

Case Studies





Introduction

What is Skillnets?

Skillnets is an enterprise-led support body whose mission is to enhance the skills of people in employment in Irish business and industry, to support competitiveness and employability. Skillnets is funded from the National Training Fund and its stakeholders include leading employer and employee representative bodies - IBEC, CI, CIF, SFA and ICTU.

Through the creation of enterprise-led Learning Networks, Skillnets supports groups of firms to come together and devise training and development initiatives to meet their skills needs. Networks receive grant aid and other forms of assistance from Skillnets through

the Training Networks Programme. Further funding comes from member firms who co-invest in their network's activities. Between 1999 - 2005, Learning Networks supported the activities of over 6,100 companies and 35,000 trainees.

These networks encompass a wide variety of sectors and regions in Ireland, with a particular focus on the needs of small and microenterprises. Currently 54 Learning Networks are being funded under the 2006-2007 Training Networks Programme.



Case Study 1 Fresh Produce Skillnet

Growing Standards in the Fresh Produce Sector

Key Data

Promoter
Country Crest Ltd

Sector

Agriculture, Horticulture,
Wholesale Trade

Membership

32 Member Enterprises

No of Trainees

739

Key Linkages

An Bord Glas
Teagasc

Type of Training

Operative, Technical and
Management Skills

Certification

FETAC

Origins and Aims

The Fresh Produce Skillnet emerged from an informal network of producers of fresh vegetables, fruit and flowers who supply the multiple retailers in Ireland. The companies range in size from 7 to 250 employees. The network formed in response to pressures generated by saturated markets, falling incomes and competition from imported products.

The Skillnet has been strong on networking and sharing resources among the 32 member firms as well as providing a range of training

to 739 trainees including a comprehensive ‘train the trainer’ programme and a management development programme in association with An Bord Glas. The network is a self-managing entity with its own steering group, a network manager. It is also led by a promoter who is one of the constituent members and chairs the steering group.



Challenges Faced

The agriculture and horticulture sectors have typically been low skills based, with many traditional skills not easily transferable. In the fresh produce industry about 65% of employees are general operatives with generally low levels of education and relatively little training.

While the fresh produce sector (including flowers) continues to grow at over 3% year on year it has had to cope with increasing demands from customers, higher standards of practice, and increased regulatory provision. The major retail chains also operate their own strict certification of ‘good agricultural practice’ through the European Good Agricultural Practice (EUREPGAP) standard and Nature’s Choice standard. The members of the Fresh Produce Skillnet aim to achieve this accreditation as a key outcome of their participation in the network.

Sharing of people and resources through the Skillnet has allowed these producers to respond to challenges which they could never hope to do acting alone. For example, the training of 26

trainers by the network means that certified operative training is now available to all firms, with one company regularly ‘lending’ a trainer to another.

Benefits Realised

The Fresh Produce Skillnet has been very successful in engaging owner-managers of SME’s through the delivery of a nine-month management development programme covering Finance, HRD and Strategic Planning. The programme was run in collaboration with An Bord Glas. A shared pool of 26 fully qualified trainers now exists within the network in areas such as manual handling, forklift driving, sensory analysis and food hygiene. This has had a major impact on company operations.

Network Impact

- over 70% of companies reported that they had increased their training spend
- 43% of companies developed a training plan for the first time
- 86% of companies indicated that the training provided has improved the employability of staff

Company Outputs

- improved employee satisfaction
- improved quality
- maintenance efficiencies
- better linkage between skills profile and skills needs

Company Profile Country Crest Ltd

The Hoey family has grown potatoes in North County Dublin for almost 100 years. In 1994 Michael and Gabriel, the fourth generation in farming, set up Country Crest.

Country Crest saw that the consumer requirements for potatoes were changing and multiples were presenting and marketing potato products in new and innovative ways. Increasing consumer choice was the driving force behind a series of innovations which has enabled Country Crest to become the major supplier of potatoes to the Irish retail sector.

