

**THE MERSEYSIDE
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICT) SECTOR**



SKILLS
ENABLING MERSEYSIDE

CASE STUDY PROFILE >>>

AN EU AWARD, WORLD MARKET AND SKILLS SPRINGBOARD ON MERSEYSIDE

People matter at Brainboxes. Customers and employees are valued highly. As part of the strong ICT SME community that has clustered at Liverpool's Wavertree Technology Park, the company is setting a number of challenging precedents.

As a specialist serial and Bluetooth manufacturer for the high end of the market, where close quality control is essential, Brainboxes is defying the trend to export production of PC data communications hardware to remote, low-cost global centres. Instead, through the SkillWorks programme it has invested in the skills of people on Merseyside to deliver an outstanding R&D department and matching manufacturing capability.



Brainboxes breaks the mould in many ways. Since its inception in 1984, and with an ever-growing workforce, it has carved out a global niche market for extremely high quality serial communication cards used widely in retail point-of-sale (EPoS) terminals and the medical, financial and general industrial sectors.

The Brainboxes Bluetooth Compact Flash card recently won the Mobile Computing category in the Best of Microsoft Tech Ed 2005 Europe Awards. Announced in Amsterdam, this effectively marked the beginning of a vigorous new international marketing drive. Interestingly, judges commented that they had made the award partly on Brainboxes' technical accomplishment but also because of its commitment to continual development.

This philosophy also applies equally to skills. Investment by Brainboxes in

a sound infrastructure to support exports considerably pre-dates the award. Like many small companies determined to make the most of every opportunity, it has taken maximum advantage of the SkillWorks programme for bespoke training tailored to build a world-class team.

'Responding positively to customer demand, design, manufacture and quality control all have their roots firmly here on Merseyside,' explains Brainboxes' Managing Director, Eamonn Walsh. 'We rely absolutely on the flexibility, competence and initiative of our staff. To make customers a priority, it is essential to make our employees a priority.'

When the company became one of only 50 worldwide able to produce accredited Bluetooth™ SIG qualified products for customers such as IBM, Reuters and Fujitsu, SkillWorks was pivotal in equipping staff with matching competencies.

Brainboxes' achievement is partially based on the Lean Manufacturing methodology. In addition, SkillWorks funding has given it access to a range of courses that included the Six Sigma programme.

Six Sigma is a proven route to better business practices used extensively by major organisations such as General Electric (GE), Sony, Jaguar and Motorola. Six Sigma's disciplined, data-



driven approach that strives for near perfection, offers a rigorous analytical process which trained staff can apply generally as a methodology for anticipating and resolving problems.

Achieving Six Sigma means that a process must not produce more than 3.4 defects per million, a defect being defined as anything outside customer specifications. The concept is a journey to improved profitability based on reducing errors and constantly raising overall standards within a company.

For Brainboxes, Six Sigma has brought twin benefits. While allowing the company to improve overall operational performance, the training has also meant a great reduction in quality issues.

'The effects are so significant that they clearly help us to differentiate ourselves and our offer from our main competitors,' adds Eamonn. 'One very tangible result is that SkillWorks funding has helped us to roll out ten new products vital to sales and growth.'

Most recently, Brainboxes was named Manufacturer of the Year at the Elektra European Electronics Industry Awards, an accolade seen as a testament to the company's efforts to remain competitive in an industry where outsourcing production to the Far East is increasingly commonplace.

www.brainboxes.com

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HOME-GROWN WORLD-CLASS SKILLS

Brainboxes has deliberately cornered a specific and crucial part of the ICT hardware market. Its client-base is international, as are its recent award achievements. Essential to the company's success strategy is personnel development and skills investment. Brainboxes has made exemplary use of what SkillWorks can offer (previous page)

SKILLWORKS

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SKILLS - MERSEYSIDE = TALENT

As we all strive to project the Merseyside ICT cluster to a much wider world audience, what we are really selling is people - the skills and qualities of our region's working population. This is what attracts investors. This is also the essential feature of clustering. The lure is not big glass palaces, or lucrative grants. It's the ability for businesses to recruit easily and cost-effectively, and then retain good quality staff. Hence, if you locate similar businesses together, the people and skills inevitably develop around them. This is not some new fangled theory; it has been proven custom and practice for hundreds of years. Note the traditional propensity for traders of many types to congregate in specific areas where their deep skills are developed and retained. For the supply-side viewpoint, it means that a skilled workforce can reside around a local centre and concentrate on developing its craft. The modern equivalent is found in San Jose, Santa Clara, Boston, The Washington Triangle, Bangalore, Taiwan.... the list goes on.

More importantly, a skilled workforce attracts more talent and more specialists, lured by a location that appreciates and rewards their knowledge. Therefore, to show the world that you are in an ideal place to locate new ICT businesses, you must demonstrate that the skilled individuals you will depend upon can and do indeed work, live and play there. Merseyside offers strong propositions on every count. An academic culture runs through Merseyside life. The University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) are recognised as offering world-class learning to UK and many overseas students. LJMU has the International Centre for Digital Content (ICDC), truly a 'one-off' in terms of being the closest institution in Europe to a Digital Business School. Liverpool University's Grid Computing Centre at AIMES again provides a degree of speciality within the IT world that is scarce. It is vital to the sub- region's attraction.

