

Business Briefing

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World Class Skills Vision Unveiled

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has set itself an ambitious target. Its vision is that by 2010, young people and adults in England have knowledge and skills matching the best in the world and are part of a truly competitive workforce.



Verity Bullough

The LSC East Midlands' regional director, Verity Bullough is clear about the organisation's purpose – to create the skilled workforce necessary to help businesses flourish in today's internationally competitive market.

She said: "Skills are one of the five drivers of economic prosperity and we work with young people, adults, and employers alike –

investing in high-quality, post-16 education and training in order to stimulate a transformation in the region's skills agenda.

"We have addressed the recommendations of the Leitch Review which, along with setting out a blueprint for post-19 skills, urges a radical step change in order to maximize growth, productivity and social justice. Lord Leitch's challenge, to make the UK a world leader in skills by 2020, has been accepted by the Government and has also gained the support of the CBI. Although the region's overall employment rate is well above the national average, productivity levels remain below it.

The region is described as low skills, low waged equilibrium, exposing the region to international competition, low-cost imports and technological change.

"For employers, a more highly skilled workforce is a route to achieving higher productivity and greater competitiveness and profitability. Forecasts show a continuing shortage in the number of young people entering the workforce, too few to fill the vacancies in more highly skilled occupations caused by those retiring and leaving. These trends serve to highlight the vital role all employers have in arranging and funding training and also in identifying skills gaps and employee development needs.

"In 2005, East Midlands' employers spent almost £2.5 billion on training but only a small proportion was directed towards NVQs or other national qualifications. Meanwhile, high proportions of the workforce are in lower skilled occupations, leaving the region less able to cope effectively with changes in skill requirements and leaving individuals exposed to unemployment."

She explained: "We have set out a strategy which is very firmly geared towards tackling these issues head on. Through a portfolio of services and initiatives our clear aim is to help develop the skill levels of the current and future workforce. We are attempting to stimulate business demand for skills and improve the skills supply through matching skills provision to employer demands."

For further information visit

<http://inourhands.lsc.gov.uk/> or call 0800 011 3030

The Skills Agenda – As Defined by Leitch

A less than rosy picture was painted when the Government asked Lord Sandy Leitch to undertake an independent review of the UK's long term skills needs.



His findings showed the need to urgently raise skill achievements at all levels and he warned that even if current targets were met, skills in the UK would still lag behind comparable countries in 2020.

His report said: "Without increased skills, we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a weaker future for all. The case for action is compelling and urgent."

Included amongst his findings were the following:

- the UK has a serious legacy of low skills, is deficient at intermediate and technical levels and also likely to fall behind at degree level and above
- those with the lowest skill levels are least likely to receive work-based training

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The Skills Pledge - Don't Get Left Behind

Calling all East Midlands employers – if you haven't made the Skills Pledge, it's time to get involved and join the skills revolution.

That's the message from LSC East Midlands chairman, John Kirkland OBE, who says that skills will be the currency of economic success in the global market of the future.

He has highlighted the need to ensure that the UK has a skills base to compete with the best in the world. And he says that there is a top-level consensus that equipping the nation with world-class skills is a key issue for the country.

He said in order to do this, employers and providers need to work closer together to create a more flexible system, responsive to the needs of businesses.

"In my opinion, we now have a better chance than ever to build this new partnership and we have a great deal of progress on which to build. We have more young people in learning than ever before, our Apprenticeship success rates are now on a par with Germany and Train to Gain has already helped over 50,000 employers to develop their business," he said.

John's comments are echoed by Sir Digby Jones, a former director general of the CBI, who said of companies making the pledge: "By taking this step, you are showing other employers that by investing in the skills of your people you are investing in your business."

Minister for trade promotion, Sir Digby Jones, has warmly congratulated all employers making the pledge.

Tesco signed the pledge at the CBI summit and hundreds of other employers have also signed up the pledge, including many from the East Midlands.



John Kirkland OBE

The Skills Pledge is a voluntary commitment by the leadership of a company to support all its employees to develop their basic skills and work towards a relevant valuable qualification to at least level 2.

