“We now have a digital strategy and a digital toolkit which ensures that we are more agile in our approach”

Neil’s links with PROCAT go back many years to when the organisation was a training centre for the engineering industry in Essex. Having been its chief executive for 18 years, Neil is a passionate advocate for improving the standard of education and training in the skills sector.

Tell us about your college

First of all, PROCAT is not a general further education (FE) college. We have come from a very different background and are better described as an advanced technology college, formed in 2014 to meet the workforce development needs of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector.

We were originally a training facility set up in 1969 by a group of engineering employers to provide the first year off-the-job training for their craft and technician apprentices. The Engineering Industry Training Board (EITB) provided funding to build an engineering training centre and then invited the employers to appoint the board of trustees/directors. Over 150 similar training centres, known as Group Training Associations (GTAs), were set up across England. Today there are only 24, of which PROCAT is the second largest. We still have a very close relationship with employers today.

In 2014, we acquired FE college status and became Prospects College, often known as PROCAT, the UK’s first college of advanced technology and the first new college to be founded since 1992. Our role is a specialist one, providing higher level technical and professional education and training, mainly in the form of apprenticeships, for sectors such as aerospace, rail, advanced manufacturing and defence.

Our apprenticeships start at level 3 but we have a strong focus on advanced and degree level apprenticeships because of the high-level skills requirements of the industries we support. In addition, we offer pre-apprenticeship programmes at levels 1 and 2 for learners who come to us with the aim of eventually becoming apprentices and following a career in these industries.
Can you give an account of the digital journey the college has been on, and where you are today?

Technology is at the heart of what we do. By that I mean the technologies used in industry as well as digital technologies to enhance the learning experience. We have combined both into one digital learning and advanced technology strategy.

While they are with us, our apprentices need hands-on experience of the technologies they will use in increasingly automated industrial settings: 3-D product design and realisation for manufacturing industries, robotics for engineering, virtual reality and simulation software for aviation maintenance and business information modelling for construction and infrastructure development, these are just some of the advanced technologies you will find integrated into delivery at PROCAT. Our employers are closely involved in the decision making and procurement around industry-specific technologies; funding for these technologies can come from employers as well as from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). That way, employers know their apprentices will be trained on equipment the industry actually uses.

But we are equally passionate about creating engaging, effective learning experiences for our learners. Making full and effective use of digital technologies to add value to your delivery is one primary reason for having a digital strategy. Then there is the significant advance in learners’ expectations of the technology they will use at college; you have to plan for this too. For example, we did a survey of our learners which found that 97% had smartphones. It was clear to us after this that depending on the VLE and desktop computers was no longer adequate. The digital scene changes and you have to adapt.

When we became a college in 2014, we were only making limited use of digital technology to support learning, so we have come a long way in that short time. Progress was helped significantly by the appointment of a digital fellow funded by the Education Training Foundation (ETF).

Jisc research into the learner experience in an FE setting also set us off on the right track. It was clear from that baseline research with learners that we could make real improvements to the accessibility and flexibility of learning by making the right use of digital technologies. The growth in smartphone ownership alone meant that we could take learning out of the classroom and empower learners to take greater responsibility for their study targets. We could also engage employers more fully by providing digital platforms that enable them to track their apprentices’ learning.

From these early beginnings, we now have a digital strategy and a digital toolkit that ensure we are more agile in our approach. To make sure it all happens on the ground, the strategy links into the college’s wider four-year, strategic plan.
What benefits are you realising through the use of technology – to learners, staff and to your core business?

It’s really important for a college, whether it’s a general FE college or a specialist college like ourselves, to try to get close to, if not ahead of, the curve when it comes to technology. The days of always doing what you have always done are no longer acceptable, either to learners or employers. The development of the employer levy and the new employer-led standards will heighten expectations even more that the relationship between what goes on in a college and what learners experience in the workplace – and in the home for that matter – will be much closer.

However, a digital strategy demands continuous focus. It has to be integral to all of your planning over the long term and if you pause in your efforts, then progress lapses. That said, we are seeing some interesting developments that may be a result of our work on the digital strategy. During 2015, we had double the number of applicants for our programmes. We have seen a significant change too in the progress learners make since we have introduced OneFile, which is being used to centrally co-ordinate learner portfolios, individual learning plans (ILPs), assessments and monitoring systems.

The other area where we have seen an impact is the recruitment of more able young people who have chosen to apply for apprenticeships rather than go to university. As a result, we have had to adapt our delivery to accommodate learners who are more able to study independently. So I would say that we have seen a transformation in the way learners learn and the way teachers teach since we developed our strategy. Whether these changes are directly related to the strategy is difficult to say, but they are significant nonetheless.

What still remains to be achieved? Where do the difficulties lie?

We are still in the process of improving the digital capabilities of all our teaching staff. Many come in from industry and, although familiar with the technologies used in that industry, enhancing students’ learning with technology is often new to them. So we have put in place bite-sized pieces of training to build the confidence and competence of staff and have appointed digital champions to cascade the pedagogic skills. This investment in CPD appears to be paying off. Use of OneFile as the sole means of managing learners’ progress was only 30% a year ago. Now it’s more like 80%, but that still leaves 20% who have not taken the leap.
What advice would you have for other senior leaders on developing their visions for digital?

We are only two years from incorporation so don’t pretend to have all the answers, or even all the questions. We started at a low point in digital and made a lot of progress very quickly, but still have further to go. Nonetheless, having a digital strategy in place gives everyone a clear sense of direction. For us that means staff, learners and employers.

So I suppose my advice would be to make that first step and you will be surprised where it will lead you. We are now planning to develop our own pre-enrolment diagnostic tool to help us select the right applicants from the large number of learners we are attracting. At the same time, we are creating an online preparatory module so that would-be applicants can improve their skills in maths and English before they apply. We have set up a web shop showcasing the PROCAT offer to employers and have adopted a digital approach to making our initial contact with students. This would not have happened a few years ago.

To sum up:

- Be realistic about what you can achieve
- Devise bite-sized pieces of training for staff
- Accept that a drawing up digital strategy is a long term commitment, not a one-off event
- Allocate sufficient resources to implementing your strategy – this can make a real difference

More information

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