

All the skills that's fit

By Martin Moriarty

When it comes to the skills agenda, printing industry trade unionists, employers' organisations and the Sector Skills Council ProSkills are all singing from the same song-sheet: the industry can't become any more competitive if its workers aren't equipped with the skills they need.

That degree of consensus is probably one of the main reasons why there's a detailed learning and skills clause in the national partnership agreement between the BPIF employers' organisation and what is now the graphical, paper and media sector of Unite (the newest union on the block,

Unite is hoping the learning agreement with Quebecor (below) will persuade more print employers to come onboard

created by the merger of Amicus and the TGWU).

Formally launched last April, the clause commits companies to planning their skills needs in partnership with the union at shopfloor level and to investing 0.5 per cent of their payroll costs in training.

But there's a sting in the tail, according to Bernard Rutter, the sector's head of organising, learning and skills.

"The employers are in the last-chance saloon, because the learning and skills clause says that if companies don't meet the skills levels the industry needs by 2008, the government will introduce a statutory".

The union has also drawn up a second national partnership agreement with the Confederation of Paper Industries which also actively promotes learning and skills.

In addition to good relationships with the employers' organisations on the learning agenda, the union is also working well with Proskills, the Sector Skills Council.

Bernard is a full member of the Proskills board, and he also sits on the Proskills printing industry group alongside the national training adviser David Tarren.

"Proskills are really working closely with us: they've valued our participation and they've always included us in everything," Bernard says.

A case in point is the latest presentation to the DTI on the proposed Skills Academy for the



Tanina Struk/reportdigital



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industry: when a European Graphical Federation meeting in Rome meant Bernard and Dave were unable to attend, Proskills set up a conference link to Italy to make sure they could still take part.

The good relations are not only at national level: the union's regional learning organisers have been building an effective network with their opposite numbers at Proskills in the regions as well as – to a lesser extent – with the BPIF.

While he himself is new to the printing industry, Proskills Chief Executive Terry Watts has been very

for print



companies across the industry, things might seem pretty rosy in the print sector's workforce development garden.

But there's still a very great deal of work to do, the union says.

In the wake of the partnership agreement, signed in November 2005 at the Department of Trade and Industry offices in London, the union identified 10 companies in each region which it reckoned might be willing to action the learning and skills clause.

David Tarren is currently finishing an interim report for the DTI on the progress Unite has made to date – and it won't make very encouraging reading.

Basically, of the 19 learning agreements with major companies that the union has signed in the sector, just one – with specialist printers Bemrose Booth – can be traced to the BPIF agreement.

The others have come about because of long-standing positive relationships companies like Polestar (who print the *Radio Times* among many other major titles) and De La Rue (who print most of your banknotes).

"We always knew it would be hard to deliver this because we

know that British companies don't tend to train as much as they should and print companies are especially bad, but we thought that the threat of a levy might make some of them more interested," David says.

"I'm sorry to say that the initial findings show that around half of the employers we've targeted haven't even responded to our approaches, and even many of those that do train think that the development of an employee in the workplace belongs to the employer, and they don't want to involve the employee, let alone the union."

Nor is he alone in his assessment. Earlier this year, ProSkills admitted it "has so far really only worked with those employers 'converted' to the message of business improvement through skills" and that "feedback has shown that managers are not always convinced by the skills arguments."

Meanwhile, Bernard Rutter remains hopeful that more employers will see the learning light: after all, the union has recently signed a learning agreement with Quebecor World, one of the biggest printing companies on the planet.

"I believe the signing of an agreement with Quebecor will indicate to other companies how serious we are about ensuring the union and its members are involved in learning and training decisions within the workplace," he says.

pleasantly surprised by the degree of consensus on workforce development between managers and unions.

"For an outsider now working with the printing industry, it's refreshing to see a union working so hard to support and develop the skills infrastructure – and to see this drive welcomed by many employers," he says.

With good relations with the SSC, two national learning agreements with the employers' organisations, and another 19 learning agreements with a range of major

Everyone agrees the skills agenda is crucial for the printing industry

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