

## It's a stitch-up

*Mike Harris and Deirdre Figueiredo show how professional and personal development resulted from collaboration, interaction and shared interest between Craftspace and Viking Sewing Machines (VSM UK Ltd).*

It all began with Craftspace 'selling' VSM the idea of sponsoring its 'Made In The Middle' exhibition. This offered useful links within the community and some valuable PR. As it turns out, it was the first step in a continuing journey in which corporate training has become a central tenet. VSM hasn't undertaken corporate training by running an arts course for its employees, nor purchased an expensive training package 'off the shelf'. The company has simply immersed itself wholeheartedly in an artistic and creative environment. The resulting stimulus has really worked for them.

The initial project coupled the Educators from VSM's sales department with textile artist Karina Thompson. Together they pushed the boundaries of technology, knowledge and imagination. An exploration of machine stitching was shared through workshops with textile undergraduates from Birmingham City University. The students gained core sewing skills, while VSM Educators challenged their pre-conceptions of the creative potential of their sewing machine product. VSM continued its links with the University through a student placement, which allowed them to deepen their understanding of the requirements of future customers.

The impact of the project was deepened by taking the sales team to the launch of the exhibition, and providing opportunities for other staff to visit and take part. From one small step has grown a spider's web of involvement. The result is a vibrant staff involvement in a range of social and cultural situations and a fresh context in which to think about and position VSM's values and objectives.

The company has learnt how artistic involvement can stimulate and motivate staff, deepen understanding and enhance expertise. By working outside their normal environment, staff have grown more confident in their own skills. All staff can see that the company's active involvement within the community is making a difference, working alongside a totally new audience that challenged many of their established activities. Craftspace is gaining a new audience for contemporary crafts, and can raise its profile within the burgeoning amateur textile market that forms VSM's customer base. It is also able to harness the technical expertise and use of high-tech machines to encourage artistic development.

The next project with Craftspace is a three-way partnership, which has received investment from Arts & Business, involving VSM with The Project Group, a crafts social enterprise that provides a creative, progressive and entrepreneurial environment for individuals in the community to achieve their full potential. Masterclasses led by Karina Thompson are specifically targeted at men and will use sewing machines provided by VSM. Having experienced the value of informal learning, VSM aims to involve every member of staff in some capacity and use the community context to open minds.

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w: <http://www.craftspace.co.uk>