

TACKLING THE SKILLS SHORTAGE

Chris Callander spoke to BPMA member companies to find out more about their experience of the reported skills shortage and how they are dealing with it.

Reports suggest that skills shortages could cost science, technology and engineering businesses as much as £1.5 billion a year in recruitment, temporary staffing, inflated salaries and additional training. We spoke to a variety of industry spokespeople to get their thoughts on the issues facing the pump sector.

flow: Are you seeing a skills shortage in your business and if so, how are you addressing it?

Julia Bloomer, Head of Learning & Development at AESSEAL: We are experiencing a shortage of skilled engineers and machine operators. We've addressed this in recent years by adopting a 'grow your own' approach. We dedicate time and money to demonstrating to young people that engineering is a career to aspire to. In 2019 we put 3,792 hours into outreach work, engaging with around 3,000 students from primary year six onwards.

Christian Cuvelier, Business Controller and Aaron White, Product Manager (Technology), at PPS: We are seeing a shortage of qualified pump engineers. We would like to see an NVQ (or similar) developed as today this is not a natural path for young graduates building up skills in plumbing, electrical systems and mechanical engineering.

Shabana Pottle, UK/Ireland Service & Rental HR Business Partner at Xylem UK&I: We have experienced a skills shortage in some regions but to mitigate this we are actively retirement planning, hiring apprentices and ensuring our workforce planning is fluid. In April 2018 we introduced a careers-banding structure in the engineering division to give our engineers a framework of

progression with additional training and mentoring. This has been effective in nurturing talent.

flow: Has the Apprenticeship Levy helped you to bring young talent into your business?

JB: We've always had apprentices, so the levy hasn't made much difference. But it is easier to find good training providers and has made management of the apprentices and suppliers easier.

CC/AW: We looked into apprenticeships, but as an SME struggled to identify the internal resources needed to support them.

SP: Most certainly, we holistically promote the levy across our workforce but have a particular bias on our engineering workforce. We are increasing apprentice numbers year on year and are reaching out to all our employees for other levy qualifying study opportunities.

flow: What methods do you use to upskill existing employees?

JB: We use the levy to support external and in-house training. The personal and professional development support offered to our apprentices extends to all our employees, creating a strong culture of ongoing personal advancement throughout the company. We also have a focus on mentoring.

CC/AW: As a company, we are committed to regular training for all our staff. Our field engineers receive the largest share of the training budget. On-the-job training is also used to develop competencies internally, covering office staff and staff in the field. This includes toolbox talks on ad-hoc topics as and when required.

SP: The majority of upskilling is identified through our feedback and

appraisal processes and one-to-one discussions with line managers. We have a number of subject matter experts who reach out to employees to develop competencies, working across all regions via a skills matrix to identify gaps. We find mentoring and coaching works well alongside classroom-based learning.

flow: Do you place a focus on retaining staff, if so how?

JB: Absolutely, all apprentices become formal employees from day one and are treated as young professionals. We pay, as a minimum, 10% above the national minimum wage.

Succession planning means apprentices receive training for their current job and potential future roles, so are motivated to stay and progress their career.

CC/AW: Retaining staff considering the current shortage of skills is key to our business growth. Following a random anonymous survey of our staff, the quality and calibre of training is viewed by most as a critical factor in their long-term commitment to the company.

In addition to staff mentorship and competitive base salary packages, we have negotiated several benefits to offer staff an enhanced package. Team motivation events outside work hours were introduced to allow personal relationships to flourish, and a bi-monthly internal newsletter highlights the positive contributions made by staff in their working environment.

SP: Employee retention is a paramount concern for us and is a crucial stabilising force for our future success. We have continued meaningful dialogue with managers, teams and staff to discuss issues. ➔

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