



Skills for Life Quality Initiative

Mercia Partnership: Leading Skills for Life in Work-based Learning

Mercia Partnership provides training from three sites in Greater Merseyside. It was set up in 1995 by co-directors whose previous experience in regeneration and further education had left them frustrated by the skills barriers that prevented local people from taking up new employment opportunities. Economic development initiatives were attracting firms into deprived areas but poor literacy, numeracy and IT skills made the immediate workforce a poor fit for the new jobs. The directors firmly believed that they could make a difference where the existing agencies were failing to meet local needs. Mercia Partnership now prepares local jobless people for work and extends the skills and opportunities of those already employed in a range of companies.

Strategy and ethos

The company aims to move people into work or better jobs. It models that purpose in its own practice: most current staff were out of work when they were recruited and three quarters first joined the company as learners. This gives a special impetus to the learner-centred ethos that drives Mercia's values and practice. There is a strong sense of teamwork and a shared determination to get the job done. Staff work very flexibly to ensure that common goals are met and to keep company performance high. The company has a high level of openness and involvement in decision making. A recent IIP report highlighted shared ownership and responsibility as particularly strong within the company culture¹.

Mercia continues to see poor generic skills as the main obstacle to employment. Having begun as an ICT provider, it retains this focus through its apprenticeship programmes but has become increasingly involved with *Skills for Life*. The Managing Director, Andrew Taylor, explains that the initial work on literacy and numeracy aimed to help tackle poor NVQ outcomes but says 'we didn't anticipate the bonus effects.' His experience suggests demands for *Skills for Life*



Managing Director, Andrew Taylor

development are widespread and many companies are waking up to those needs in their workforce. Not many people are flexible enough to meet employer needs, he claims, but 'you're on to a winner if you are.'

In the last year over 1100 learners have gained level 1 or 2 qualifications in literacy or numeracy. Most have benefited from the National Tests Scheme² delivered at their workplace. Successful literacy and numeracy practice has also supported key skill success. Having achieved a 62% framework success rate on their own apprenticeship programme, the company has now won a contract to deliver the key skill component of the Jarvis apprentice scheme.

Mercia has recently been awarded the local Offender Learning and Skills Service contract delivering in HMP Liverpool and Walton, the biggest prison in Europe, and to community-based offenders in partnership with the Probation Service. *Skills for Life* is recognised as central to offender learning. This contract has doubled the company's workforce, with existing prison staff transferring under TUPE, to around 80.

¹ IIP Report extract
² Website extract

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Mercia believes that training providers are playing an increasingly important role in the *Skills for Life* strategy and is keen to break down some narrow conceptions of work-based learning. It was the first non-FE provider to join the Merseyside Working Together Group for *Skills for Life* and the first non-FE participant on the senior leadership programme delivered by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership. Mercia juggles the usual contractual uncertainties and varied income streams managed by WBL providers. The funding for its Call Centre Development programme dried up shortly after ALI had judged it outstanding and commended the model for embedded skills. In this climate, the directors describe aspects of planning as 'an act of faith'. A rigorous focus on quality and an alertness to new opportunities have enabled Mercia to flourish and to grow several areas of new work. The company was particularly glad to be awarded an LSC FE contract in addition to its Workforce Development, WBL and Learndirect contracts. The Three Year Development Plan commits it to substantial development of the *Skills for Life* offer.

The organisation is committed to distributed leadership and has a relatively flat structure³. Staff enjoy the varied responsibilities they take on to meet the changing needs of learners and customers and enable the company to respond quickly to new demands. Tutors provide information and guidance to individual learners, employers and community organisations as well as delivering the programmes. The company believes that administrative support is as valuable as teaching and some staff undertake both roles. All staff are kept closely involved with company developments and attend weekly management and/or team meetings. These meetings follow a four-weekly cycle focusing on operations, performance against target, operations and finance/administration. Each year the company adopts an improvement theme: the current theme of growth was preceded by quality, equality, marketing and management information.

