenue between 20 and 30 per cent while the bottom line is between £200,000 to £250,000 year on year," says Owens.

While the firm grew 5 per cent last year, Owens expects a considerable rise of between 40 and 70 per cent next year. The company recently moved to a new Leeds head office and has faced considerable supply chain issues.

But as Owens explains, preparations have been made to overcome the challenges. "One of the challenges is NHS long-term contracts that we are tendering for at the moment.

"We feel well-positioned for them but they seem to be jamming and almost frozen. We're talking about £20m to £30m of contract value to the business.

"Outside of that, the long list of challenges these past few years goes on."

As Owens reiterates, raw material problems, longer lead times, shipping container issues and Brexit have all been getting in the way.

"What we did in response though was make a conscious decision to forward-purchase a lot of stock and raw material," he adds.

"We started carrying between £1m to £1.5m more worth of stock value than we normally would. It clearly has knock-on effects like tying cash up. But we do that because 75 per cent of our business is contracted revenue business.

"During the pandemic what seemed to happen is that suppliers were letting their contracted customers down. It meant new customers came to us.

"So, while our approach has been a cash-heavy process, it is enabling us to nibble away at new accounts but also make sure that we service our current contracted accounts exceptionally well."

manufacturer of rugby training equipment. It supplies a range of foam-based products from tackle bags and contact shields to post protectors and pitch kits.

While blue-chip customers include Gilbert, Life Fitness, Decathlon and Manchester United, GNG Sport is becoming well-known within the fast-growing fitness industry, manufacturing punch bags and exercise mats alongside other products.

Whittell adds: "Our sports and safety divisions are setting new boundaries in the fields of fitness and training equipment, working with companies such as Escape Fitness and Decathlon as well as producing rugby equipment for brand leaders including Gilbert and Rhino.

"We also see major recruitment and training of local staff as a key strategy, and our investment in larger premises is crucial to our ability to supply fast-growing new business. We aim to continue to be a great success story for the region, and look forward to many years of growth."

Making it in America with Neo G

Neo G's push is to stay on the cutting edge of the industry and consistently produce new orthopaedic solutions.

It is the best-selling manufacturer of medical-grade orthopaedic supports in the UK.

In its strategic report for the financial year ending July 31, 2021, Neo G said turnover remained constant in the year, and that while wholesale turnover in the UK was impacted by Covid-19, any impact was mitigated by an increase in new customer business in the US.

The orthopaedic support manufacturer has since appointed a new chief executive and moved its 35 staff into a fully refurbished office in Harrogate.


Dan Jones

Neo G founder Paul Starkey has now become chairman. He has since predicted that under the leadership of Dan Jones, the company will go on to reach new heights.

International pharmaceutical retailers including the likes of Boots, Tesco, Walgreens and CVS are now demanding Neo G's products. So much so that the brand is the fastest growing within the muscle supports devices category in the US.

Driven by nationwide distribution in CVS, Rite Aid and Walgreens, further US growth is expected.

A total of 30 jobs will also be created over the next few years to support further anticipated growth both in the UK and across Europe.

To enter your company in the Made in Yorkshire Awards go to: www.insidermedia.com/events/region/yorkshire