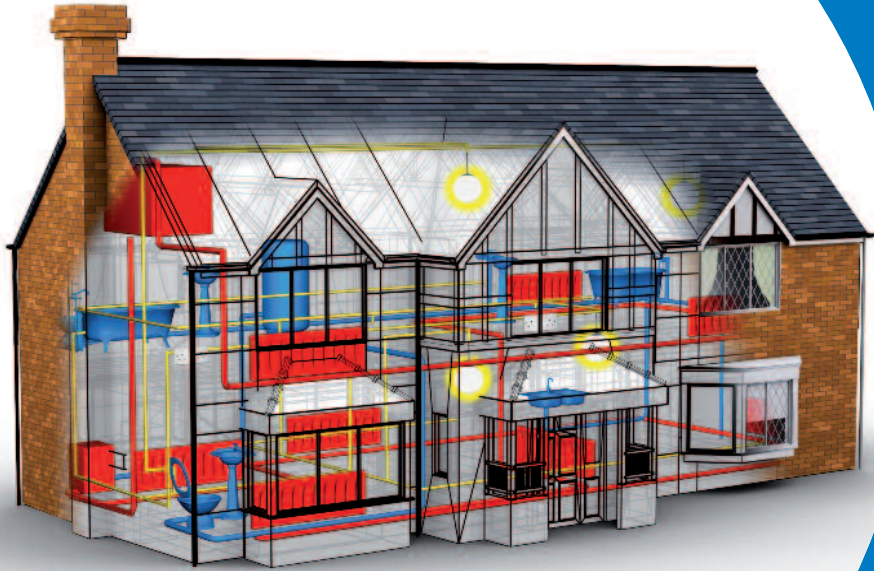




# South East Case Studies



Training makes good business sense. If your staff don't have the right skills for the job, you're not only unprepared for today's projects, but also vulnerable to future risk as the marketplace becomes more technical and competitive.

As the Sector Skills Council for building services engineering, SummitSkills works across the sector to encourage employers of all sizes and types to invest in training. It's not just about craft skills; at every level of your business – craft, technical, managers, supervisors and directors – it is vital to have staff who are qualified and competent.

But don't just take our word for it – this booklet showcases employers from all walks of the building services engineering sector and also gives a great example of how other related industries use our skills, qualifications and training programmes.

They describe the ways that training really does pay and, for them, how staff development is not just an optional extra, but an essential investment for a sustainable business.

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As a building services engineering design consultancy, having technical staff at the cutting edge of knowledge and technology is absolutely vital to **EDP Consulting Engineers**. But for the company to stay there, its employees need continuous training and professional development.

**Liz Heighway**, administration manager, thinks that people work more efficiently if they've got the right skills for the job.

As a professional organisation, it's important that our employees have professional skills. This doesn't just apply to the technical team; our administration function needs to be of the same high quality to support their colleagues. We expect a high standard of work, but in return we invest in our staff to ensure they receive every chance to progress and improve their skills.

I can think of many reasons why training has benefitted us and there's no doubt that over the years it has contributed to our business success. Each time we wanted to progress, we were able to do so because we had people with the right skills. For example, we took a business decision to move into energy and sustainability. Without investing heavily to develop key staff with specific skills, we just wouldn't have been able to do so.. As a result, we've developed very strong work streams in these areas.

But it's not just about making business decisions regardless of the impact on employees; it also involves harnessing the skills of people who want to work in those areas. You need a good relationship between employer and employee to investigate and discuss who is best placed in the company to take advantage of the training on offer.

Working at the strategic end of skills development is important to us, which is why our managing director supports SummitSkills' work and also chairs the Hampshire Economic Partnership Building and Construction Task Group. It means we have a voice on skills issues and gets our sector's concerns onto the public agenda.

Outside the company, developing a relationship with training providers has helped to raise our profile. As well as sending employees on their courses, our engineers have held talks at a local college to describe our work and the BSE sector. At school level, teachers have visited our office to see what we do, we've lectured at a local university to architectural students and we also regularly take part in careers fairs. It's all about putting something back into the community and making it exciting for new entrants.

*“We expect a high standard of work, but in return we invest in our staff to ensure they receive every chance to progress and improve.”*

For financial support, I've found that Train to Gain, accessed through Business Link, is becoming increasingly helpful. We're always looking for additional funding, so building a relationship with their brokers to help them help you is great. It's not just for lower level skills, there's also funding for higher levels. We have benefitted from leadership and management training, as well as business mentoring.

