

Helping to close the gap

Emerging technologies are just one of several factors disrupting today's world of work. **Alex Bell** asks Yorkshire's employers and trainers how they are closing skills gaps to ensure tomorrow's workforce is fit for purpose

The 2020s have become the decade of development for employees and employers alike – in terms of skills and career progression that is.

According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2023, employers believe 44 per cent of workers' core skills are expected to change in the next five years – and that six in ten staff members will require training before 2027. Green transition, technologies and economic outlook were named as the three key job drivers in the report.

Supporting local learners

The Yorkshire & Humber Institute of Technology (YHloT) was founded in 2019 and is a partnership between education institutions and employers across the region.

It is one of the 12 original Institutes of Technology (IoTs) which were developed by the Department for Education – and the network has rapidly grown, now having 21 regional IoTs across the country.

Through its seven college partners, the YHloT now runs around 130 courses from Level 3 to Level 6, mostly in the agriculture, construction and engineering, and digital sectors. Around 1,200 students graduated from IoT courses in its first four years and the current cohort of students is around 1,600.

The YHloT's mission is to help the region's businesses access employees with the skills they need to succeed. But how does it approach which courses and industry pathways it makes available to learners?

Mark Gibson, director of the YHloT, says: "When the first wave of IoTs were established in 2019 [the YHloT being in that first wave], capital funding was provided by central government for IoTs to invest in providing new technology-focused education facilities and resources through regional FE [further education] college partners.

"By providing such facilities, and through consultation with regional businesses, our FE and university partners, as well as other interested parties, the partnership was able to identify prevalent sectors in our region – agriculture, construction and engineering and digital – and new courses, or existing courses, within those sectors where the

"By investing in advanced technologies, we believe the region can become a hub for innovation."

Mark Gibson
The YHloT

student experience would benefit considerably from the use of such facilities.

"This 'added value' is really what differentiates an IoT course. A course does not need to be out-and-out technology-focused to benefit from this 'added value' but may have a strong technical element that benefits from those facilities."

The speed at which technology advances is a challenge for us all, according to Gibson, but it is especially challenging in education.

"A key strategic focus for the YHloT is to continue to build and maintain close relationships with regional businesses and to bring their expertise into the learning environment through not only a direct influence on the curriculum but also through collaborative projects, events, work experience and additional resources," he adds.

"This helps us, with our college partners, to identify those courses to which the IoT can add value through these collaborations which again differentiates an IoT course from any other. Although the YHloT focuses mainly on Level 4 and 5 learning it is not restricted to this and certainly, a key challenge to business is not only attracting a new workforce with industry relevant training, but also to maintain the technological skills of the current workforce."

In this respect, as Gibson points out, this is an area that the YHloT will focus more on in the coming years in developing more modular and hybrid-type courses.

He adds: "Essentially, it's through our close collaborative relationships that we

Youngsters at the YHloT





understand regional skills needs and add value to the different pathways learners can take into high-skilled, well-paid, in-demand careers with our regional industries and therefore support the economic growth of the region."

Yorkshire expansion for Aptus

Aptus is a leading multi-utility company offering solutions for residential, commercial and industrial developments.

People director Natasha Clarke says the company's Yorkshire depot has grown significantly since launching almost five years ago. "A big focus at Aptus is our academy which is all of our colleagues who are working through a training and development plan or apprentices," she says.

"Our academy meets once a quarter where we run a workshop session which might include problem solving, communication skills and a speaker. Our last speaker did a session on AI which was very well received."

On training programmes, Clarke says: "Staff on training development plans are in five days a week. We do that because they learn a lot by being in the office, shadowing people. And it works. We've had 75 apprentices since we started trading and the

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majority have stayed with us for some time after their apprenticeship. We very much see the training and development scheme as a way to grow new people in the business."

JTL's flagship facility

In October, one of the UK's leading apprenticeship providers in the building services engineering sector launched a new training centre in Wath upon Derne.

JTL's newest and largest hub – a £2m investment – will focus on training in 'green' technologies and electrical apprenticeships.

Sir John Low, chair of the JTL board, says: "The opening of our South Yorkshire Training Centre marks an exciting milestone for JTL as we continue to expand our network of facilities to meet local, regional and national skills needs.

"This new centre will help to equip young people in the South Yorkshire area with the practical, hands-on experience necessary to succeed in the building services industry, particularly as we move towards a greener economy.

"We are thrilled to contribute to both the local community and the wider national agenda for skills development and net-zero commitments."

JTL has centres in South Yorkshire, Hull and York, training 1,800 apprentices in partnership with 1,200 employers.

John Healey MP, who represents the local Rawmarsh and Conisbrough constituency, says: "I am delighted JTL has chosen Wath as the home of its new South Yorkshire training centre for apprentices to learn their trade. The centre has already created 17 jobs locally through new tutors, administrators and supervisors and plans are in place to train almost 100 new electrical apprentices from across the borough with an expansion into plumbing courses in the near future."

Revolutionising manufacturing

"Historically, Yorkshire and the Humber has been a key manufacturing region in the UK," says the YHIoT's Gibson. "By investing in advanced technologies and workforce development, we believe the region can become a hub for innovation in sustainable manufacturing and can contribute to stimulating national growth.

"To be competitive, manufacturers need to invest in technology and skills such as digital manufacturing, robotics, data analytics, prompt engineering and smart production systems. Technological advancements like automation and AI are making it more feasible for manufacturers to bring production back to the UK, rather than relying on overseas suppliers.

"The YHIoT supports this shift, which could reduce the UK's dependence on global supply chains and enhance the country's industrial resilience. Reshoring would not only create more domestic jobs but also foster innovation within the UK's borders, reinforcing its position as a global leader in advanced manufacturing."

Gibson points out that by collaborating with SMEs and large manufacturers in the region through research, innovation and a skilled workforce, the YHIoT is committed to addressing the skills gap that exists in the UK manufacturing sector by offering learning that is reflective of these new processes.

"At the YHIoT we recognise the transformative potential of technological advancements in the manufacturing industry, especially in such areas as automation, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things and Big Data, and additive manufacturing [3D printing]," he says.

"We believe the sector is poised for significant change, and through the integration of new technologies, the UK – particularly regions like Yorkshire and the Humber – can reclaim its position as a global manufacturing powerhouse."