



# Glazing performers

Rory Brogan visits the Lenstec laboratory in Wales and discovers an emphasis on NVQs and the niche areas of premium and sports glazing

**A**n entire wall at Lenstec's Caerphilly laboratory is covered with staff NVQ certificates and with the company's focus on training, it looks like more wall space will need to be set aside.

So important is training to the independent lab that it has a full-time quality manager in Paul Kibble, and it plans to convert its former warehouse into training space. Kibble, who is an assessor for NVQ 1, 2 and 3, worked in the car industry and has eased Lenstec through ISO 9000 and Investors In People. He now has IIP Champion status in his sights.

Explaining the focus, managing director Nigel Castle says: 'It's not about the plaque on the wall. The culture here has changed to one of training, and staff retention is our focus.'

Lenstec recently had the highest NVQ uptake in the optical industry and new staff coming on board must commit to undertaking NVQs, with three new recruits now on the latest standard. 'It has changed the overall perspective of the company. They can see we care about employees. You can't make every pipe dream come true but there is a true opportunity to grow and develop,' adds Kibble.

As an added incentive to train, the pay structure is based on improvement, 'within a scope'. There is training taking place every day and there are matrix boards in the lab, showing who is doing what.

## Shadow training

An internal lab committee acts as a bridge between management and the work-force, picking a quarterly employee award from the 76 staff and a six-month team award.

Staff are also given an insight into other areas of the company by shadow training operators in different departments. 'When we started out with it, each department had to do 20 hours a week on-the-job shadow training and we struggled at first. Now each department does 50-60 hours as it's worked into the daily routine,' says Castle.

The next mission is to progress



**The German Performer sports lenses are a new direction for the lab**

in lean manufacturing and Kibble describes the development cycle as continuous – 'You don't stop, you look for the next challenge.' The aim is to achieve a world-class manufacturing process, mapping out the key processes in detail. 'You are only as strong as the weakest link in the chain,' he says.

The staff are given work towards this aim and the instructor comes back

every three months and goes through everything that has been done.

'Our industry is complex for process mapping and there are a number of things that can go wrong,' adds Castle. 'Communications is normally the key barrier on crossing different production areas, but shadow training goes a long way towards breaking this down.'

The company, which started out in 1983, is now heavily geared to premium glazing and this he says is the way for independent labs to survive, as 'stronger image-leading labs'.

'In the future we are moving to higher-value work with the same or fewer people. It's the only way we can remain competitive. You have to look at yourself as a company and go to market with some other way of maintaining or increasing business.'

## Robotic moves

Moving forward, Lenstec is investing £300,000 in robotic technology and taking on up to four new members of staff in the next three to six months.

'We've applied for a local government grant as we are bringing new technology to the area and creating new jobs with the expansion,' adds Castle. 'Robotics aren't the answer to everything, you need stand-alone to do certain jobs, but it will help with rimless.'



**Managing director Nigel Castle spends 60 per cent of his time in production**



## Looking at lenses

Lenstec is also introducing new telephone technology so that on answering the phone, it automatically brings up the account on the PC.

At the heart of Lenstec's premium offering are the specialist lenses of Seiko and the German-made Performer 8-base lenses for sports eyewear. 'We work with all suppliers, particularly Essilor and offer everybody's lenses by brand, but we do favour certain routes for certain things,' adds Castle.

The move into 8-base was prompted by some independent research undertaken two years ago and it has led to the average price per job going up significantly in the past 12 months.

'Fifty of our customers were visited as well as 50 who did not use us and the research firm reported back on what they felt an independent optician wants from a lab. Premium glazing and sports were seen as growing niche markets.'

Castle followed up the research by reviewing 8-base sales in other countries and flew to Germany to visit the supplier of Performer lenses as it was looking for a UK distributor. 'When we agreed, we then sent two technicians to train with the company in glazing complex sports product. The whole process was completed in six weeks.'

### Performer package

The main selling point of the technology is that Lenstec can glaze up to -6.00D into 8-base in material options spanning Transitions V, CR39, 1.67 and polycarbonate. A complete package comprises six Performer sports sunglass models in options of magnesium alloy and acetate, backed up in a 'Starterset' with attractive display material and tint sets. Practices also have the slightly more expensive option of glazing other eyewear, with the company specialising in brands from Ray-Ban to Police and Chanel.

Each 8-base job is presented with a docket showing the prescription that is compensated for the bow angle of the frame, so the patient can see what has been done. 'The Rx is changed to compensate for head movement and non-tolerances are very low,' says Castle. 'Opticians are well educated on the pitfalls of vision, but this doesn't take much explaining and is easy to dispense.'

Not every frame can be glazed and there are limitations. 'We pre-check every order and ring the customer to let them know if we can do the job, rather than agreeing to do something and have three goes and then say we cannot.'

To offer 8-base, Lenstec had to invest



The company has plans to add more robotic technology in the next six months

in extra edging technology, as Castle explains you cannot bevel a -6.00D lens on a standard edging machine. 'The bevel has to follow the front of the lens. A normal machine bevel would pop out or protrude at the front.'

As well as creating the appropriate bevel, he says you only get one chance to insert the lens as you would damage it if you pop it in and out. 'Fortunately we don't break many.'

An extra selling tool for the practice is an attractive magnetic stack of tint options in four flash mirrors, four blue blocking tints and standard brown, green and grey. 'We need to set our stall out and invest. It's no good having a premium image and using a colour swatch. You need to back it up.'

There is also a trend towards glazing non-sunglass 8-base lenses as patients go for rimless lifestyle options. 'Most of the business starts off with sunglasses and opticians then broaden their thinking,' says Castle.

In the same way, when the company takes on a new account for this work, they often go on to use Lenstec for

other complex glazing, for example Seiko or Lindberg's rimless frames.

'We weren't a Lindberg Glazing Laboratory and following demand from practices we achieved that in six months. We are not afraid to put people on a plane and train them.' Indeed another technician will soon be sent to Germany for 8-base training.

The company has a specialist team of 10 technicians, led by Wayne Howells, for the premium glazing. 'We use the best 10 highly trained technicians,' says Castle, adding that to make sure it doesn't become elitist, they have to 'pump numbers' too. This is something Castle also does, spending 60 per cent of his time in production.

### Opticians Charter

'When a practice is waiting up to 14 days start to finish for a complex lens to come in and you break it, that cycle starts all over again. You have to look at it from a patient's perspective. We show slides at staff training presentations of where jobs have gone wrong to educate them on the retail value of their work.'

As if training and investment was not enough in what Castle describes as a year of hard work, Lenstec is contemplating a move to 24-hour production. It has also introduced a new logo and come up with an Opticians Charter, which gives an overview of the lab, its product range and quality standards.

Also included in the charter are the mobile numbers of key members of staff, from IT through to Castle himself. 'It's a nice selling feature to the customer that there's my mobile number and I'll know what's going on in the account.' ●

● www.lenstec.co.uk

**A specialised technician pre-checks the bow angle of a prescription 8-base wrap**