These innovations include: full supply-chain product traceability systems, the introduction of new fresh potato products, the development of new packaging systems, and the introduction of par-cooked products.

The business is built on a premier team in Country Crest, and the training and continued development of the business team through the Fresh Produce Skillnet has been an important feature in the ongoing progress of the company. The following are some of the achievements to date:

- establishing a clear vision of future market opportunities in the potato industry
- undertaking successive investments in the development and expansion of the business
- winning supply partnerships with premier retail multiples; interpreting customer trends and requirements from the drawing board to the retail shelf
- setting up a private transport company to guarantee the highest level of service standards for customers
- maintaining a complete supply chain perspective
- and most importantly, building a top class team to spearhead the ongoing development and expansion of the business

Case Study 2 Refrigeration Skillnet

Raising Standards, Building Best Practice and Coping with Evolving Technologies

Key Data

Promoter
Refrigeration
Technology Skillnet Ltd

Sector

Refrigeration and Air
Conditioning

Membership

125 Member enterprises

No of Trainees

300 Annually

Key Linkages

Dublin Institute of
Technology

Type of Training

Technical

Certification

FETAC/HETAC/City
& Guilds

Origins and Aims

Refrigeration Skillnet is an enterprise-led training network for companies involved in the design, manufacture, installation and maintenance of refrigeration technology in Ireland. The network comprises 125 refrigeration engineering SMEs (mostly contractors) providing a combination of commercial and industrial refrigeration/air conditioning services to Irish industry. The network was established six years ago under the very first Skillnets programme and quickly fulfilled an important role as the only

representative body for the refrigeration engineering sector in Ireland.

In 2005 the network achieved an important milestone by supporting the creation of a new national institute for refrigeration and air conditioning professionals - the Institute of Refrigeration Ireland (IRI).

The Skillnet now works alongside the IRI to raise standards within the industry, developing continuing professional development opportunities for employees of member companies whilst also improving competitiveness of the sector.

The network is operated through a limited company - Refrigeration Technology Skillnet Ltd. - under the directorship of a voluntary board of nine representatives from the sector.



Challenges Faced

The traditional model of recruiting finished apprentices and providing them with part-time-on-the-job support no longer enables firms to stay abreast of changes in regulation and technology. Most firms in the refrigeration business in Ireland are SMEs. This, allied to the previous absence of a trade association or professional body, left companies at a major disadvantage when trying to manage key changes such as: the import, wholesale, installation, commissioning, maintenance, and repair of equipment.

The creation of a refrigeration Skillnet filled a gap with a focused response directed towards the joint trading needs of member firms.

Prior to Refrigeration Skillnet, equipment manufacturers provided most of the training to the sector, which gave them a powerful selling position. Now Refrigeration Skillnet provides on average more than 80% of all technical training in member firms.

Benefits Realised

Between May 2002 and December 2005 over 800 trainees participated in more than 100 training programmes and 50 separate network events.

Network Impact

- 80% of the companies are happy with the running of the network
- 80% of companies are willing to commit to training beyond the life of the network
- 67% of companies increased their level of training
- 27% of companies developed a training plan for the first time

Company Outputs

- increased productivity
- improved safety records
- improved quality and customer satisfaction
- improved team working and employee satisfaction

The network has been successful in spinning off a new national institute of refrigeration and air-conditioning professionals - the Institute of Refrigeration Ireland - the first of its kind in Ireland.

Company Profile Refrigeration Engineering Ltd (REL)

A founding member of Refrigeration Skillnet, Kilkenny based REL (established in 1954) is a family owned business which has grown into one of the leading refrigeration and food service equipment deployment companies in Ireland.

With 50 employees, the company serves the retail, hospitality and catering sectors with supply, installation and maintenance of a wide range of air conditioning, refrigeration and hot display products.

Over half REL's workers have participated in training organised by the Skillnet which has enabled the company to tender for contracts with major chains and corporate clients. The attainment of a 2078 licence and brazer approval training (related to the PED Directive) was crucial in winning contracts with clients such as Diageo and SuperValu.

