

The green rooms

Elizabeth Eyre talks to training venues boss Alastair Stewart about his company's efforts to be environmentally friendly

Green seems to be everyone's favourite colour these days, whether it is councils taxing residents for producing too much waste, corporations using biodegradable plastic in their packaging or shoppers counting the food miles in their local supermarket.

The environmental lobby is making its presence felt in all areas of our lives, and work-based learning and development (L&D) is no exception. There are companies, for example, that are now providing facilities for classroom-style learning sessions to be held over the internet, enabling learners to benefit from interaction with tutors and course-mates without having to travel.

The main driver for this kind of development has been saving time but it also has an environmental impact through reducing companies' carbon footprints.

One man who is vigorously waving the green flag within the L&D industry is Alastair Stewart, managing director of etc.venues. The company provides specially-designed non-residential training venues around London and is now looking to expand outside of the capital.

He has been in charge of the company for a year – he took over as MD last June after having been MD of Initial Style Conferences – and has been strengthening and expanding environmental policies that were put in place by founder Sally Wilton.



"I've gone from talking green to living green"

Etc.venues was founded in 1992 by Wilton who, along with a group of course leaders and trainers at the Greater London Enterprise, was asked by the GLE to raise extra income from designated training space. It has since grown, from having a turnover of £750,000 and seven employees in its first year, to a £10.5 million business with six venues and 130 employees in 2006.

The company was the subject of a £21 million buy-in manage-

What a waste

According to Green-Works Consulting, the amount of waste produced by UK industry during 2002/03 was 67.5 million tonnes, 30 million of which came from the commercial sector. This is expected to grow to 86.3 million tonnes by 2019/20, driven, says the government, by increasing commercial waste.

And every month, more than 36,000 incidents of fly tipping involve waste that can be traced back to business.

London plays a significant role in the problem of waste production. A survey of national waste production by the Environment Agency revealed that 7.1 million tonnes of industrial and commercial waste was produced in the city during 1998/99, 61 per cent of which came from commercial sources.

ment buy-out (BI-MBO) last year, backed by private equity house Dunedin Capital Partners. Wilton and non-executive chairwoman Teresa Graham OBE both retired last June.

It acquired its seventh venue – Dexter House near the City – last month (see Trainer's Choice on p66 for more details) and now has plans to extend out of the capital to regional cities including Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester and Edinburgh.

A £1 million upgrade for exist-

ing venues is also under way.

"I've come to a very green business," Stewart told *TJ*. "It's about as green as I've seen. I've reinforced the idea of being green and continued our investment in being green."

"Sally Wilton was very passionate about the environment – being environmentally sound was one of the founding values of the company back in 1992. She was ahead of her time. I've been influenced by what she's done – I've gone from talking green to living green."

"The challenge now is that everyone's jumped on the bandwagon. Anyone can put mission statements on their wall but what do you actually do behind that?"

The answer, in etc.venues' case, is quite a lot. The company recycles a lot of the waste it produces – more than half in the 18 months between June 2004 and November 2006 – and has just started recycling fluorescent light tubes and batteries.

It has a team of specially-trained 'green champions', one person from each of the six venues, which drives its environmental activity, and has won a number of local green awards for its CSR work.

It has no company cars and encourages its employees to travel around London by bus or tube. Its chefs are encouraged to use locally-produced food in the venue restaurants. "We give our chefs the freedom to use local butchers, fishmongers and markets. At this time of year, 80 per cent of our fruit and vegetables will be sourced in the UK. Wherever we can, we would rather get away from mass procurement," said Stewart.

But behind the altruistic concern for the environment is basic business common sense: Stewart recognises that many large organisations are "going green" and are looking for training providers that will reinforce and support that commitment, rather than being ignorant or cynical about it. That extends to the providers of training space, so etc.venues emphasises the fact that delegates can travel to the venues

easily on public transport for carbon-neutral training sessions.

He says: "We've been doing some work with one of the big four accountancy firms and it's interesting that, in line with its own CSR policies, it is now selecting venues using accessibility by public transport as a key criterion for carbon-neutral meetings. The overnight stay and transportation are the biggest contributors to a venue's carbon rating."

"We don't do overnight stays – our venues are for daytime sessions only – and our criteria is always walking distance from public transport. It's something we pay a lot of attention to."

"We see the large organisations starting to ask 'we're green, are you going to help us?'; that puts pressure on the supply chain to help them."

Stewart claims to know plenty of people who are jumping on the environmental bandwagon without actually demonstrating commitment to the issues in real terms – "who are talking green but, frankly, who are not green". But when you're dealing with big customers, he says, your commitment has to be properly thought through and embedded, not just a superficial statement.

"If you're a training provider, you need to be aware of what your clients' green policies are, how putting together a training programme is one aspect and how the venue is probably going to be a major consideration: where is it, is it in line with their corporate culture."