The lead-up to signing the pledge consists of four stages and the employer is supported throughout by the LSC's national employer service and/or skills brokers. Among the first organisations with presence in the East Midlands to make the Skills Pledge were: Center Parcs, Paramount Hotels, Lincolnshire publishing firm, Mortons and the East Midlands Development Agency.

Mortons of Horncastle, which produces magazines, newspapers and niche market titles, has signed up to the pledge to ensure that employees develop basic literacy and numeracy skills and work towards a full Level 2 qualification (equivalent to five GCSEs A* to C grade passes).

Like other employers committing to the Skills Pledge, the company will have access to a skills broker, part of the LSC's Train to Gain service, through whom they can access free literacy and numeracy and first full Level 2 qualifications and Leadership and Management to Level 3.



Center Parcs Links Staff Retention with Training

Center Parcs – one of the first employers in the East Midlands to sign up to the Skills Pledge – knows from experience that training leads to higher retention figures and happy, productive staff.

"Training keeps our staff motivated and is the key to retaining good people," commented HR manager Judi Leavor. "We have seen a tangible link between retention and training."

The company, whose head office is in Newark, employs 6,200 staff and runs four holiday villages in the UK. "We are already committed to developing our people and currently have around 150 employees working towards a Level 2 qualification," Judi said.

Organisations signing the Skills Pledge commit to support their employees to work towards relevant, valuable qualifications to at least Level 2 (the equivalent of five GCSEs at A*-C grade) and develop their numeracy and literacy skills.

"Very proud" to be the first company in the region to sign up, Center Parcs' efforts in developing its people have been recognised through a number of awards including Investors in People and Hospitality Assured accreditation, and the Nottinghamshire Stars Awards for 'Team of the Year'. In 2006 the company won two awards for Individual Excellence in Customer Service and Best Ambassador for the Industry.

New employees are able to find out more about Center Parcs through its newly launched training website or by spending a day in a village and experiencing what it's like to be a guest. The organisation also runs an annual management development scheme – a 12-month Manager in Training programme providing a clear route for career progression. Successful applicants are supported by mentors and undertake on-job activities to demonstrate their learning.

How to Take the Pledge

Research shows that one of the keys to a productive, successful business is having a skilled and competent workforce. The Skills Pledge is an opportunity for the leaders of a business or organisation to publicly demonstrate the importance they place on investing in the skills of their people.

Open to all employers of all sizes in the private, public and voluntary sectors, the pledge is a corporate commitment made by a senior director covering the whole company/organisation.

The Pledge is not a contractual commitment. It is not legally binding on the company/organisation or confer any additional legal rights or status on an individual. It does not affect employment contracts. Its value is as a signal of voluntary commitment and partnership between management and employees to develop staff skills and so support the success of the organisation.

Taking the pledge couldn't be easier. When a company or organisation registers its intention, it will be able to access the support and advice of a skills broker. There is a national network of skills brokers across England, managed and funded by the LSC. They will work with you to understand your business priorities, help you identify your skills needs, and work with you to design a training package that will best meet those needs.

Some companies have done this by drawing up a separate action plan for training to deliver the Skills Pledge. Others have integrated this work into their normal business planning process. It is for each company or organisation to decide how to take the process forward. The skills broker will identify sources of public funding that are available from across government, and help to identify the best suppliers of training.

The LSC has prepared a general form of words which is the minimum commitment. This can be downloaded from the Skills Pledge web site: www.traintogain.gov.uk/skillspledge

For more information, call 0800 015 55 45
www.traintogain.gov.uk/skillspledge/

Just what the Doctor Ordered

A company 'doctor' who spends most of his time helping to give companies a new lease of life has come up with the perfect remedy for a skills shortage – training and jobs for the unemployed.



Frank Lord

Frank Lord, chair of the Employment and Skills Board, in the Alliance sub region of North Nottinghamshire and North Derbyshire, has helped to secure training and jobs for a project on the King's Mill Hospital in Mansfield.

Employment and Skills Boards are led by employers whose role it is to engage fellow employers, articulate labour market needs, scrutinise local services and recommend improvements in integrating the labour market and training support.

