

TACKLING THE SKILLS SHORTAGE IN THE POWER SECTOR

Ian Graves, Power Director at Costain, looks at what the energy industry can do to stave off a looming skills deficit

The power industry is facing some big challenges over the next five to 15 years. With almost half of the UK's energy and utility workforce expected to retire by 2023, we actively need to be attracting enough younger people into the sector with qualifications in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) to fill the skills gap.

But we have been struggling to do so. According to a CBI survey of education and skills carried out in 2013, while STEM skills are in widespread demand, nearly two in five firms (39%) that need employees with STEM skills and knowledge currently have difficulties recruiting staff. A similar proportion (41%) expect those difficulties to persist in the next three years. When put into the context of youth unemployment, which affects up to a million of our young people aged 16-24, these findings make depressing reading.

Recognition of this potential threat to the industry's prospects has galvanised all of us involved to find effective and sustainable solutions on a number of different levels: nationally, through industry-wide collaboration and setting up appropriate schemes in our own businesses.

The national strategy

An important start to tackle these problems on a national scale was made in 2009, with the set up of the National Skills Academy for Power with substantial investment from employers and government.

One of its key aims has been to take a long-term view of sector needs in

close collaboration with employers, educational providers and prospective recruits. It has already had some notable success in encouraging more new talent into the industry by highlighting the careers and benefits and promoting cross-sector sharing of best practice.

Working together

This emphasis on collaboration has led to a number of positive initiatives in the industry itself. For example, in February 2013 Costain was joined by senior figures from across industry and Government for a National Infrastructure Skills dinner at the House of Lords. There were valuable discussions about how we can inspire young people to acquire the STEM skills we want and need and also offer them more vocational routes into employment.

We followed that in September with the "Big Infrastructure Conversation", held in conjunction with Business in the Community (BITC). It was a fantastic listening exercise, bringing together students, representatives from The Prince's Trust, apprentices and an impressive array of senior business leaders to discuss the importance of STEM skills and the critical role apprenticeships can play in meeting the UK's infrastructure needs.

Putting ideas into action at company level

At Costain we have taken these propositions to heart with a number of initiatives.

- For example, we have implemented a group-wide drive to



recruit more apprentices into a wider choice of disciplines as well as putting a sharper focus on training and leadership throughout the business and supply chain.

- In addition, we have joined forces with "plotr", an online careers service, to encourage more young people to consider joining Costain.
- I have made a personal commitment to help bring about change by becoming a STEM ambassador, a very worthwhile programme I strongly recommend to others with a science and engineering background. As ambassadors we volunteer our time and support to young learners to encourage them to embrace STEM skills in creative, practical and engaging ways.

We firmly believe that promoting STEM skills is a socially responsible thing to do. But it also makes good business sense as we can attract the best and brightest into our companies.

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