

Man on a mission

Four months in, managing director of the National Skills Academy for Manufacturing, Bob Gibbon, tells Laura Cork why industry's training needs are not all academic

How many industrialists does it take to change a sector's approach to training and development? One. That's the plan, at any rate. The industrialist in question is Bob Gibbon, who has been at the helm of the National Skills Academy for Manufacturing since March. Not a long time in which to make an impact, but Gibbon is clear about the overall goal. "The academy is here to enable a significant shift in the global competitiveness of UK manufacturing plc through effective learning programmes.

"The ultimate aim would be to create an embedded culture where people truly believe that effective learning delivers business results... It's not just the content and delivery, it's how you create a context back in the workplace and in the mind of the person attending [the training programme]. And then how do you create a learning programme that's as effective in its delivery for a multinational, multi-site manufacturer as it is for a sub-10 employee SME? Apart from that, it's easy," he grins.

For those unaware of the academy's existence, let's set out its stall. Firstly, for anyone expecting a building to spring up, think again. This academy is virtual; it's not an institution, rather an organisation set up to tackle the skills priorities for this sector. Working with industry, training providers and government, it will set national standards for the training that industry needs. Crucially, it has secured the help of a large employer in each of the nine English geographic regions (plus Scotland, Wales and Northern Ire-

land). These employers act as champions to help the academy to drive forward and bring other employers, large and small, into the fold throughout the UK. It operates a 'hub and spoke' model, with its national hub in Birmingham and the spokes in the regions. For now, the hub is housed in the SMMT Industry Forum offices on the outskirts of Birmingham, which is where I meet with Gibbon for the first time.

A career industrialist, he's a chartered engineer who rose through the ranks at John Crane from trainee engineer to MD of its European operations – not, he hastens to add, because he was some sort of "demented, career-crazed employee" knocking on doors for promotion, but because "they allowed you to progress and gave you space to develop".

Right choice

After holding other senior positions in industry (see box), he set up his own consultancy in 2004, a move he admits was a lifestyle choice. How, then, has he come to be heading an organisation like the National Skills Academy? "When I did a masters degree, thirty-odd years ago, my thesis was 'The demise of UK manufacturing industry and what can be done to turn it around'. The simple last line of that thesis was 'Well led and well trained, the British workforce is capable of beating anyone else in the world'. That was something I believed in throughout my career and I have put it into practice, so it would have been a bit hypocritical when I was approached for this role to say 'go away, leave me alone!'"

What does Gibbon bring to this role? "I could say passion, but there's a hell of a lot of people out there with passion for the same subject. I probably bring a tonne of creativity to find different ways of doing something bigger, easier and faster. My career has always been about transforming performance and I did that through creativity."

A criticism often heard is that there is a tangled web of government quangos, such as LSCs, RDAs, Business Links, MAS, Sector Skills Councils, and many more besides – and manufacturers don't know which to approach. Certainly the boundaries are blurred between many of these, but Gibbon says the academy's role is to pull many of their offers together, rather than clear a path through them. "Strangely enough, we're not the only ones with this wonderful goal for increasing global competitiveness; there are many organisa-

Bob Gibbon: Career spotlight

- 1978/79 UMIST: BSc in mechanical engineering, MSc in manufacturing technology
- 1979: Joined TI Group (now Smiths Group); various positions within John Crane International, culminating in 1995 as MD of John Crane's European operations
- 1996: Chief executive, specialist products division, McKechnie Group – spearheaded its transformation from a holding company to specialist engineering organisation
- 2000: Honorary fellow, Brunel University; became chief executive of McKechnie's aerospace division
- 2002: Group executive director, McKechnie Group
- 2004: Formed business consultancy Stratalis
- 2007: Managing director, National Skills Academy for Manufacturing

tions dedicated to that. Our being here doesn't make the others redundant... what we have to do is work with them effectively and we should only do things that add to [what they already do]... It's not for us to say 'this is rubbish', sweep it away and start with something new.

"There may always be alternatives, certainly, but there's nothing wrong with alternatives as long as there isn't confusion."

