

Timing is Everything – UK Waste Management Vocational Qualifications and the Mentoring Role

In the UK there was the right time to be a vocational qualification and training centre for the waste management sector. It was the time when the concept of technical competence was born and overnight all waste management facilities who had a licence from one of the two UK Environment Agencies were required to demonstrate that at each of the sites there was a technically competent person in charge of operations.

This requirement was enshrined in law and in the waste management licence conditions. The singular method of demonstrating competence at that time was for a waste manager to undertake a vocational qualification in managing waste management operations. Waste managers across the UK rushed to sign up with a registered vocational qualification centre to ensure they were in process of undertaking the correct qualification. There was a time allocated in the waste management licence for compliance with this condition.

This was a time where vocational centres and their staff took on the informal role of mentors as they guided prospective candidates through the challenges of undertaking a management level 12 unit qualification in a specific waste management activity. In those days those unofficial mentors perhaps saw the candidate they were mentoring for a 4 hour session every two or three weeks until the 12 units were completed.

As the permitting system evolved and the waste management licences became in many cases IPPC/IED permits so the focus changed a bit from the person to the site and technical competence became a bit of a fuzzy issue. NOT a good time for vocational qualification and training centres who needed clarity on technical competence.

Alternative schemes of demonstrating competence started to spring up and then we saw a shift from a blanket approach to the subject to a more measured approach for installations based on a risk assessment of the waste management activity. This latter approach met with some resistance BUT is now broadly accepted as the way forward.

Technical competence is still a mandatory requirement in the UK whether under the waste management licence regime or the IED permit regime but now we have two different schemes running which gives the candidates more options to consider. There was a feeling at one point in this change process that time had run out for the VET centres BUT they still have a role to play in determining technical competence.

As time has moved on the industry and the sector skills council have developed new National Occupational Standards for the sector and this has led to a new range of entry level qualifications as well as the development of a new Modern Apprenticeship for the industry based on the new concept of sustainable resource management.

Time may have moved on but as far as the mentoring function itself and these vocational qualifications is concerned it is still on an informal footing. What time and technology has shaped is the dynamic between the mentor and the candidate. The level of support now being offered by the VET Centres to their candidates is no longer restricted to 4hour visit every few weeks.

In these enlightened technological times centres and their staff, who are acting as informal mentors, are able to offer candidates a wide range of learning support. It has always been about one to one relationships with the candidate, that's the nature of vocational learning in the waste sector, but now it is about much more.

The 'mentor' is able to support the candidate in a distance learning type environment so that the candidate does not feel isolated between visits. The 'mentor' is making use of the internet; mobile phone apps; email; digital photos and video to better engage with the candidate and to support the candidate through the qualification process.

The development of new qualifications and the introduction of the Modern Apprenticeship has seen new business opportunities for VET centres across the UK. The uptake of these newer qualifications is not mandatory and therefore uptake is not on the scale of the gold rush times of the late 1990's early 2000's. To be fair it was never going to be the case that we would return to those heady times.

VET centres seem to me, if my own centre's experience is anything to go by, like farmers who in the not so distant past were looking at the challenges of farm economics and the opportunities available through diversification to ensure a sustainable future for their holding.

In our case the time was right to look at alternative markets for our products not just domestically but also internationally. In addition to consider alternative projects for our skilled staff in the context of qualification development for niche markets as yet untapped.

It was the right time for us to change direction and we found ourselves alone in this new untapped marketplace, particularly in the niche areas we explored. This was, at the time, a lonely journey BUT ultimately a productive one which saw the centre successfully enter the international marketplace and develop a range of new qualifications which it makes best use of in both the UK and international markets where it operates.

Despite advances in qualification development and the internationalism of the UK qualification product we, as VET centres, still find ourselves, in the waste sector at least, performing the role of informal mentor within a formal qualification framework.

The relationship between 'mentor' and candidate has radically changed, time and technology, have facilitated a significantly improved relationship status between the two parties. This however does not alter the fact that this relationship is still based on the fact that the 'mentor' role has not been formalised.

The timing of the development of the EcoMentor project outputs could not be better as far as the UK marketplace is concerned. We as a nation have had an excellent agenda as far as vocational qualification in the waste sector are concerned.

This agenda in the sector however has not extended to the area of mentoring and this new qualification will be a welcome addition underpinning a suite of qualifications already available in the sector.

The timing is also fortuitous in the context of the new Modern Apprenticeships in the waste sector as their push to prominence creates an opportunity to formalise the role of the mentor in this modern apprenticeship agenda.

They say *timing is everything* which is very true however there is also the notion of *being in the right place at the right time*. This mentoring qualification may just meet those criteria as far as the UK marketplace is concerned.