Lifestyle is important. There is a huge variety of residential options round Merseyside and beyond. The chart on page 9 shows the demographics of some 16 million people within a two-hour commuting distance of Merseyside. Combined with the Lake District's proximity to the north, the Yorkshire Dales to the east, Peak District to the south and Snowdonia to the west, the 'live, work and play' factors become very powerful. But it all comes down to skills. This is our true untapped potential. In Merseyside, we enjoy one of the most liberal, least bureaucratic Skills Development Programmes in the UK - SkillWorks. This is a unique bounty that will only be available to Merseyside once and needs to be exploited and applied for its economic benefit. The beauty of the SkillWorks concept is that all training is carefully designed to respond to the problems perceived by individual companies - a total reversal of conventional syllabus-led course training. In reality, any training that can be shown to have value to YOUR business can be supported. In addition, with Merseyside ICT SMEs able to judge their own skills and development needs, 60% of costs can be covered by the LSC, coupled uniquely with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Later in these pages, David Bold, Deputy Chair of Merseyside ICT, looks at conditions applying to this offer, which has limited duration. My advice is to carefully identify bespoke training and skills upgrading that can positively enhance your business performance and talk to us NOW via skillworks@merseysideict.org.uk. We will ensure your best case is put forward to the SkillWorks programme.

Steve Smith
ICT Industry Sector Director
Merseyside ICT

SKILLWORKS - WORKING FOR SMES AND INWARD INVESTORS



SkillWorks is here to help Merseyside ICT SMEs develop skills bases for better business and to generate a resource pool attracting inward investors. While many have benefited already, more of the industry's crucial backbone – small companies employing fewer than ten people – should take advantage of the programme. Training is demand-led – you decide which skills will boost your business. A training package is then built around you, with a 60% cost incentive

MERSEYSIDE'S SKILLS ADVANTAGE

Skills is a word on everyone's lips these days, although not everyone knows where training help is available. In fact, there is plenty of help for small firms, says Merseyside ICT Deputy Chair, David Bold.

Larger companies generally know where to turn for training. It is the smaller ICT entrepreneurs, potentially with the most to gain, that often miss out on schemes intended specifically to help them. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has a budget in excess of £300 million to spend on Merseyside skills development. Where does it go? Most is for post-16 education. However, a substantial portion is for workforce development.

That gives Merseyside ICT Industry members important options. Employers with staff aged 16 to 24 might seriously consider Modern Apprenticeships. If individual staff have fewer than five O-Level qualifications, or their English and/or mathematical skills need to be of O-Level standard, funding is also available.



"The ICT sector on Merseyside is categorised by an overwhelming number of very small businesses. If we are to attract ICT suppliers and ICT users here, then we need to be able to offer a pool of resources, skilled and qualified."

Merseyside ICT Deputy Chair, David Bold

However, the jewel in the crown for Merseyside SMEs is SkillWorks. The beauty of the SkillWorks concept is that training is designed to respond to problems and goals identified by you, the employer - a total reversal of conventional syllabus-led course training.

In addition, if training is in line with your business plan and will safeguard jobs or create growth, 60% of the costs can be

covered, subject to certain conditions that are outlined in FAQs on page 5.

Once you have identified your skills needs, we will help you to access the SkillWorks programme where an appropriate package, delivered by local training companies, will be structured and administered for you by an approved Provider.

SKILLWORKS – AN OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSFORM YOUR SME

For ICT SMEs, there are three key messages.

[1] Act soon.

[2] SkillWorks applies to any company employing no more than 250 people.

[3] For more sector information and help, contact skillworks@merseysideict.org.uk.

SkillWorks is a programme unique to Merseyside SMEs that encourages employers to train their staff. It can fund any training support for your business that is not a legal requirement.

Merseyside ICT has dual goals for the local ICT industry. The first is to promote a thriving sub-regional ICT goods and services supply side by helping small, forward-looking and innovative companies to improve their efficiency and performance. The sector's other aim is to see that Merseyside becomes increasingly attractive to major inward

investors who will boost the local economy and, in turn, strengthen the ICT sector.

A major incentive to incoming businesses is the presence a large population of existing companies 'badged' with supplier certification. SkillWorks is an opportunity for more SMEs to reinforce their own prospects and that of the sector by gaining industry vendor qualifications.

As small companies grow into larger firms, and their founding entrepreneurs become increasingly involved with corporate issues,

business development and long-term career planning, then skills training for better management and to bring on new managers, or simply to make more efficient daily use of software, can become vitally important.

In small, tightly-knit SMEs, where delivering to the customer must be the daily priority, making time to examine the big picture and plan strategically for the future is difficult. SkillWorks creates a perfect opportunity.

SKILLWORKS PROVES FLEXIBLE, DEMAND-LED TRAINING IS A MERSEYSIDE SUCCESS

The Learning and Skills Council's SkillWorks is now in its third year, with businesses finding real benefits in the bespoke training programmes they help to create.

