

Tackling the skills shortage: What does the next generation brownfield professional look like?

Roundtable outcomes and notes

18 January 2022



By Brian Noer

Senior Analyst / Writer

About

Environment Analyst's [Brownfield and Regeneration Network \(BRN\)](#) brings together the entire brownfield community through our news and events, to share insights, identify business opportunities and to build connections at all levels.

With a widespread skills shortage significantly affecting the sector, the conversational parameters set out for this roundtable discussion included the following talking points:

- What skills and techniques are needed for attracting new talent?
- What are the current challenges in the recruitment and the retaining of staff?
- What resourcing strategies are being utilised to more effectively recruit the next generation into the sector?
- How are you future-proofing in terms of skills and organisational structure to respond to changing industry and project demands?

Key themes discussed

- Should firms focus on recruiting or retaining staff?
- Should firms focus on trained professionals or training junior staff?
- How are firms dealing with salary inflation?
- Where is the next generation coming from?
- How to engage new workers early enough in their educational cycles
- How can regulators or local authorities retain workers?

Recommendations

- Provide on the job training interwoven with higher education
- Support future workers both financially, and through providing access to proper training and educational opportunities
- Start the engagement process early enough - before GCSEs
- Invest in early careers programmes instead of recruitment consultants
- Provide real achievable career growth opportunities within the company
- Consciously bid on tenders that provide opportunities to utilise to junior workforce
- Engage the volunteer communities to develop themed activities and events

The challenges

Recruiting vs Retaining

- Amongst the biggest challenges discussed at the roundtable was the recruitment of qualified prospects with the right skills. "Recruitment consultants are the bane of our lives right now," said one participant, regarding the quantity and cost of involvement with this type of service vs the resultant hiring results. There was a general dissatisfaction with recruitment services.
- It was agreed that recruiting is always more costly and time intensive than retaining, and one of the key solutions to retaining staff is to provide career and skills development to existing staff and to create better opportunities to engage the next generation.
- As a result, the group consensus was to, first of all, target bringing people in at an early stage, and then supporting them through the process of earning a formal qualification, all the while training them on the job.

Where are they coming from?

- "The question is where is the next generation coming from?" asked one participant. "Are universities providing them? Portsmouth university used to have a programme years ago, but that has since ended. We were talking with the British Geotechnical Association before COVID hit, but haven't seen much progress since."
- The need to involve outside organisations to build momentum was discussed, for example, the geological society or regulators like the CIH that have previously been involved in developing expertise in contaminated land.

The regulators are losing out

- It seems to increasingly be the case that positions with regulators, or local authorities, are taken in order to develop skills, and then result in workers leaving for greener pastures in the private sector, lured by higher salaries and better career prospects.

- Retention is a critical problem for both regulators and local authorities - as it is difficult for them to match the higher pay scales on offer in the private sector. "Unless we start to value the skills within regulation and enable people to plan valid career development, then it's always going to be a problem," explained one participant.
- "We will continue to lose people to the private sector once they've been trained and have got some expertise. They will certainly go somewhere that they can use their skills to take the opportunity for further development."

Salary inflation

- Another intertwined issue is salary inflation. "That's impacting projects and everything across the board."
- Participants noted the difficulty of recruiting experienced prospects - which has always been the case - but in this recovery market salary inflation compounded with competition from the likes of the HS2 contractors, "it is almost impossible."
- Note: According to Environment Analyst's Future of Consultancy Survey published at the start of February 2022, practitioners working in the environmental and sustainability consultancy sector enjoyed an average salary increase of 3.7% in 2021, this is below the UK average remuneration rate of 3.8% reported by the ONS in the three months to November 2021.

The solutions

Investing in education

- The group agreed that one part of a long term solution is to support future workers both financially, and through providing access to proper training and educational opportunities.
- "Students don't want to graduate from university with huge debt," said one participant. "If we're spending tens of thousands each year, on each person, to bring them in through recruitment consultants, why not invest, as a sector, in funding degrees through an apprenticeship route, and developing people to suit the employment environment that they're ultimately going to go into work in? *We need to work on building the new 'us' of tomorrow.*"

Apprenticeships

- One of the opportunities discussed at length (and width) is widening the net to not only consider individuals with a degree. Many of the firms represented at the discussion were either currently accessing - or preparing to implement - apprenticeship schemes, to bring people on board for more technical roles and then to build up their skills - tailor them towards what the company requires.
- A plan B initiative was also proposed - life schemes, where apprentices would rotate throughout the business, working alongside architects, contractors, consultants, project

managers - and coming out at the end with a better idea of how they want to plan their careers.

- “We strive to make them rounded professionals first, especially at the junior levels,” said one participant, “and then, as a part of their career development - providing a path that is more specialised, whether that means a geo tech route, or a standard contaminated land route, etc.”

Degree apprenticeships

- Degree apprenticeships were also discussed. It was noted that environmental practitioner degree apprenticeships were run by Bolton, Kingston and Brighton Universities. One participant did say however that, “We’re struggling to engage with them in order to develop viable and effective programmes.”

How do we make the sector attractive to students?

- “We have all spent a lot on recruitment over the last two years,” said another participant, “but we have to turn that on its head - by investing in early careers and connecting with talent while they are still at school. We have to show that a relevant, purposeful career is available. We can provide a quality work life balance, and a career where they can be very proud of the differences that the sector makes.”

Engaging them early

- It was suggested that targeted bidding is often useful. When bidding on tenders, it should be kept in mind whether the project is viable for apprenticeship schemes. “We prioritise projects that allow us to bring people in to experience the work, even going as far as taking 16 year old school leavers, whether it’s through STEM or whether it’s coming from a community run event like a geosciences bike run.”
- The need to engage volunteer communities was discussed, due to the fact that at the moment, there are a large number of people who will not be interested in going to university, that firms might be missing out on.
- Trying to engage 16 and 17 year olds is a bit too late. It’s gone past the ‘goldilocks zone’ at that point. Many firms have a dedicated early careers focus, aimed at years 7 and 8, for children going into high school before choosing their GCSE subjects.
- “As a sector, we are competing with the rest of the built environment. We need to create ways to open doors towards the ‘environmental’ part of the built environment, not just the bricks and mortar, architecture and engineering parts.”

Roundtable participants

Duncan Cartwright	Associate Director	Atkins
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Ann Barker	Lead Officer, Contaminated Land	Bradford Metropolitan District Council
Kelvin Hughes	Technical Director	Delta Simons
Paul Nathanail	Technical Director	GHD
James Connelly	Project Manager	Harworth Group
Scott Elliott	Chief Operating Officer	Hydrock
John McAuliffe	Managing Director	McAuliffe Group
Mike Owens	Associate Director	RSK
George Evans	Managing Director	Soilfix
Neil Williams	Senior Director	St Modwen
Amanda Rafferty	Community & Events Director	Environment Analyst
Brian Noer	Senior Analyst / Writer	Environment Analyst