

Boeing's action plan for SMEs

Self-improvement can be one of the most difficult areas for SMEs to tackle. Boeing Defence UK is lending a hand to close that gap, as Alan Dron reports.

It can be tough running a small or medium-sized company (SME). You may have a highly innovative product or process that promises to carve a niche in the marketplace, but there's all the behind-the-scenes admin that has to be taken care of on a daily basis.

The directors of any SME can speak about the time and effort that has to go into recruiting staff, sourcing materials or investing in new equipment, all while dealing with whatever new regulations the government of the day has handed down from Westminster.

With all this going on in the background, training staff, fine-tuning processes and finding new industrial collaborators can take a back seat. That is a situation that Boeing Defence UK (BDUK) is trying to make easier with its SME Action Plan.

Bristol-based BDUK, part of Boeing's US company's Global Services division, has around 2,100 employees spread over 12 regions.



With a supply chain of 435 UK companies, BDUK is well aware of the challenges SMEs face. It has embarked on a policy of trying to improve the prospects of both its own supply chain members and companies from throughout the wider UK aerospace ecosystem, through training sessions that help smaller companies to sharpen their acts.

"We bring in a cohort of SMEs with every capability – services, products and manufacturing," said Toyha Cox, formerly of BDUK's supply chain social governance team.

"And we support them through a bespoke training programme in collaboration with the Excellence Partnership, an independent third-party training provider and an SME.

"There's an application process to begin with," she said, "and we look at certain capabilities that we may have potential requirements for in the wider Boeing organisation. We advertise on a defence-facing portal asking for expressions of interest, then go through a down-selection application process."

The participants complete an online SC21 baseline assessment, with their results helping BDUK to create a syllabus to tackle whichever topics are appropriate for that particular cluster of companies.

That cohort is brought together at a Boeing UK or BDUK site for a one-day workshop where they learn best practice, share ideas and build a support network. Knowledge exchange is a key part of creating a strong SME ecosystem.

Workshop leaders are drawn from a third-party provider and BDUK's own internal capability experts. Eight sessions were completed over the last year.



Taking the challenge: An SME cohort takes a break during a bespoke workshop put on by Boeing Defence UK.

IMAGE: BDUK

Cox said: "We very much use ADS's Supply Chain 21 framework, but it's delivered through a BDUK framework on top of that. We then work with [companies] on how to take their learnings and implement a continuous, sustainable improvement plan. We help them to help themselves.

"This isn't just for Boeing suppliers, so not everybody in the cohorts are on our books already. We have some Tier 1 companies, some Tier 2s and some brand new ones."

The aerospace giant provides more than training through the programme, Cox added:

"There are also introductions to the wider Boeing organisation," whether to engineers, sales professionals or other specialists across Commercial and Defence.

The UK has strong capabilities in the SME category and BDUK is keen to enhance those, opening up potential future opportunities. In doing this, it works closely with the West of England Aerospace Forum (now ADS South West), Make UK Defence, the Joint Supply Chain Accreditation Register (Joscar), and ADS.

This initiative and these relationships are key features of BDUK's SME Action Plan.

"The programme isn't focused on particular [supply chain] problems," said Cox, "it's about improving the SME community in the UK from a supply chain perspective."

Continuous improvement is the goal. BDUK can use its internal lean practices practitioners to share their best practices with the smaller companies.



BDUK aims to support the SMEs both within the UK and from an export perspective, helping them with their competitiveness and their own business improvements in areas where they may feel a little weak.

The programme has garnered positive feedback from participants, especially around the networking element and knowledge share. SMEs on the programme have struck up relationships with each other and within the wider aerospace industry. ■