

It's all about engineering

As Chancellor George Osborne ramps up the rhetoric on manufacturing, with his 'march of the makers' theme, while Prime Minister David Cameron and much of the coalition cabinet dance to a similar 'rebalancing the economy' tune, British industry is seeing a gradual resurgence.

Don't get too excited: according to the latest Markit/CIPS UK Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index, UK manufacturing ended last year with its headline PMI growth indicator rising tantalisingly close to the all-important break even 50 mark.

The actual figure for December was 49.6, up from 47.7 in November. Markit/CIPS records a significant improvement in export orders (rising for the first time in five months), particularly from Germany, Eastern Europe and China, and counterbalancing a six-month decline in new orders – indicative of continuing domestic weakness.

There's little point in putting too great a spin on such muted good news. The inescapable facts are that, yes, Britain is doing better in manufacturing than many pundits would have us all believe, but, yes also, these remain very tough times, especially given an ongoing shaky situation in the Euro zone.

For us, in plant engineering, it's worth focusing on the aspects we can influence, rather than concerning ourselves too much about those we can't. As the soothsayers put it: worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow; it empties today of its strength. That being the case, it's all about excellence and innovation, which together can get more people buying British, and drive that PMI figure decisively into the 50-plus zone.

But for that to happen, we need even more creative talent to be attracted into engineering. They're wanted to slake the thirst of manufacturers that point to unfilled vacancies as holding them back. However, they're also needed to replace baby boomers, who are increasingly heading towards (albeit delayed) retirement.

And that means diverting some of the steady stream of bright individuals choosing art school or finance, instead of engineering. It's been said before, but we need to help youngsters understand the sheer scale of rewarding opportunities in engineering careers. We also need to nurture latent enthusiasm by keeping the dream alive.

On their own, the new Queen Elizabeth prize for Engineering (page 3), UCL's 'Make Space' engineering centre, the 'I'm an engineer, get me out of here' event, the Engineering Insight programme (launched by PC World and McGraw Hill) and the celebrations around Prof Stephen Hawking's 70th birthday may not seem that much. But, you know, change is all around us. Engineering and science are catching on.

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