SkillWorks can provide Merseyside SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises employing one to 250 people) with subsidies towards any training that will help their businesses develop and grow.

Co-financed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and European Social Fund (ESF), SkillWorks' success is due to its flexibility. The programme is not about courses run at pre-determined locations; it is about devising a training plan that fits in with the realities of business life.

The way forward is for businesses to select one of SkillWorks' accredited training partners – providers - who then helps them to devise a training plan. Providers can give advice about a whole range of LSC programmes and support, which in some instances offers grants of up to 100%.

THE EASY CUSTOMER JOURNEY FOR SMEs



SkillWorks' unique brokerage system means that any training a provider cannot supply is sub-contracted out to ensure individual businesses needs are met.

More than 3,300 Merseyside SMEs have already benefited from SkillWorks. Around 20,000 individual training

programmes were completed in the programme's first two years.

As a result, not only have hard-pressed business managers been able to stretch their training budget to the limit, SkillWorks has also helped them to win new contracts, reduce costs and maximise their business potential.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Who can claim SkillWorks funding?

A: Any SME with an office in an approved post code area. The definition of an SME and a list of approved post codes are to be found at -

<http://www.theskillworks.co.uk/eligibility.html>

Q: What training can be funded?

A: Any training relevant to your business that is not a mandatory requirement. For example, Corgi gas fitter training could not be funded.

Q: What exactly is funded?

A: The cost of training and reasonable travel costs. The additional cost of gaining a qualification cannot be funded.

Q: Who provides the training?

A: Whoever you and the SkillWorks Provider agree is the best source for your needs.

Q: Can I specify where I want to go for training?

A: Not entirely. Your preference will be considered but the SkillWorks Provider is charged by the LSC to ensure training is delivered by the most efficient and effective route. The decision to fund a particular course is at the Provider's discretion.

Q: What if I do not want to go where the Provider specifies, or the Provider turns me down?

A: You can opt to try one of the other Providers to see if they will accommodate you.

Q: Is there a lot of paperwork?

A: This is a Government scheme, so there is paperwork but it is kept to a minimum. The goal is to get you the training, not tie you up in paperwork.

Q: Are there any other fees?

A: Yes, you may be charged for a Training Needs Analysis (TNA) which is necessary to ensure the training need is understood. Your Provider may charge a fee to cover their costs. However, these fees will also be 60% funded.

Q: Is there a limit on the amount of funding I am entitled to?

A: Yes, each SME is limited to a total of £60,000, including any SkillWorks training you may have received last year.

NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE SKILLWORKS SUCCESS

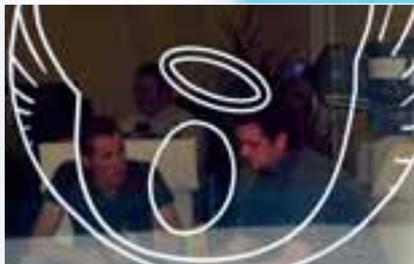
Nothing beats leading by example, as SkillWorks can prove. Many companies and individuals have already benefited from new and enhanced ICT skills. As case-studies demonstrate, the scope is only limited – or not limited – by the perception and commitment of the people involved.

HEAVENLY SOLUTIONS FOR ANGEL

SkillWorks helped Merseyside-based ICT company, Angel Solutions, build a long-term training plan resulting in three industry-leading products.

Five years ago, Andy Kent saw the need for software analysing student-level examination result data from schools.

He set up Angel Solutions and developed Keypas for the National Consortium of Examination Results (NCER), that represents approximately 150 local authorities in England. Contracts to develop additional products followed swiftly. The company expanded to offer private and public sector clients web and software solutions. When NCER asked Angel



Solutions to develop a more advanced application School Profile+, an industry first, Angel Solutions turned to SkillWorks for training assistance.

'To be "future-proofed", the software had to be produced in a language we hadn't used before, involving essential ASP.net and SQL Server training,' explains James Burch, Angel Solutions' Project Manager. With SkillWorks partners, the company also identified broader management/administrative training needs, such as the Project Management methodology – PRINCE2.

'Most importantly, SkillWorks kick-started us into establishing a training plan,' James adds. 'It helped us realise that training is integral to any company's growth and development.

'Staff have benefited greatly because training has clearly raised the bar in terms of that which our company and individuals can achieve. Employee satisfaction is at an all time high because our people now see



Angel Solutions is a forward-thinking company, investing in employee career development as well as products.'

Recently awarded a Top 10 spot in the Deloitte Fast 50 Awards, and with three industry-leading ASP.net SQL Server applications in development, the company is anticipating another year of record achievement.



Angel Solutions Ltd

www.angelsolutions.co.uk

PERSONAL AMBITION

Julie Napier is celebrating success in gaining her driving licence – her European Computer Driving Licence that is. The ECDL is increasingly seen as a competence hallmark by employers recruiting proficient office staff. Many workers recognise personal advantages in the qualification that sets standards in Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, Internet Explorer and Outlook. Julie is no exception, although qualifying presented special challenges. Julie is blind.