Participation in Skillnet training has also led to an increased awareness of safety issues which, in turn, has assisted in keeping employees safe and work-related accidents to a minimum. John Ryan of REL believes that Refrigeration Skillnet has been very effective and exceeded the industry's expectation in what has been achieved.

Case Study 3 Waterford Chamber Skillnet (WCS)

Regional Focus to Support Innovation in Manufacturing Firms



This means we don't have to train all the managers in one group, and we avoid a situation where they are all off-site at the same time." *Stephanie Coffey, Training Manager, Ivax Pharmaceutical.*

Company Profile South East Lean Forum

An initiative of the WCS has been the establishment of the South East Lean Forum to provide informal learning opportunities for sharing and solving issues relating to the implementation of Lean Manufacturing among member firms.

The forum was launched in October 2003 by Professor Dan Jones, author of 'Lean Thinking' and a world expert in the field of Lean Manufacturing.

The forum has held seven learning events including site visits which focus on a specific element of Lean Manufacturing or a current project being undertaken by the host company.

As a result of this initiative a number of participating companies are now introducing their own Lean initiatives or co-operating with other companies on Lean ventures.

The Forum has been instrumental in promoting Lean concepts to a wider audience and has also attracted attention from other parts of the country.

One participant at a recent event said that 'we have learned an awful lot and it has now given us the impetus and confidence to go forward with a similar initiative.'

Low Basic Skills E-learning Project

This project was geared to production operatives and developed in co-operation with the Waterford Institute of Technology and the Brewing Skillnet. 68 students took part in the first module which covered such topics as: environment management systems, health and safety, good manufacturing practice, regulator matters, ISO 9000:2000 Standard.

Participants had a two week timeframe to complete each lesson and were allowed two attempts to complete each lesson quiz which required a 70% pass mark to graduate.

Students, over half of whom had not gone beyond Junior Cert education, praised the flexibility of the learning and stated they would not otherwise have been able to access traditional learning due to shift work and family commitments. 75% of participants rated the learning as better than classroom instruction.

base and developed the capacity to provide a range of courses. Areas of focus for the Skillnet included the development of a Lean Greenbelt training module subsequently taken up by the Carlow / Kilkenny Skillnet. It also included two e-learning programmes: "Lean Manufacturing" with 30 students; and "Manufacturing Systems and Standards" in partnership with Waterford Institute of Technology and the Brewing Skillnet. The Skillnet also oversaw the establishment of the South East Lean Forum.

The Skillnet is operated by a steering committee of member companies with the support of Waterford Chamber.

Challenges Faced

The manufacturing sector in Ireland is under increasing threat from competitive pressures posed by low cost economies such as Eastern Europe, India and China. Ireland is steadily losing significant elements of its manufacturing sector. The problems are heightened for firms based in regional locations. Waterford has been particularly affected in recent years – the ongoing challenges faced by Waterford Crystal being just one prominent example.

Creative responses to these challenges have been many and varied, with the focus largely on the better use of existing resources, introduction of new systems and processes, and the increased use of information technology. Crucially, enhancing the adaptability and capability of the workforce through training

and re-training has been yielding dividends. One of the Skillnets motivating factors was the belief that local firms working collaboratively could better meet shared training needs than working individually. The existing pool of knowledge and expertise needed to be shared so that all could benefit and the region could retain a pool of highly skilled and motivated workers into the future.

Benefits Realised

Between 2003 and 2005 over 1,534 trainees participated in 137 training programmes and two company focus group sessions.

Network Impact

- 89% of companies regarded the Training Networks Programme as an effective model for the delivery of training to companies
- 74% of companies surveyed indicated their training had increased (by an average of 46%) since they had become involved with the Skillnet
- 25% of companies developed a training plan for the first time.
- The South East Lean Forum was established

Company Outputs

- increase in employee satisfaction
- increase in productivity
- improved team working
- 96% of firms indicated that employability of staff had increased
- one company indicated that 75% of its training needs are now being met by the Skillnet

Comments from Companies

"WCS did what it said on the box. It delivered the training we required, where, when, and how we requested it. The training was delivered in a highly cost-effective manner, with no additional costs arising from travel or overnight accommodation." *Lorna Long, Quality Co-ordinator, Frentech Engineering*

"I would recommend the Skillnet as it's a group of people coming together with similar training needs, these needs are shared, training sourced and delivered locally by a local trainer (where possible). 'H&S for Managers' 2 day programme has been a great success for us in IVAX, We have put 34 Managers through this training, with 50 more scheduled for 2006.

