

# The Company of knowledge

**I**s technology reducing the skill-level of people who work in optics? Does it matter? And can anything be done about it? Recent comments by Mano on remote edging (see *Optician* 26.07.13) are part of a wide-ranging debate within the sector about the best way to maintain and develop skill-sets in the 21st century.

Catherine Barrell, an optical technician at Specsavers, has little doubt about what the impact of technology has been. 'It saves a lot of time and, at the end of the day, it's better in terms of the quality of the work,' she thinks. 'But you're not using as much of your own skill.' This is partly what prompted her to enrol on a Level 4 Diploma for Optical Technicians with the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers (WCSM).

'I saw it as a good way to gain more knowledge. When you're working on a day-to-day basis, you don't always get to learn why you're doing what you're doing. You're losing a lot of the science behind it all, because of the advances in technology.'

The WCSM (a City of London livery company) runs training programmes and qualifications for those who work on the 'non-regulated' side of optics, such as technicians, dispensing assistants, receptionists, managers and supervisors. Like many holders of a WCSM qualification, Barrell came into optics by chance.

'My background has nothing to do with optics,' she says. 'I had an HND in business information technology, but when I was trying to find work, everywhere wanted office experience. I ended going to a job agency, and got a job as a receptionist at Specsavers. My original intention was to work there for 6-12 months, get some office experience, and then divert back down the computing route. As it is, I got into dispensing, became a supervisor, and was then offered a position in the lab. It just sort of snowballed.'

### Career progression

Barrell signed up for the Optical Technicians course after moving into the lab. 'My manager, plus one of the directors in our company, both have the qualification. I like to have a challenge, and I wanted to be able to progress and take things

The Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers is focused on improving skills. Here Catherine Barrell reveals how the Level 4 Diploma for Optical Technicians has boosted her career



**Catherine Barrell received her diploma from WCSM Master Michael Barton**

further.' The result was a boost in her understanding of optics. 'It's given me experience far beyond what I would have gained otherwise. It's shown me a different side of things – surfacing, for example – and it's shown me the processes that go behind it all.'

The Level 4 Diploma is, naturally, a technical qualification. Yet the WCSM builds technical elements into every one of its courses. For instance, the Level 2 and Level 3 Certificates in Optical Practice Support, which are designed for front-of-house members of staff in high-street practices, include units on the anatomy of the eye and ametropia, spectacle lenses and frames, contact lenses and screening (see *Optician* 21.06.13). Likewise, the Level 2 Certificate in

Customer Service focuses both on interpersonal skills (eg, dealing with complaints) and technical knowledge (eg lenticular and aspheric lenses – see *Optician* 22.02.13).

### New qualifications

The range of courses on offer from the Spectacle Makers continues to grow: in just the past few months it has unveiled seven new qualifications (see panel) and helped to launch the Livery Companies Apprenticeship Scheme, which received a £1m investment from the government's Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. The WCSM is an accredited awarding body in all four countries of the UK, and its awards, certificates and diplomas form part of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). For Barrell, this is an important consideration: 'I've done various courses, but one of the beauties of the WCSM is that it is nationally recognised.'

What's next for Barrell? She would like to shift her career towards management at some stage. 'Having the WCSM course behind me does open up other opportunities down the line, not necessarily related directly to working in a lab,' she reckons. 'It gives you a good basis for a change of direction, because it touches across the whole of the subject.' ●

### SEVEN NEW WCSM QUALIFICATIONS

- Level 2 Award in Repairing Spectacles
- Level 2 Award in Spectacle Lens Treatments
- Level 3 Award in Glazing Spectacles
- Level 2 Certificate in Spectacle Operations
- Level 2 Certificate in Spectacle Production
- Level 2 Certificate in Glazing Spectacles (an upgraded version of the Level 2 Award in Glazing Spectacles)
- Level 3 Diploma in Manufacturing Spectacles

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