



Reflecting on the skills agenda: a construction industry perspective

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skills agenda

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide a perspective on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the publication of the journal *Education + Training*.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach adopted is that of providing a viewpoint, reflecting back on papers first published in the 1950s and relating them to current issues in the international construction industry.

Findings – While the context in which skills debates are conducted have changed (e.g. through greater internationalism) many concerns from the 1950s remain current (e.g. how to attract and develop apprentices and graduates).

Research limitations/implications – This paper provides a perspective and does not represent empirical research. It seeks to compare and contrast industry concerns 50 years apart.

Originality/value – This paper is one of a series commissioned by the journal on its fiftieth anniversary. Its originality stems from the subject matter and the construction industry perspective.

Keywords Training, Apprenticeships, Skills shortages, Construction industry

Paper type Viewpoint

The news agenda on any given day will report on market uncertainties. The global marketplace is certainly a dynamic space in which to do business. Few things can be taken for granted, and circumstances can change with unpredictable suddenness. Corporate life is fast-paced. It is about grasping opportunities while mitigating against excessive risk. It is about facing up to the future and mobilizing resources to take advantage of it.

It is rare in business to have a chance to stop and reflect. Such opportunities are to be highly prized. They are built into corporate life through think tanks, brainstorming sessions and strategic conferences. Reflective practice is engineered into the Kentz project management cycle through the audited requirement to consider “lessons learned” at the close-out of every major construction project. Avoiding past mistakes in future practice is the bottom line of such an exercise, yet going through the process can yield so much more – a chance to think about why we do things, a chance to see a context and a bigger picture.

It is rarer in business to be asked to look back 50 years. The 50th anniversary of *Education + Training* provides such an opportunity; something similar was provided on the occasion of the recent retirement of a Kentz manager after 50 years of service. The abiding sense is that much has changed, yet much has stayed the same. Strip away the changing context of politics, technological advances or fashionable preoccupations and



many of the underpinning root causes of the issues facing business have not changed all that much. Talented people have engaged with them to better understand them for profit, to inform public policy, and to create and disseminate academic research.

A changing world?

As a company, Kentz Engineers and Constructors pre-date the *Education + Training* journal by quite a few years. Kentz was formed in Ireland in the early part of the twentieth century. The company has grown into one with 7,000 people in 22 countries serving clients primarily in the upstream and downstream hydrocarbon sector, mining and healthcare.

Education + Training appears to have gone through not dissimilar changes, reflecting a global, interconnected world. Looking back to the first issues of *Technical Education*, as the journal was then known, the preoccupations of the editor and contributors are clearly national in nature. It has the feel of a British journal reflecting in part British industry's preoccupations in a post-war world, albeit with an eye on an international audience looking in.

Reviewing the paper "Training in British industry", for example, Sir Willis Jackson (1959), Director of Research and Education at Metropolitan-Vickers Electrical Company begins with a strong opening statement, most of which could be made today:

No industrial firm large or small can afford to be without personnel skilled in the properties and uses of materials and in the tools and techniques of manufacture. Such personnel are the lifeblood of industry; yet in a large number of firms the need for broad training in these fundamental matters is scarcely recognised, and reliance is placed upon processes, techniques and designs which, though they may have served adequately in the past, are unlikely to suffice in the highly industrialised, and increasingly competitive, world of the future.

A skills agenda is at the heart of current day organisational development. Put simply, without sufficient people with the requisite skills companies such as Kentz will be unable to fulfil their potential for growth. It is difficult and there is a global battle for talent which is becoming more intense. While firms were probably slow to recognize it, the ability to attract, retain and develop skilled people is increasingly a required core competence.

Jackson continues:

It is only by increasing the scale and quality of the further education and practical training of the recruits to industry that we shall be able to improve the material basis of life in this country, strengthen our economic position in world markets, and fulfil our many obligations abroad.

It is a mantra that will be familiar to politicians, civil servants and industry lobbyists in both developed and developing countries. It is the same set of challenges that they are wrestling with at this moment. For many skills-based economies are at the heart of the competitive advantage of nations, although the reference to "obligations abroad" points to a paternalistic world view that would not serve companies well within today's context of global competition.

Craft apprentices and graduate entry

One aspect of life that has changed significantly since the 1950s is demographics and the aging population in developed nations. It has heightened competition for

young talent among school leavers encouraged to join apprenticeship schemes, those leaving the technical colleges, and high-quality graduates, in particular engineering graduates.

Business leaders in the 1950s were looking forward to the “baby boomers” entering the workplace. Their concern was that training departments would have difficulty coping with the sheer volume of young people who would be seeking to gain both employment and skills. Jackson recognized this, commenting:

What is quite certain is that they cannot absorb for training more than a small fraction of the increased number of young people who will become available for industrial recruitment in the early 1960s.

