

Fast-growing training venture aims to bridge the skills gap



Client

Marks4Training Centre
Staffordshire University Business Village, Stoke-on-Trent

Activity

Providing free training and work placements to unemployed and disadvantaged

Mentors

David Cliffe and Sherine Holden

Programme

Let's Do Mentoring managed by the Business Broker Project

A training centre committed to raising skills, aspirations and job prospects amongst unemployed and disadvantaged people in Stoke-on-Trent is achieving rapid success – just months after its launch.

Although trainer and lecturer Maria de Marks started her Marks4Training venture only last autumn, the centre has secured a some funding and now plans to expand its workforce and open a training venue in Burslem.

Of its current intake of 18 clients, six have already engaged in employment and now 15 are ready to secure valuable NVQ Level 2 qualifications. In the year ahead Marks4Training will provide free training to at least 90 more clients after receiving funding from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust.

And as links are established with local authorities, training providers and employment agencies, the business expects to offer training courses and work experience to an ever-growing number of people.

Operated as a not-for-profit Community Interest Company, the centre has been backed from its inception by expertise from Let's Do Mentoring, the volunteer support scheme run by the North Staffs Business Brokers. Mentors David Cliffe and Sherine Holden have supported Maria in developing marketing materials and applying for funding.

"My vision is to help everyone have access to the same opportunities, whoever they are and

whatever their background," she said.

"It's all about bridging the skills gap in Stoke-on-Trent. Our free training helps people improve their skills, achieve a recognised qualification and gain confidence in areas such as IT and business administration. We can provide work placements and we help people prepare to find a job.

"I have always had an interest in helping people. I think I have empathy for people and how to develop their skills," added Maria, who worked internationally as a trainer for IBM, has previously lectured at Keele University and still lectures at Staffordshire University and South Staffordshire College.

As well as courses leading to NVQs at Levels 1, 2 and 3, the centre aims to support non-English speakers and offer workshops in leisure subjects such as local industrial heritage, literature and photography.

"Many of our trainees are mature people who are gaining the first qualifications of their lives - they are very proud of their achievements," Maria added.

Based at Staffordshire University Business Village in Stoke, Marks4Training currently has four staff. That number will increase when the business starts to offer free courses from a centre in Burslem in the spring.

"The funding from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust is fantastic because it secures our position for this year and gives us a platform to grow from. We want to find new partners in North Staffordshire and we are already exploring links with the City Council's regeneration programme," said Maria.

She also has no doubt that support from the mentoring team has been important in her achieving so much in a short time.

"The mentoring support that we receive from the Business Brokers is making us better able to respond to the needs for our training centre which sees a skilled community as key to the future growth and regeneration of Stoke-on-Trent," Maria commented.

"David is our hidden valuable helper, he is there when we need him and knowing that we can count on his business experience and advice is not just so reassuring, but is making us more focused. With his support we see our goals closer to reach.

"With Sherine's help we have now a



Marks4Training founder Maria de Marks (right) and senior trainer Yetunde Alale

professional looking brochure to hand to our clients with pride."

She concluded: "The expertise of the Business Broker's mentors is a wonderful benefit to businesses; simply, they transfer to us their expertise in all areas of business development."

Positive outcomes

Funding

Grant aid secured from Coalfields Regeneration Trust.

Employment

Four posts created, more are planned. 18 clients completed training courses, six of whom have already found employment. At least 90 places available during 2010.

Regeneration

Raising skill levels and job prospects in Stoke-on-Trent.