

Now is the time for action

Life-long learning' used to be the term; now it's 'continuing professional development' (CPD). What's in a name? Both emphasise the importance of continuously enhancing our knowledge throughout our careers.

Most of us acknowledge that failure to keep building our engineering know-how can, in the end, lead to one of two extremes. At best, we'll be left behind, so that when the axe falls on our jobs, or indeed our employers, there will be nowhere to go. At worst, we'll be hauled before the Court, following an incident, facing questions over our use of technologies, equipment, documentation and/or methods that have long since ceased to be considered fit for purpose.

But how many of us do much, even anything, about it? Relatively few. There are plenty of reasons: the pace of work today leaves little time for 'nice to haves', like education, whether that's dressed up as life-long learning or CPD. Redundancies and slashed budgets mean that almost every employee is doing their work and that of their erstwhile colleagues. So we just get on, regardless, until something happens.

It's much the same in politics. Now that the general election is almost upon us, there is suddenly no end to the giveaways. As we go to press, Labour has announced National Skills Academies for five new sectors, including rail, green buildings and biotechnology – with £12m of public funding to be matched by the private sector. What's more, the National Skills Academy for Power is now open for business, with a further £2.9m. The grand claim is "more than 300,000 learners [attracted] to the training programmes ... over the next four years".

Heard it all before? Plant and operations engineers, like everyone else, are about to be given the opportunity to vote on which party they want to take us forward for the next few years. But who can we entrust with such a momentous responsibility?

Try starting with your professional institution. IPlantE within SOE draws your attention to the recent call to action by the Royal Academy of Engineering, on behalf of engineering institutions. This asks engineers to remember what the country desperately needs from the next government: a robust and renewed national infrastructure, meeting low carbon targets; an economy in which technology and innovation can flourish; and an engineering skills pool to deliver on these challenges.

SOE's own web page (www.soe.org.uk/generalelection2010) may assist you here. You can use it to help you challenge your local candidates on their intentions. Now is not the time to just get on with our jobs. Now is the time to act – and vote wisely.

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