'I decided I wanted the qualification and was determined to get it. Training is generally visually-based as the most cost-efficient form of delivery. For me, animations are obviously of little use. I use

a Braille reader and voice-recognition system, neither of which are effective with graphics. We tried many options but none offered a clear solution,' she explains.

But Julie and her skills trainer, Sharon Samson of Software Generation, are determined people made of sterner stuff. 'Most click and drag moves have a



Sharon, Julie and Keats

corresponding keyboard alternative that people often overlook. But Sharon would not give in until we had the answer in every case. On many occasions she went away to research the answers. I think it was our personal rapport that won through in the end,' Julie adds.

She is hoping her determination and success will make a difference to her career.

What personal targets are you setting?



www.sgtraining.co.uk

EVERTON FOOTBALL CLUB SCORES WITH SKILLWORKS ICT

‘Everton is The People’s Club and well-known for being family-orientated,’ says Customer Relations and Training Manager, Leigh McLean. ‘Employees, including many relatives, join us at Goodison Park from all walks of life and the club thrives on their enthusiasm.’



The club’s Extra Time Study Support Centre helps schools to develop pupil motivation by improving their personal and social skills. A specific aim is helping young people achieve more through information and communication technology (ICT) skills. It was natural then for Everton to look internally and use SkillWorks to help its own 220 staff optimise the company’s business performance in the modern world, from managers to receptionists and accountants to administrators.

‘Many employees have not had formal training in their present jobs, even in the use of computers,’ Leigh explains. ‘With so many people, departments and skills, we have carefully structured our training approach, concentrating on IT skills first. ‘Initially, I am taking a five-day ‘train-the-trainer’ course through SkillWorks. I’ll follow this with an IT training package and customer relations course which will allow

me to roll out IT tuition progressively through the organisation,’ adds Leigh.

‘That will give many people a common grounding in basic computer programmes, from Outlook to Word, Excel and PowerPoint.

‘Clearly, this is only a starting point. Later, we will consider project management and specialist off-the-pitch skills!’



Adlib Audio and the sound of SkillWorks success >>> page 16

ITQ – THE NEW NVQ STANDARD

ITQ is the new, flexible IT user qualification and training package tailored by employers for employers to ensure staff are trained in precisely the IT skills they need.

IT proficiency is as important in many UK jobs as numeracy and literacy. For many SMEs, ITQ now offers a new, flexible route for equipping employees with specific IT skills.



Delivered by accredited training providers, ITQ is designed primarily for IT users - not professional IT engineers and developers - and is benchmarked to the e-skills National Occupational Standards for IT Users. As a result, both companies and staff members know exactly what to expect, while employee performance at work can be certified. (ITQ is available for adults and young people as a new Apprenticeship Framework for IT Users - details and free

documentation are available via the web address below.)

ITQ has been designed to respond to what companies have reported they want from an IT user qualification and is backed by both awarding bodies and employers. It allows different skills to be learned and assessed at different levels. Because many employers say they need staff to be trained on software unique to their businesses, ITQ allows the inclusion of bespoke units.

Where staff already hold an IT user qualification, this can count towards an ITQ, removing the de-motivation of starting again or demonstrating existing skills. Since many employers consider NVQ assessments bureaucratic, steps have been taken with Awarding Bodies and QCA, so that much assessment now occurs ‘naturally’ through company systems already in place.

ITQ flexibility requires companies to think carefully about the IT user skills their staff will need to meet business demands. The answer often lies in simplicity rather than complexity and to help, e-skills UK has created the e-skills Passport as a straightforward online tool that quickly leads to the right answer.

Providers help to ensure that identified skills requirements do add up to the appropriate level qualification. However, so that companies can experiment with options themselves, a unit calculator is available.

e-skillsuk

www.e-skills.com/ITQ/Introduction/556

MERSEYSIDE'S ACADEMIC SKILLS DYNAMO

Merseyside's ICT industry could not be better placed when it comes to academic support in skills generation. The sub-region has a modern tradition of learning at university level that now offers portals to business for the refinement and transfer of skills at an outstandingly sophisticated level.

UNIVERSITIES ANTICIPATING ENTERPRISE

Academia can be the crucible for responsive skills development that is best able to accurately forecast and foster new skill sets well ahead of actual market demand.



This publication has featured Skillworks as a key up-skilling enabler for Merseyside's workforce. Yet it forms only part of the complete picture. The Merseyside economy's real knowledge power-base centres round the prestigious tripos of the University of Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores University and Liverpool Hope University. Here, we give key current information about how the first two are bringing commerce and their graduate populations together closely. Professor Florida, the famous American cluster theorist, preached that the '3 T's - Technology, Talent and Tolerance' were

crucial in developing a modern knowledge economy built round a technology cluster. This mantra is even more vital to Merseyside where universities are the bedrock of our local economy. Their specialities in medicine, business, bio-tech, computer sciences and digital content underpin and support Merseyside's crucial sectors. Merseyside ICT has formed strategic alliances with appropriate faculties and business schools in our local universities to ensure that collaboration between research facilities is paramount. This is enabling greater communication between institutions and business,

resulting in the more rapid commercialisation of innovative products and services. These unions are in their infancy but already producing a more cohesive route map for companies. If you would like further detail, please contact Merseyside ICT. We will be delighted to champion your engagement with our university colleagues.