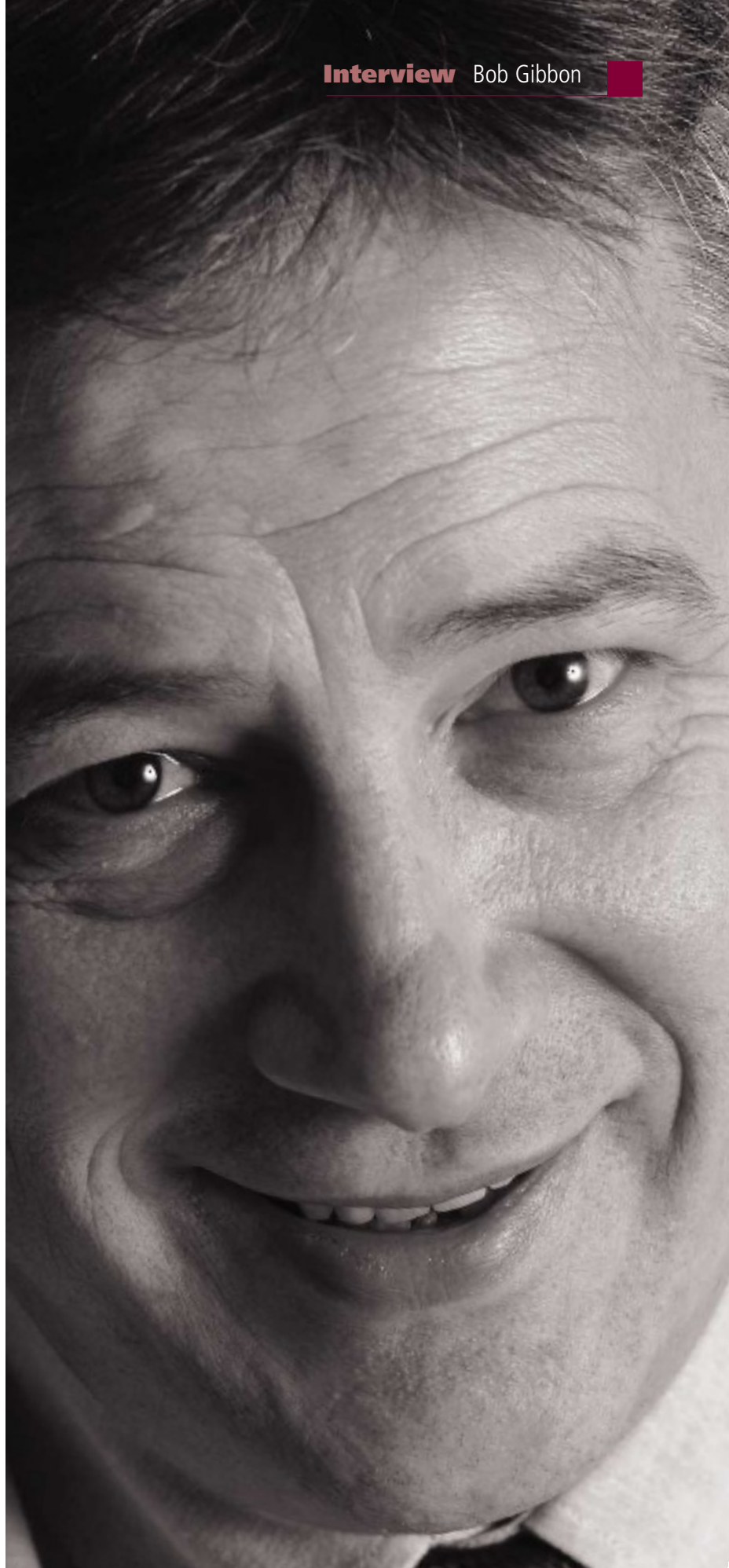
Sustainability

There's quite a challenge there, especially when the insufficient levels of training are only half the story. Even when training does take place, there's little focus on sustainability. "You have to follow up the instruction with mentoring and coaching to keep that knowledge ticking over," he insists. "But most training is just instructional. Sure, apprenticeships go through the whole process, but how many other training courses think about the outcome that should be delivered? Are the milestones being mapped to check that learning and business outcomes are being delivered at the right time, at the right level? And is the learning being put into practice effectively?" The mentoring stage is where it usually falls down. "Most people try to put [what they've learned] into practice, but they realise they don't quite remember it correctly. So they try a couple of different ways, then give up. That's where it stops. They go in with enthusiasm, they come out with enthusiasm, but when they try to put that learning into practice, they come up against a stumbling block – unless someone is there to help them, it grinds to a halt and you've lost the benefit of the training. Unfortunately, there's a lot of that about." Quite where the blame lies is not easy to pinpoint, he says, but we should all take some responsibility.

Gibbon cites a recent international study in which 95% of all businesses said that training and development was top priority: "It's the number one issue. But then you find only about 10% have a talent management programme to nurture and develop the people, and less than 15% carry out any post-training measurement to see if they got what they needed from it."