Key Data

Promoter
Waterford Chamber

Sector

General Manufacturing

Membership

34 Member Companies

No of Trainees

1,534

Key Linkages

Waterford Institute of Technology

Type of Training

Technical Skills

Certification

FETAC

Origins and Aims

The Waterford Chamber Skillnet (WCS) emerged as a direct response to the need of manufacturing firms in Ireland to remain competitive. The Skillnet was formed in 2003 by a group of 34 companies in the South East region with the support of the Waterford Chamber of Commerce. Its aim has been to design, develop and implement a range of manufacturing related skills training in response to the specific needs of local companies.

Anchor participants such as Bausch and Lomb and Waterford Crystal provided initial support, but the network quickly grew its member

Case Study 4 National Engineering Training Skillnet (NETS)

Facilitating a Partnership Approach to Training

Key Data

Promoter
National Engineering
Technical Skillnet
Technology Skillnet Ltd

Sector

Key Manufacturing

Membership

125 Member Enterprises

No of Trainees

300 annually

Key Linkages

Dublin Institute of
Technology

Type of Training

Technical

Certification

FETAC/HETAC/City
& Guilds

Origins and Aims

The National Engineering Training Skillnet (NETS) is a nationwide expansion of the Leinster Engineering Skillnet which was founded in 1999. With 32 companies, including some of Ireland's largest manufacturers, the Skillnet was established to respond to the need for training to bridge the skills gap for craftspeople arising from the introduction of new technology.

In 2003, the Skillnet expanded to form five regional clusters overseeing 72 upskilling, cross-skilling, and reskilling courses. The

Skillnet also launched a 'train the trainer' programme in coaching skills to embed the capacity to sustain a training ethos in the companies.

The network is operated by a Steering Group of members and is facilitated by the Technical Engineering and Electrical Union (TEEU).

Challenges Faced

With the introduction of new technologies, manufacturing systems and processes have changed dramatically in the past decade. Many older workers have therefore found it hard to stay abreast of these changes especially those in the traditional crafts of pneumatics, hydraulics and electrics. Maintenance skills in particular, require a broader range of technical competencies and a deeper understanding of the whole production process. Typically the workers involved are older males, and providing training responses - which involve upskilling, cross-skilling and re-skilling - present special challenges.



The central involvement of the TEEU in facilitating the process has been crucial. This includes playing a key role in jointly assessing training needs with company management, within an agreed context. The TEEU also facilitates training in the general industrial relations area, working with the Skillnet to establish training priorities, along with reviewing training impact, both at company and individual levels. This activity is well beyond the traditional role of a trade union, and has been greatly welcomed by member firms.

Benefits Realised

NETS have developed with FETAC a National Certificate in Maintenance Technology which is the first of its kind in Ireland. The Skillnet has achieved a major impact on the level of cross-skilling in member firms.

Network Impact

- Over 90% of the companies reported that the Skillnet had met or exceeded their expectations
- 83% of companies indicated that the programme was a very cost effective option for them
- 57% of companies surveyed indicated that training spend had increased

Company Outputs

- better internal relationships
- improved development opportunities for staff
- maintenance efficiencies
- better linkage between skills profile and skills needs

Company Profiles

Dublin Airport Authority

At a time of significant change, the DAA has found that its involvement with other companies through the NETS skillnet has helped it to learn alternative ways of approaching and managing training issues.

The focus on integration training has brought significant benefits. For example, as a result of participating in the PLC course, craftspeople have now taken an interest in specialist equipment such as X-Ray machines, and can help to get these up and running, should specialist expertise not be close at hand.

