

Accentuate the positives

Changing the public's perception of the construction industry is key to attracting the 350,000 new recruits it needs by 2010, argues Saul Townsend of the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB)



There is plenty of evidence to show the industry is suffering a skills shortage. Earlier this year the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) conducted a survey of its own members to examine what the 'on the ground reality' was; and the difficulties faced in recruitment.

The results found that 77% of respondents had problems recruiting during 2006, with 68% expressing that they felt the existing workforce was not sufficiently skilled.

Recruitment difficulties were reported at all levels in the industry but the greatest problems were found at both management and at craft/trade levels. The reasons given for this were varied but most commonly respondents felt that the construction industry was simply not attractive enough to potential recruits.

The construction industry worldwide has an image problem; the question is how to address that. Firstly as an industry we must communicate our successes. There is a culture in construction to just "get on with the job" which is laudable but doesn't help attract new recruits into the industry.

How many times in the UK did we hear about the failures of Wembley Stadium and yet there was hardly any news about Arsenal's new football ground.

To make significant strides in creating a positive image we must talk more about the uniqueness of the industry and showcase all its achievements; making it

known as an aspirational and accessible place in which to have a career.

As well as the industry's image problem there are additional factors; small numbers of appropriate graduates leaving university and a buoyant global construction industry attracting talent, both of which have influenced the skills shortages we now see.

The belief is that the recruitment of non-cognate graduates is fundamental to plugging the gap and providing growth within the industry. The CIOB's own Graduate Diploma Programme has received huge interest and is already delivering graduates with a multitude of different skills into the industry.

The route was developed by a consortium of CIOB, ConstructionSkills, employers and universities to meet the industry demand for qualified construction managers and surveyors.

The programme offers a conversion course designed to complete the technical and managerial components required to support their potential role within a construction firm. To register for the programme, a candidate must have already gained an honours degree and either be accepted for employment or already appointed within the industry.

The syllabus consists of 12 modules. For the residential option, students follow a one-week course at a university followed by 9-10 weeks back on site with coursework and assessments to complete. The distance learning option follows the same modules on

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an open learning basis. The programme is run over three years with four modules per year delivered by the universities with the first module delivered at the National Construction College, Bircham Newton, in conjunction with the CITB.

Another solution to the skills shortage is to make the current workforce even more efficient through new technology and innovation.

The UK's construction sector is the largest industry in the UK, employing around 2.2 million people. The UK industry's annual turnover in 2005 was valued at £169,248 million yet only £33 million of that was spent on research and development (R&D.) By comparison, the agricultural industry's turnover was significantly less at £1,084 million but £127m was spent on R&D.

The CIOB has recently published its own research into R&D and found that 100% of respondents regarded innovation as either very important or important for the future of construction. However, 67% felt their own company was not investing enough. That is of particular concern when we consider that almost 95% of respondents were directors or managers.

The CIOB would argue that if the industry is to be fit for purpose in the future then it must invest in developing new technologies, processes and products, especially with the new challenges sustainability brings.

