

If colleges want employers to see them as relevant and reliable sources of skilled workers, they need to make sure they are providing courses that reflect current industry practice.

That view led North West Kent College's assistant managing director of business services Jacquie McDonnell to work closely with a local company to set up a groundbreaking apprenticeship scheme.

The scheme, which is training youngsters in electronic security and emergency systems to prepare them for a career in the highly-specialised electronic security and monitoring industry, is already proving a success and could lead the way for other 'bespoke' courses.

It came about after Clifford Corne,

Reflecting current industry practice

managing director of Secure Engineering, based at East Sutton, near Maidstone, approached the college about running an apprenticeship.

"I wanted to encourage young people to learn about installing and maintaining the kind of sophisticated cameras and other electronic security equipment that we provide but I couldn't find the right course anywhere in the county," said Mr Corne.

"The college was keen to help, but because they weren't convinced they had all the expertise the lecturers would need, they asked me to help make sure the course covered the right topics and provided the right information.

"In the event it has been a great partnership and the college has been amazing. They really have under-promised and over-delivered."

Ms McDonnell added: "We have been delighted with Secure Engineering's support in setting up this new course. We know that if we don't work closely with employers we are in danger of teaching outdated skills, and that is of no use to either the employer or the apprentice."

Secure Engineering now has two employees on the course, 18 year-old Adam Stannard and Harry Shrub, who is 16. Although Secure Engineering

Kent engineering firm opens training centre

An independent inspection and testing business in Kent is set to open a new welder training centre as part of its expansion plans, following a six-figure loan from Lloyds TSB Commercial.

Sittingbourne-based Spree Engineering was founded by director Chris Spree in 1978, and provides weld testing services and non-destructive testing of buildings, structures and pipelines for companies in the power generation, petro-chemical and construction industries. Its customers include the National Grid and the engineering firm Laing O'Rourke.

The opening of the welder training school early next year will create two new jobs and will add to the company's current ability to test welders looking to become registered.

The business currently employs 12 staff and has a turnover of £1.2 million, which it is hoping to boost to around

£2 million in 2012 as the operation expands in both size and scope.

Chris Spree, director of Spree Engineering, said: "Despite the widely publicised difficulties in the manufacturing and construction sector, I'm proud to say that we've been very busy over the past year and have

been engaged with some large national construction projects.

"While we've been involved with welder testing for many years, the new school will enable us to train welders for the first time which will be a valuable addition to our business and the construction industry."



Chris Spree (left) and Paul Green

neering pays more, apprentices must be paid at least the minimum wage, while the government funds the training for everyone who is under 19.

Both Mr Corne and the college are happy to see other security specialists take advantage of the course and Jacquie is keen to see other companies come up with ideas for courses that can help provide local employers with suitably qualified workers.

Secure Engineering installs specialist security and monitoring equipment and part of Mr Corne's thinking is to ensure a steady flow of 'young blood' into his busy company.

The two new apprentices helped the college beat its own target of finding 112 industry places by 2012 in partnership with Gravesham Council's economic development department and Connexions. At Christmas the total stood at 131.

Bexley College has established long-term relationships with a number of key employers both locally and further afield, through apprenticeship learning schemes and also customised courses offered by the colleges training division 'Transform Skills'.

On 7 February 2012, as part of the 2012 National apprenticeship Week, Bexley College will be hosting an Employer Lunch and Forum where businesses can find out more about apprenticeships, the college and how an apprentice can help improve their organisation.

What are apprenticeships?

Apprenticeships provide 16-24 year-olds with a mixture of on and off-the-job training while they are being paid. As employees, apprentices work alongside experienced

College hosts employer lunch and forum

staff to gain job-specific skills.

Off-the-job, usually on a day release basis, apprentices receive training with a local training provider, in this case Bexley College, to acquire the knowledge to underpin their practical work based skills.

Levels of apprenticeships

There are two levels of apprenticeships available for both new and existing employees: 'apprenticeships', incorporate a National Vocational Qualification to Level 2; key skills and a technical certificate, 'Advanced apprenticeships', incorporate a

National Vocational Qualification to Level 3, key skills and a technical certificate.

Why hire an apprentice?

Apprenticeships can improve an organisation's productivity and profitability, and are an effective means of filling skills gaps in current and future workforces. Apprentices tend to be eager, motivated, flexible and loyal to the company that invested in them. Remember, an apprentice is with you because they want to be – they have made an active choice to learn on the job and a commitment to a specific career.