

GW

GEOMATICS WORLD

Issue No 3 ■ March/April 2005 ■ Volume 13



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The UK Government is keen to raise the application of new technology in the construction industry. In the East Midlands area plumbing and surveying are amongst the prime beneficiaries. (Let's hope surveyors will soon be earning as much as plumbers seem to – Editor.)



New technology benefits East Midlands

Phil Sargent, Senior Lecturer at Nottingham Trent University

The East Midlands New Technology Initiative (NTI) is the largest of 18 regional NTIs across the UK, and is recognised as a best practice model for all NTIs. A £6m initiative, it is a consortium of 33 universities and colleges formed to strengthen the links between education and the local economy.

East Midlands NTI has eight networks targeting various industry sectors, including the newly-formed Construction Network, which has some £0.5m funding from East Midlands Development Agency to support its work over the next two years.

The network aims to work closely with small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in construction in the region to identify their equipment, training and educational needs. The network aims to fulfil its brief:

- through provision of advice and consultancy relating to advanced technologies: evaluation and assessment, procurement, effective application and implementation, best practice, etc,
- by providing SMEs with access to new, high-tech equipment so that they can assess its possible impact on their productivity,
- by supporting and assisting an SME to make a technical development grant application to the East Midlands NTI and/or to make an application for financial assistance from other sources,
- through the provision of company-based training services (for example, by delivering new bespoke training on company premises or enhanced or new work-based learning, providing advice on the design of in-house technology training programmes, etc),
- by using NTI investment to enhance or develop institution-based academic provision which employees of SMEs may attend with the support of their employer.

The network aims to assist and serve SMEs from one person to 250 employees which are working in any aspect of the provision or supply of construction-related activities or services. The network identified

two areas of particular strength among its members: plumbing and surveying. It has therefore just used its Phase 1 capital money to buy a fully-equipped diagnostic workshop for training plumbers, and almost £200,000 worth of

surveying instruments and software from Topcon, including robotic, reflectorless, imaging and scanning total stations, GPS and digital photogrammetry. The equipment will be available both for students and accessible by companies. Topcon just edged out Trimble, who also offered a superb value package of equipment.

SMEs will be offered:

- **access to this equipment and software for initial inspection, instruction and assessment,**
- **training courses,**
- **hire opportunities, and**
- **assistance with grant applications if purchases are planned.**

Assistance to SMEs is not limited to this equipment; the network can assist, companies involved in any aspect of construction. Needs already identified by one group of employers and being addressed by the network are provision of training courses in AutoCAD and Microsoft Project.

The range of equipment bought by the network is a major step in bringing education facilities in line with equipment used on-site. Funding is a constant issue in education and it is not uncommon for students to be learning surveying techniques on relatively outdated equipment. Now students will be able to have hands-on experience of the equipment they are likely to meet when they go out into industry.

Lecturers will also have training in how to use the latest instruments and software, so increasing their skills and helping them to keep up-to-date with industry developments. Ian Lester, lecturer in construction and civil engineering at Lincoln College, agrees: "As a college this gives us the leading edge in technology. A lot of students are on day-release and are using up-to-date equipment in their businesses. Equipment at colleges can be many years old. Suddenly we are at the cutting edge, which students appreciate, and that gives us more credibility."

The Technical Development Grants which are available include up to £5,000 for the purchase of advanced technology equipment to enhance the company's productivity with funding matched by the company and one or more employees enrolling on a relevant NTI course. The scheme is open to small and medium sized firms which have been trading for a minimum of one year and operating in the sectors specified by NTI.

- *More details from East Midlands NTI Press Office, Lyn Churcher or Sarah Braund. Tel: 01949 850010.*

Photo above shows a delighted Phil Sargent as he gets his hands on some of the equipment. The instrument is one of Topcon's new GPT7000 series digital imaging total stations.

Phil Sargent and colleagues are benefiting from nearly £200,000 worth of survey equipment supplied by Topcon.



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