Case Study: Paul Leadbeatter – Dŵr Cymru (Welsh Water)

Returning to work after a long period of illness can be daunting prospect at the best of times, but for Paul Leadbeatter it had the potential to be a particularly difficult process. Not least because on coming back to work at Dŵr Cymru (Welsh Water) after a 15-month sickness absence, he not only had to adjust to the demands of being back at work but also had to take on the challenge of a completely new role.

Paul (pictured right) had previously worked for many years as a draughtsman in the electrical engineering side of the business. However, due to changes in the company, he had returned to work to find himself transferred into a very different role in the customer services department. This new job required many different skills to his previous role, and due to his illness, Paul had experienced some memory loss which had affected his confidence in his abilities. However, thanks to the support of union-led learning, Paul has not only learned the new skills he needed for his role, but has also rediscovered some of his lost confidence and is now enjoying being back at work.

Returning to work
Paul explains “When I first came back from sick leave in the summer of 2012, I had been through a very difficult time and had been off sick for over a year.” He continues, “I found that my new job as customer service coordinator was very different from what I had done before. Although I had help from colleagues and tried to pick it up as I went along as best I could, I didn’t feel very confident in what I was doing, because it was all so new to me.” The nature of his illness meant that Paul had also experienced some memory loss and suffered the effects of depression, which had left his confidence at a low point. Although he had not done any formal training for years, through his union, Paul heard about some training courses that were being organised by Mike Wilson, a union learning rep at the company.

Getting back into learning
“I spoke to Mike about my situation” explains Paul, “I told him that with my illness and the new job it was as if the slate had been wiped clean, and that I might need some help to brush up on my skills and also pick up some new ones that I needed.” Mike arranged for Paul to have a diagnostic assessment which identified that he could benefit from some training to improve his IT, literacy and communication skills. Mike spoke to Arfon Dwyfor Training (ADT), a local not-for-profit training provider experienced in providing essential skills training for adults, to discuss setting up some training for Paul. Mike has worked closely with ADT to arrange training for other staff, and was able to ensure that the training courses were tailored to meet the needs of the staff at Dŵr Cymru. For example, Mike arranged for the training to be adapted to incorporate the computer systems and bespoke software used by the company. This means that as well as meeting the requirements of nationally recognised essential skills qualifications, the training ADT provide is also contextualised to make it as relevant as possible to the learners’ every day work. This makes it easier for them to apply their new skills back in the workplace.

How the union helped
Mike liaised with ADT to make sure that Paul got the appropriate training he needed, incorporating literacy and communication skills plus the software he needed to use in his job into the IT training at the same time. Mike made sure that Paul was put into a small group with other staff who were all learning at the same level. The cost of the training was funded by Essential Skills Wales, which is a Welsh Government administered
Mike has been effective in convincing the company of the value of the training by showing how it can help raise staff morale and productivity. As a result they have agreed to release staff with time off to attend training and have also provided training rooms and equipment to facilitate the training. Following Mike’s negotiations, Paul was given time off to attend the group training sessions, which were held on site at Llandegfedd Reservoir near Cwmbran (pictured right), where Paul works. Mike spoke to Paul’s manager, who was very supportive and was happy to let Paul attend the training sessions whenever he needed to. Dŵr Cymru also provided a training room, equipment and refreshments for those attending the training.

**High quality training in the workplace**

Paul says that he was ‘very impressed’ by the standard of the training. He explains, “The way the courses were delivered and having them on site was really good. The tutor, Helen, was excellent – accommodating, flexible and understanding.” He continues, “The IT training used the same systems that we used in Welsh Water, for example they used Windows 7, Microsoft Office and also the company based applications so that made the training very transferable into my work. I also picked up a lot of simple tips and quick shortcuts during the training that have been really helpful in my day to day work.”

The literacy and communication skills that were built in to the training have also helped Paul to brush up on his spelling and writing skills, “I now feel more confident in my communication skills - I’ve found the training has helped me to identify misspelt words more easily and it has improved my spelling”. Paul explains what he found so effective about the training, “The tutor was very easy to talk to and built up a good rapport within the group. It wasn’t like school, it was much more informal which helped to bring people out of themselves.” He continues “There was a good atmosphere, you could grab a cup of tea and feel relaxed. It helped people learn more as they didn’t feel embarrassed. It was a supportive environment. I attended all the sessions and just stuck at it until it clicked.”

**New qualifications and confidence**

Since starting the training at Entry Level, Paul has now progressed through to Level 2 A*-C and has now achieved a qualification. Mike says “Gaining this qualification is a fantastic achievement. Paul’s managers have also told me what a vast increase they have seen in Paul’s confidence and his problem solving skills.”

Although Paul is modest about his achievements, he acknowledges that the training has helped him to feel much more confident at work. He says, “I’m not afraid to ‘have a go’ now. I feel confident to use an element of experimentation with my IT skills that I wouldn’t have before. I feel I can pick up new things more easily.” Paul has also found that the some of the new skills he has learned have been helpful in his personal life as well. He explains, “I have been able to use the PowerPoint skills I learned on the course to design animated e-cards for friends and family on special occasions, which I had never done before. They have gone down really well, and it is nice to show that I have learned something new.”
One of many success stories
Paul is just one of the many hundreds of members of staff who have benefited from union led learning at Dŵr Cymru. As the lead union learning rep at the company, Mike has been involved in organising hundreds of training opportunities for staff. Mike’s role is now being jointly funded by Dŵr Cymru and the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF). This enables him to work 3 days a week on promoting learning within the company, which has around 2800 employees at sites all over Wales and in parts of England. As well as liaising with training providers and identifying funding, part of Mike’s role has also been to make the case to the company on the benefits of them supporting workplace training.

Mike, who is from the GMB union, now leads a team of 12 union learning reps from a number of different unions, and together they have promoted learning to staff throughout the company through meetings and a series of road shows. In the last few years, the team have signed up hundreds of staff on to essential skills courses. Between them, these learners have now achieved more than 800 qualifications. And through word of mouth, the reputation of the courses has grown and grown amongst the staff (pictured right, at a recent event celebrating learning success in the company).

Spreading the word
Having seen the difference it has made to his own confidence, Paul is keen to let others know about the benefits of the training. He says, “I would definitely recommend this training to colleagues and friends. Mike and the tutors have been prepared to go the extra mile to make the training work. I’ve already told others about how the course has helped me.” Paul is now actively encouraging his colleagues to take up training opportunities, and has even been getting involved himself by helping Mike with booking training rooms. He also plans to continue with his own learning, “This training has really worked for me and helped me when I needed it. Now I wouldn’t hesitate to go for it in terms of any opportunities to do more training in the future.” He continues, “Hopefully more people will come forward as they see the success of others. It would be great to see more people benefit from this training.”

A pioneering model
Ken Skates, the Welsh Government’s Deputy Minister for Skills and Technology (pictured right) recently visited Dŵr Cymru to meet with some of the employees who, like Paul, have benefited from the union-led learning. After hearing from them about their experiences he said “Dŵr Cymru, Arfon Dwyfor Training, the WTUC, the unions and the learners themselves have shown the way with this pioneering model of learning.” He continued “I’d like to see this collaboration from more of our employers in Wales and I hope that other organisations and learning providers can follow this example.”