Delivering Skills for Life

Mercia has a strong focus on professional development: all tutors are required to gain 12 Learning and Development units at level 4. They are also expected to achieve level 2 literacy and

numeracy qualifications if they do not already hold these. The directors led the way by undertaking diagnostic assessment, acknowledging areas in which they needed a skills boost and gaining accreditation. Managers understand exactly what they are asking staff to do; tutors understand exactly what they are asking learners to do. The whole company has now been assessed and upskilled according to individual need.

Andrew Taylor describes *Skills for Life* practitioners as 'like gold dust'. They have the right attitude and believe in what they're doing. Investment in the skills of these colleagues is seen as very worthwhile and the company has made good use of the *Skills for Life* specialist qualifications. One tutor has already achieved the level 4 Subject Specialist qualification and three others are working towards level 4 accreditation. The level 3 and level 2 programmes are delivered in-house. The strong commitment to staff development supports the progress from learner to teacher. Billy Young, for example, was a bus driver who accompanied his mother to her IT course while recovering from an accident. He never left, progressing from IT learner to tutor and subsequently to numeracy teacher. Billy's success in getting local parents a level 2 qualification, through a six-week numeracy programme based at their children's school, recently featured in the Liverpool Echo⁴.

The workforce development programme has successfully enabled a range of local public and private sector employers⁵ to support their staff to gain national qualifications in literacy and numeracy. There are two marketing officers who promote *Skills for Life* training and also act as tutors. Sandra Birchall, one of the marketing officers, told us that this combination of experience works very well. 'I know I can sell *Skills for Life*,' she told us, 'because I believe in the programme.' The marketing officers negotiate a pattern of delivery that fits the particular company's need. The programme is generally delivered over ten weeks but Mercia offers intensive evening or early hours learning and can include breaks in delivery as required to meet employer needs. The offer is customised to reflect particular job demands – accident report writing at the docks, incident report writing at the youth offender institution, caredex

³ Organisation chart

⁴ Liverpool Echo article

⁵ List of current workforce development programme sites

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reports at nursing homes – but the company finds most employers have common skill development needs. The commitment to immediate and flexible delivery is more important in hooking employers in. Most recent contracts have seen a month or less between the initial exploratory meeting and the start of delivery. According to Sally Taylor, company director, the promotion strategy is very direct. The company does not employ highly sophisticated training needs analysis tools. They go in asking, ‘Why don’t you employ local people, what’s your problem?’ When the skills gap is explained, Mercia provides the solution.

All *Skills for Life* programmes are underpinned by initial and diagnostic assessment and the agreed plan of work is regularly reviewed and updated every four or five weeks. Each learner’s comprehensive Personal Development Record is available to tutors and copied for the learner. There are three main strands of *Skills for Life* delivery: workplace delivery, community outreach and key skill learning for apprentices. Learndirect programmes and a small number of discrete courses, including one for people with learning difficulties, are offered at company premises but most community courses take place in outreach locations. Partnerships with organisations like Sure Start engage new learners and delivery is organised to fit particular needs.

Mercia teams take learning to their learners. A community outreach tutor’s mobile toolkit usually includes laptops, Basic and Key Skill Builder workbooks and some in-house resources contextualised to the group. Workplace delivery is organised in much the same way although tutors will also ensure that learners work with authentic job tasks and materials. The apprentice programmes are frontloaded and young people build their skills at Mercia before moving on to placement. Assessment and progress review then take place on the job with a usual day each week back in the academy for development and review.

All learners have the opportunity to gain recognised *Skills for Life* qualifications and there are store voucher rewards for those who achieve: the company currently has a £20 000 budget to support its incentive scheme. Monthly award presentations are also used

to celebrate and reinforce learner achievement. Over 60% of those who start on apprenticeship programmes achieve the full framework. Over 80% of those learners who set out to achieve a recognised *Skills for Life* qualification are successful. Many use these qualifications to progress into employment or promoted roles at work. In the Army, for example, there is a direct link between literacy and numeracy success at levels 1 or 2 and opportunities for promotion. Of the soldiers supported by Mercia tutors, 83% have gained their literacy qualifications and 92% their numeracy qualifications. All learning is customised to the target group but effective practice is shared across all the areas of *Skills for Life* delivery. Sharing is coordinated by Paul Carden, the *Skills for Life* Team Leader, who has a clear overview and acts as a consultant and mentor to all the delivery teams.



