

Skills key to Olympic success

The UK was crying out for construction workers long before London won the bid to host the 2012 Olympics. The shortages, caused in no small part by the 1990s industry recession which cut training budgets, have continued to affect the industry ever since

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Britain's successful Olympics bid has brought into sharp focus just how far the industry lags behind in providing properly trained construction professionals – not just in London but also across the whole UK. According to the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), an estimated 23,500 workers covering the whole spectrum of construction skills will be needed to service the Olympic projects – and that's before 2008. Such are the demands on the construction industry for this kind of global event.

Skills shortage and recruitment remains the ongoing challenge. Month on month, the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) job reports show that demand for permanent and contract construction staff continues to outstrip all other sectors. Without exception, we believe that if we are going to satisfy the enormous potential shortfall in the Olympics workforce and beyond, there needs to be an immediate expansion in the number of people taking up a career in construction.

REC members are currently addressing these issues via the creation of a Sustainable Employment Legacy Forum (SELF). Bringing together construction recruiters, private companies and other interested stakeholders, SELF is involving recruiters in schemes designed to attract people into the construction industry.

One example of how this is already working in practice is through partnership REC members Malla, Fusion People and the Construction

Knowledge Exchange (CKE), based at London South Bank University. The CKE funded by the London Development Agency under the "Headstart" Programme provides 150 eight-week placements over two years for construction industry undergraduates. The idea behind the scheme is to give students valuable work experience during their course. This not only boosts the undergraduates' chances of employment, but also helps to reduce the skills deficit in the London region.

In addition to general recruitment challenges, changing demographics are causing increasing numbers of employers to embrace a more diverse workforce in their future business plans. Predictions estimate that by 2010 the white, able-bodied male under 45 who represents the typical UK construction worker will comprise only 20% of the UK's workforce.

One possible solution already discussed and debated in the industry and within Parliamentary circles is to allow the inclusion of workers from Romania and Bulgaria after their countries' Accession to the EU in 2007.

The REC is critical of the current thinking of Home Secretary John Reid who plans to restrict Romanian and Bulgarian workers into the UK labour market. In recent years, the UK economy has benefited from the large number of migrant workers who came from the new accession countries – successfully filling vacancies in all sectors including construction. We believe the working restrictions imposed on the Romanians and Bulgarians

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by the Home Secretary is likely to create more problems than solve them. Operating these restrictions, yet allowing these workers to live in the UK and be self-employed may increase the possibility of many working illegally.

While winning the Olympic bid has provided a huge boost for the industry, demand is not restricted solely to the South East. There are countless numbers of projects up and down the country that urgently require skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

For local authorities, accredited REC specialist recruitment agencies provide the first point of contact in hiring skilled labour – ensuring that candidates' skills and interests are well matched with any potential roles. REC members can also offer advice on training, Health & Safety, CSCS and CIS issues relating to recruitment. All REC members are committed to the very highest professional standards, abiding by a Code of Professional Practice to ensure the best possible delivery of services.

Sustaining construction employment levels after the Olympic torch is extinguished will be the key to continued recruitment success.

Through careful planning now, we can ensure that with UK's stable economy increased investment in rail infrastructure and the boom in the commercial property sector will continue generating construction jobs not just in London, but across the country.

To find out more about the REC and its construction sector members, visit the website <http://www.rec.uk.com/rec/sector-groups/construction-directory.aspx>.