With the economic climate as it is, businesses have to change and adapt. You can't stand still or get stuck in the last decade – and that demands training to keep up with the pace. We will continue to train – it's a fundamental part of our core strategy. We will keep our skills up there with the best and keep growing the business. The two work hand-in-hand.







Since 1996, **Andy Crown** has grown **AC Electrical Services** from a sole trading firm to an electrical contracting and maintenance company with six employees – three of whom are apprentices.

With a training provider taking the administration strain, he benefits from a team that is moulded to his way of working, helps the rest of the company be more productive and leaves customers satisfied.

After being successful for a number of years, firstly on my own and then with a few employees, time went on and my workload steadily grew. Because of the nature of my business, it was difficult to find people with sufficient working knowledge on the maintenance side.

It got to a point where we were faced with not enough people with the right skills to complete the work. I eventually realised the only way to improve the situation was by training and developing the workforce myself. That's when I recruited my first apprentice.

*“I found the best way to train is to work alongside someone, take them under my wing and show them our way of doing things.”*

Even if you do take the easy option and employ someone already qualified, they don't always have the same working practices, manners or knowledge that I would want from an employee. I found the best way to train is to work alongside someone, take them under my wing and show them our way of doing things. The end result is, when I send one of my team to do a job, it's another pair of hands working in my style, with my way of thinking – they become a replica of me and the way I work. My customers are also happy as they're receiving the same service and quality of work that they're already used to from me.

Training also helps to make sure we're using our resources most effectively. Using an apprentice alongside a fully qualified craftsman not only means the job is being completed safely and competently, but it also means the apprentice is learning from a mentor whilst a second fully qualified engineer is available to work elsewhere.

Having the whole apprenticeship process managed for me makes life a lot easier; I work with a training provider who looks after everything. Their initial vetting service gave me a choice of candidates who had already been assessed, to ensure we got the best possible trainees. When my current apprentices were recruited, they completed a block six-month programme to do all the college training in one go. It means they didn't have to go on day-release once they joined me and were primed with some knowledge before they went out on the tools.

Training officers visit us regularly to oversee work and do all the written assessments. Having them look after the paperwork is ideal. When you're busy, the last thing you want to do is to spend five hours filling in forms. Having this all taken care of is great. And all the training costs are covered, so it's just wages that I need to pay.

Apprenticeships have proved very beneficial for AC Electrical Services so far and I hope to continue in this way. It does take time to mentor the apprentices, but it's all part of the learning process. The positive outcomes far outweigh what may be a minor inconvenience at the time.

When commercial kitchen design and maintenance company **McFarlane Telfer** decided to substantially invest in people to become an employer of choice, it kick-started a progressive organisational culture that is now recognised by clients and suppliers alike.

By working with staff to identify needs and using local training providers to his advantage, **Chris Craggs** believes that, through his approach, competence breeds confidence.

In our field, and I think it's borne out by our client list, we're at the top of the tree. That's why we invest to make sure that we genuinely are and stay the best. We target ourselves at a very limited niche, so the customers we pitch to not only expect a standard, but want evidence of that standard. It's not good enough to say that you've been around for 20 years, you need to prove your competence.

It was a remark from an employee during a job chat that triggered our technical skills training programme. We were already implementing new systems and processes as part of Investors in People accreditation, when one of our metalworkers said it would be useful to enhance his plumbing skills and learn best practice. This made us consider the wider benefits of taking that approach one step further. Our team works on a wide variety of projects, but often people specialise in one particular discipline and there's scope for them to hone skills in other areas. So we reviewed our training by asking everyone what further skills they would like to gain.

We became involved with East Berkshire College after we compiled a wide-ranging wish-list of building services engineering and construction training that would benefit our workforce. The college took this on board, came to the office and devised a plan for how we could fit the training around our business operation. Some courses were delivered at the college, some at our office. We were able to do exactly what we wanted in terms of course content, hours and location, within practical limits. The ability to tailor your own schedule was remarkable and very beneficial. I'm sure many employers don't realise this is possible.

Companies often want firm evidence of how training contributes to the bottom line. What it does do, inescapably, is create a company full of individuals who feel good about their own competence and professionalism. Most of our employees are client-facing and have to justify what they do and why. If you've been properly equipped to do the job, it creates confidence and makes an enormous difference in terms of your credibility and ability to talk to people. We don't want our staff bluffing their way through.

