

A ladder to new skills

As a new Community learning centre opens at hosiery firm Courtaulds (UK) in Derbyshire, we learn how it is helping members boost their skills and qualifications whatever their age.



Carol Wilton receiving her certificate from Mick Brightman (left) and Roy Rickhuss

Carol Wilton and Pat Pinnock have worked at Courtaulds' West Mill in Belper, Derbyshire, for nearly 80 years in total. Both left school without qualifications and started work with the hosiery firm. But now, thanks to a joint venture between Community and the company, they are getting the chance to 'learn as they earn' at a new onsite learning centre.

In March, the Community branch signed a learning agreement with Courtaulds, enabling union members to have access to computer training and study support. The new Mill Head Learning Centre had its official opening in mid October, which national officer Roy Rickhuss and other guests attended. Now fully up and running for all 410 employees to use, initially 10 learners tested out how the centre would work with the firm's shift patterns.



Union Learning Reps Shirley Vernon (left) and Lorraine Scattergood (far right) with Tracy Clarke and Roy Rickhuss

Carol and Pat are two of the 'pioneering 10' and despite being aged 60 and 58 respectively, they don't see age as a barrier to learning. 'While I left school at 15 with no qualifications, I've learned a lot at work, done computer and textile testing courses for my current job as a lab assistant. I see young people with qualifications and think I'd like some too,' Carol explains. 'Through the learning centre, I'm doing a literacy course and I hope to do Maths next. I'm not ready to give up on work, or learning, yet!'

Like Carol, Pat has worked her way up – from the dyehouse to quality control and is now a senior operator overseeing finishing work. 'I've been too busy working and living to chase qualifications,' she says. 'But now I've got the chance to better my computer skills, which are so useful nowadays. A lot of information is online so I can work on our computer at home.'

So what do they hope to gain? 'I'm doing it for myself, for my enjoyment,' says Carol, and for Pat it's about being more computer literate. She adds: 'Being onsite makes it easier. There are few learning facilities nearby and if I had to travel miles to study I doubt I'd do it.' Carol agrees, adding: 'Given the credit crunch, everyone needs all the skills and qualifications they can get.'

The learning centre is a true partnership between the union and the company. The firm has provided the premises, internet access and reasonable time off for study, Communitas, Community's training arm has provided PCs, and other resources, and organised for Derby College to deliver the courses and learning support.

'It's been hard work but worth it. We were trying to change a culture of just employing and training people for work to a learning culture for all,' explains Communitas' Mick Brightman,

who along with branch secretary Tracy Clarke, union learning reps Lorraine Scattergood and Shirley Vernon, and HR manager Melanie Freeman, has been instrumental in the centre's development. Melanie says: 'The new learning centre gives our employees the opportunity to develop work and life skills, while Courtaulds benefits from a motivated workforce, increased productivity and improved customer service. The centre is also a means of attracting a wide variety of age groups into the industry. We all win.'

'The centre is just starting out,' adds branch secretary Tracy Clarke 'and we hope to offer more courses with nationally recognised qualifications soon. It's important that employees realise the centre is theirs - they chose its name, their union membership made it happen and now it's up to them to grab this opportunity to learn before, during or after the working day.'



Pat Pinnock receiving her certificate from Mick Brightman (left) and Roy Rickhuss