

Diversity in Apprenticeships

Case Study Number One: The Business Case for Increasing the Diversity of Apprentices in the Energy Sector

Funded by the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS), the UKRC developed and ran a ‘Diversity in Apprenticeships’ pilot project in 2010/2011, working with the UK’s leading energy providers to increase the number of female and BAME apprentices in this sector.

Driving Force

This project focused specifically on the energy sector. However, the issues highlighted apply to many of the engineering sectors.

It has been estimated that the UK needs to recruit 587,000 engineers between 2007 and 2017 (one fifth of the 2008 engineering workforce)¹. The energy sector has an aging workforce, aging assets and a high demand for technicians. This, coupled with a declining supply of young people exiting the education system over the next 8 to 10 years, could lead to critical skills shortages as the programme to further develop national infrastructure in energy generation progresses. It therefore makes sense to widen the pool that has traditionally been used for recruitment, in order to avoid an acute skills shortage in the coming years.

“Skills shortages, an ageing workforce profile and a decline in the overall number of school leavers are all key drivers behind the need to create a more diverse workforce within our sector. It also makes sound business sense to have a workforce that reflects its customer base - including women and ethnic minorities.” (Kevin Dowd, Operations Manager, The National Skills Academy for Environmental Technologies)

The UKRC elected to look at the under-representation of women and BAME apprentices in the energy sector for the following reasons:

- As with other heavy engineering sectors, the numbers of women and BAME applying for apprenticeships are very low. The energy sector needs to understand and address why it is not attracting these groups.
- The development of renewable energy is central to the future energy needs of the UK and is high on the national agenda. Addressing the lack of women and BAME apprentices at the early stages of this development helps to widen the available talent pool and increase the likelihood of a more diverse workforce in the future.

The organisations participating in the project (see list of acknowledgments below) were keen to highlight the following key benefits in improving the diversity of their workforce:

Diverse People = Diverse Thinking

This is the resounding message from the organisations involved in the project. It makes sense to these organisations that by increasing the diversity of a team or workforce, you get fresh ideas and new ways of thinking. In a sector that needs creative thinking and innovation to succeed, this is of critical importance.

Better customer communication is another key message. An organisation whose workforce reflects its market will be better able to understand and communicate with its customers and tailor its products and services accordingly.

Legal requirements, particularly in times of recession, are another reason for improving diversity, as many contracts and bids now require evidence from tendering organisations that they offer equality of opportunity.

In the energy sector, having engineers and maintenance personnel that reflect the customer base is of particular importance. Being able to send a female engineer to a property that specifically requests it (say for a lone female customer) is a great business benefit. It also sends a hugely positive message about equality of opportunity in the industry, and provides great role models for girls and women.

Aims of the Project

These were to:

- Facilitate an increase in the numbers of female and BAME apprentices within the craft, technical and professional areas of the energy industry, including green/clean energy, over the period of the project, and create a sustainable model for the future.
- Ensure sustainability of the initiatives by embedding practices within organisations.
- Tackle the barriers to recruitment and retention of female and BAME apprentices, including those of the individual, for example self-stereotyping; influence of peers and parents, and those of the organisation, for example unintentionally biased recruitment practices; workplace culture.

Action

The three case studies that follow on in this series (see 'Further Information' below) look at specific actions that can be taken to improve the attraction, recruitment and retention of women and BAME apprentices. This is based on the learning and experiences of the organisations taking part in the project. The UKRC provided a variety of services and resources to support the organisations taking part. These included consultancy, training in gender equality and understanding unconscious bias, and organisational culture analysis. In addition, knowledge sharing between organisations in partner meetings proved a very valuable part of the project.

The project concentrated on the very practical things organisations can do to improve the representation of atypical apprentices. The parameters of the project did not encompass a review of wider factors affecting career choices, such as media role models and careers advice. For more information on other factors influencing career choice, read the accompanying Good Practice Guide to this series.

Impact

Following the discussion on the benefits of increasing diversity, partner organisations came up with the following points on how to get started:

1. Know where you are starting from, or you won't know if any of the positive action* you undertake is having an impact:

- Establish how many female / BAME apprentices you have on your apprenticeship programme.
- Gather as much data as you can from the last five years on recruitment activities. Look at applications, progression through the test and interview stages as well as actual recruitment. Split data by gender and BAME. Establish any trends in this data. For example, are there significant numbers of a particular group failing at the test stage? Are particular groups getting through all stages but just not being offered employment?

- If you don't have the data – start to gather it from now on! (see the UKRC's 'SETting the Foundations: Monitoring Gender Diversity in Science, Engineering & Technology Good Practice Guide' for more advice:
http://www.theukrc.org/files/useruploads/files/organisations/good_practice_guide_-_setting_in_set.pdf)

2. Get your staff involved. Inform them of what the vision for the organisation is, and the business benefits that a diverse workforce brings. They may have some ideas you haven't thought of. Hold a focus group or a training session in order for any fears or concerns to be aired in the right environment.

'If you get the opportunity to be involved in this type of project then take it – keep an open mind – there is always something to be learned. We (at Cogent) now ask ourselves more questions regarding gender equality and we are gathering more data on diversity to monitor the impact of any good practice initiatives we are involved with.' (Chas Hubbard, England Manager, Cogent)

* 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 actions such as employing or promoting women or BAME candidates simply because they are under-represented, regardless of whether they have the relevant skills and experience.

Further information and acknowledgements

There are four case studies in this series. This is number one in the series – The Business Case for Increased Recruitment of Atypical Apprenticeships. The others in the series are: Best Practice in Attracting Atypical Applicants to Apprenticeships; Best Practice in the Recruitment Process for Atypical Apprentices; Best Practice in Running Women Only Days. There is also a Good Practice Guide to complement these case studies.

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¹ Institute for Employment Research, cited in "Engineering UK 2011 - the state of engineering: Executive summary and conclusions",
(http://www.engineeringuk.com/db/documents/6152_EngUK11_ES&C.pdf accessed 20/02/12)

Contact the UKRC at info@theukrc.org or 01274 436485



www.theukrc.org
