

Education & Training - Chris Hall, Chief Executive, Hallmark Consumer Services

There have been lots of surveys done about what local businesses most want improved. Perhaps number 1 is education and training.

When it comes to talking about education and training I could be wearing any one of three quite different hats.

I run a company called Hallmark Consumer Service- a logistics company that relies on the quality of my staff.

I'm Chair of Brooksby Melton College

And I'm on the Leicestershire Board of the Learning & Skills Council.

But today I'm going to share with you my thoughts on the challenge I have in finding the calibre of employees that my company needs to keep ahead of the game.

As a county that has seen a dramatic turn from being a manufacturing city to service led economy, its no surprise that education & training is such a hot potato.

We've been talking about it for years I know, but we still have a relatively low skilled workforce in Leicestershire. As a manufacturing biased county, cheap labour was once a benefit. But as you may know, employment across the county is heavily biased towards the service sectors. Clearly a lower skilled workforce is bad news. This inevitably has a knock-on effect in the ability for these sectors to compete nationally and internationally. The value of services is based primarily on the level of skills provided by the people giving the service.

I run a logistics company. The success of my company is hinged quite simply on the skills of my employees- their basic levels of education, their attitudes, their ability to learn specialist skills or knowledge. We have to match our skills in a global market

Although our own difficulties in finding people are based primarily around IT, the main problems I find are broader education ones. Like many of you I'm sure, I suffer in disbelief at the basics levels of numeracy and literacy.

For instance, we have a small call centre. Once our requirements were focused primarily on good telephone communications. Now we have to respond back via email. This requires a reasonable standard of English written skills. A lot of new IT systems have broadened the skill requirements of many jobs. I now need my fork lift truck drivers to be able to use a stock control database as well as add up the number of boxes on lorry delivery. My pick and pack teams now need to use scanners, keyboards and printers.

Schools and colleges must be in tune with typical employment applications of numeracy and literacy.

I do give the government a lot of credit in trying to help us. The Learning & Skills Council's Train to Gain scheme is trying to help by providing employers with expert advice on how and where to train staff to increase productivity. This Skills brokering scheme and the ability to source funding is helping many companies move with the times and is helping to motivate employees too in raising their employment value. Many are using the scheme to provide their staff external training for the first time. But many companies still struggle to find out what's out there. If they have to struggle, the chances are that they won't bother.

The problem is that education and training establishments generally already think they know what companies need. I sit on various committees and get frustrated by peoples' inability to imagine what its like to run a company. They get angry because employers are not taking up what's on offer and in some quarters believing that we should be taxed for not doing so.

How many of you have ever really been consulted about what you need?

So your average business is thinking, where to I get the best return back on my investment. Do I invest in new capital and machinery? New people? New IT systems? New people? Or training?

Businesses aren't stupid. If colleges don't sell the benefits, then employers won't see the point. Why should they take the risk? If somebody tries to sell me a new fork lift truck or a new IT system they point out the features and sell me the benefits.

So a plea to colleges, if you think you've got courses that companies want, then get in people who can sell them, and get out there and make companies think its worthwhile.

If colleges don't know if they've got a good product or not, then maybe they should get out and talk to employers more about what they need.

Its something businesses take for granted.

And remember, business people, especially when they're at the coal face, just don't have the time to search. Give us some tools we can use to find what we need.

Universities too are not building visible enough bridges to draw us in to higher level training. Nor are their vocational based courses adequately considering the skills that employers want.

We've just been trying to recruit a graduate for IT. Most of the applicants had really esoteric IT skills- but I needed someone with a broad range of skills with a general passion to learn. One young lady told me that she wanted a job where she could get a buzz out of improving the performance of a businesses through the use of IT. Manner from heaven – she was hired instantly.

Even though we should not feel that we somehow have a right to expect graduates from our three universities to stay in Leicestershire, many do in fact want to. But courses are not usually linked in any way to local companies who might provide employment for them afterwards. It's a common complaint that many vocational based courses do little to provide the skills that employers are looking for.

But its not just about providing Leicestershire with world class skills the economy needs. We need people with the right attitude. The old adage "find me the attitude and I'll give them the skills" is all too true.

We need people who can deal with people- who can sell... who can motivate... who can manage others... who can build teams.

We need people who are aware of their responsibilities- not just their rights.

We need people who don't think profit is a dirty word... people who are fired up for success.

But if the people who teach don't share this attitude, then we have a problem.

As employers we have a role to play as well, we should give the colleges the time of day if they want to talk to us. We should think about work experience, how can we inspire young people from schools when they come into our business – let them sit with the MD or the sales director for the day not by the photocopying machine.

So we need to find ways to help education and training establishments help us. And they need to find ways to reach out and persuade us that maybe we live on the same planet.