



APPRENTICE CASE STUDY

CRAIG CONLON, METSEC PLC

Craig Conlon left school with five GCSEs grades C-D and little motivation but went on to win the Metals Industry Apprentice of the Year award. "Following my dad passing away I had a negative attitude to most things and ended up in two dead-end jobs," Craig says. "The apprenticeship allowed me to focus my efforts on gaining qualifications and a job with career prospects. For the future I want to continue to develop my skills at Metsec, become a team leader for my division and eventually manage my own rolling division."

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THE BUSINESS

Metsec is the UK's largest specialist cold roll-forming company and a part of the voestalpine Group, the world's leading manufacturer of cold formed sections. The company employs over 300 people at its Oldbury premises and currently has 16 apprentices.

EARLY RESPONSIBILITY

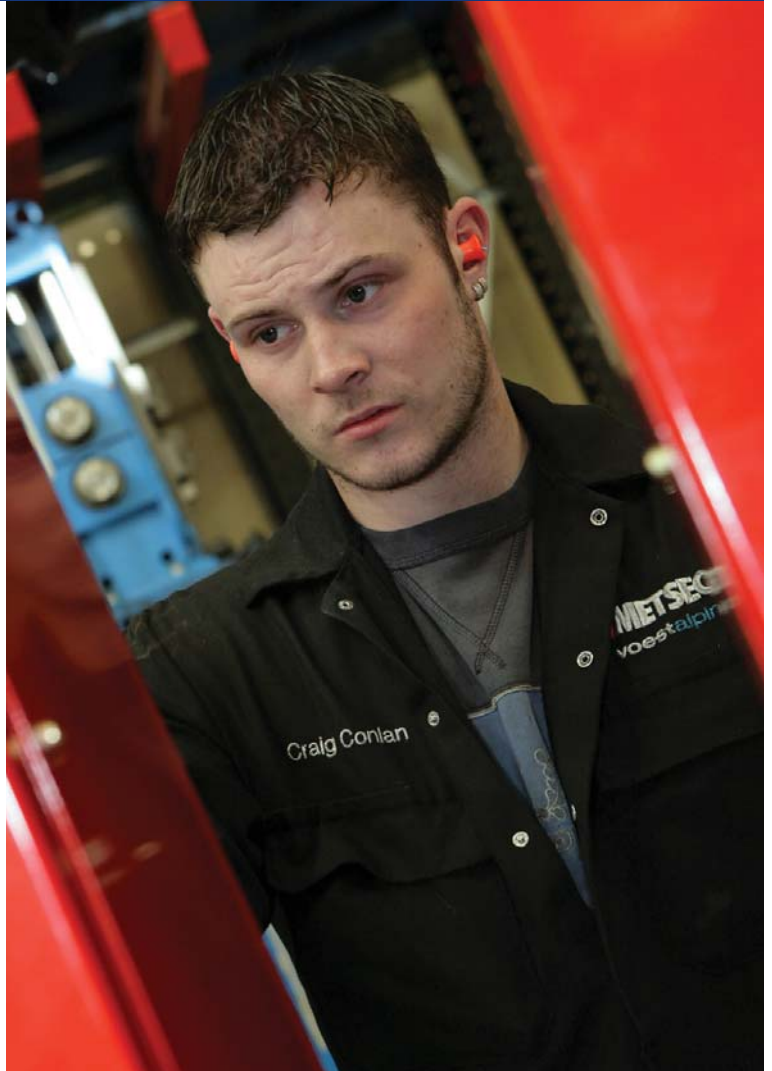
Craig is typical of the many Metsec apprentices who have flourished, given the opportunity. Such is the confidence placed in apprentices that they are given early responsibility. As an apprentice, Craig was made part of the technical team that headed on one of Metsec's biggest investments – a new £4 million rolling line. During the commissioning he travelled to Germany three times to see how the line went together, how it would work and be maintained. He alerted Metsec to potential problems he discovered with part of the equipment – problems that would have cost the company money if they had not been put right. Having recently completed his advanced apprenticeship, Craig is now a key member of the team working on the line.

FILLING SKILLS GAPS

For Metsec, former apprentices are an invaluable source of the highest craft and technical skills. They make up 10% of the workforce and the company aims to increase that to 30% to maintain its competitive edge. One of the best successes has been in maintenance where Metsec struggled year after year to recruit skilled fitters and electricians. "We've got three ex-apprentices in maintenance and they're a key part of the team," says Training Manager, Steve Giles. "Four years ago we couldn't recruit – apprentices have filled the gap."

FLEXIBILITY

The speed of learning and flexibility of young apprentices is an asset. "Young people are like sponges: they soak up information and learn and retain a variety of things," Steve comments. "They quickly become competent at doing the job." Developing apprentices as multi-skilled maintenance workers has broken down barriers and removed traditional demarcation lines. Steve explains: "When fitters see apprentices coming in with electrical and electronic skills and getting more variety and enjoyment out of the work it gives them an incentive to broaden their skills, take on flexibility and get more job satisfaction."



COMPANY BENEFITS

Apprentices not only boost Metsec's skills base, they learn by doing real jobs that help the company save money. "We've had big successes with apprentices," says Training Manager, Steve Giles. "One fourth-year apprentice saved us over £20,000 on continuous improvement projects and a third-year apprentice saved £10,000 by designing a tool that would otherwise have been sub-contracted. Another third-year apprentice saved £30,000 by replicating an existing cooling system for three lines."

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