Steve Smith
ICT Industry Sector Director
Merseyside ICT

ICDC'S DIGITALINC CRADLES DIGITAL CONTENT SKILLS

Skills development is a valuable currency for transferring innovative digital knowledge into the real world, with the International Centre for Digital Content committed to creating Merseyside's own mint, explains Business & Incubation Manager, Peter Leather.

Genius, said electric light-bulb inventor, Thomas Edison, is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

When it comes to attracting, retaining - and particularly home-growing - digital entrepreneurialism, Merseyside has a purpose-designed environment for today's IT pioneers to experiment, hone and refine their skills on impressive market-based projects.

ICDC, part of the Digital Academy project at Liverpool John Moores University, begins with the major advantage of already having an extremely high percentage of inspiration and innovation. There are some very talented people at its new, impressive state-of-the-art home - and increasingly prestigious international address - Liverpool Digital.

ICDC is the digital content solutions hub for Liverpool John Moores University. Strongly supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA), ICDC's triple mission is to teach, research and take outstanding breakthroughs in digital know-how out to the world of commercial realities.

At one end of the scale, by encouraging the skills latent in 14 to 19 year-old young people, it is helping to underwrite Merseyside's future skills backbone. Another important interface to industry is a continual programme of skills training, workshops and seminars delivered by highly-qualified professionals, giving SMEs and other organisations regular access to cutting-edge concepts and the thinking that drives them.

However, Liverpool Digital is now also the home of Digitalinc, the incubation centre run by ICDC that is spinning out applications which, if not pure genius, are certainly changing the face of how business, commerce, industry - and the community - perform. Even a brief look at the combined client list of Digitalinc's occupants shows it to be peppered with pedigree names, such as the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA), DEFRA and the Inland Revenue Services. Digitalinc enterprising leaders are now routinely welcomed to high-level meetings in North America, Canada, Australia, the Far East and China. The key is not only in emphasising new technology but also on its exciting practical application.

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BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Liverpool John Moores University's Digital Academy project will become the focus of learning for Merseyside's new media industry, widening the International Centre for Digital Content's (ICDC) remit by exploiting its high-level knowledge and skills within the community and schools sector.

'The Digital Academy will only run learning programmes closely aligned to the needs of the new digital economy,' explains Tony Hughes, Assistant Director of Digital Academy, which encompasses ICDC and

new and emerging tools to succeed in media and creative organisations, plus others. The aim is to benefit local and national industry. But key to the sustainability of Merseyside industry is that



its incubator, Digitalinc. 'It will work at all times with relevant private sector companies and associated organisations to ensure a complete match between educational supply and market demand. The Academy is geared to helping its learners build skills that will result in appropriate employment.

'The overlap between ICDC's research activities and the learning programmes will be deliberately defined so that people developing learning activities and those delivering them, such as teachers and mentors, will both be constantly updated and informed. At the same time, it will be important to maintain an ever evolving set of practitioner skills relevant to the industry as it is currently and will be in the future, rather than as it was in the past,' he adds.

Digital Academy's mission is to provide the skills and techniques enabling individuals in the area to develop and realise their creative talents, empowering them with

the area's local talent base is suitably trained and people's skills updated on a regular basis. This goal means that the Digital Academy is not only intended to help students within the university. It also places heavy emphasis on its lifelong learning programme. Equally vital is engaging overlooked groups - popularly known as the 'digital underclass' - from disadvantaged areas with no previous access to the level of skills and expertise that the Digital Academy can provide.

'Each Digital Academy learning programme stresses the role of content, while helping those with no previous skills to develop the skills needed to create content. The programmes, which are practical, vocational, community based, experiential and active, have changed the very career patterns of many participants,' says Tony.

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www.icdc.org.uk

WINNING HAND AT PLAYING GAMES

Liverpool John Moores University's (LJMU) School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences is an established leader in SEVERAL ICT disciplines. It has links to, and collaboration with, many international universities and companies, such as Selex Communications (formerly Marconi), Sony, Taiwan National Telecommunications Company and Unilever. Research and collaboration includes technologies such as wireless networking, computer security, networked appliances, and games technology. Technology transfer and advanced training is further helped by two yearly events held at Liverpool: (a) The International Computer Game Design and Technology Conference workshop (GDTW) (www.livjm.ac.uk/gdtw) which showcases the cream of industrial games talent and future research, and (b) The Engineering and Physical Research Council (EPSRC) supported conference addressing the Convergence of Telecommunications, Networking and Broadcasting (PG Net) (www.livjm.ac.uk/pgnet), which provides a forum for the training of the next generation of UK PhD students in this rapidly advancing field. The latter is in its 7th year.

The School provides state-of-the-art degree ICT programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, addressing the training needs in many of these areas. For example, Computer Games Technology has support from many of leading industry names, such as Sony, Nintendo, Rare and Blitz Games and association with many of the industry's leading lights via its association with the International Game Developers Association (IGDA). Professional placements are a fundamental aspect of all degree programmes within the school and strong links can again be found in the 600+ companies (both locally and nationally) currently working with the school to help place more than 120 students annually to gain valuable work experience and contribute to the growth and economy of the UK.

