Attention on retention as engineering skills shortage continues

The UK's oil and gas industry supports some 440,000 jobs across the UK and with business confidence and investment in the industry growing, an estimated 20,000 more jobs will be created in the North Sea alone this year, making the skills shortage in the thriving energy sector even more pressing than ever.

According to the Association of Graduate Recruiters, the number of graduate vacancies in the UK is set to increase by 10.2% in 2014, with the biggest growth sectors including energy, banking, IT and telecommunications. Government statistics show that there will be demand for around 87,000 graduate engineers each year for the next ten years in the UK, and currently we only produce 46,000 engineering graduates every year.

For companies like Aquaterra Energy, the knowledge that demand for graduate engineers in the UK far exceeds the current supply, is a major concern.

Patrick Phelan, Managing Director of Aquaterra Energy, who will be speaking at The Sea of Opportunity training and skills seminar on 5th March at the Southern North Sea Conference 2014, said: "While much collaborative work has been undertaken by industry, government and education, we are just not achieving the results the industry needs at the pace we need them. Our company has doubled its annual turnover in the last two years and our workforce has grown by 40 per cent in that time. The challenge, industry-wide, for specialist engineering companies like ours, is how to sustain this level of growth without adequate numbers of young graduates to fuel it."

Retention

Phelan holds a position on the Oil and Gas Industry Council, and was involved in the development of the government's Industrial Strategy, which set out to bridge the skills gap and ensure continued growth for the oil and gas industry. While his work with the Council and Aquaterra Energy's involvement with education establishments in promoting engineering careers continues, the company also keeps a focus on the issue of retention and how UK SMEs can better recruit the right candidates and retain skilled engineers for the long-term.

Phelan continues: "Historically our recruitment strategy has been focussed on the academic achievements of our graduate recruits, along with their potential to develop within our company. But, having secured the very best candidates on paper, we were investing heavily in training and giving them the best hands-on off-shore experience they could get, only to then lose them in a few years to major oil companies with deeper pockets.

“So, our approach now is to adopt a more holistic approach to candidate assessment, taking into account character and personality attributes, as well as personal interests and passion for engineering. We’re not just looking for bright, hard-working engineers, we’re looking for individuals who are committed and determined, with the energy to persevere and succeed in helping us to drive our business from strength to strength, over the long-term.”

Education

According to Phelan, schools have an important role to play in closing the engineering skills gap, with gender inequality in academic subjects still a major issue throughout education. Data from the Department of Education and Institute of Physics shows that only a fifth of girls who get an A* at physics GCSE go on to study the subject at A level, compared with half of boys in the same position.

Phelan continued: “With such urgent demand across the industry there is an undisputed need to rapidly increase the number of boys and girls in schools and colleges who are studying and progressing in the relevant academic and vocational STEM subjects, particularly physics. By the time they are applying to university, and considering engineering as a degree subject, it is often too late. If they haven’t studied both maths and physics at A-level, most of the best engineering degree courses will not be available to them.”

“There are also many things that businesses operating in our industry can do to promote engineering as a career and help attract new talent into the sector, including: offering work experience; exhibiting at graduate recruitment fairs; gaining accreditation and actively engaging with engineering institutions; paying competitive salaries; developing close working relationships with university departments; considering non-engineers for commercial roles and maths graduates for analytical roles; and delivering talks and presentations to secondary school staff and students.”

Patrick Phelan will be speaking at The Sea of Opportunity training and skills seminar at 11.45am on 5th March, at SNS2014, Norwich Showground, Norwich. The seminar programme starts at 9.30am and further details can be found at www.eeegr.com/events <http://www.eeegr.com/events> .