Frank has received national recognition for his contribution to employee development and business excellence through a series of awards, including the first motor industry retailer approved an NVQ centre and the first pilot for the Investors in People Star project. He has also helped build many successful businesses and contributed to many others, based on his passion for and belief in people development, serving on 14 public and voluntary sector boards and 11 private sector boards.

Frank said: "Employment and Skills Boards give employers the opportunity to feed through current, live information on what is happening to their organisation in relation to recruiting and retaining skilled staff. This can be in relation to young people coming into the workplace for the first time, graduates or adults who are returning to work. We are increasingly feeding messages from local employers through to the suppliers of education and training, be that on forthcoming 14-19 diplomas, apprenticeships or Train to Gain and what employers see are the real issues of having an appropriately skilled workforce."

He added: "The sub region continues to suffer from the legacy of the former coalfields with large numbers of local residents claiming benefits such as Incapacity Benefit, so we are focusing our attention as an Employment and Skills Board on getting those people back into work through initiatives such as Making the Connection.

"Through this partnership approach, we support people to gain the skills needed and respond to employers' needs to get skilled staff, be they inward investors or local companies growing. We have already seen the benefit of this approach with Skanska who are redeveloping the King's Mill Hospital in Mansfield. Through the Making the Connection project they took a group of long term unemployed people through an initial training programme and then offered the majority of them roles on the site."

He continued: "The Employment and Skills Board is made up of partners from a range of local and regional employers, including private, public and the voluntary sectors. We have a strong representation from smaller employers which reflects the industrial and commercial profile of North Derbyshire and North Nottinghamshire alongside major public sector employers such as the NHS and local authorities. Membership also includes regeneration agencies, business support organisations, representatives for work based learning, further and higher education, the voluntary/community sector, Jobcentre Plus and the LSC."

If you would like more information about the North Nottinghamshire and North Derbyshire Employment and Skills Board, please contact Stef Stubbs by email: ssubbs@alliancessp.co.uk

Training Service Reports Major Success

An innovative training service to help employers has celebrated its first anniversary with hundreds of East Midlands firms signing up.

Train to Gain, a service from the LSC which helps businesses to get the training they need to succeed, is reporting first-class results.

More than 52,000 employers have already signed up, including 17,788 from the East Midlands – a figure which exceeds the targets set by the Government.

The latest figures reveal that nearly 230,000 employees have begun learning through Train to Gain, while almost 96,000 have already completed Level 2 qualifications. Top of the pile to sign up is the health and social work sector (19 per cent), followed by the wholesale and retail

sector (14 per cent), then real estate (12 per cent) and manufacturing (11 per cent).

The cornerstone of Train to Gain is a unique skills brokerage service that offers free, impartial advice and helps find the best training to meet business needs.

Tony Belmaga, LSC East Midlands Train to Gain director said: "The service aims to encourage all businesses to value and realise the benefits that learning and skills can bring and to invest appropriately. We expect that by the end of 2010, over 500,000 learners will have achieved first full Level 2 qualification through Train to Gain."

Secretary of state at the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills John Denham said recently: "If we are to succeed in today's competitive global market, we need to train. The Government has launched a skills campaign to encourage employers and individuals to take control of their future by investing in skills and Train to Gain is the easiest way for businesses to achieve this challenge."

Altogether, 450 Nottinghamshire firms, 200 Northamptonshire firms, 200 Lincolnshire firms, 560 Leicestershire firms and 500 Derbyshire firms have signed up to the Train to Gain service.



SEEING THE RESULTS



ways to improve and update their skills, particularly when it comes to operating mobile plant machinery."

Skills broker James Lund, said: "Brett Landscaping were obviously serious about training their staff as they had already had an external trainer on board, so they are a great example to other companies."



Motorbike mechanic revs up the training

From helping out part-time at motor mechanics Ray Hamblin Ltd in Gainsborough, Scott Townsend, 17, has been taken on as an apprentice through the Train to Gain service.