This shift towards environmental friendliness is a relatively new trend amongst organisations keen to demonstrate their corporate social responsible credentials. And it's just the latest trend to have been recognised and capitalised upon by Stewart, who has been in the training venue business for two decades and seems to have made a habit of spotting, and making the most of, trends within the L&D industry.

His first job was running IBM's dedicated UK marketing and train-

Green credentials

- Between June 2004 and November 2006 etc.venues produced 347.2 tonnes of general waste, 190 tonnes of which were diverted from landfill through its recycling initiatives.
- Following environmental audits, cardboard, glass, mixed paper, mixed plastics and steel were introduced into the recycling initiatives.
- The initial target of the recycling initiatives, which started in June 2004, was a minimum recycling rate across all of the venues by 2005 of 48 per cent.
- etc.venues' recycling rate between May and November 2006 was 46.5 per cent.
- etc.venues reduced its total amount of waste between December 2006 and February 2007 by 27 per cent on the preceding three months.
- etc.venues recycles its ink and toner cartridges, benefiting the Kent Air Ambulance Trust, Wisdom Hospice, the Woodlands Trust, the Quest School for Autistic Children and the Battersea Cats and Dogs Home.
- This year, etc.venues has started recycling fluorescent light tubes, standard dry cell batteries and general waste from two of its six London sites.
- etc.venues' environmental activities have won it local recognition: gold in Southwark Council's Environmental Business Awards (Avonmouth House); Best for Business in the 2005 Visit London Awards; silver in the Islington Tidy Business Standards Awards, and silver in Southwark Council's Environmental Business Awards (Prospero House). They also helped the company to be re-accredited with Investors in People for the fifth time

ing centre in the late Eighties. After a couple of years with the computer manufacturer, he set up PricewaterhouseCooper's training centre. This was in the days when it was cutting edge for big companies to have their own residential training centres out in the middle of nowhere, where employees could go for long courses away from the distractions of everyday life.

"I was at the forefront of the outsourcing arena," Stewart said. "Organisations said 'we're not in the business of running our own

venues, we want to get a specialist in'. So we bought an old country house, refurbished it and ran it for PwC. We ran all of its generic programme of courses right across the range of disciplines – about 1,500 different courses a year.

"The company was previously using lots of different hotels. Some were great and some were rubbish. People were fed up with it and the company wanted to save money, so it decided to have its own venue. It also wanted a PwC-branded environment for its training, so we had the corporate carpet in the foyer and brochures everywhere"

He then spent the next ten years setting up training centres for companies like the Prudential, Abbey National, Barclays, Lincoln National, BP and Nationwide.

He first spotted the trend towards outsourcing within the IT sector – IT companies were the first to use residential training – and then took advantage of regulatory controls of the financial sector following issues such as the pensions mis-selling scandal of the Nineties. Financial companies would use their training centres as evidence to the regulators that they were complying with the spirit, as well as with the letter, of the law.

Over the years, Stewart witnessed a move away from residential training, as companies decided it was too expensive and too time-consuming, to non-residential. "I decided my next step would be in non-residential venues. I'd known Sally Wilton for some time; she and I had a discussion about what she wanted to do in life and she invited me to come forward with a proposition that would support her decision.

"I went to some private equity brokers. They liked the concept – they saw good growth opportunities for non-residential venues – and I arrived here last June.

"It's been very interesting. There's always a very special relationship between the employees



The floor-plan of etc.venues' latest venue – Dexter House near the City – acquired last month

Championing the environment

etc.venues' environmental policy is being driven by a select band of 'green champions', who have just completed the government-recognised waste awareness foundation level qualification, awarded by the Chartered Institute of Waste Management. The qualification is supported by, among others, the Environment Agency, SEPA, the Environment and Heritage Service and the Sita Trust.

The green champions are Samuel Cole (Prospero House); Jacqueline Purcell (The Hatton); Abiola Farore (Avonmouth House); Michelle Goss (Park Street); Sarah Watson (CBI), and Vicki Lovatt (Bonhill House).

and a company founder, so when you take over from the founder it takes time to win people's approval and for your ideas to be considered and accepted. But we've performed very well, which is good.

"My job is to take etc.venues from being an SME to a larger organisation. So I've appointed stronger, more experienced managers and we will be opening new venues."

Does he see any future trends that may see traditional, face-to-face-style training disappear altogether? Employers are favouring short training sessions, held close to home, to cut down on costs and the time employees spend out of the office; could they abandon classroom teacher altogether for,

say, e-learning conducted exclusively by employees at their desks?

Stewart thinks not. "The e-learning thing has got its place but it's never gone as far as people predicted. Maybe that's a generational thing but I think it also has to do with people's wish for face-to-face contact – they value the difference that it brings.

"E-learning can communicate knowledge but it can't change behaviour. I think it's people that change behaviour, through the sense of real challenge that comes from the trainer or from the other people on the course. Face-to-face training is effective in linking information and knowledge – which is what L&D is about – with changes in behaviour." ■