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Why world-class performance needs collaboration and skills development

Moving with *The Leisure Review's* swimming current, Steve Franks looks at issues of training and skills development within the leisure industry, making the case for partnership and courage among employers and training providers facing the toughest of economic conditions.

Never before has there been a greater need for employers from across the wider sport and leisure industry sector to adopt a collaborative approach to skills development through effective and dynamic partnership working.

As far back as 2003 the government of the day was indicating that some 7.3 million adults in the post-19 years age group had not gained a level 2 national vocational or equivalent qualification. Targets were subsequently set to reduce the number of adults in the work place without a level 2 qualification by 40% before 2010.

The vision was to create a "world-class" performing workforce that would enable UK plc to improve its global trade positioning through having the best-trained and most highly skilled workforce anywhere in the world. However, fast forward eight years and we have just experienced the toughest economic challenges for a generation compounded by unemployment hitting a 17-year high of 2.5 million and, according to the Office of National Statistics, youth unemployment hitting its highest levels since records began in 1992.

In today's challenging economic environment employers need to demonstrate true leadership and have the courage to invest in their staff through adopting meaningful and relevant professional qualifications and staff training programmes to aid and support future growth. The Skills Protocol Employer Leadership Group's recent report on physical activity, sport and active leisure provides a welcome insight into the skills that are needed to underpin the future growth and development of our industry sector. It also highlights the associated benefits of having a qualified and skilled workforce that can make a positive contribution, not only to the regeneration of our economic recovery but also to the overall health and wellbeing of the nation.

Having in place clearly defined single qualification structures that are employer led, albeit working in partnership with relevant agencies and bodies to provide context, rigour and relevance, will most certainly assist and motivate organisations to adopt a more strategic approach to how they invest in the training of their staff. This will ultimately enable them to fulfil their full potential, not only as individual employees but also in improving the overall competitive positioning and capability of their own organisation.

With a current workforce of over 500 instructors, administrators and 50 individual business owners across the UK and Irish franchise network, Water Babies has joined forces with the ASA and the Institute of Swimming to sign a publicly announced skills pledge. There are a number of layers to this far-reaching partnership, which will include adopting the principle of a single qualification structure for our instructors to ensure that they are genuinely world-class in their delivery of our baby and toddler aquatic teaching programmes as well as in their overall competence, professionalism and capability.

The values and associated benefits of adopting and implementing a fit-for-purpose, single qualification structure supported by clearly defined career pathways within the company will most certainly become core components in sustaining Water Babies' exponential growth and expansion over future years. Our employees are the most valuable assets in our business and we have a belief in our company that 'people only buy people'. It is therefore unquestionable that having the best-trained and best-qualified staff in our industry sector will most definitely become the defining ingredient in sustaining our long-term development both here in the UK and internationally, despite

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operating in a highly competitive market place and managing through the toughest economic trading conditions for a generation.

Steve Franks is the chief executive of Water Babies.

Download a copy of the SPELG report Employer Skills Protocol for the Leisure Industry [pdf]

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