Scott has been working towards an NVQ Level 2 in Repair and Maintenance of Road Vehicles and hopes to go on to do Level 3. "I've always been interested in bikes and really wanted to be a motorbike mechanic," he said. "I'm really pleased to be able to do this training as it means I'll have a trade for life." Owner John Hamblin commented: "It's great for me as it means I've got someone to help out who will be properly trained up. It's also great for Scott as there are limited jobs in the area and this gives him a great opportunity."

Skills broker Jenny Stainton's research for a specialist motorcycle trainer led her to Carter and Carter in Ruddington, near Nottingham. Trainer Mark Gauld sends Scott an action plan to work towards and assesses him on visits to his workplace. "I visit Scott about every six weeks to assess him during his normal working day so we don't disrupt the normal work of the business," he explained.

Co-op staff train on the premises

Eight employees at Raunds Co-op near Wellingborough have started NVQ Level 2 in Retail and Business Administration. All the learning is delivered at the store at times to suit both the business and the learners.

Office manager Rachael Stevens said: "We are a small independent firm and don't have a huge budget so when we were told there was funding available, we thought 'great.' We wanted to encourage younger members of staff to improve their skills."

Train to Gain skills broker Matthew Croxon explained: "After an initial skills assessment, Leicester College put a package of training together to help employees to achieve nationally recognised qualifications in a range of roles across the store."

And Wendy Lomas from Leicester College pointed out: "The college's experience as a Centre of Vocational Excellence in Retail means that it is aware of the challenges facing retailers and the need for flexibility."

Recycling staff now working even greener

Nearly 90 employees with Nottingham City Council's waste management team are on their way to benefiting from Train to Gain and the NVQ in Recycling and Customer Care.

Domestic waste manager Jason Martyn said at the



team's Eastcroft depot that the service had helped build morale among staff. "Our staff are now more knowledgeable and customer focused. The service was tremendous and the teaching was fantastic."

"We're even on our way to meeting our 25 per cent recycling target for year ending 2007 – this training has certainly played a part with this. We have also had fewer customer complaints, thanks to an even higher level in customer service."

Staff member Ian Wilson commented: "I have enjoyed my time doing the NVQ. It has helped me become more customer-focused and I understand a lot more about recycling."

Neil Fowkes of South Nottingham College, which is contracted to deliver training under the Train to Gain service, pointed out: "It's been over 30 years since some employees have been in the classroom, so it's great that it's been treated with such enthusiasm and everyone has got so much out of it."

For further information visit www.traintogain.gov.uk or Call 0800 015 55 45 to arrange your meeting with a local skills broker.

Lovehearts Profits Rise Thanks to Training

A Derbyshire company that makes the famous Lovehearts sweets has seen profits soar by £60,000 thanks to Train to Gain.

New Mills-based sweet manufacturer, Swizzels Matlow, who produce cult favourites such as Parma Violets and Lovehearts, signed up for the service and has trained 450 of its 600 employees to NVQ Level 2 in Food and Drink.

And as a result, the firm says it has found more staff are staying put and there has been an increase in both productivity and efficiency. Tony Salt, training & development manager of Swizzels Matlow, said: "Staff training has proved to be extremely valuable for our company and I can't understand why any company wouldn't want to train their staff to the highest level possible."

"Since our training initiative started we have seen a dramatic reduction in the staff turnover resulting in an increase in both productivity and efficiency; in financial terms, this has helped to boost company profits by about £60,000 a year. It has not eaten into our production time either as the training is so flexible, essential for a business like ours. The University of Derby, Buxton provide an excellent course and that is key to us - the funding helps us but it isn't our only priority. The course gives staff the chance to learn about safe working practices and the specific safety standards for the industry. Then they get the chance to do optional units relevant to their role which they choose with their tutor."

Beverley Warhurst, an employee at Swizzels Matlow who has undertaken an NVQ Level 2 in Food and Drink said: "It is great to be able to get training for the job we do on a daily basis and get a qualification for our skills. It really helps to improve your confidence and skills. The company has always encouraged its staff to learn new skills and push themselves."

Chris Morrison, business development coordinator at The University of Derby, Buxton, said: "We've done an awful lot with Swizzels Matlow to make the training under the Train to Gain service work for them, meeting with managers of the organisation on a monthly basis, initially to tailor the course to the company's specific needs and then later as the course has developed to make training work around the shift patterns, which could be in the middle of the night or over weekends, and offer the flexibility to keep the production line running."

