

Training key to survival in a downturn, says Farrar

New data from the Construction Skills Network reveals continued demand for skills despite the economic downturn. Here Mike Farrar, Chief Executive of ConstructionSkills, talks to Anthony Woodburn about the importance of maintaining a commitment to staff training during leaner economic times

The forecasts by the Construction Skills Network (CSN) paint a picture of the skills needs and growth rates for the 2009-13 period and reveal two distinct phases for the industry: one of recession (through 2009 and into 2011) and one of gradual recovery (from 2011 to 2013).

The data suggests Government investment in public sectors such as Crossrail, Scotland's 10-year transport plan and major station redevelopments including Reading, Birmingham New Street, and Nottingham, is supporting the market in the earlier years of the forecast period, with any growth from 2011 reflecting general market recovery as credit conditions ease.

Farrar said: "This means

overall workforce numbers at the end of the cycle are likely to return to 2008 levels of around 2.6 million, maintaining the industry's position as the UK's largest employer and prompting calls for businesses to ensure that workers possess the requisite skills for when demand for work picks up.

"This year will be an especially challenging one for the construction industry, and some sectors such as private housing and commercial will be impacted further by the adverse economic climate. In response, ConstructionSkills is working on a number of measures to support affected employers.

"However, after a forecasted contraction of 3% in 2009, followed by no growth in 2010, we expect an

"THIS YEAR WILL BE AN ESPECIALLY CHALLENGING ONE FOR THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY"

incremental recovery culminating in a growth rate of 3% by 2013, largely due to public sector spending and potential market recovery from 2011. The importance of firms ensuring that their employees are well trained and capable of delivering high quality work – both now and when the industry returns to growth – should not diminish."

The latest CSN data also reveals significant variations in regional performances. Average annual growth in Northern Ireland's sector, bolstered by investment in public services such as major road improvements, education and new hospitals, is anticipated to be around 1.6%, almost double that of the other best-performing UK regions. The industry in the South West of England, by comparison,



The research suggests workforce numbers at the end of the current cycle are likely to return to 2008 levels of around 2.6 million

Search is on for Britain's top trade talent

Find out if your apprentice is a plastermind or trowelblazer at SkillBuild – Britain's biggest skills competition to find the best young builders across a range of construction trades.

SkillBuild regional competition dates are now available and entries are open, so firms of all sizes are being encouraged to put forward their trainees to demonstrate their skills and talent.

Despite the downturn in the industry and wider economy, training has never been more important, as firms need the skills to compete for the work currently available and to respond to an upturn when it happens. Entering SkillBuild enables firms to demonstrate the quality of their staff and helps apprentices to develop their skills – and it's free to enter.

Martyn Price, chairman of SkillBuild and MD of CMC Ltd, started out as an apprentice and now employs around 25 apprentices. He said: "I believe that industry skills competitions such as SkillBuild help encourage excellence and develop talent. They also allow employers and colleges to demonstrate their commitment to quality training, ensuring a highly skilled workforce for the future."

Last year's national bricklaying winner, Jason Stanley, who attends Derby College, said: "I have entered before but it's the first time I got through to the national competition and it's great that I won. I think competing at this level really pushes you harder, to do your best."

SkillBuild kicks off with regional heats from April to July and ends in an intense national final in October. The competition is managed by ConstructionSkills, the Sector Skills Council for the industry. It forms part of Construction Showcase, which enables employers to promote their business and career opportunities to young people, replacing National Construction Week.

Paddy Maguire from Southern Region College in Newry, County Down, attended the 2008 final to support painting and decorating finalist Ronan Connell. He said: "As well as being good for the student, it's good for the college – we get more students as a result of them seeing our successful students in the papers."

National winners could be selected for the 'skills olympics' – the international WorldSkills competition – which takes place this year in Calgary,



Jason Stanley, the Skillbuild National Bricklaying Winner 2008

Canada. In 2011 WorldSkills will be held in London. ConstructionSkills aims to build the profile and increase entries to the competition over the next two years, with the aim of having winning British competitors on the stage in London.

Visit www.cskills.org/skillbuild to find out more and download an entry form.

which does not benefit from public sector spending on projects such as the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme, is expected to contract by 0.2% per year.

Figures for Greater London indicate that there will be an annual drop in commercial property activity of around 2.3% on current levels, reflective of less demand for industrial, office and leisure facilities on a wider scale. The capital is, however, a key beneficiary of public sector spending with Crossrail going ahead and some existing railway stations due for large-scale redevelopment. As a result, London's industry is expected to grow by an average of 0.8% per year between 2009 and 2013.

Farrar continued: "This is the first time that we have seen such variations in the CSN figures for the regions and nations. The results clearly show that while activity is not expected to decline across all sectors of the construction industry, this

has varying effects across the country and significant challenging times are ahead.

"Despite this, we do need a flow of young people to enter the industry, particularly in the areas of higher skills need, such as the professionals arena, to help us cope with an ageing workforce and fewer young people entering the industry."

Farrar continued: "Critically though the industry must focus its efforts on retaining and reskilling workers currently in employment. A recession is not a time to decrease training levels, because if that happens, the long-term skills deficit will be severe. These are issues we still face from the recession in the 1990s."

ConstructionSkills has also called on Government to help the industry deliver its training requirements, and is now working closely with officials to implement recent announcements which give more power to public sector bodies to insist on apprentice

"A RECESSION IS NOT A TIME TO DECREASE TRAINING LEVELS, BECAUSE IF THAT HAPPENS, THE LONG-TERM SKILLS DEFICIT WILL BE SEVERE"

employment as part of the procurement process.

In last year's Pre Budget Report, Alistair Darling gave the public sector the ability to act as a 'best practice' construction client and only award contracts to businesses that use apprentices as part of their workforce. This policy is now being turned into action, which will help provide much-needed skills to the industry.

"Working with the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, ConstructionSkills has put in place a 'matching service' to help find placements for those apprentices facing redundancy.

"The service is already assisting more than 1,200 young people whose apprenticeships are at risk, and it sends a clear message that the more the public and private sectors can work together, the stronger the industry can become in these challenging times," Farrar concluded.