

Setting up a

# Workplace Learning Centre



One of the main barriers preventing Usdaw members returning to learning is that learning is often organised at times and in places that make it difficult for them to attend. One solution is to bring the learning into the workplace. This often means setting up a Learning Centre in or near the workplace.

A Learning Centre is a place where people can drop in to learn, get advice or even attend a taught course. It can be anything from a room with a couple of computers to a suite of rooms with classrooms, computers, learning materials, a library and lots more.

Most Workplace Learning Centres have access to the internet so members can learn 'online' if they choose.

Workplace Learning Centres are usually for the use of employees on-site. However, an increasing number are now open to family and friends, even the local community. They are often supported by a local college, which runs courses in the centre. Employees can usually use the Learning Centre before or after shifts, and some are open in the evenings and at weekends.

Usdaw Union Learning Reps (ULRs) have worked jointly with employers to set up Learning Centres in many workplaces. Companies such as Argos, Shop Direct, Tesco and Sainsbury's Distribution, Co-op Retail Logistics, Keystone Foods, Boots and United Biscuits all have workplace Centres. Thousands of Usdaw members have used them to learn computer skills, to brush up their English and maths, complete their National Vocational Qualifications and even to attend Spanish, British Sign Language and aromatherapy classes.

This leaflet will help you decide if our members at your workplace could benefit from a Workplace Learning Centre, if your workplace would be right for one and if so, how to go about setting one up.

*"We couldn't have done all this without our on-site learning facilities. It just goes to show what can be done when the will is there and management and unions work together on learning."*



*At Fenny Lock we prepare a leaflet of courses three times a year. This lets people know what's on offer at the Centre and how much it costs. We also promote these courses through*

*posters, road shows and the ULRs. The courses are agreed at the Steering Group meeting and I put together the leaflet.*

*We are a large site but we also have a family and friends policy and promote the Learning Centre in local stores. This means that we can get enough people to run courses.*

*When a member comes to the Centre for the first time, we always have a chat about what they want to learn and give them an induction on how to use the centre. This includes a Skills for Life assessment.*

**Karen Harris,**  
Usdaw Co-ordinator  
Tesco, Fenny Lock

*We have a U-Net Learning Centre at Sainsbury's Rye Park Distribution Centre. We offer a wide range of courses to learn which are online and tutor-based. We can deliver anything, from English and maths, to management courses and computing.*



*We have a lot of colleagues at Rye Park who use the Centre, with many going on to get qualifications in literacy, numeracy and ITC.*

*We are just about to introduce a facility in the way of CD ROMs and workbooks, so colleagues can do free language courses.*

*A large selection of books are available for experienced readers and for colleagues who may have not read for a while. For these colleagues we have a large selection of quick reads, these have proved very popular with the literacy students.*

**Mick Power**  
Usdaw Learning Centre Coordinator  
Sainsbury's, Rye Park

## Bringing Learning into the Workplace

### The case for Workplace Learning Centres

Often it is difficult for working people to return to learning because:

- ➔ Courses are run at times when they are working.
- ➔ Courses are run in colleges that are not easy to get to in the time available.
- ➔ Caring responsibilities and work patterns can make attending a college difficult.

Deciding to go back to learning can be a huge step. Walking through the doors of a local college for the first time and asking about learning can be so frightening some people just don't bother. They are more likely to take part if they can do it in familiar surroundings.

A Workplace Learning Centre makes learning so much easier for Usdaw members. Often tutors are available to run courses around a worker's shift pattern. Learning with friends and work colleagues encourages people to keep at it and is much more enjoyable than on your own. Sometimes, employers agree to release people to learn in company time or give 'matched time' but even if they don't, it is often easier to learn on your own doorstep.

It is important to get the right 'learning provider(s)' for your Centre – Usdaw have found that working with local colleges is usually the answer. You need to ensure they are willing to be flexible and deliver courses around shift patterns and will work to make learning as affordable as possible for our members.



### Is a Learning Centre right for your workplace?

A Learning Centre is not always the best approach to making learning accessible to our members. If your workplace does not have many staff, or does not have the space for a Learning Centre, this approach may not be suitable.

Experience has shown us that for a Workplace Learning Centre to be sustainable there should be at least 300-400 staff on-site, as 'taught' courses need 10-15 learners to make the course viable. If there are not enough potential learners or enough space, you may be better off adopting a different approach. Many Usdaw sites have to do this.

## The benefits of Workplace Learning

There are many benefits for members who are able to learn in a Workplace Learning Centre.

- ➔ On-site learning means no travelling. Travelling can put people off learning, particularly if they have no means of transport.
- ➔ Courses are usually more flexibly delivered in a Workplace Learning Centre than they are at a college.
- ➔ Often courses in a Workplace Learning Centre can be cheaper than in a college.
- ➔ Members can learn in familiar surroundings, which makes learning easier, particularly if they learn with friends.