Employers Help Cut Crime in £1m+ Project

Employers in the East Midlands are helping to cut crime by signing up to a £1 million plus training and skills project to provide help for offenders.

A group of employers has signed up to nine projects in the region that has received more than £1 million from the Equal project which is funded by the Learning and Skills Council East Midlands and backed by the European Social Fund (ESF). This money has been used to support various initiatives and activities that encourage the employability and learning opportunities for ex-offenders, such as the employers of ex-offenders conference (see back page for details).

Jane Peacock at the LSC East Midlands said: "Getting and holding down a job is one of the key factors in reducing reoffending – and reducing re-offending benefits individuals, their children and families, the communities they live in and wider society."

Learning and skills to encourage offenders into employment was outlined in a Government green paper: Reducing Re-offending through Skills and Employment, published jointly by the Department for Education and Skills, the Home Office, and the Department for Work and Pensions.

Secretary of state for business, enterprise and regulatory reform, John Hutton, said: "Work is the best way to reduce re-offending. That is why we will be developing and testing new approaches to intensive work-focused support – and engaging employers in the design and delivery of the programmes – to help ex-offenders return to the labour market quickly and turn their back on crime."

If you would like more information about the Equal project and its outcomes, please contact Henry Kukiewicz at LSC East Midlands by email on: henry.kukiewicz@lsc.gov.uk or call: 07824 837735

Offenders on Track for Employment



The LSC has teamed up with Ranby Prison and Trackworks Ltd in an innovative partnership to help prepare offenders for work by delivering rail-based qualifications.

In an 11-week course at the prison, offenders are given the opportunity to achieve Personal Track Safety and Track Induction Course certificates, the NVQ Level 2 Permanent Way Renewals qualification and a number of stand alone qualifications for using power plant

equipment such as disc cutters and impact wrenches. Their training ends with a one-week employment course customised to the industry and delivered by the prison's Resettlement Department.

Sue Bance, head of learning and skills at Ranby, said: "The programme's success has been overwhelming and prisoners value, and take seriously, the opportunities they are being given. The qualifications they receive significantly enhance their prospects of getting work on their release." Applications by prisoners go through a rigorous risk assessment process, and those accepted on the course have to commit themselves to being drug and alcohol free. During the programme, prospective employers make presentations to potential applicants and also attend celebrations of achievement ceremonies.



Internal training makes the grade at British Bakeries

Training On View

Employers and senior trade unionists have seen at first-hand how the skills crisis in the Midlands is being tackled by local firms.

A delegation from the TUC together with Karen Woodward, the LSC's East Midlands' director of skills, recently visited Watnall-based British Bakeries and Beamlight Automotives in Eastwood to see how they are encouraging their workforces to get back into learning and gain GCSE-level and higher qualifications.

Simon Clarke, site manufacturing manager for British Bakeries said: "Here at the Nottingham site, we are keen to introduce National Vocational Qualifications into our internal training programmes as a way of improving the skills of our workforce and providing opportunities for personal development."

Karen Woodward said: "Learning in the workplace is an efficient and effective means of updating the skills."

Frances O'Grady, TUC deputy general secretary said: "Everyone in the East Midlands has to take skills more seriously to keep business competitive and protect jobs.

"We need more employers to follow the lead of British Bakeries and Beamlight Automotive and work with trade unions to up-skill their employees. Helping workers improve their skills gives them confidence to move forward in their lives and careers, and can encourage families and neighbours into learning too."

Apprentices Help Plug the Skills Gap

Recent success stories are showing that apprenticeships are coming back onto the business radar with a vengeance.



Karen Woodward

Karen Woodward, LSC East Midlands director of skills, said: "Apprenticeships focus on the whole job, not just individual skills and have big benefits for companies of all sizes. They are now becoming as popular as ever, with both employers and employees alike. Improved

productivity, motivated people, relevant training and a chance to avoid skills shortages are just some of the advantages and there is clear evidence to suggest that apprenticeships help companies to stay competitive by developing the kind of people that the business needs for the future."

