



advancing gender
equality in science,
engineering and technology



Diversity in Apprenticeships

Case Study Number Four: Best Practice in Running Female Only Open Days for Apprenticeships

Funded by the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS), the UKRC developed and ran a 'Diversity in Apprenticeships' pilot project in 2010/11, working with the UK's leading energy providers to increase the number of female and BAME apprentices in this sector.

What stops women and girls from doing engineering Apprenticeships?

Through experience of working with organisations and women in SET, and identifying recurring problems, the UKRC has found that these are some of the barriers to women and girls:

- Lack of role models
- Lack of knowledge of the sector
- Girls perception that engineering Apprenticeships are only for boys
- Fear of being only female at recruitment events
- Parents' lack of knowledge of the sector

The following quotes are taken from a focus group of young women and girls, and highlight some of the barriers many women and girls face when entering engineering Apprenticeships:

'I wondered about engineering but I've really got no idea what engineers do. My parents both work in the Civil Service and they seem a bit nervous about me going into such an unknown world.'

'I had a friend who went for an interview for an Apprenticeship, they gave her part of a car engine and made her dismantle it and put it back together again using a diagram. I could never do that.'

'I once went on a school visit to an engineering company. Never again. They made us listen to long talks which I didn't understand.'

The following quotes show that girls can have a positive experience of engineering. Positive experiences and positive role models can lead to a complete change of career choice.

'I've wanted to go into engineering ever since I was quite little. We were learning all about being green and an engineer came to our school and he showed us how to build a wind turbine, it was really cool.'

'My dad is an engineer and he encouraged me to apply to an engineering company. I knew from him what was involved and he's really helped me.'

'My ideas about girls and engineering changed a lot because I thought engineering was just for males, but now I know it's for females too. It's also very interesting.'

How 'Positive Action Open Days' help remove barriers

Positive action open days are one way in which companies can tackle some of the barriers listed above, to attract more women and girls into engineering Apprenticeships.

Many companies already run open days to attract new apprentices. However, an open day for mixed genders in a sector which is traditionally male, is likely to attract a small percentage of females, if any at all. Experience has proved that open days specifically for women and girls are not only well attended, but can be oversubscribed.

The UKRC worked with E.ON to design and implement positive action* open days designed specifically for females looking to get into an engineering Apprenticeship.

"They were a success – we had more applications from women than ever before. The result of the action we took is that we recruited 7 female apprentices this year, that's from only 1 last year – an increase of 600%. Our positive action open days were and continue to be oversubscribed. We will definitely use the positive action approach in future."

It is important to advertise these events in places that will be seen or heard by women and girls.

"After reviewing our literature and planning recruitment activities we looked at where we were most likely to attract girls and women to apply for our Apprenticeships. We decided to advertise in Glamour magazine and to let women know of our upcoming Open Days on local radio stations. We have since expanded our advertising to include social networking sites."

Experience has shown that role models are influential in encouraging more women and girls into non-traditional careers. Having positive female engineers, especially current apprentices, gives potential candidates an insight into realistic and achievable career goals.

"The candidates that attended were extremely positive about the role models they met on the day and also the content of the day."

Sue Treharne, Diversity Manager, E.ON UK

*** Positive Action** - The initiatives described in this guide, such as open days for under-represented groups, are examples of positive action. Under current legislation, employers can take positive action by providing training and encouragement for disadvantaged or under-represented groups, to help improve the diversity of their workforce. Under the Equality Act 2010, in a provision that came into force in April 2011, employers also have the option, when faced with candidates of equal merit, to legally choose a candidate from an under-represented group.

Positive discrimination, however, is illegal. This would include activities such as employing or promoting female or BAME candidates simply because they are under-represented, regardless of whether they have the relevant skills and experience.

Essential ingredients for a positive action open day

When planning your open day it is useful to include tasks which may also be part of your recruitment process – this helps potential applicants to become familiar with tests and interviews should they be invited to the assessment centre. Many companies include an assessment centre as part of their recruitment process for Apprenticeships, and they usually include a tour of the training centre, a practical test, and an interview. To find out more about what an assessment centre is please visit <http://www.theukrc.org/apprentice-interview/what-is-an-assessment-centre> and watch the short video from National Grid.

Involve parents and family members

When advertising the open days, ensure that parents or family members also feel welcome. The day will give them an insight into what is involved in an engineering Apprenticeship and give them more confidence in encouraging their daughters. On the day, give them a leaflet outlining the benefits, including salary and career options.

Organise a range of practical, fun and relevant activities

Ensure the day is pitched at an appropriate level for the audience and organise a variety of activities. Give attendees a positive non-threatening experience which is fun, interesting and relevant.

Involve attendees in practical activities which are in line with the assessment centre task

Some practical tests undertaken at assessment centres can inadvertently disadvantage female candidates, as they are less likely to have been able to practice these skills at home. Female candidates are less likely to recognise and select appropriate tools, so having a practical session can help alleviate any fears about the practical test and give them the opportunity to practice using tools and equipment in a safe environment. You can also suggest ways they can practice in their own time at home so they can prepare for the assessment centre.

Invite female and male engineers to support the activities.

Your employees are the best advert for your organisation. Let them do a brief introduction about their job and give the attendees time to ask questions. Offer some training in presentation skills beforehand if needed and discuss with them the message you are hoping to get across. Ensure you have female engineers supporting activities on the day so attendees can see that there are women doing engineering as a career.

Demonstrate career options

Ask your engineers to talk about their career ambitions and what career options there are in engineering. Evidence has shown that women and girls are drawn to careers that make a contribution to society, so talk about how engineers make a difference to people's lives.

Give an overview of the assessment centre process and interview

Put attendees at ease and give a brief overview of what they should expect at the assessment centre, should they want to apply. One of your female engineers can talk about her experience of the assessment centre process and give tips on how to prepare for it.

Talk briefly about what happens in the interview and what to expect, what they should wear, and what sort of questions they may get asked.

Talk about what support is available for apprentices

Talk about any support facilities you have in place. Do you have a mentoring scheme? How are new apprentices supported? Does the company organise leisure activities for employees that are gender neutral? Does your company have flexible Apprenticeships to accommodate parents with children? Ask a female engineer to talk about how she overcame any difficulties regarding being an only female. This could be done in small groups where attendees can ask specific questions in a safe environment.

Further information and acknowledgements

There are four case studies in this series. This is number four in the series, 'Best Practice in Running Female Only Open Days for Apprenticeships'. It looks at how you can improve your recruitment of female apprentices through positive action open days. The others in the series are: The Business Case for Increasing the Diversity of Apprentices in the Energy Sector; Best Practice in Attracting Atypical Applicants to Apprenticeships; Best Practice in the Recruitment Process for Atypical Apprentices.

There is also a Good Practice Guide to complement these case studies.

Thank you to the following businesses for their efforts during the project, and for their permission in using their experiences in these case studies: British Gas; Drax Power Station; E.ON; Lomax Training Ltd; National Grid.

Thank you also to the following organisations for their advice and support: Cogent SSC; The National Skills Academy for Environmental Technologies; The National Skills Academy for Nuclear; The National Skills Academy for Power; SummitSkills.