Jacob Fruitfield

The part of this company which was formerly Irish Biscuits based in Tallaght has been an active member of NETS Skillnet since its inception.

The company has benefited extensively from its involvement, by using the programme to strategically address training issues in the context of a major change strategy.

The company has seen benefits arise from participation in courses such as: Programmable Logic Business, Pneumatics and Computer Application Courses. Other business benefits have arisen from addressing demarcation issues and retaining in-house work that was formerly completed by contractors.

NETS Skillnet has helped the company focus on a significant degree of cross-skilling and played a strategic role in moving towards a fully integrated operations department.

Novartis

Novartis Ringaskiddy Ltd has benefited extensively from its involvement in the Skillnet by using the network to strategically address training needs.

The courses it has been involved with to date cover: Industrial Pneumatic Systems; Programmable Logic Controllers; Industrial Mechanical Maintenance Skills; Industrial Electrical Systems and Instrumentation.

NETS Skillnet has helped the company's maintenance employees to achieve a significant degree of understanding of each others skills, which has helped greatly in trouble shooting and problem solving in the plant.

Case Study 5

South East Micro Skillnet (SEMS)

Facilitating Micro Companies to Participate in Training

Key Data

Promoter
Montip Engineering

Sector

Multi-sectoral

Membership

30 Member Companies

No of Trainees

300 Annually

Key Linkages

Waterford IT

Type of Training

Management
Development and Soft
Skills

Certification

FETAC

Origins and Aims

The South East Micro Skillnet (SEMS) was formed by a group of micro enterprises in the South East to develop a systematic approach to building commercial awareness, measure business improvements and support the managerial capacity of key staff and owner-managers alike.

The network has 30 members and has provided training to over 300 trainees. The network is directed by a steering group of the members with one member acting as promoter. Five key training responses

have been formulated by the Skillnet and these play a key role in Skillnet activity:

Business and Commercial Awareness: Understanding the need for information and feedback mechanisms, developing interpretative skills among staff at all levels, knowing the key business drivers and the key factors influencing business performance;

Personal Development of Employees: Helping employees to build self-esteem, self-worth, communication and team working skills, learning and listening skills, managing time, taking responsibility and ownership;

Developing Human Resources: How to build programmes to motivate and provide incentives to staff, facilitating teamwork, implementing performance evaluations;

Market Focus: Mechanisms for collecting and using customer feedback, learning to listen to customers, how to read what customers want and respond effectively, looking at the business from the perspective of the customer, examining current and target markets, developing a genuine customer 'charter';

Measuring Impact: Measuring how improvements impact on business functions, setting and monitoring goals, benchmarking throughout the business, labour



efficiency levels, employee turnover, 'how to manage processes and save time in the process.'

Challenges Faced

Given that many of the participants did not have a very positive experience of formal training in the past, a significant amount of work went into designing training programmes that were open and collaborative.

The process of collective analysis planning proved invaluable, and the Skillnet has developed its own process of peer learning, fostering an atmosphere of openness and trust. This trust has facilitated the open exchange and application of new ideas amongst members leading to shared advice and best practice development.

Benefits Realised

Some of the special characteristics of the Skillnet include:

- Peer to peer learning, especially in the areas of pricing, credit control and customer relations
- Burden sharing by empowering staff at all levels of the enterprise leading to delegation of

decisions and information analysis

- Innovative training methodologies to support the implementation of learning in the businesses to ensure real impact from participation in training
- Developing training in a 'rounded' way which goes beyond technical skills and helps bridge the traditional management-employee barrier

Network Impact

- 73% of all employees in member companies have received training
- 50% of companies developed a training plan for the first time
- 69% of companies surveyed indicated that training spend had increased

Company Outputs

- One company has increased its customer base by 50%
- One company developed a new product from material it had in the past discarded without use
- One company's net profit per chargeable hour has doubled
- One company has significantly changed its customer base resulting in profit increases in excess of 40%

Company Profiles

"While the training Montip Ltd did in the past 7 years was invaluable, I found that the surprise benefit to me was the advice and help I got from other business owners who had - at some point - faced the exact same problems as my company, and were only too happy to share their solutions."
Gerry Horan, Montip Ltd.

