

Forward SCHOOL of Composites

How one company is taking a hands-on approach to developing local skills



Forward Composites, the Huntingdon manufacturer that is responsible for creating lightweight parts for the automotive and aerospace industries, amongst others, is paving the way to realise some seriously impressive growth plans.

With a £6 million turnover last year and forecasts of £11 million for the current financial year, coupled with an incredible turnaround story and phenomenal leadership and expertise within its senior management team, its ambition to become a £20 million company is looking more than achievable.

But ask any business in the manufacturing sector what its greatest barriers to growth are and it's likely that local skills shortages will feature in their top three. That's why Paul Jackson, Managing Director at Forward Composites, and Ed Collings, Technical Director, have created the firm's very own dedicated training facility and appointed an in-house trainer, demonstrating a steadfast commitment to 'growing their own'.

The Forward School of Composites has held open days with presentations, tours of the firm's facilities in Huntingdon and even a speed interview process. It's already employed its inaugural class of eight trainees with the selection process under way for a second cohort.

Those trainees are now undertaking six weeks of intensive training that will ensure each one understands the technicalities of composites and develops the skills needed to produce monolithic panels that comply with the strict processes and quality standards that underpin every component Forward Composites produces.



Then, after a period gaining experience on the shop floor, it will be back to the classroom for another four weeks of intensive advanced training that will develop the skills necessary for more complex components.

Paul Jackson said: "It was really important to Forward that as we continue to grow, we maintain the community spirit within the business and continue to invest in people who we know hold the key to Forward's future growth and continued success.

"These guys were hand-picked at our first open day and they're united by their eagerness to learn and an appreciation for the vast skills and experience they hope to continue to learn from for many years as they continue to carve out their career on the factory floor. They're just two weeks into their traineeship and along with demonstrating heaps of potential, some are even producing saleable parts – they've got a great career ahead of them."

With more than 170 employees and contractors now working at the firm's St Peter's Road site, including 40 on the night shift and three existing apprentices with WATA (West Anglia Training Association), this is a company that really believes in, and invests in, its people.

That's not to say that technology isn't playing a significant role in its growth plans though, with a £300,000 automation cell now being commissioned, using a robot to pick and place the composite materials, and providing the company with the ability to turn parts around in as little as 15 minutes rather than days – named the 'Fast Forward' process.

With strategic direction, Forward continues to go from strength to strength.



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– Paul Jackson, Managing Director