

James Cook

Skill: Joinery

From: Cambridgeshire
Competed in: WorldSkills 2005, Helsinki
Result: Medallion of Excellence
Employer: AB Carpentry and Joinery

Qualifications

- 9 GCSE's
- NVQ level 3 in Joinery
- City & Guilds Licentiate



Woodwork was James' favourite subject when he was at school and from a young age he was much more at ease when doing 'hands on' activity. With his uncle a joiner and his father having a keen interest in joinery, entering into the wood profession seemed the natural career choice for James. Says James, "I had always been interested in timber and making things from wood so when I got the chance to get some work experience while I was at school I chose to give joinery a try. It was definitely the right move for me as I ended up being offered an apprenticeship with the same firm when I left school."

How did he get involved in competitions?

"During my apprenticeship I did a day release at Cambridge Regional College and one day my college lecturer asked me if I was interested in taking part in a local competition. I didn't realise skills competitions like these existed before but I decided to give it a go to see how I fared against other people. For me it was addictive and once I got a taste for winning I went on to compete in some larger regional events."

And how did he get selected to go to WorldSkills?

"Having competed in quite a lot of local and regional joinery competitions I got the opportunity to compete in the 2003 SkillBuild National Joinery competition in Darlington. I came second at this competition which meant I was put forward, alongside the winner, to take part in the final elimination event for a place at WorldSkills. This competition, which was held at Derby College over 3 days, was very intense as myself and my competitor both really wanted to win and it was down to the wire at the end. I was hugely relieved to get through although I have to admit to feeling bad for my counterpart who was really upset when it was over."

So what was the training and preparation like for WorldSkills?

"There's no doubt that the training that needs to be done for a WorldSkills competition is really, really hard and time consuming! That said the effort is worth it as it's such an amazing experience. For the last month before the competition I did solid training for the event organised by Skillbuild so I wasn't at work at all."

What kind of things did the training involve?

"My technical training involved doing lots of test projects from WorldSkills which were a bit like mock exams. This was certainly very helpful as I felt much more prepared for the competition because of all the practice. We also did a lot of team training which involved learning how to cope with pressure and how to deal with the environment at WorldSkills."

And how supportive was his employer?

When he took part in WorldSkills, James was working for AB Carpentry and Joinery where he had done his work experience and completed his apprenticeship. "My boss was extremely supportive and encouraging which was a really big help in preparing me for WorldSkills. Being part of a small team, I'm sure both my training and competing had an impact on the business but he was always behind me 100%."

So what was WorldSkills like?

"WorldSkills was overwhelming and a bit of a shock to the system if I'm honest but it was also absolutely amazing. Seeing so many different nationalities all under one roof and hearing all the different languages was in itself a lot to take in. Chatting casually to other competitors is a normal part of taking part in competitions but this is much harder when you don't speak the same language. I found the scale of the whole event much bigger than I'd imagined which took me a while to get my head around."

And how did you cope with the competition itself?

"I really tried to pace myself during the competition and take everything one step at a time. I used the breathing techniques we had learnt during the team training to help keep me calm and when I made a mistake I remembered to stop and stand back from the situation and work out what I'd done wrong before moving on rather than panicking and rushing blindly ahead.

The other thing I found really useful was the physical exercise we did together first thing in the morning. Doing some stretching and exercise really helped to prepare me and get me in the zone for the competition."

What benefits does James think taking part in WorldSkills has given him?

"I think confidence has to be one of the biggest benefits. I am quite a shy person so taking part in something like WorldSkills really helped to bring me out of myself. I also think the quality of my work improved enormously in a relatively short space of time and I feel much more capable of doing work I never thought I would be able to do. It gives me a kick to know that although I'm still only 25 I can do things people twice my age can't do and this is largely due to all the additional training I've received through taking part in WorldSkills."

So what has James been up to since taking part in the world's biggest skills competition?

"Well on a personal note I've got married and become a father which have been very positive life changing events! I changed jobs in August 2007 and I'm now working for Cambridge Joinery but as for the future I'm remaining open-minded about my long term plans. I love what I do and I think I'll always want to be working with my hands so that's as much as I can be sure of at this point in time."

Any words of advice for future competitors

"If you're given the chance to compete for a place at WorldSkills go for it because it improves whatever you do. Taking part in WorldSkills is a once in a lifetime opportunity which has benefits which go on and on! Work really hard and take it seriously as the pressure you're up against during the competition is more than you'll experience anywhere else."

And finally, with WorldSkills London 2011 just a few years away, what do you think will be the benefits to young people?

"I think the fact that WorldSkills is coming to the UK will give a real boost to lots of skills young people may be considering as career options. It will help to promote skills like joinery as worthwhile choices and create a real buzz at the same time. I think that it will be a particularly amazing experience for the British competitors taking part in WorldSkills London 2011 as it will be on home soil so if you have a chance of being part of it start preparing now!"

For more information, please contact the PR Team, UK Skills: 020 7612 9260