Madjid Merabti
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SKILLS CATCHMENT

Some 16 million people are within two hours commuting distance of Merseyside: extensive use of broadband also integrates the region.

THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL'S BUSINESS GATEWAY

A key university mission is transferring knowledge to business. This is unfamiliar territory for many companies, as the University of Liverpool knows well. Step through its Business Gateway to a warm welcome from ten experienced business managers.

Students may face tough university entrance qualifications but entry is easy for ICT SMEs! The University of Liverpool is committed, in addition to teaching and research, to its 'third mission' – matching skills, knowledge and blue-sky thinking to the challenges of business and industry. As a Russel Group university, one of the UK's top 20 for research, it turns to profound academic and intellectual skills in generating bespoke business solutions.

'A new type of relationship has grown up between the university world and the wealth and job-creating commercial sector,' explains Mark Ratcliffe, Marketing Manager for the university's Business Gateway.



'Business people understand market-led problems and where they need specialist help to succeed. The responsibility of our team of managers, each with business experience, is to guide them effectively through the university structure towards world-class solutions. Once companies enter our Business Gateway, we introduce them confidentially to the right people.'

Innovators have enormous needs for high-level ICT expertise support in exploiting new markets. It is also clear that solutions tailored by University of Liverpool ICT specialists are often of outstanding sophistication. NASA and Motorola are just two global giants that benefit from software techniques designed by the university's Verification Laboratory. Careful software assessment saves company time, money and reputation if catastrophic failures are a possibility. The Liverpool team has verified mobile phone control designs for Motorola. It has also assessed the correctness of autonomous software components essential for NASA's Shuttle orbiter.

Since 2001, the e-Business Research Centre has pioneered the use of leading Internet technologies for improving manufacturing and competitiveness. The aim of e-business tools is to raise competitiveness of UK businesses and develop and prototype new business models that enhance the performance of Internet supply networks.

The University's expertise has also contributed to data and text mining breakthroughs, giving companies ready access to the electronic wealth information stored in many different formats - text, hypertext, still and moving images, numerical, statistical and other types of data. Before the university's 'Cheshire' search engine, it was not possible to handle, evaluate, extract, organise and present information in one consistent format.

One of the university's highest profile applied research knowledge transfer centres is AIMEs (Advanced Internet Methods and Emergent Systems). AIMEs specialises in advanced Internet technologies, and grid computing in particular. Since 2003, AIMEs has advised more than 120 businesses, created and safeguarded more than 85 jobs and spun-out five new start-up businesses. Recently, it moved into the new AIMEs Centre. Access to grid technologies on a 'computing-on-demand' basis eliminates the need for businesses to invest in expensive hardware themselves, while having recourse to substantial computing power and AIMEs's grid expertise.

'The quality of the AIMEs staff and the excellent facilities have made a significant contribution to the successful launch of the Centre and in realising our potential for turning technology and technologists into businesses and entrepreneurs,' says Director of AIMEs, Prof. Dennis Kehoe.

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APPRENTICESHIPS - A VERY MODERN ICT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT ROUTE

Apprenticeships are an exciting and effective route to sustainable skills development, mutually benefiting tomorrow's operatives, innovators and managers in parallel with today's wealth-generating enterprises.

ICT APPRENTICESHIPS OPEN EXCITING DOORS

"Apprenticeships deliver well-rounded, business-knowledgeable people, totally committed to the company. They provide a positive return on investment, are more commercially aware and understand the need for growth of the business." - BT

Apprenticeships are growing faster than any comparable programme in the UK and offer flexible new options for both IT employers and employees.

For many young people, the opportunity to gain priceless work experience in business – and an income – is often a more appropriate introduction to the high-level working environment than going directly to university. The added bonus for employers is Government aid funding.



Apprentices are motivated young people with potential to become the 'managers of the future'. Apprenticeships give them a foundation for progressing into

management roles, particularly where apprenticeship frameworks match a company's own management development programmes. Learning while working means that the knowledge apprentices accumulate is current and the practical skills they acquire, by definition, suit an organisation's business parameters.

For those individuals with the motivation and ability to go still further, 'fast-track' apprenticeships offer the prospect of gaining a full Honours degree via a Foundation Degree. After a rigorous selection process, 'Higher Apprentices' follow a quality-led, work-based training and development programme specifically designed to raise to degree level the skills of people available to the UK's modern ICT industry.

This route can be taken by students with appropriate qualifications in school, sixth-form and FE colleges. It can also be followed by advanced apprentices wanting to

progress, employees with A-Levels or equivalent educational attainments, or employees with several years of experience in the industry who have demonstrated to their employer that they are likely to succeed.

However, the main requirement is an enthusiastic interest in ICT, plus the ability and drive to succeed in the programme!

Apprenticeships are now the solution of choice for top employers that include BT, Orange, O2, Fujitsu and EDS.