*“If you've been properly equipped to do the job, it creates confidence and makes an enormous difference in terms of your credibility and ability to talk to people”*

The investment we make in our people is genuinely appreciated by the whole organisation. You can see it not only in the quality of their work, but also the way they hold themselves, their professional esteem and the respect between colleagues and the company they work for. We feel it and the clients feel it.

Of course, I wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't in the interest of my business, because at the end of the day it is a very significant investment. But it's absolutely clear that if I want a successful business based around successful and motivated people, that investment is not just worth spending – it's essential. If that's not a good enough argument for whether training is worth it or not, I frankly don't know what is. Training for us gives the business a unique and immensely valuable boost.





Carrier  
CONDITIONING  
MAINTENANCE  
HVCA

Unit 3

ZCHEM  
MULTI-  
STORAGE

Developing staff with the highest competence levels has allowed **Barrier Air Conditioning** to rise above the competition, says **Karen Leader**.

Having the ability to work with more complex equipment than their competitors has enabled them to operate in a specialist marketplace, giving them business stability and prosperity.

Because the building services engineering sector and the air conditioning industry is so technical it's absolutely essential that people have structured training and qualifications. We don't have employees without it, and if you have engineers both with and without qualifications, side-by-side, you do see a difference in the way they approach jobs. At NVQ Level 3, engineers' skills really do go up a gear, both in their ability to solve problems and also how they deal with faults and breakdowns.

*“If you have engineers both with and without qualifications, side-by-side, you do see a difference in the way they approach jobs.”*

We want to develop our people and grow our own apprentices and engineers. Even when staff come to us from elsewhere, we want them to be Barrier engineers so we put them through the relevant training. That's always been a major focus of this company. We find that we have fewer accidents, fewer client complaints and waste less time dealing with problems.

We say that anyone can fix a Ford Fiesta, but if you're technically competent you're a Rolls Royce engineer. You are respected for your skills and get rewarded financially for doing things that others are not qualified to do. Most clients deal with us because we're in an industry where the number of companies that have our level of skilled engineers is limited.

Our skills base gives us a competitive edge which leads to a better business; clients sign contracts with us as they are confident we do a proper job. It enables us to operate in a market where price is not the first consideration and we don't win jobs on lowest cost alone.

Stability is very important to us. Lots of companies boom then bust, but we have found that ongoing training gives us that stability. Our employees also feel secure; they're working for a company that's more health and safety conscious, more quality conscious and providing clients with an excellent service.

We've accessed Train To Gain through Business Link to help some of our staff gain formal qualifications. The fact that the service was flexible and fitted in with our working patterns was very useful; it has meant that staff have been able to gain qualifications while they're on the job, via on-site assessment. It has to be coordinated between on-site staff and assessors, which can be challenging and takes effort, but ultimately it's worth it.

You can only get better by investing in training. We consciously try to elevate ourselves within our industry and that means making sure our staff are continually trained. It's not just about making an effort internally; I sit on SummitSkills' Sector Skills Agreement implementation group to ensure our company contributes to the skills agenda on a wider level, which we also benefit from.

Clients do notice high-quality suppliers – if they're high-calibre companies, they expect to deal with the best..Overall we get to rub shoulders with a much better class of client. Quality people recognise quality service!



Apprenticeship training is so ingrained in the history of ductwork contractor **Hotchkiss**, the company has an apprenticeship indenture dating back to 1911.

The commitment to training doesn't stop there – from the shop floor to the board room, **Mel Hobbs** believes their business success stems from a professional workforce able to offer clients the best team for the job.

Training for us means we benefit from an amazing level of staff retention and ultimately a stable workforce. The majority of our people started as apprentices and are still here years later as craftsmen, CAD technicians, engineers and surveyors. We've got a 25-year club for long-serving employees with over 80 members. It makes for a real community feel across the company as everyone knows each other – a true family spirit.

But also, importantly, the workforce has been trained in our way. We know what they can do and how well, because we've taught them to do it. As a specialist ductwork contractor in the building services engineering sector, we believe we're the best because we have the right people in place.

