

# Selling the vision

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## Stan Hornagold examines ways the construction industry can recruit and retain the best young talent

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Graduates and school leavers considering careers in the construction industry will have spent the whole of their lives with internet and mobile technology: shopping, communicating, learning, playing, reading and getting their news. They are very adept at applying it intuitively, intelligently and quickly.

They will run their careers in the same way, seamlessly and without a second thought. In making choices, it will not be through a careers adviser; rather, they will carry out their research online, and it will be the relevance and appeal of this experience that will determine how they spend their working lives.

A prospective recruit investigating what construction offers is faced with a large number of websites, the most prominent of which are those of recruitment firms. On some, they are greeted by a complexity that manages to achieve the near impossible of making our fascinating industry seem boring and second best. [The Construction Industry Training Board](#) even refers to 'the great construction comeback', hardly a phrase that will have young and enthusiastic people queuing up with their enthusiasm and fresh ideas.

Photographs and videos showing the ubiquitous hi-vis jackets, hard hats and safety goggles are not images that are likely to appeal to young people.

## Don't leave it to HR

We will only be able to compete with other industries and attract the best talent if we have a clear vision and can articulate it in an inspirational way. The most important management skills are leadership and marketing, which are much more important in this respect than the HR function. This typically tends to concentrate on the more administrative aspects of recruiting and managing people.

Leaders and experts in marketing choose their words carefully. For example, they talk about the benefits of their product or service rather than the features. This is summed up in the expression 'sell the sizzle not the steak'. Done well, rather than picturing a steak in your fridge, you imagine the sight, sound and smell of a well presented and perfectly cooked steak being served in a good restaurant.

The drive to attract tomorrow's talent should therefore come from the people at the top of every organisation in our industry, and they should give it due time and attention.

## The need to inspire

Ironically, given its apparent reluctance to inspire young people, it was to the construction industry that sports psychologist Bill Beswick turned when working with Sir Alex Ferguson's young Manchester United team in 1992, among them David Beckham, which became one of the greatest.

Beswick asked the players to imagine three bricklayers, each with a different attitude. When asked what they were doing, the first said: 'Laying bricks'; the second replied: 'Earning ?10 per hour', while the third said: 'I'm building a cathedral and one day I will bring my kids here and tell them that their dad contributed to this magnificent building.'

He then asked them to think about which attitude they would apply to the training session they were about to start. Would they be 'just practising', 'earning ?1,000 an hour' or 'helping to build the best team ever so that they would be proud to tell their grandchildren that they had been part of it'.

When Beckham scored during the session, he celebrated with outstretched arms, shouting 'Cathedral 1 ? Bricklayers 0'. Just think what the analogy could do if applied to the industry it was borrowed from.

## **Where do we start?**

There are two stages to attracting project management talent into the industry. The first is to promote construction as worthy of young people investing their career prospects. Without this foundation, we cannot properly create the vision and inspiration needed.

The second stage is to promote project management as an exciting and vital role. Indeed, it might legitimately be described as the pinnacle of the industry, since a project manager controls all aspects from inception through to operational completion.

Talent management comprises 3 major functions ? attraction, recruitment and retention ? and it remains important to manage all 3 effectively.

## **Attraction**

Promoting the industry as a whole is of mutual benefit to every employer. A great place to start is with Sir Winston Churchill's statement: 'We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.'

Let's stop showing uninspiring pictures of scaffolding and muddy sites, and remind our graduates and school leavers that buildings affect not only how we live and work, but also how we feel. They will have personal experience of feeling awe in a church or museum, or perhaps excitement and energy in a theatre or sporting venue. Rather than present an endless list of different job types to young people (most of which they will not yet understand), we must concentrate on the vision.

A more practical, rounded and emotional approach is much more likely to boost the long-standing initiative aimed at increasing industry diversity.

## **Recruitment**

When recruiting project managers, we must show them the fruits of their labours, not the labours themselves. Most construction websites do not show images or videos of clients

enjoying and benefiting from their buildings, and yet this is the whole purpose of the industry.

Focusing on the higher purpose offers an antidote to the current clichéd images of sites. Young people communicate very rapidly through photos, videos and online posts and if we are to reach them, our recruitment needs to be done in a similar way.

## **Retention**

Construction is such a wide industry that the majority of people manage to stay in it for the whole of their careers. More often than not, it is the cyclical nature of the work that causes people to leave, likely through redundancy, not a desire to move out of the industry *per se*.

The key to retention in the future will be linked to continued advances in safety, innovation in technology, more offsite assembly, greater efficiency, faster delivery, more diversity and better value for money.

## **The future**

The next generation of recruits are likely to bring significant change to the industry. They live collaboratively and will work in the same way.

They have been used to concepts such as crowdsourcing, which means that they are more likely to improve cross-disciplinary working and reduce traditional contractual conflicts. They will make rapid advances in tools such as building information modelling, and wonder why the industry has not achieved this decades earlier.

They expect things to happen quickly as consumers, and as a result, they expect to deliver things quickly themselves, not only for the client's sake but for their own. The faster things are built, the more enjoyment, experience, success and rewards they will have. This, together with offsite assembly, means that the next generation is likely to end the trend for relatively slow building.

*Project management might legitimately be described as the pinnacle of the industry, controlling all aspects from inception to completion*

The next generation will not be too concerned about the cost reduction targets in the UK government's [Construction 2025 strategy](#). If anything, they will see it as a way to cut waste, make their fortune and create greater continuity in the industry. The real cost of most things has fallen in their lifetime, but construction has not followed this trend.

The industry acknowledges the need to change, and as we encourage the next generation we should be circumspect about how we effect the handover. It is fine to pass on experience and skills, but it will be equally important to stand aside and let them develop new skills relevant to what will become a rapidly evolving industry. If we do, the future of project management will be in safe hands.

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## **Further information**

- Related competencies include [Managing people](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Construction journal* (June/July 2015)