Details of full benefits for staff and employers, training and qualification structures, funding support and advanced options are available online from e-skills UK via The Sector Skills Council for IT - Telecoms - Contact Centres.

www.e-skills.com/apprenticeships

QUESTIONS FREQUENTLY ASKED

e-skills UK is regularly asked questions relating to apprenticeships. Answers given frequently via its brand new dedicated website - www.e-skills.com/apprenticeships - provide precise information on: -

- Who is eligible for Apprenticeships
- The recognition of Apprenticeships qualifications
- Help available in setting up Apprenticeship programmes
- Access to copies of the Employment Rights and Responsibilities (ERR)
- Details of proxy qualifications and time limits that exempt parts of the Key Skills
- The cost of Apprenticeships
- Registering with e-skills UK to offer Apprenticeship programmes
- IT Skills currently in demand
- Date when the technical certificate became a mandatory outcome of the IT, Telecommunications, Contact Centre Advance Apprenticeship frameworks (England & Wales)
- Date when the Employment Rights and Responsibilities (ERR) became a mandatory outcome of the IT, Telecommunications, Contact Centre Apprenticeship frameworks (England & Wales)
- Use of ITQ as part of the IT User Apprenticeship

MERSEYSIDE ICT SECTOR EMPLOYER NETWORK

Long-term skills training is meaningless without a regular hand on the tiller from employers. A broader ICT skills development strategy for Merseyside is being pioneered through a new forum – the Merseyside ICT Sector Employer Network facilitated by the Learning and Skills Council – charged with defining new demand-led models that respond to real business needs.



EMPLOYERS ACCESS AND INPUT TO ICT SKILLS

The ICT Sector Employer Network provides a voice giving companies the opportunity to flag up the essential skills sets they need to remain competitive. It will provide a foundation for generating local skills solutions, says Kirsty Evans, Director of Strategy & Finance at the Learning and Skills Council.

Knowing what skills businesses need in practice is essential if we are to ensure that training provision in Merseyside can respond positively to future challenges and demands.

The ICT Sector Employer Network is a new channel allowing us to understand local employers' skill development needs accurately. There is a real opportunity for the network to become the body that organisations empowered to address skills issues actively consult and involve in future developments. Over time, we foresee the network recognised and respected as a voice to which decision-makers turn for incisive skills knowledge and advice.

Make no mistake, our aim is positive action!

We already have strong backing from e-Skills UK, the Sector Skills Council for IT, telecoms and contact centres – the people responsible for representing your sector's skills issues to Government and key agencies. This support offers great potential for Merseyside's ICT Sector to become involved at an early stage with the initiatives led by e-Skills UK in response to

sector issues. The network is also supported by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) with its annual budget exceeding £300 million for training Greater Merseyside's present and future workforce. To ensure this investment continues to be maximised, a LSC priority is to make learning truly demand-led and aligned to the needs of employers, young people and adults.

This is an outstanding opportunity for the ICT Sector to promote its practical skills agenda and directly influence the design and delivery of future training.

Network members will also agree the sector's priorities for action. These will form the basis of a plan that Merseyside ICT and LSC, supported by e-Skills UK, will address directly, or with partners. This plan will be reviewed and monitored regularly by network members so it remains pertinent, with comment and feedback encouraged. Implementing the action plan and addressing agreed priorities may take time, particularly where significant change is involved. However, there is a commitment and will to make both a reality, despite apparent difficulties. It is extremely

important to take the first crucial steps. While Merseyside ICT and the LSC will be jointly responsible for progressing the action plan and the priorities, your commitment as a concerned employer is vital. Your involvement, contribution and support will be pivotal, not only in providing a clear understanding of the issues you face, but also in leading to the creation of new opportunities for you to seize and put into effect. For the first time, the ICT Sector Employer Network aims to put employers in control!

If you would like to participate, contact ICT Industry Sector Director, Steve Smith, now: - steve.smith@merseysideict.org.uk



MERSEYSIDE ICT SECTOR EMPLOYER NETWORK – TRULY REPRESENTATIVE OF A DIVERSE SECTOR



CSC
Outsourcer to the Health Sector
350 employees



New Mind
Interactive media /
tourism software
40 employees



Connect
Software developer / trainer
90 employees



Software Generation
Trainer
35 employees

AIMS

- Advise the LSC of ICT sector skills requirements
- Champion ICT skills provision
- Improve access to training
- Upskill the ICT workforce
- Accelerate recruitment
- Address difficulties in retention
- Ensure future labour sources
- Develop training innovation



CHT
Small business solutions
8 employees



Cybertill
Broadband delivery of
EPoS systems
40 employees



Brainboxes
Hardware manufacturer
34 employees



Network Partners
Telecommunications distributor
70 employees

"Employers have a right and duty to make clear their well-informed views on skills shortfalls and training priorities. Until now, they may have had no channel for sharing their experience with skills facilitators and funders. I believe the Merseyside ICT Sector Employer Network is a turning point and urgently ask representatives from ICT companies large and small to come and join us if they feel strongly about skills development in response to real commercial needs."

Steve Smith, ICT Industry Sector Director, Merseyside ICT

ICT'S PILGRIM FATHERS RETURN

Merseyside ICT made considerable in-roads within the dynamic US east-coast ICT community during 2005. The payback has been a considerable insight into the modus operandi of America's enterprising culture. Could this be transferred to Merseyside?

