

Step up to the skills challenge



Supporter of WorldSkills London 2011



With UK manufacturers continuing to report the welcome news of increasingly healthy order books and predicting further growth in production output for the months to come (according to latest figures from the CBI, the self-styled voice of business), you can almost hear the collective sighs of relief, as the recent recession edges, ever so haltingly, into history.

Almost, but not quite. Because, in that same breath, industrialists seeing their factories' and plants' futures finally looking more secure are hitting the next big barrier to growth. And the words on their lips are: "We can't get the staff."

This is nothing new. The plain fact is that skilled engineers and technicians have been in gradually declining supply for decades. However, as the UK starts to see a resurgence in its manufacturing and engineering business prospects, the dark warnings of a generation of pundits are coming to pass. The lack of trained people, equipped for just about every technical function in industry, is now holding us back.

Hence the clamour, from across the industrial divides, disciplines and regions, for action. Business leaders in the North West, for example, are now calling on engineering firms to say 'Yes To Apprenticeships'. Nathan Bluer, managing director of Torkington Engineers, is among that campaign's champions, making the point that, as part of the new Apprenticeship Training Agency (ATA) initiative, employers can bring in an apprentice from as little as £5,000 per annum.

"Saying yes to taking on an apprentice is saying yes to trained staff, yes to the next generation of talent, yes to government funding and yes to the future of your company and industry," he insists. "Why wouldn't businesses want to say yes?" Why indeed?

And with the biennial WorldSkills 2011 almost upon us (the largest international skills competition on the planet, taking over the entire ExCeL Centre in London, from 5–8 October) the opportunity to benefit has never been better. Around 150,000 visitors are expected, with the event hosting 1,000 competitors from 50 countries in the final heats, which span 45 skill disciplines. See: www.worldskillslondon2011.com.

Sponsoring organisations already include big names such as 3M, Autodesk, BAE Systems, BT, Cisco, City & Guilds, Fluke, Honda, LearnDirect, Lincoln Electric, Mori Seiki, Mitutoyo, Samsung, Snap-on and Travis Perkins. So this is very big.

As the Society of Operations Engineers' new president Garry Gilby (Operations Engineer, opposite page 16, for inaugural address), puts it: "SOE supports the skills agenda and WorldSkills 2011. Engineers and companies need to get involved now."

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