



Back to school

Apprenticeship training is changing, especially in the shopfitting area, and it is only for the better.

There is still a school of thought amongst some employers that sending their apprentices to trade school is a waste of time, because they can teach them all they need to know at work. There is an element of truth in that thinking, however, it is a short-sighted view of the reasons for training apprentices.

Employers remember what they did when they went to trade school, 10, 20 or 30 years ago—a series of small scale models of house frames, windows, etc built on a woodwork bench showing the teacher they can build whatever the project was.

Thankfully, in most states, under the National Training Package system we have moved towards larger scale models and even full size projects, with the requirement for TAFEs to assess apprentices

within simulated workplace conditions. This is definitely the case at Northern Melbourne Institute (NMIT) in Victoria where two groups of third-year shopfitting apprentices are building and fitting out two full size shops. Staff consulted a few of the larger employers who choose NMIT as their preferred trainer and it was decided they could offer even better training to the apprentices by undertaking this project.

After discussions with a draftsman who has extensive knowledge of the shopfitting industry, plans were drawn up so the apprentices had a document to continually refer back to. Some compromises were made, as there needed to be sufficient tasks within the shops to train and assess 12 apprentices over a number of competencies listed in the shopfitting package.



There needed to be a variety of wall linings, shelving types, shop fronts, bulkheads, columns, etc but the end product had to have good aesthetic qualities.

At each stage of the project, the apprentices were given the opportunity to discuss construction techniques, and as a group they decided on how they were going to do a task, as long as it was undertaken safely and demonstrated the necessary skills to their instructors.

Each shop became the property of a group and consequently they took ownership, and set and maintained the standard as it became a bit of a competition between the groups.

This made it easy for the instructors as the students monitored each other's work and if it was not up to scratch they fixed it.

The standard of work was excellent and it was noticeable how some students really embraced the project, as they did not always get the chance to go on-site and install with their companies. Other students were able to demonstrate skills previously unseen by their instructors.

To enable the project to be completed, the apprentices also painted the necessary areas, internal and external, and installed 12 volt lights to the circuit which was installed by contractors.

While the apprentices enjoyed the full size work, the instructors involved, Roger Bain and Adrian Rutley first had some reservations with undertaking the project.

"I think the guys really enjoyed the project, they are used to working to deadlines at work so it made our job a lot easier, we just had to keep the work up to them," says Bain.

"We had some reservations with undertaking the project but we thought it was the right thing to do. There were no real problems but we will make changes and improve it for next year's groups. It has been a great exercise for both us and the apprentices."

Having the support of the industry—NMIT is a member of ASOFIA—was a significant factor in the success of the project including Gunnensen (John McClure); Australasian Retail Projects (Daryl Gough); Rondo Building Services (Charlie Kouray); Alspec (Peter Fry); Alternative Glass Supplies (Ian Hughes); The Laminex Group (Richard Martin); Polyflor (Frank Jardim); Mei + Picchi (Janelle Tassone); Australian Slatwall Industries (Linda Waterson).

"Without the considerable support of suppliers the project would not have been as successful," says Bain, who is the shopfitting program coordinator at NMIT.

"It is great not having to compromise because of budgetary issues and we will be able to re-use some of the material next year because of the construction techniques used by the apprentices."

It should be noted that competencies that couldn't be covered during the shop fitout were completed in skill bays or other areas, so the complete training program was not compromised in any way.

For more information on the NMIT project or shopfitting training contact Roger Bain on 03 9269 8610.