

Jessica Twentyman reports that it's no secret that skills shortages have a crippling effect on the economy, but while some businesses are sitting on their laurels, others are being active and providing formal or on-the-job training for staff.

BETTER OUT OR IN?

EVERY DAY, AROUND 1.3 million people in the UK go to work without the skills they require to do their job well, according to government estimates. That undoubtedly affects the national economy - but a Skills for Business survey in 2006 of 1 3,000 employers, found that there are still significant barriers to putting the situation right.

The survey showed that over a third of small and medium-sized enterprises don't provide training for their staff. Almost half were deterred by costs and a greater proportion believed that training would disrupt day-to-day operations.

Mark Yates, company secretary of Yorkshire-based Kershaws Garden Centre, has found a way round that problem. Training at the company is provided by an outside specialist, Enterprise Solutions Training, and takes place on the firm's own premises, at times that avoid busy trading periods.

"It's very helpful that training can be done onsite," says Yates. "It makes it more relevant to the job staff are doing and it doesn't take them away from the garden centre."

Staff have worked towards an NVQ level 2 in customer service, while fulfilling their daily duties. "If something unexpected happens or someone has a query while our employees are training, we can still get hold of them and it doesn't affect the smooth running of our business," says Yates.

He says that working towards - the qualification has not only given employees the knowledge and skills to do their jobs better, but has also increased their motivation and confidence. "We'll definitely do more training in the future," he adds.

Other companies favour a "blended" approach that involves on-the-job and formal training. At leicester-based firm Walkers Midshire Foods, for example, HR manager Tracey Billingham believes that, when it comes to training, employees benefit from being out of the working environment at least some of the time.

"We've been helping some employees to move up to team leader and a two-day residential course is a vital part of the training," she explains. "By taking those employees off-site, we can be sure they won't be distracted by issues that arise in the business. It's a more efficient way of learning and developing new skills," she says.

Working with tutors *from* Leicester College, the company has been able to design a programme that exactly fits its needs. It has also enabled employees to tap into external sources of ideas and best-practice management.

The programme also involves some on-the-job training. "Everyone on the course works with a tutor on an individual project looking at ways that improvements could be made within our business," explains Billingham. "These have looked at everything *from* the protective equipment that we use to the way we handle shift changeovers." Some of the ideas generated by trainees, she adds, have even been implemented by the company, saving it approximately £25,000.

When it comes to training, the approach needs to be as individual as the company itself. But the evidence suggests that a blended approach is the recipe for success. In a recent study conducted by the Learning and Skills Council, 71 per cent of employees agreed that on-the-job training delivers the skills they need for their career, and 62 per cent stated that they have benefited most of all *from* a mixture of formal and on-the-job training.

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