

# Delivering Business Benefits Case Study Billington Structures

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The Sector Skills Council  
for Science, Engineering and  
Manufacturing Technologies



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Darren Kemplay  
Human Resources Manager,  
Billington Structures

## Semta apprentices help company improve bottom line benefits

Billington Structures had been looking for candidates with higher GCSE grades but when Max Elliott applied “he broke the mould,” according to HR Manager, Darren Kemplay. Max achieved 11 GCSEs grade A\*-C but continuing full-time education was not for him. “Quite a lot of teachers wanted me to stay on and go to university but it never appealed to me,” he says. “I’ve always been a hands-on person and wanted to get into a job working with my hands and earning money.”

Billington Structures designs, fabricates and erects steel-framed buildings and specialises in complex engineering projects involving large structures. The company employs 300 people at its head office in Wombwell, South Yorkshire, and fabrication facility near Bristol. Apprentices help sustain the high-level welding and fabrication skills base on which it depends.

Before taking Max on as an apprentice, Darren was careful to check his commitment. “When you’ve got someone whose educational base is certainly good enough to go on to A

levels and probably university you have to ask the question: ‘is this really what you want to do?’ Max was certain he wanted to work with his hands and do a skilled job and he’s been pretty fantastic at it!”

Max started his apprenticeship in September 2005. He completed his BTEC National Certificate, winning the Rotherham College Student of the Year Award in 2007, and went on to take the 2009 Metals Industry Apprentice of the Year title. With a Level 3 NVQ under his belt, within three years he was earning the fully skilled rate for the job.



“We normally expect it to take the best part of five years for someone to become a competent fabricator. Max got there in just under three,” says Darren. “He’s made phenomenal progress and is a natural at the job. He’s practically as good as any fabricator we have – that includes people who’ve been doing it for 20-30 years.”

Former apprentices have progressed to office-based positions, technical roles and supervision. That is an option for Max but for now he is content where he is.

“Maybe one day I’d like to progress up the chain but my priority now is to build up my practical experience and stay good at what I do. It’s a challenging job with lots of variety and you learn something new every day.” Max intends to repay Billington’s

investment in him, saying: “They’ve trained me up in their ways from scratch and it’s a good company to work for. I’m planning to stay for a long time.”

Going for quality rather than quantity of apprentices is a strategy that works for Billington Structures. The company’s 80-90% apprentice success rate speaks for itself. “We concentrate on getting a small number of good, committed people who will stay and we’re seeing the bottom-line benefits,” says HR Manager, Darren Kemplay. Taking on apprentices also has a positive impact on the shopfloor, he says. “One of the best ways the company can show employees its commitment to the future is by putting investment into people and bringing in apprentices.”

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