## Employers can benefit too!

Experience shows that employers who support learning either of a vocational, career development or a personal nature will benefit from their investment through:

- ➔ Increased participation in training in the workplace.
- ➔ A better skilled and trained workforce, more adaptable to change.
- ➔ More motivated employees with a positive attitude to learning and training.
- ➔ A lower turnover of staff.
- ➔ A learning culture in the workplace.

## Getting the most out of your Learning Centre

To help make your Learning Centre cost effective and sustainable long term, it needs to be used as much as possible. Using the Centre for vocational/company training as well as personal learning can be a good option and will help with employer 'buy-in'.

However, you will need to ensure that is managed properly through the Site Learning Committee, so company training is arranged only at times when the Centre is not being used for personal learning.



*The Learning Centre at Boots in Heywood was set up in October 2005. We ran some maths and English courses but things really took off when the company announced the closure plan. Usdaw negotiated the Retraining Agreement which gave staff up to £300 to fund learning and we also set up vocational learning and loads of Skills for Life courses. By the time the workplace closed, over 95% of all staff had taken some kind of learning – most of it on-site.*

*We had to extend our learning facilities to cope with the demand. The original Learning Centre became the main computer training centre as it had internet access. We set up a second Learning Centre with computers, which we used for courses which didn't need internet access. We also had other learning facilities – a large training room we used for classes, the snooker room which we used for briefings and finally the library and a quiet room that we used for NVQ assessments, one-to-ones or small classes.*

*We couldn't have done all this without our on-site learning facilities. Of course it was a unique situation but it just goes to show what can be done when the will is there and management and unions work together on learning.*

**Suzanne Mortimer and Claire Frost  
Usdaw Union Learning Reps  
Boots Distribution, Heywood**





*I am the Learning Rep Co-ordinator at United Biscuits in Manchester and I do two days a week in the Learning Centre (Learn 4 U) and three as a production operative. We run a large learning programme covering things like Skills for Life, information technology and vocational qualifications.*

*With an on-site Learning Centre it's important to have a central point of contact for the learners, the Union Learning Reps, (ULRs) the unions and the company. I liaise with Learning Centre providers to organise learning and agree site arrangements for courses. I co-ordinate the activity of the ULRs, facilitate the ULR meetings and liaise and communicate regularly with senior union reps and convenors on-site, to ensure the unions are fully aware of any challenges relating to Lifelong Learning.*

*I organise and support promotional activities in conjunction with the ULRs, the management, the providers and other unions on-site, in order to increase Centre usage and expand learning activities.*

Jonathon Waterhouse  
Usdaw Learning Co-ordinator  
United Biscuits, Manchester

## Making it happen

If you think your workplace is suitable for a Learning Centre then discuss it with your Usdaw Lifelong Learning Project Worker. They can help you put together a case, raise it with the employer and develop an action plan. Things to think about include:

- ➔ **Location** The Learning Centre needs to be in a prominent position and in an easily located spot. It will need to be accessible to all including any disabled members.
- ➔ **Equipment** You will need the full range of information technology – computers with internet access and virus protection, desks and seats which meet health and safety guidelines, printers etc. You may want to add learning packages and other things such as a projector or whiteboard.
- ➔ **Opening times** What times will the Centre be open to ensure access for all staff? You will need to think about security and any rules; should staff be able to access it on their own?
- ➔ **Staffing** Centres are more successful if they are staffed, so that advice and support are always available. Centres in large workplaces have an Usdaw co-ordinator who is released on a part or full-time basis to support the learners and the Centre in general.
- ➔ **Management** Learning Centres are normally managed by a Site Learning Committee made up of Union Learning Reps and management working together. (See the Resource Sheet LLL RS5 about Workplace Learning Committees).
- ➔ **Funding** Learning Centres are often supported by a Site Learning Fund to help sustain the facility. The money should be kept in a separate account which is managed jointly through the Learning Committee. Usdaw can provide advice and guidelines on setting up and managing the Fund.
- ➔ **Providers** Some Learning Centres have one provider (usually a college) whilst others work with several different providers. There can be benefits in both approaches. Some colleges will help equip a Learning Centre if they are the sole provider or offer cheaper rates for courses. Be careful though and make sure you are not signing up for something you don't want or targets you can't reach.
- ➔ **Online learning?** Online learning lets people learn in their own time and at their own pace. Some people like it – others don't. The most popular version is U-Net which is provided through unionlearn. But some online learning can involve a lot of paperwork so always discuss the matter with your Usdaw Lifelong Learning Project Worker before agreeing to it.