Our sheet metal workers and site installers undertake NVQs and our CAD draftsmen and surveyors do BTECs and go on to HNCs. For our sheet metal apprentices, we work with a managing agent to look after the process – they take the weight off your hands and generally make life more straightforward. For management training, we work with our trade association and our client Mace has a business school that runs very good courses. We supplement the formal training with a lot of in-house training and mentoring – it's a crucial part of the learning process.

We're also committed to the SKILLcard system to prove our workforce is competent. We insist that all our workers have SKILLcards; we won't employ people on site without them. It was part of a decision to raise the quality of our workforce.

Client perception is important to us, as they have preferences for who they want to work with. With the right skills in place, we can assure them that we will not only meet but exceed their expectations.

Competitors often submit a cheaper price to get the job, but most don't offer a full management service to the client – we do, because we have an excellent team with the skills and knowledge to do it. It's all about resolving problems, keeping the project on schedule, pushing through approvals and generally being capable and proactive. It lessens the burden on the client and reduces the need for them to deal with sub-contractor issues, which can add hidden costs to a project.

*“Training for us means we benefit from an amazing level of staff retention and ultimately a stable workforce.”*

If companies don't train, or rely on others for industry training, the outlook is dire. If employers are not replacing those leaving due to retirement or natural wastage there's going to be an ever-reducing labour force and a shortage of skilled labour.

We're passionate about the future workforce, which is why we also get involved in skills development outside the company. I currently work with SummitSkills, an apprenticeship taskforce and the local Education Business Partnership so Hotchkiss can feed into wider skills development. We also invite local schools in to learn about the sector as part of their career talks and diploma training. It's all part of our ethos – training for now and investing in the future.





For **GE Healthcare**, having the right skills for the job means you're helping to save lives each day. Skills and competency are where they focus.

**Gary Sinclair** recruits and trains apprentices to service the company's range of medical imaging equipment, life support and monitoring devices. His fully-qualified team also provides technical training to biomedical engineers, electrical service engineers and third-party contractors.

We want to give the best and most professional training to the highest standard. The equipment we service can save lives, so being fully skilled is imperative: if you're not trained, you shouldn't be working in this area.

Until recently our team consisted of mainly mature workers. We were concerned about skills gaps as the years progressed, so by recruiting apprentices we're now bringing younger people with modern skills and practices into the organisation. We've developed a handover system where, in the last year of the apprenticeship, the student shadows an engineer coming up for retirement. So from a client perspective, the apprentice is not a new face, they're already known and familiar with the premises and equipment. It's good succession planning.

*“You can be a great engineer but you need to know how to successfully deal with customers.”*

Having a good supply of people to choose from is equally as important. We joined STEMNET to work as industry ambassadors, in parallel with SummitSkills' own ambassadors scheme. It involves going into schools, attending roadshows and giving talks, giving students a first-hand idea of what it's like to work in the healthcare sector. We're trying to get away from the thought train that to be an engineer you need a pair of overalls and a bucket of grease!

We are currently training a network of eight electrotechnical apprentices around the UK to work on the life support systems, diagnostic imaging and ultrasound equipment across the healthcare sector. Managing remote apprentices is a challenge, but each apprentice has a personal mentor in the field who assists them with their day-to-day work/life balance, coupled with specific technical coaching. We are also supported by a training provider who manages the assessments.

Apprenticeships work for us because we can tailor training by adding certain modules to suit our specific business needs. In addition to technical training, we're looking to introduce a customer service NVQ with medical elements included, so employees develop a broader skills base that gives them client-facing confidence as well as product knowledge. You can be a great engineer but you need to know how to successfully deal with customers. That's half the challenge – leaving people with a positive and professional impression of GE Healthcare and our apprentices.

The same concept applies to our trainers – a competent engineer doesn't necessarily make a competent teacher. I'm proud to say that all our trainers, including myself, are qualified Cert Ed (Certificate in Education). GE wanted us to have an unrivalled educational department within the industry, so time and money has been invested in developing the team and it has paid dividends. We're not just engineers with a training role as an add-on; we have a proper teaching qualification. As a result, we've boosted equipment sales as customers know the people doing the product training have both technical and educational knowledge.

Overall we're seen as the gold standard, which has had a great impact on our success. Even across GE internationally, the UK is seen as the best in class and our technical training department is often asked to provide support and information across GE Healthcare Europe. But it's not just internally - feedback gathered during our course critiques, from customers, who have worked with our competitors, lets us know we are doing the right thing and this continues to give us the competitive advantage we strive for.

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