The LSC, which manages Apprenticeships through its network of 47 offices, aims to match employers to local learning providers. The requirements of large businesses are met by the LSC's national employer service.

There are nearly 19,000 young people aged 16–24 in the East Midlands taking an apprenticeship. Over 200 apprenticeships are available across 80 industry sectors, from food and drink to recreation and travel.



Kelly Panks

Here we focus on the experiences of two of the region's award winning apprentices....

Engineering may be viewed as a predominately male dominated industry but 22-year-old Kelly Panks from Northamptonshire is helping to change all that. For Kelly from Irthingborough is doing an Advanced Apprenticeship in Maintenance Engineering. And Kelly's placement at Sarantel, a world-class manufacturer of miniature antennas at Wellingborough has

revealed the many facets of engineering and opened up new career opportunities.

Kelly said: "The Apprenticeship has given me the opportunity to develop a wide range of new skills, along with the opportunity to see many different areas of engineering. Thanks to my employer's support, I have also undertaken further engineering courses to give me a greater depth of knowledge across a number of different areas."

Kelly's achievements were recognised when she received the title of Northamptonshire 'Apprentice of the Year' – Advanced Apprenticeship category at the regional Apprenticeship Awards. Richard Darlow, a manager at Sarantel said: "During her apprenticeship Kelly has developed to be a huge asset to the company. She is working independently and even covering our shifts in her role as maintenance engineer.

"Kelly has always been totally committed to the apprenticeship and Sarantel has invested a lot of time and money into developing Kelly's career. We have been rewarded by Kelly becoming one of the company's brightest assets."

Meanwhile, sixteen year old George Matthews from Stamford in Lincolnshire recognised the need for both experience and qualifications in his chosen career – the motor industry. A student at Queen Eleanor Technology College in Stamford, George undertook a placement at Cooks, a locally-based, family owned VW retailer.

He said: "I have achieved a lot since I started my Apprenticeship, gaining invaluable hands-on skills in the workshop as well as the day-to-day running of a vehicle service department and my confidence has soared. My greatest achievement is receiving the accolade of Young Apprentice of the Year in recognition of the work I've done so far."

Daniel Walker, service manager, Cooks of Stamford said: "We have benefited from having George here as much as George has gained. He came to us as a shy and quite young man who would carry out anything asked of him. He has progressed to a level where he now seeks out the tasks to do for himself and completes them on time and to a high standard of work. It is a great pleasure having George with us and we wish him well for the future." George left school in June and secured a full-time Apprenticeship with Ford. He added: "I couldn't have achieved this without my invaluable work experience at Cooks and commitment to training. Eventually I would like to progress to the Advanced Apprenticeship in Motor Vehicle Engineering so I can make sure I'm at the top of my game."



George Matthews

STARTING EARLY

The link between employers and an apprentice can now start before students even leave school – as one group of switched-on Derbyshire students illustrates. The students, aged between 14 and 16, have started their second year on a high after notching up a 100 per cent pass rate in their first year.

All Young Engineering Apprentices from four Derbyshire schools – Mortimer Wilson, Swanwick Hall, Tibshelf and Selston Arts and Community College – have been attending a one-day-a-week course at NLT Training Services in Chesterfield as part of an innovative programme. The programme gives pupils the chance to gain practical experience in welding and fabrication, electrical engineering and mechanical engineering as well as work experience with a range of local engineering companies at the same time as studying for their GCSEs at school. NLT Training Services chief executive Steve Meadows explains: "The achievements of these Young Apprentices are truly outstanding. They have adapted so well to a work environment and have worked hard both on practical and theoretical subjects that they really do deserve their success."

James Williams, partnership manager at the LSC Derbyshire, said: "Engineering is a very rewarding and challenging sector for young people and these students now have a much better insight into the industry, as well as many of the skills that will be relevant to their working lives."