"After attending a training session with SEMS shortly after joining, I realised that the structure of our business was costing us dearly. After implementing the new learning and making some simple changes, we saved thousands and put the business on a much better footing. We now undertake training in a range of areas we would never have contemplated before, including project management, personal development, HR, etc."
Jane Kennedy, Kennedy Electrical

"At times managing staff can be complex and challenging. One of the biggest benefits for me has been the ability to discuss issues that occur in the highly confidential environment of the Skillnet."
Mike McKenna, Blackwater Garden Centre

"The Project Management Training we participated in was a perfect fit for the business. The structure of the programme allowed us to work with the trainer to develop and implement simple and effective controls, suited to our business, that are helping us to manage our way through projects more efficiently and more profitably. We even did a Return on Investment Study on the training programme and were astounded by the result - over a 400% return on the programme."
Garry Gleeson, Constructive Solutions.

"Just before joining SEMS I got a ridiculously high quote for some internal training I wanted to undertake - even then I wasn't even sure if it was exactly what we needed. Now I feel our company has a solid support structure to look realistically at training, make well informed choices about what we need, and best of all - get the training at less than half the cost."
Miriam Mulrennan, Nemeton Ltd.

Case Study 6 BME Skillnet

Solving Key Business Challenges in the Border, Midlands and Eastern Region

Key Data

Promoter
BME Training Network
Ltd

Sector

Mixed

Membership

65 Member Companies

No of Trainees

1118

Type of Training

Operative, Technical and
Management Skills

Certification

FETAC

Origins and Aims

Founded as a direct response to the Skillnets Training Networks Programme, the BME Skillnet brings together a mixture of small, medium and large enterprises in the counties of Cavan, Monaghan, Louth, Meath and Westmeath (hence the name Border, Midlands and East – BME Skillnet).

Designated by the Government as an area for special attention, the BME region has had some success in recent years in attracting high technology companies. The Skillnet in

turn has been successful in attracting participants from a diverse range of industries including, Flair International, Pat the Baker, Pauwels Trafo Ireland, IJM Timber Engineering, Quinn Direct Insurance, Century Homes and Bellurgan Precision Engineering.

The network has grown from 5 to 65 member firms and has delivered 186 training programmes to 1,118 trainees. The network is a self-managing entity with its own member Steering Group, and a network manager employed by the Skillnet with support from Skillnets.



Challenges Faced

The BME region is dominated by labour-intensive manufacturing, the hospitality industry and financial services. While some employees are involved in high-tech activities the majority are engaged in low-skill jobs. There is a high preponderance of non-national workers which poses a number of challenges for local employers.

Training in the region has traditionally been a low priority. The Skillnet opted to refrain from offering generic training courses from a catalogue of pre-set lists and instead approached the companies individually to assess their key business challenges. Using the results of training needs and gap analyses the network has been able to identify, match and customise training programmes to ensure they are relevant and meet the specific needs of the members.

Benefits Realised

The BME Skillnet has had a major impact on employee morale and has been active in sharing opportunities with other Skillnets networks. Following the introduction of the 'train the trainer' programme, companies have shortened their learning curve, reduced waste and improved the quality of their output. All programmes go through a quality assurance process and all are independently certified or accredited, mostly through FETAC.

Network Impact

- Over 70% of participating companies reported that they had increased their training spend (by an average of 34%) as a result of becoming involved in the Skillnet
- 60% consider that the enterprise-led approach to training works better than alternative approaches
- 30% of companies developed a training plan for the first time

Company Outputs

- improved safety record
- improved quality
- improved staff retention
- improved teamwork
- improved productivity

Company Profiles

Bellurgan Percision Engineering Ltd

Founded by Brendan Carroll in 1978, the company currently employs 70 people at its 5,000 sqm state of the art facility at Bellurgan, Co. Louth. The company is focused on delivering precision engineering products and services to a number of multi-national and indigenous manufacturers operating in Ireland in the automotive, electronics, medical and precision engineering sectors.