A DIFFERENT WAY OF GROWING SMALL BUSINESSES

A key lesson of Boston and the New York's ICT culture is the American way of injecting high-level skills to promote small, but potentially profitable, SMEs with innovative ideas believed to have world markets.

A problem faced by many ground-breaking UK small firms is bridging the gulf between being highly promising start-ups and becoming functional mid-market enterprises that meet an international demand.

Their presence is essential but, on their own, the change is almost impossible. No real evolutionary route exists for SMEs with great ideas to gradually transform into high-hitting, medium-sized companies. To succeed, they need not a transition but a metamorphosis. Success demands an 'X' factor present in the USA that now promises to pervade the UK model.

The American way is to recognise ICT potential but not leave it to the perhaps limited discretion of the company founders. Rather, venture capitalists are introduced – plus a panoply of top-notch, skilled

professional support able to implement far-reaching business strategies – with detailed goals and positive exit strategies.

The potential of original ideas is recognised but not left within the structure of a start-up or small SME. The founding partners benefit wholeheartedly from co-operating with the 'big team' but in exchange must be prepared to give way to experts – inevitably with a larger interest – who rapidly build up a mid-market company with commercial sway. Everyone wins.

Inspiring results are seen in Boston. The model is being applied to Merseyside. The Pinnacle Programme, funded by the Government Office North West (GONW), championed by Merseyside ICT and delivered by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) is a great example. It is targeted directly at larger small enterprises, enabling

mature businesses with fresh ambitions to grow rapidly by focussing on innovation, investment and leadership.

The programme appreciates that Merseyside is home to a wealth of medium-sized companies that have grown to a substantial level of turnover and profitability but are finding it difficult to clear the next hurdle and succeed as internationally competitive businesses.



For more information on accessing the Pinnacle Programme, contact Steve Smith at Merseyside ICT via steve.smith@merseysideict.org.uk.

CASE STUDY PROFILE >>>

THE SOUND OF SUCCESS

A sound and audio visual company is hitting the high notes after SkillWorks helped it to improve efficiency and profitability.

Adlib Audio in Speke was already a thriving concern with contracts in the UK and throughout Europe. However, its managers realised that through SkillWorks training they could do even more.

The company caters for a wide variety of entertainment events, including major concerts for mega-stars like Scissor Sisters, David Bowie, Texas, The Coral, Milo plus the Glastonbury Festival.

SkillWorks enabled Adlib Audio to become less dependent on external

resources for portable appliance testing, rigging and HGV-FLT. General training in areas such as Health and Safety, basic IT and First-Aid also freed time for the directors to concentrate on business development.

'The SkillWorks training enables us to invest heavily in our staff to widen their skill set. There is a marked improvement in productivity and they are more likely to remain with us because they can see us investing in their future,' says director David Kay.

'SkillWorks training in Health and Safety and First-Aid assures us our employees are working in a safe environment, which helps to fulfil our duty of care,' he adds.

Time to expand the company allowed David to work closely with American and UK suppliers to launch his concept using Wi-Fi internet technology to control larger concerts. Today, the company assists other audio companies worldwide.

<http://www.adlibaudio.co.uk>



KEY ORGANISATIONS WHO SUPPORT MERSEYSIDE ICT

UNITED WE STAND

Our strength is our members – their ideas, skills, initiative, adaptability and ambitions.

Members are invited to play an active role in a series of district-level events, seminars and co-operative ventures that are organised through the year.



MAKING CONTACT

We would like to discuss how we can help you to make a success of ICT-based projects on Merseyside.

In particular, we would like to show you the special strengths, skills, financial advantages and support that Merseyside offers. However, we appreciate that any decisions you make must be based on reliable information. If you would like more detail, or to talk to us in confidence, please contact: -

Steve Smith
ICT Industry Sector Director
Merseyside ICT

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t: +44 (0)151 221 3529
f: +44 (0)151 220 5715
www.merseysideict.org.uk

1 Faraday Road
Wavertree Technology Park
Liverpool L13 1EH

The Merseyside ICT Sector represents a series of geographically defined district clusters in which ICT companies co-operate rather than compete, join in collaborative ventures, provide a voice in local decision-making and exchange technical and commercial ideas. To talk to the clusters directly, please contact: -

Knowsley ICT Cluster
Chair - Eric Menzies
BEC Systems Limited

Tel 0151 290 1111
eric@becsystems.com

Liverpool ICT Cluster
Chair - Johnny Read
Village Software Engineering Ltd

Tel 0151 709 7728
read@villagesoftware.co.uk

St Helens High Technology Group
Chair - Kevin Cliffe
Lake Technologies Limited

Tel 01744 622304
kcliffe@laketechnologies.co.uk

Sefton ICT Cluster
Chair - Ed Horwich
Pacificstream.com

Tel 08456 444 345
support@pacificstream.com

Wirral ICT Cluster
Chair - David Roberts
Amatica Limited

Tel 0151 650 6991
david.roberts@amatica.com



Visit our website at
www.merseysideict.org.uk