

Most money spent on training is wasted, says John Neill, who wants to change that. By Carly Chynoweth

John Neill is not only a businessman, he is also dean of a university in a way – the Unipart way, that is.

Two decades ago Neill decided that staff at Unipart Group needed more development opportunities if the business was to remain competitive, but he was not impressed with the training options available externally.

“A huge amount of money is spent every year on training and less than 20% of it is effective – that is, it results in a performance gain,” said Neill, chairman and chief executive of the manufacturing, logistics and consulting group.

“Often people would learn a body of knowledge that was not consistent or coherent with what’s happening in the company, so they would get demoralised and demotivated. You actually end up worse off than if you had not done it at all.”

So, rather than use someone else’s courses, Neill spent £2.5m setting up an in-house learning and development operation, the Unipart U.

“Corporate universities” appeared in the 1950s, but their popularity has increased in the past five years or so, according to Ruth Svensson, a director in people and change practice at the auditor KPMG. “More companies are asking me about what corporate universities are and how they can set one up,” she said. “Having one sends a clear message to employees that the company wants to invest in their development.”

It is not just businesses that are interested in what such institutions can add to their bottom lines. Earlier this year Lord O’Donnell, the former head of the Civil Service, said he wished that more ministers and civil servants would visit the Unipart U.

While there is no formal difference between a corporate university and the learning and development function of a company’s human resources depart-



John Neill wants Unipart’s scheme adopted by formal engineering courses

Learn at 10 and do at 11 – that’s the Unipart Way

ment, there should, if done right, be practical differences.

“With a corporate university, it should be easy for anyone in the company to see online what training opportunities are available on the job and in a classroom,” Svensson said. “They should be a one-stop shop for all the organisation’s learning.”

That is a big part of Unipart U, said Neill, who expects his employees to work out what they need to know and then take responsibility for learning it. “If someone was in a situation where they needed a particular skill to solve a problem, they would go to our ‘Faculty on the Floor’ and they would learn at 10 – do at 11.”

This is Unipart–speak for short, focused training and problem-solving sessions in the work area of

each business unit, rather than traditional classrooms. Staff use the U’s database to work out what they need to know, learn it in the morning and apply it immediately.

The Unipart U has programmes that lead to national vocational qualifications, and also assistance for more senior staff. Neill said: “At board level there is a whole body of knowledge on strategy . . . we use the same set of tools and techniques [as at shop-floor level].”

Many corporate universities work with traditional universities, said Svensson. “They might partner with Harvard or some other institution,” she said, “but it does not have to be a university. It could also be helpful to add partners from other organisations, such as professional bodies.”

The involvement of high-profile

names can help sell the corporate university to employees, but enlisting outside help is not just about the name. “It’s also about making sure you bring fresh insights into courses,” she said.

Still, the opportunity to earn an externally accredited qualification can be appealing to employees who want to make sure they keep their CVs in good shape. Knowing that can help employers attract new people and retain staff, she added.

Unipart’s employees were initially sceptical about the U, said Neill. “There was fear about whether we had a hidden agenda, but then people started coming forward and volunteering to teach their own courses. One of our most militant shop stewards became one of our best teachers.”

Some employees’ teaching abili-

ties will face a new challenge from September in the shape of the Institute for Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering, a partnership between Unipart and Coventry University. Neill hopes it will take the U’s “see, learn, do” idea and apply it to formal engineering courses.

“You can watch a video or read a book about how to swim, but you may not want to jump in the deep end to see if you can do it,” he said. “Academic education is a bit like that. You can learn from the best, access the best tools, but you have to really do it to be familiar with it.”

Unipart hopes the institute will give it a head start when recruiting graduates, but that is far from the only goal: “Training better engineers is good for the UK. If we don’t have a successful economy, who buys our products?”