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Steelfixing Trailblazer Apprenticeship

Sector: Construction/Civil Engineering

Location: Sheffield, UK

The brief

Closing the skills gap in civil engineering:

NOCN, along with major UK contractor Laing O'Rourke and Bridgwater College, has developed a new Apprenticeship programme for one of the major craft skills in civil engineering. The subsequent Apprenticeship has now approved by Ofqual and the Skills Funding Agency.



Skills gaps are a major risk

Over the next 10 years the UK will see an increase in investment in major civil engineering infrastructure such as the Nuclear Power Station Build Programme, Crossrail and HS2.



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There are major skills gaps for the core civil engineering skills in the industry which unlike the 'building' part of construction has not had a strong history of apprenticeship programmes. Couple this with the demographic time bomb of an aging workforce means that unless urgent action is taken, the problem of a skills gap is about to hit home. Unless the skills gap in the workforce is addressed, UK contractors will have to look to Europe to meet the skill requirements.

"There is a skills gap in the construction industry that is only going to get wider. If we are to sustain this predicted expansion then we have to ensure people receive proper accredited training in the skills needed for now and the future." Graham Hasting-Evans, MD, NOCN

What we delivered

In the past, the industry has used major projects such as T5 at Heathrow and the London Olympics as catalysts for improving skills. NOCN has experience in such major skills projects and MD Graham was the person responsible for developing the skills agenda on the 2012 London Olympics, ensuring those who were trained and employed could then use their skills beyond the project.

Graham has also been a member of the UK National Steering Committee for the Build Up Skills programme, a UK initiative backed by the European Commission which aims to support closing the training and skills gap in the UK workforce to enable it to meet the EU 2020 energy efficiency targets. With all this experience it should be no surprise therefore that NOCN were asked to be part of this important Trailblazer apprenticeship.

Employers leading the way

Laing O'Rourke is a direct employer and is fully aware of these skill gaps and the risks they pose. One significant national skills gap that has been identified is Steelfixing and so the company spearheaded a project funded through the Employer Ownership Pilot to develop a new Level 2 apprenticeship for Steelfixing. As project leaders, Laing O'Rourke selected a group of colleges to deliver the formal training component. These were Bridgwater College, Gateshead College and latterly the National Construction College. After a full tendering process the company then appointed NOCN as the awarding organisation to support the development of the qualification.

"Working with all of the stakeholder partners to develop this qualification has been an incredibly useful and beneficial process and as a result of the breadth of involvement we have developed a qualification that's fit for the new infrastructure projects currently being planned. By giving people new skills in the latest methods of construction, we are equipping them to a new world of opportunities, bounded only by their enthusiasm and imagination." Alison Lamplough, Head of Operational Training, Laing O'Rourke

The development process

In February 2013 at NOCN's offices in London, Laing O'Rourke brought together the team to develop the qualification and the apprenticeship delivery model. The development included input from operational staff, Laing O'Rourke's suppliers and BAM Nuttall as a representative of other major contractors. The team defined the employers' standards, the quality control requirements, the knowledge qualification, workplace learning (NVQ), the approach to up-skilling, the training exercises and delivery of the apprenticeship.



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The process was undertaken in line with the Richard Review principles. A full package was then brought together including Functional Skills, Employment Rights and Responsibilities (ERR) and Traineeship/pre-apprenticeships pathways at Entry and Level 1. A Level 3 is also planned for team leaders in order to give a full pathway.

The local enterprise partnership (LEP) and other local agencies were involved in recruiting potential apprentices and the apprenticeship was approved by Ofqual and is now on the Apprenticeship Framework. Looking to the future, a quality control group with employers will now oversee the implementation of the apprenticeship.

The qualification has also been designed in such a way as to provide a framework for up-skilling the existing workforce and introduce the use of new technology into site-based work.

Apprentices now on programme

The initial trainee programme has now been running since 2014 and the first cohort of apprentices have been employed and are working towards their Level 2 apprenticeship at Bridgwater College.

One of the first apprentices described their experience of the programme:

"I had no formal qualifications and when I started the course I was unemployed and nervous about having to brush up on English and maths, but actually I really enjoyed it. The staff had high expectations in terms of working practices and applied the rules exactly as they would on a construction site. The instructors made us feel part of something very special, and treated us with respect. My proudest moment was realising that I had been successful in my end of course interview and am now going to be a steel fixing apprentice with Laing O'Rourke." **Tom Baker, Steelfixing apprentice**

Where we added value

Collaboration is the future

Bringing everyone together to collaborate in this way is an innovative approach to the development of employer-led apprenticeships and qualifications. All those involved have enjoyed this collaborative approach and see this as an excellent way of working. It's the way of the future for employer-led apprenticeships and qualifications and a methodology to which NOCN is fully committed.

"NOCN is working with employers in the construction and civil engineering industries to develop a suite of exciting new Trailblazer Apprenticeships which are specifically designed to fill the gap. Working hand in hand with industry we will support 'The Great Construction Comeback' across the country which is good news for workers, employers and everyone". **Graham Hasting-Evans, MD, NOCN.**