If you think your firm might be interested in taking on an apprentice, call 08000 150 400 for your free employer's pack. www.apprenticeships.org.uk

- skills gaps account for a fifth of the productivity gap with Germany and an eighth of the gap with France and these countries and other international competitors have ambitious strategies in place for further improvements on skills
- by 2020 nearly 20 million additional people will need higher skill levels than at present, ranging from basic skills to degree level
- we cannot depend on young people to solve the skills deficit in the immediate future as 'over 70 per cent of our 2020 workforce has already completed their compulsory education'
- much of the training provided by employers is informal and does not lead to nationally recognised qualifications – in total, only 11.5 per cent of employees were training towards a nationally recognised qualification and only 5.5 per cent were receiving training leading towards an NVQ.

The LSC...what's in it for employers

The Learning and Skills Council is dedicated to meeting the skills requirements of the economy at both the regional and national level.

Working closely with employers to enable them to develop their workforce skills, the organisation also offers individuals the chance to work their way up the career ladder – leading them towards better jobs and a better quality of life.

It is clear that greater investment in training and skills will help the UK compete more successfully in a global economy. Karen Woodward, LSC East Midlands director of skills said: "We believe it's vital employers both recognise and value the impact that developing the skills of their people will have on boosting productivity and competitiveness.

"Our task is to also build a dynamic, high-quality and successful Further Education system. Recognising how complex the FE system is, we are determined to improve access learning and training in away that best suits both businesses and individuals alike. We use our knowledge of where the demand is, where the gaps are, where excellent learning and training takes place and where there are weaknesses that need to be tackled."

Karen added: "As a publicly funded organisation acting on behalf of Government, our aim is to secure excellent value for money and our across-the-board relationships with schools, colleges and training providers are key. We strongly believe that it is by working together that we can deliver a better skilled workforce for the economy."

Repeat Award for Derbyshire Firm

At the LSC's 2007 Apprenticeship Awards, engineering firm, Slack & Parr from Kegworth, impressed judges so much with its programme that it notched up Medium Employer of the Year accolade for the second year running.

The firm believes the programme is 'the life blood of the company' and it adopts a rigorous selection procedure for new apprentices by visiting schools and having an open evening for parents. Richard Hallsworth, managing director, said: "It's a fantastic endorsement of the work that goes into the training of our people. Now we will keep on doing what we're best at, training people for our business."

The 2008 regional awards will take place in May followed by a national awards event in July. As in previous years, there is expected to be a flood of applications. The awards are designed to recognise employers who are successfully using Apprenticeships to improve business performance, and the hard work and the commitment of young people currently on, or who have recently completed an Apprenticeship.

To request an application form call 0845 058 0490 or email realsuccess@headstorm.co.uk

DID YOU KNOW ?

There are 43 Further Education colleges in the East Midlands, including seven specialist colleges for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. • The region is home to 34 Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in both work-based learning and FE. • There are 179 secondary schools with sixth-forms in the East Midlands. • In 2005/06, there were 275,469 learners in the region aged between 14 and 19.

Key Event to Spotlight Ex-Offender Employment Issues

Decision-makers from companies across the East Midlands are being invited to attend a major one-day conference examining the business case for employing ex offenders.

To be staged on Wednesday 30 January, at Nottingham's East Midlands Conference Centre, the event will focus on the construction, rail engineering, logistics, utilities and catering sectors and is designed to brief senior company executives. Following a range of key note presentations, specific case study success stories will be highlighted, helping delegates to learn more about the processes involved in taking ex-offenders into their workforce and matching them to available jobs.

Please book your complimentary delegate place by registering online at www.hollandalexander.com/committedtowork, or, if you require further conference information please contact Victoria Frodsham on 0116 261 6867 or email victoria@hollandalexander.com (Places are limited to two representatives per company).

Our future. It's in our hands.

In the future the majority of jobs will require people with better skills. In fact, in less than ten years there will be very few jobs that will require no skills at all. We all have it in us to grow in the workplace by learning new skills, gaining qualifications and taking control of the situation. Whatever stage you're at in life, there are lots of ways to get training on or off the job to help you open up a whole new world of job opportunities, earn good money and flourish.

To improve your skills call 0800 011 30 30 or visit lsc.gov.uk/inourhands

New skills help you flourish at work.

ENGLAND ONLY