

West Cheshire Business Insider

Talking Skills with Heat Trace



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What does Heat Trace do?

To put it simply, Heat Trace makes heating cables which can be wrapped around pipes to keep the contents at the correct temperature. The cables can also be used as underfloor heating or to stop railways or driveways from freezing over in winter. If you imagine a chocolate factory with liquid chocolate running through hundreds of pipes it's easy to see what a disaster it would be if the chocolate wasn't warm enough and solidified. This tells you that Willy Wonka would definitely have had trace heating! The consequences of oil or gas being the wrong temperature in factories would be equally disastrous, if not worse.

How has the business got to where it is today?

Well, if you go right to the beginning Heat Trace was started by one man, Neil Malone, pretty much from his bedroom. He was an engineer and working for a company that sold products associated with trace heating. At the time the only people manufacturing a new trace heating product were in Germany and Neil saw an opportunity. He started off working with a Korean manufacturer to replicate this product, but soon decided he could make it better himself and so started manufacturing it in Stockport. We opened our second site in Helsby in 2005 partly because there is a history of cable making here so there were many skilled workers in the area and to take over an electron beam that was already here - the world of heat tracing is very sci-fi! We have always been exporters with regional distributors across the world from Italy to Asia and the Middle East but everything we make is made in Stockport or Helsby.



We struggled a little bit in the recession as most people did but since we've moved to Helsby we've more than doubled the size of the workforce here, from 32 to 78. We've also more than doubled the turnover and had the best run of profitability in our history so we're in a really strong position. This is allowing us to invest more in research, new products and apprenticeships.

What jobs do you have at heat trace?

School leavers often think that engineering is all we do but we currently have a fantastic apprentice in marketing and there are also roles in finance, admin and HR. Even looking at the engineering part of the business there is a lot of variation between roles.

So you employ apprentices?

Yes, and we find having apprentices amazing. We started the apprenticeship scheme in 2011 because we knew we were growing and we had an ageing workforce. We weren't doing much training at that time and I was very keen to bring people in who we could train up to be Heat Trace people. At Heat Trace our apprentices get the chance to move around different departments in the business. So whilst they might be on an engineering apprenticeship, they will see different aspects of engineering and also



have presentations on business finance, commercial awareness, health and safety, and other things going on in the business. This means that as well as getting the widest possible experience of engineering, apprentices gain knowledge about the rest of the business and so become well-rounded employees. We don't employ apprentices to just do manual work for 3 years. As a company, we see recruiting apprentices as a way of developing managers for the future, so we approach the scheme as a staff development process. As such all the apprentices we have recruited

"We see recruiting apprentices as recruiting managers for the future"

secured a permanent position in the business and many are continuing to upskill even more. For example, our current marketing apprentice came straight in to do a higher level apprenticeship and in September she's embarking on a degree apprenticeship with MMU. This means that in four years she will have a full honours degree, six years' experience in the company and no debt!

What has the impact of taking apprentices been?

I think one of the great successes of apprenticeships is not just what the apprentices have brought to Heat Trace, which has been amazing and some of the individual contributions of apprentices has far exceeded our expectations, but more than that it's the halo effect on the rest of the business. Staff used to see training as something that they had to do (but didn't want to). Having apprentices in the business put training in a new light and now there is much more of an appetite for training and development across the business. This has improved moral, attitude and productivity across the business so there's a genuine financial payback for us from taking on apprentices. We've had a 47 year old man doing his NVQ. He hadn't studied for more than 20 years but he has decided he wants to do it so we're giving him the chance to do just that. Even I've started doing a training course recently for the first time in 15 years!

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What skills do you see Heat Trace needing in the future?

We are expanding into installing cables as well as making them so we are going to need more people with electro-technical skills in order to install cables in an industrial setting. This role will be like an electrician, but for factories. Our projects in general are on the up and so we'll be looking for design engineers as we try to design new and innovative solutions to resolve businesses problems. For this we look towards the graduate market looking for graduate engineers and scientists as the products and application might be to do with polymer science as well as electrical engineering.

More generally, one skill that is becoming more crucial to all roles is computer aided design (CAD). It used to be that one person in a team would do CAD drawings, but now we are moving more and more towards everyone being able to do it. Another skill that I feel we need more of, particularly in engineers, is commercial awareness. Our engineers are great at software, making stuff and trialing



new ideas but it would be good if they knew more about how our business makes money and how to find new routes to market. So rather than working with universities to get the best technical input it's finding the customers and distributors who are going to promote your product and getting it in front of the right people. I don't know if it's something they're teaching at school but it doesn't seem to be coming through enough yet in the young people we see.

Do you do much work with schools and young people?

Yes, we have close links with the local Secondary School, Helsby High. Once we decided to take on apprentices we thought where are the candidates going to come from and having a big school down the road meant we had an easy answer. I phoned the school up and after meeting them I was able to go into the school in their next steps week and talk about Heat Trace and the apprenticeships we were offering. Since then we've helped out with general apprenticeship promotion as well as going in to help pupils with CV writing and interview skills. Our current apprentices give talks there too as pupils can relate more to them than me. In the last couple of years we've had a class of students come in to the factory where we show them around and talk to them about apprenticeships with our current apprentices passing on tips on how to get on to good scheme. We're starting to work with Neston School too and we offer several work experience placements throughout the year. This year we sponsored a make it day at Helsby High School for year 9 which I was a part of by being a "dragon" in a mock dragon's den but without the huge pile of money sadly!

"At Heat Trace we have found that establishing a quality apprenticeship scheme and being proactive with local schools has enabled us to attract high quality employees that have contributed to the growth and success of the company."