Here the challenge has truly changed. The reduction in the number of young people entering work is a fact of life in Western nations, although not in many developing countries. However, the skills crunch in engineering and construction is a global phenomenon. More young people need to be attracted into apprenticeship schemes. Of the growing numbers filling the world’s universities, more need to be attracted into engineering programmes.

Currently, there is almost a sense of apprenticeships being rediscovered, having dropped off the public radar. In 1959 at the height of industrial apprenticeship schemes, T.H. Hawkins (1959), personnel manager of Laycock Engineering, Sheffield, UK, felt moved to write a paper entitled “What is an apprentice?”. It was at a time when school leavers not entering an apprenticeship scheme or going on to university might find themselves as:

... messenger boys and girls, lorry-drivers’ mates, mashers of tea and general factotums.

It is an insight into a world that many will still remember, but to all intents and purposes has gone. The conclusion Hawkins reaches, having first discussed the nature of both “craft apprentices” and “graduate apprentices” is one that goes to the heart of today’s policy and practice within Kentz:

... far more important than an “apprenticeship” to a school-leaver is the industry or firm which he joins, the kind of training provided, the opportunities available and whether or not an outstanding boy can make his way to the Board of Directors. Parents and teachers and youth employment officers should never be deceived by elaborate displays or obsolete indentures; many good companies have long abandoned them. They should carefully examine attitudes towards training and the concerns for human beings inside the firm in which they are interested.

Although couched in the masculine-oriented language of the day, this gets to the heart of what it means to be a preferred employer in the fight to attract scarce resources. In Kentz this same sentiment has caused us to map out potential career pathways demonstrating how qualified apprentices, young graduates and all high-potential people can reach the top of the organization should they have the drive, ambition and capability to do so within the realities of the world of work. These are underpinned by the formal creation of exposure and experience rotations within the business, backed up by skills development and management development programmes. It has necessitated the formalisation of a mentoring programme specifically created to help young people thrive within the organisation.

The need for cool

In this first decade of the twenty-first century young people's lives are characterized by choice. They make highly sophisticated consumer choices. When it comes to training, education and jobs they have similarly large numbers of choices from which to make decisions. Construction and engineering need to compete as career choices. Logically they do. They offer great career opportunities and potentially excellent remuneration, coupled with challenge and opportunities to learn and develop.

The new consumerism, however, is essentially a world where emotions matter – ask any brand manager. The engineering and construction industry needs to be “cool”. The concept of “cool” can be traced back to the nineteenth century and would be well understood in the 1950s, which saw the birth of the concept of the teenager. Growth in the noughties and beyond will be determined by attracting sufficient of them into engineering and construction. Global capacity to produce will need to increase; innovative solutions will need to be found to new challenges.

In a recent article in the UK's *The Times* newspaper (Chynoweth, 2007) Chris Spray, a general manager at the drinks company Britvic, is quoted as saying:

One way of attracting young people into engineering is to show them the cool technology they'll get to work with.

It is an issue that continues to need addressing. Engineering has declined in popularity just as it is needed the most. It is competing with careers in IT and the media, both of which celebrate the need to be technologically savvy. There is a basis to turn this around. The emotional appeal of engineering needs to be as strong as the many powerful logical arguments in favour of it.

Reflecting forward

For Kentz the search to attract, develop and retain the best talent is a global one – the business is expanding globally. To quote from the Managing Director's Overview within the company's *Sustainability Report* (Kentz, 2007):

In 2006 our business activities in both sales turnover and breadth of presence have grown within the expanding markets where Kentz operates. Specifically the Middle East operations, Southern and West Africa, Russia and Australia have seen the greatest growth in the last year.

Looking back to the earlier papers published in what was then *Technical Education*, much has changed:

- the workplace is more diverse culturally and in terms of gender;
- developed economies have diversified from their industrial base and new industrial centres have emerged around the world;
- tariffs and barriers to trade have reduced; and
- in developed countries the demographics have turned upside down – “baby boom” was followed by “baby bust”.

But there are major areas explored that are high on our corporate agenda:

- competing and achieving advantage through people;
- recognizing that processes, techniques and designs from the past will not meet the challenges of the future;

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- attracting, retaining and developing the craft apprentices and engineering graduates vital to business growth; and
 - ensuring that entry point is no bar to success in our organisation.

The reflective process is a helpful one. Maintaining knowledge archives – whether it is this journal or corporate knowledge banks – provides the fuel to make such exercises effective. Reflection is useful if it informs action. The next challenge is to drive this agenda forward.

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