The company is built on a concept of three 'I's' – continuous improvement, investment and innovation. Major capital investment throughout the 1990s has been matched by the introduction of 'continuous skills improvement programmes' and best proactive production methodologies. This has seen the company strengthen and expand skills sets and capabilities tailored to specific industry sectors.

Pat the Baker

Pat the Baker has enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with BME over the last number of years. BME offers both formal advice and guidance in relation to the provision of quality training. It also affords Pat the Baker a platform for developing relationships with companies in the Border, Midlands and Eastern region thereby allowing Pat the Baker to develop training through expert advice, guidance and experience of other organisations in the region.

Case Study 7

Digital Media Forum Skillnet (DMFS)

Helping SMEs to Compete in the Fast-changing World of Digital Media

Key Data

Promoter
Digital Media Forum Ltd

Sector

Services

Membership

23 Member Companies

No of Trainees

366

Key Linkages

Digital Hub
Development Agency
Diageo Liberties Learning Initiative

Type of Training

Executive Development
Management Training
Sales and Marketing

Certification

FETAC

Origins and Aims

The Digital Media Forum Skillnet (DMFS) was formed in 2004 and is based in and around The Digital Hub in the Liberties area of Dublin City. The Skillnet is a cluster of entrepreneurial digital media companies who operate across the entire range of digital media, namely in the digital film, animation, television, business publishing (including web design) and e-learning industries.

A Training Needs Analysis (TNA) carried out on behalf of DMFS found that owner-managers of digital media

companies have an abundance of creative and technical excellence, but can fall short when it comes to business skills. The Skillnet aims to meet these and other resource needs through co-operation and self-help.

The Skillnet is operated through a limited company – Digital Media Forum Ltd. – under the directorship of a voluntary board of representatives from the sector.



Challenges Faced

Typically members of this Skillnet are already highly trained in their respective areas of technical expertise but have limited business skills. Training in this emerging sector has to date been largely problematic and sporadic. Business skills training specific to this sector is not widely available and there is no established culture of human resource development among this highly creative workforce operating at the cutting edge of technology.

Initially the Skillnet met with some scepticism from potential member companies regarding the benefits of training. This was soon dispelled when companies saw the customised nature of what was being proposed and the fact that training would be specific to their individual business needs.

The wider vision for the network was also important in getting member company buy-in. The promoters saw the Skillnet as being a powerful cluster of digital media companies – small individually but strong as a group – using training as both a first step in that process as well as a lever to establish

networking opportunities. Member companies grew to view the Skillnet as a mechanism to incubate ideas before bringing them to market. It is envisaged that this incubation idea will eventually lead to the establishment of a research and development fund and ultimately project funding, through venture capital.

Benefits Realised

Between 2002 and 2005 over 366 trainees participated in 50 training programmes and 7 separate network events.

Network Impact

- 89% of companies indicated that the Training Networks Programme is an effective model for the delivery of training to companies
- 56% of companies surveyed indicated that their training spend had increased by 96% since joining the Skillnet
- 33% of participating companies developed a training plan for the first time

Company Outputs

- increase in productivity
- increase in sales
- improved customer satisfaction
- improved team working and staff morale

"We are literally on the cusp of convergence of industries. The training and networking we are undertaking through the Skillnet is absolutely vital to prepare member enterprises for the opportunities that are becoming available in the global market."

Neil Leyden, chair of the DMFS Steering Committee.

Company Profile

Journeyman Productions Ltd

A founding member of DMFS, Journeyman Productions Ltd is a full-service media production company, providing products and services for the audio-visual, interactive digital media and publishing markets.

Experience to date includes:

Audio Visual Productions

Offering high quality, cost effective and affordable audio visual production along with the development of broadcast projects and non-broadcast projects in film, television, animation and convergent media.