Skills for Life Team Leader Paul Carden

Quality improvement

There is a very strong focus on quality⁶ and all staff are fully involved in ongoing quality processes. These are designed to be easy to understand, systematic and rigorous. They must be seen to really make a difference. However well designed, the quality system wouldn’t work, Andrew Taylor insists, unless people in the service teams really want to do it. The organisational culture has to help people to understand the impact of quality processes on the learner experience and their personal contribution to improving that experience. Learner feedback is collected regularly, probed through focus groups and examined at every team review.

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The annual cycle of activities⁷ is clearly publicised throughout the premises, including the toilets. There is a well-structured and systematic programme of quality audits and the administrative team play a critical quality role. In checking the programme files and personal development records⁸, they have been trained to assess value as well as compliance. There are monthly data reports allowing all staff to assess performance against target. Every tutor is observed⁹ every two months. Although no grade is given the observer takes a copy of the previous feedback report and expects to see development in the areas recommended for improvement. The observation records inform the staff appraisal process¹⁰. Each area of learning selects a representative to join the Quality Group which meets monthly and reports to the management team.

Every programme has a formal three-monthly review¹¹ which involves all the relevant staff – teaching, technical or administrative – and is chaired by one of the directors. Performance is evaluated against outcomes and feedback received from learners and employers¹². The review is also an opportunity to look at programme resources and to consider opportunities and options for development. There is a rigorous focus on learner need and a refusal to continue with practice that fails to make sense to or benefit learners. While the company aims for an open, no-blame approach to problems, everyone is expected to be alert to areas needing improvement. Failing to notice or acknowledge difficulties is seen as cheating the learners.

Performance targets are set for equality and diversity as well as overall learner outcomes. Mercia has been particularly successful in attracting young women onto the IT Professional Practitioner apprenticeship programme. The programme is promoted through schools, Connexions and conventional channels but the company has also secured high-profile publicity by persuading a Hollyoaks star, Helen Noble, to visit and add her endorsement. The company recognises the importance of the staff team to diverse recruitment and to modelling success for learners. Over 70% of staff are themselves living locally in deprived wards, and 80% of team leaders are female.

The company's success in growing its own staff supports this profile. The company invests in the development of its teams and has high expectations of each person's contribution to its success.

Future focus

The directors attribute much of Mercia's success to a keen sensitivity to changing strategic priorities, both locally and nationally: 'We always try to read the horizon early on'. Partnership and strong involvement with local delivery networks help this process. Despite its position as a leading national provider, Mercia remains keen to learn from practice elsewhere. 'I don't think we come out of anywhere without a few tips,' explained Sally Taylor.

The OLASS contract presents an immediate challenge for the company, which needs to extend its positive organisational culture into an unfamiliar setting where much of its practice is new and alien. There is a well-developed approach to change management which includes the identification of change agents, a transparent process supporting clear standards and expectations of staff and the speedy demonstration of tangible impact. The company has to demonstrate to new colleagues that it operates fairly, listens and does what it says it will do. The directors began the transition by making sure that they were on hand and that one of them went into each of the 23 prison classrooms every day. They met regularly with teams at lunchtime and introduced a structured system of evaluations. They have begun to see a shift in attitudes and have created an organisational development post to further support the change process.

The main improvement strategy, however, is simply being there, meeting with learners and teachers and prompting discussion by asking, 'How can we make it better?' The company starts by wanting to make a difference and to be really good. The company believes that if you fully understand the needs of your learners and you have thoroughly researched best practice, then you have a clear way forward. These founding beliefs have enabled Mercia to become a leading *Skills for Life* provider with ambitious plans for the future of the organisation and its learners.

7 Quality calendar
8 Learner file checklist
9 Observation Report
11 Programme review
12 Employer feedback report