I ask Gibbon whether he thinks the use of terms like 'talent management' turns manufacturers off. "Maybe it does," he shrugs. "But it's just managing your human talent. How do you maintain your machines? You probably don't call it 'metal structure management', but you still manage it, whether you call it TPM or something similar. So where's your total human maintenance?" If you need a machine to go faster, you upgrade it, but little thought goes into how to upgrade people, he says: "There are some exemplars that do it very well, but it's hardly an embedded trait of UK manufacturing."

The focus for the academy is on skills development and skills replenishment. The latter will be addressed through improved links between business and education. "With skills development, it's all about the current workforce and we have three areas of development," he says, "productivity and competitiveness, technical skills, and leadership and management." For each, the academy is developing a 'pathway', which features various stages of development, from pre-employ-



ment through to continuous professional development at a post-doctoral level. This will encompass some existing qualifications, as well as development of new ones, and some of the existing learning programmes which are viewed as best-in-class will also be used.

"We have to find a way of developing confidence that the materials in those pathways are of a sufficiently high standard that they will give us global competitiveness – and that the people accredited to deliver those materials are similarly capable of supporting the route to global competitiveness." This will entail accrediting some training, of course, but it will also include the need for training providers to do more than talk the talk – they will need to have achieved the full qualification which they are teaching. It makes sense, but it's quite a departure. "If all we do is badge stuff, what's the difference?" he asks. "It's much more than a content badging issue; it's about working with businesses to help them be more committed to the way they use training."

Level focus

Whether the academy should direct its focus to the shopfloor or the top floor is part of the debate. Gibbon cites an example from aerospace which started at the top. "They start with leadership: once that's clear, you define your strategy. Then, once you have the strategy, you know the context in which you will do your training. Without the leadership, you can't have the strategy. Without the strategy, you don't know the purpose or vision." They have taken the pyramid and turned it upside down.

"This makes absolute sense" – Gibbon is picking his words carefully here – "but we have a programme of government funding that is carpet bombing from the bottom." It's not necessarily where an industrialist would start, he admits, but that's how it is. At least for now.

Currently, the academy's remit doesn't extend to apprenticeships, but Gibbon says the boundaries may move: "Apprenticeships aren't there at the beginning, but that doesn't mean to say they won't be there at the end. It's the same with [the government's specialist] Diplomas; when our business plan was being put together, the Diplomas were still only a possibility, rather than a fact... With Leitch coming in and changing the backcloth or landscape, there has to be a dynamic element to the academy."

The toughest challenges lie at the beginning of the academy's life, believes Gibbon, and there are high expectations. Already, the project plan is "unlikely" to translate directly into a business plan. "There are always things that won't quite work as you anticipated. The challenge is being able to communicate emerging clarity when people expect absolute clarity. We have to give confidence that we are going in a direction that will make a difference." In any event, continuous development should be as much a feature of the academy as the industry it serves. "Personally, I'd

like to get it as right as possible but I'm not into perfection in that sense. It's about practical advances, even if it's not perfect."

As well as the organisation's development, Gibbon admits that he, too, is on a steep learning curve. He spent the first three months finding out about key issues, trying to fix an "aspirational vision". To make that work, he says, you have to get "on the ground" to find out the detail of what it means to individuals in manufacturing. "And there are all the people like MAS and Business Links – you have to go in peace to create a meaningful collaboration with them... One thing I'm discovering is that, yes, I can bring a great deal to this, but I also have a great deal to learn. This isn't big business. This isn't even manufacturing industry itself. It's about influencing people around manufacturing industry. Stick me in manufacturing and I work like clockwork, I'll do whatever it takes. This is slightly different and I have to tread a little more carefully."

He believes it will need three to five years to build real momentum and put a foundation in place. In the meantime, success will be measured "by different parties in very different ways". The DTI (as it was) will have quite different KPIs to the Learning and Skills Council and to the Regional Development Agencies. Employers themselves will probably have different views again on what

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the academy stands for and how it is delivering. His own measure is that of a healthier sector. "Ultimately, it will mean that manufacturing strengthens itself; that it becomes a world leader in each particular field. A true measure will be that, culturally, people see it as a place they want to work; economically, it will be an extremely successful part of the UK economy; and, educationally, it will be seen as a great aspirational career."

And it's not just about top-level measures by national and governmental bodies. "It will make a difference all the way through the industry. If you go into a business that invests in training and looks after its people, you could go in there blindfolded and you'd know the difference. There's a buzz, a real engagement. There are businesses like that now, where everyone knows what they are doing and why they are doing it. A measure of our success will be when every business has that same vibrancy." ■

For more details on the National Skills Academy for Manufacturing, go to:
www.manufacturing.nsacademy.co.uk

