

Attracting new talent

Simon Wilson, head of highways and transportation at Matchtech, examines why industry investment requires engineers as well as finance



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In December the government announced its £15 billion 'Road Investment Strategy', billed as the biggest upgrade to the UK highways network for a generation.

After four years of local authority spending cuts the plan was welcome news for the highways sector. However road schemes of this magnitude demand more than money, they also demand the skills of highways engineers.

Engineers are in huge demand across Britain. Growth in the UK's manufacturing sector, investment in infrastructure and a resurgent property industry are all placing heavy demands on engineering skills, worsening the skills gap facing the sector.

Of course, engineers are a finite resource and training new generations of engineers to plug the skills gap takes years, but the highways sector needs these people today.

The latest Matchtech Confidence Index, which surveyed over 3,500 engineers across the UK, including 150 in the highways industry, found that over 90 per cent of highways engineers believe there is a skills gap, with the ageing workforce seen as the greatest challenge to the ongoing success of UK engineering.

Despite the skills shortage, 59 per cent of highways engineers still expect their employer to recruit more staff in the coming year. However, the reality is that many employers will find their recruitment ambitions quashed if the industry does not find more people soon, and whereas companies in other engineering industries can draw on talent from different sectors, the skills required in highways are niche and less transferable, so a broader, more innovative approach is needed.

First of all, the industry must seek to retain the valuable talent it already has. Allowing engineers to work beyond retirement with more flexible working conditions will help keep valuable knowledge for a little bit longer, and

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allow time for it to be effectively shared with the junior engineers who will eventually succeed them.

Encouraging men and women to return to their jobs in highways after a career break, will also help ease the strain of the skills gap. One way to do this, is establishing 'returnships', where individuals are gradually reintroduced to their job and given the necessary training that can bring them up to current standards.

Furthermore, there are many experienced highways operatives who do not have accredited engineering skills but could be trained while in work. Introducing adult apprenticeship schemes for those working in the industry, and for people who want to join it, would boost the talent pipeline and also allow the promotion of more experienced staff into more senior engineering roles.

As for generating a new talent pool, a lack of education has been hampering this after years of inadequate numbers of pupils studying STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects and taking them on to university. Our survey found that more than two fifths (41 per cent) of engineers across all sectors, want to see greater investment in STEM apprenticeship schemes, with more than a quarter (26 per cent) wanting reduced university fees or greater financial support for those studying

STEM subjects. It is an industry-wide problem that is being addressed, but the results will take some time to come through. To ensure STEM education initiatives have a positive impact on the highways sector specifically, businesses must play a role in educating pupils, students and parents about what it offers as a career, otherwise the talent will be attracted elsewhere.

This points us to the fundamental issue of perception. The notion that highways careers are only about road repair and maintenance must be consigned to history and people need to be taught about the breadth of opportunities and skills the sector demands. Many do not understand that modern highways infrastructure involves complex traffic management systems, the construction of iconic bridges and detailed environmental planning and design. As part of this, the industry must showcase its projects so it can stand out from the competition.

Over three quarters of highways engineers (78 per cent) say they are confident the engineering industry will grow its revenues and income in the coming 12 months. Investment such as the £15 billion 'Road Investment Strategy' will help drive this engineering growth, but there is serious work to be done across business, government and education to demonstrate that the sector offers interesting and viable career options. If there is not a successful collaboration to strengthen the future pipeline of talent, and retain the talent currently available, there will not be enough engineers to complete the projects and reap the rewards of the investment. ☹️