

## Karen rises to the learning challenge

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Karen Richardson has proved that it really is never too late to learn. Having started work as an office junior on a youth training programme, she's never set her sights too low and by aiming higher she's risen through the ranks to become a Trainee Account Manager with the North East Chamber of Commerce (NECC).

The eldest of three children being raised by a lone parent, Karen was under some pressure at 16 to help her mum out financially by contributing to the family budget.

And although that meant she was unable to pursue her original career choice of childcare, it certainly didn't dent her determination to get on through learning.

Through Learning and Skills Council (LSC) North East supported training, office administration courses led to an Apprenticeship, followed by an Advanced Apprenticeship, which subsequently paved the way to the Foundation Degree in Leadership and Management which Karen began last year in partnership with Teesside University and the NECC.

During this period she has climbed the NECC career ladder, through the roles of office junior, administrator, administration supervisor, contracts co-ordinator and member support advisor to become a Trainee Account Manager, looking after the interests of around 207 NECC members.

Karen, now 35 and from Felling, said: “I never dreamed, when I left school, that I would be able to get on so far in the workplace but with a supportive employer I’ve had the chance to continue to learn and train throughout my working life and that has opened up so many new opportunities for me.

“At certain key points in my life I’ve set myself new challenges which have enabled me to achieve career and personal development and it really all started with that first Apprenticeship. It opened my eyes to what was possible.”

Apprenticeships are a cornerstone of the LSC’s drive to improve the skills of England’s workforce. They offer training for existing staff and new recruits in a wide range of areas and there are over 160 different courses offering relevant training designed by business for business.

Apprentices learn while they work, so their knowledge is up-to-date and because their training is on the job, the practical skills they gain are the ones that are right for business.

Regional Director with the LSC North East, Chris Roberts, said: “Karen is a shining example of what can be achieved through continuous, work based learning. Although she had to leave education earlier than she would have liked, she has continued to train in order to develop her skills.

“This has led to reward for her in the form of repeated promotion but also for her employer – NECC – which is benefiting from a team member who is truly fulfilling their potential.”

Karen's progress has been boosted recently by Aimhigher, a national project set up to increase participation in higher education by raising the aspirations and awareness of young people and adults.

Aimhigher Tyne and Wear Co-ordinator, Sarah Turnbull, said: "The aim is to ensure that individuals and communities have access to information about higher education which is relevant to them. Karen's story is one that many people will relate to and by raising awareness of her achievements, we have an opportunity to help others realise their own potential."

***ENDS***

**Editor's note:**

**Picture caption:** Karen Richardson whose Apprenticeship opened the door to further learning and promotion at work.

The LSC exists to make England better skilled and more competitive. We are responsible for planning and funding high-quality vocational education and training for everyone. We have a single goal: to improve the skills of England's young people and adults to world-class standards. Our vision is that by 2010, young people and adults in England have the knowledge and skills matching the best in the world and are part of a truly competitive workforce. Established in 2001, we work nationally, regionally and locally from a network of offices across the country.

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