

I remember a discussion about engineering at University. Hinging on our choice of course it certainly wasn't raising any eyebrows, that is until a Scot chimed in with "I'm studying the changing face of Nigerian pottery in the 20th century". Not totally familiar with those artisans, using "Who's your favourite potter?" didn't seem appropriate to break the ensuing silence, so I played my Geoffrey Boycott: "Why?" The response was quick and telling. "Because it's not engineering."

## Why engineering should fear Nigerian pottery

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I have to admit the answer made perfect sense at the time. That should worry us all as it's substantially why the energy sector's lamenting the growing talent crisis.

There's no doubt about it: too many creative, brilliant people are overlooking engineering as a degree choice, wooed by other, better sold, sexier alternatives. Industry leaders, ignore this *status quo* at your peril. Countless young minds are telling engineering to 'talk to the hand' because it's seen as a stuffy old game.

But had I known then what I know now, you'd be reading a completely different article. What's more I might be a more interesting person. I'd have accumulated a plethora of interesting stories; tales of foreign lands, different cultures, technological wonders – but more importantly, the satisfaction I'd helped make a difference to people's lives, creating wealth and sustaining society.

The face of engineering is becoming more wrinkled as the amount of young talent entering shrivels. By 2012, it's estimated that 33% of today's workforce in oil and gas will have retired. The wide-scale redundancies made in the 90s recession didn't help. Add to this the propensity for freelancing and the impact that it has on training and development (ie, the future), and the scene is set for a serious challenge in engineering recruitment.

Market forces continue to drive way-above-inflation salary hikes. Employers appear to be forced to use remuneration as the primary weapon in attracting new people. This isn't the only answer.

So, there are three main problems: attraction, encouraging freelancers to go staff and retention. I haven't got a panacea

but there are pragmatic steps to be taken; some by companies, some cross-sector.

Companies could aid their recruitment efforts by looking at their branding, communication strategy, structure and business model. Smart organisations today adopt a flexible approach, enabling them to adapt to suit the demands of high-performing talent. This is quite a change to the time honoured like-us-for-what-we-are-or-lump-us approach. It certainly makes jobs more relevant to employees' lifestyles (a

main driver in changing job, according to our research). Dealing with brand needs to go hand-in-hand with embedding an honest culture that creates 'spiritual' employment.

Concurrent with individual employers' actions, there must be a complementary, orchestrated, industry-wide initiative that embraces government, learning institutions, a switched on marketing/PR organisation *et al.* Grant support, tax incentives, non-cognisant degree transference and work visas are among the many things to go on the agenda for change. And let's not forget about addressing the gender imbalance. Any takers to create and lead this initiative?

In making the energy industry more funky, the balance between the radical, new red sneakers and the necessarily solid safety boots needs to be struck, and the new image of the industry then needs to reflect it. The sector's got to be brave in its drive to get to the next generation of graduates before anyone else. It's also got to prepare young engineers for the new world where they will be empowered, making important decisions and able to take the broadest of perspectives.

The hearts and minds of those academics who look down at CDT, technology and any other practical woodwork-esque subjects have to be reached. The industry needs an oil-rig-proportioned strategy and hard-hitting communication solution, not spoon-sized sound bites. Like never before, engineering's got to get into the schools, find the best teachers, actors if needs be, and make it very clear that it's an exciting career, no better still a lifestyle with substantial financial and personal rewards.

In adjusting corporate brand to attract/retain new talent here are a few points to ponder:

how genuinely people-focused are you; are you a truly great place for someone to attach themselves; can you holistically predefine talent; once you've got talent do you have a formal way of holding on to it; do you measure how much people flourish with you?

With freelancers money tends to be the overwhelming driver, but are you doing enough to build on their natural desire to belong? Have you thought about how to attract and retain those specialists, and in so doing lessen the competition's capability? Alternatively, have you got a transition programme to bring freelancers back into the fold? There's nearly always a way of compensating for pure financial reward, once you've got to know the intimate aspirations and fears of an individual.

So in this virtual recruitment panacea there's reinforcement of both individual corporate and industry-wide brand, culture and communication strategy. An overarching solution, agreed by all and with at least a ten-year life. Fiscal/government support will be essential. A diverse cocktail of reward and benefits will be necessary to address each new recruit's needs and to keep incumbents happy. Vital will be open, frank communication, underpinned by ongoing, relevant training and development for all. Enhancing the social standing of the engineer must also be addressed.

For companies that can adopt these remedies I find that headhunting at executive-level is little more difficult today than it's ever been. Longer term, things might be different with pressure coming from many areas, eg, sustainability complexities, criminal bias of legislation. But the industry has never been more open to change, opportunity is truly global and technological advance is making life more interesting. Also, energy (in its widest sense) is at the top of the world's agenda, giving a global platform to anyone who wants to rise to the occasion.

I don't see it as a war for talent. Rather it's a serious skirmish that's given the industry an important wake-up call. How imminent and large the energy industry truly sees it I'm not sure. Whether the sector can act in concert and how much it's prepared to invest is not clear. How the industry reacts will also depend largely on whether it believes it can succeed. Engineering must become a transparent profession of highly articulated opportunity and success – an industry acting as a house of brands, encouraging talent to flourish in a variety of ways and to reap the reward. Otherwise, it'll fall foul of those of Nigerian pottery fanatics everywhere. ●