Interactive Media and Digital Media

Delivering broadcast project (or brands) with added value digital media elements – websites, DVD, CD-Rom, Interactive TV, mobile applications, etc.

Publishing

Running an online and offline publishing business that works synergistically with the production and interactive media business across a range of projects and platforms. The company also manages a number of online/offline publishing projects for corporate clients in the technology/digital media area – ezines, magazines, etc.

According to Colin O'Scolai, managing director of Journeyman Productions, the greatest opportunity for digital media companies is to be first off the mark in developing new technologies and entering new markets. "As a company we want to get our products out internationally and in a timely and efficient manner. In order to expand, entrepreneurs need the correct training and understanding of how to do that. This is where the help of Skillnets has been crucial to date."

Case Study 8

ITAG Skillnet

Local Responses to Challenges Faced by IT Companies

Key Data

Promoter
Information Technology
Association of Galway

Sector

Technology

Membership

32 Member Companies

No of Trainees

772

Key Linkages

Dublin Institute of
Technology

Type of Training

Technical and
Professional Skills

Certification

ILM, ISEB, Microsoft

Origins and Aims

The Information Technology Association of Galway (ITAG) established the ITAG Skillnet in 2002 to address training deficiencies within the sector locally and to overcome barriers to training arising from cost and location.

Most of the 32 member firms are SMEs but the leading multinationals in the IT sector in the region are also involved. Training has been delivered to 772 trainees both on a technical and professional basis and in an easily accessible modular format.

The Skillnet is managed by a Steering Group of the members and is facilitated by ITAG.

Challenges Faced

Geographic location is a significant predictor of training take-up by Irish companies and this is particularly so among new and emerging sectors such as information and communication technologies. Most training providers are concentrated in the greater Dublin region and this creates challenges for regionally based companies.

With the foundation of the ITAG Skillnet, firms in the Galway region now have access to leading-edge training programmes that stand comparison with courses being provided by any of the larger multinational corporations.

Locally delivered and centrally negotiated training means that training is cheaper and many more courses can be run in-house. The provision of quality local training solutions requires a professional vendor selection and negotiation process, and this is one key area where the ITAG Skillnet has provided much added value to member companies.



Benefits Realised

ITAG Skillnet devised a 'technical leadership skills stream', which identified the core competencies needed by team leaders in the sector and put together a flexible modular programme which employees can complete as required. The Skillnet oversaw the first Guerrilla ASP.NET specialised seminar in Ireland, and also worked with Microsoft to deliver the company's first training seminar in the west of Ireland. The Skillnet also oversaw the launch of the EqualSkills programme for employees with low basic skills.

Network Impact

- Over 60% of member companies reported that they had increased their training spend by as much as 20%
- 83% of companies indicated that the programme was a very cost-effective option for them
- 55 different training programmes were offered on a wide range of topics

Company Outputs

- improved employee satisfaction
- improved quality
- improved networking amongst member companies
- maintenance efficiencies
- better linkage between skills profile and skills needs

Company Profiles

Storm Technology

Storm Technology is delighted to be an active member of the ITAG Skillnet. Together with other local companies in the Galway area, we are able to combine our training needs, to identify/compile highly relevant training courses that can be delivered in a cost effective manner. By pooling our training needs with other companies, we can achieve economies of scale that allow us to acquire trainers.

Siebel Systems

"Siebel Systems is extremely pleased to be part of the ITAG Skillnet which offers a unique value proposition to our business activities in Galway. We appreciate the broad mix of both technical and professional courses which are ideally suited to the diverse teams working within our company.

Programmes take place within the local area and this greatly helps to limit travel and expense, allowing our employees to accomplish more. The programme also delivers a compelling return on investment, crucial to employer participation in training. ITAG courses consistently provide the key learnings sought by our employees, while also helping management to enhance employee satisfaction and employee skill levels - all at an ultra competitive cost."

Patrick Scully, Director, Finance Operations EMEA.

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Skillnets Stakeholders:



An Bord Fiontar, Tionscail agus Fiontairíocht
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