



Igniting the spark of TALENT

Attracting young people to the trade is the only way to turn the tide on an ageing industry. Tom James finds out why youth and healthy business go hand in hand

The electrical industry could face a shortfall in qualified professionals when the UK emerges from recession, warns one leading training expert.

The year 2018 has been mooted as the time when the UK is clear of negative growth, yet there are fears that unless steps are taken to improve training, the sector will not hit the ground running.

"You have to allow for a two- to three-year lead-in for qualified professionals to be trained, so we have to think about upping the volume of apprenticeships by 2015, ready for the growth in work," explains Iain MacDonald, head of education and training for the ECA.

"It won't be easy persuading business to take on more numbers, many will likely wait until they can see improvements themselves. Many larger firms have reduced their commitment to training, and it's been hard for SMEs – most electrical contractors – to commit to apprenticeships without the certainty of work; but we have to buck the ageing trend in electrical contracting," he adds.

Where the big boys might have failed, there's evidence to suggest that the SMEs are staying the course – and those companies built on encouraging young talent are thriving.

North West firm Barlows Electrical has grown its business off the back of a successful training hub, taking home the Best Medium Employer of the Year prize at the North West Regional Training Awards 2012, in acknowledgment of its good work.

Barlows launched its own skills hub three years

ago, with 65 apprentices currently in training at the centre. Their training philosophy has attracted further accolades, with hub graduate Tiffany Gibson awarded the 'Outstanding Achievement Award' at the regional training awards ceremony.

Gibson, 23, from Wem, became the first female to ever qualify as an electrician at Barlows – a proud moment for company director David Barlow.

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"The volume of female applications we're receiving is hugely encouraging and Tiffany's accolade we hope will encourage more to consider the electrical trade," he states. Linking with the local area is key to Barlows' recruitment drive, as is building firm foundations with community schools.

"Young people often know little or nothing about the trade before training starts; which is why we run taster schemes for those interested, to see what electrical contracting is all about," Barlow explains.

The electrical industry is different from other trades. It has a broad base with lots of specialism, which Barlow believes is a unique selling point for

those who want to go far.

"For those bright young people, there's vast opportunity with us. We can offer excellent career progression in a wide range of electrical sectors. We attract a good influx of A and B grade school leavers and it's by no means a second option to university. The training hub is also hugely beneficial for apprentices, as the assessors are our own managers and also industry professionals, so they know the level of competency needed to be successful."

The electrical industry, and construction at large, has been party to many discussions about how to improve the appeal of the trades, with talk of making it more 'sexy'. MacDonald has been party to his fair share of debates, yet is unconvinced that such discussions, during recession, hold water.

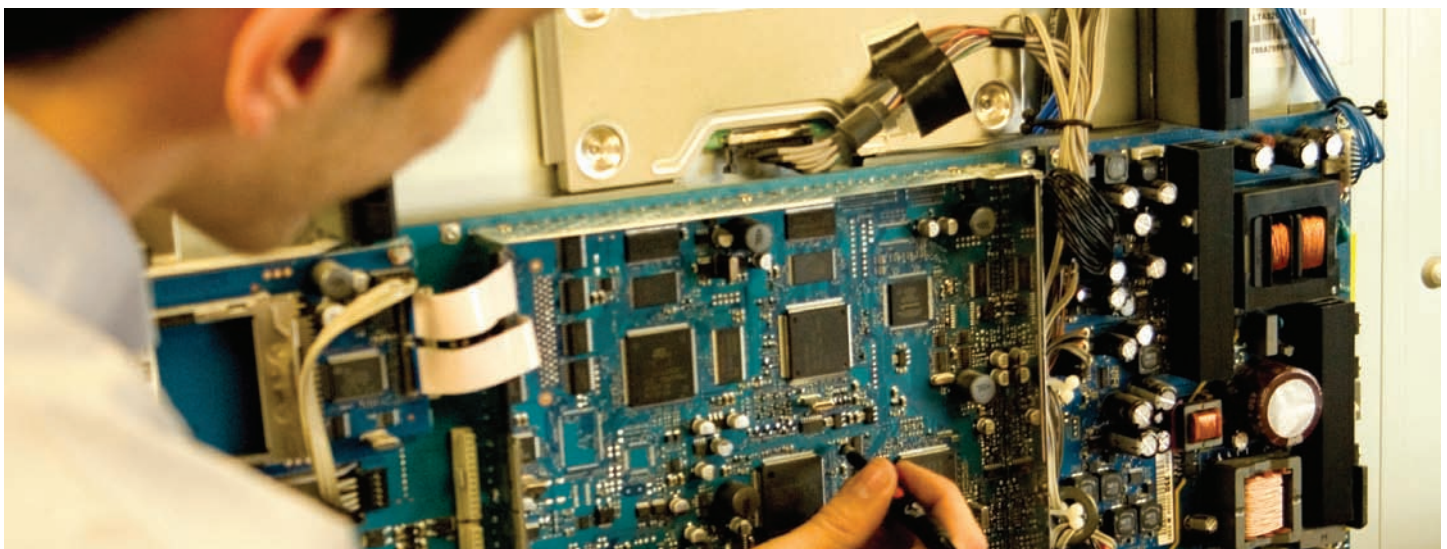
"All trade apprenticeships are being inundated with applicants," he says. "There simply isn't the work to meet the demand. In good times, when the market is thriving, then yes, the debate about appeal is a valid one but I would argue we should perhaps be talking more about higher-level apprenticeships, and the validity of those working alongside trade skills," he explains.

"There's big potential in this area, particularly as university fees increase and graduate jobs become scarcer. Trades will undoubtedly become be attractive."

In parts of the UK worst hit by recession, it's perhaps understandable that apprenticeships are dwindling; the north-east being one region that's suffered more than most.



Main image: Ryan Murley on his way to completing an electrical apprenticeship at McNally & Thompson; above left: Clarkson Evans apprentices onsite; an apprentice receiving one-to-one mentoring



"Construction has been hit hard and the big firms are cutting back," says Fred Hood, director of Sunderland-based McNally & Thompson. "Smaller companies, like us, are doing our bit and our apprentice scheme has been an integral part of business growth for the last 12 years," he adds.

The Tyne and Wear electrical contractors takes only one apprentice a year, recruiting for 13 of the 15 years that Hood's been in the post. Joining in 1997 when McNally & Thompson employed just four staff, he's presided over a year-on-year growth pattern, in part thanks to the apprentice scheme, which has seen all 12 graduates take on full-time positions within the company (28 staff currently).

For Barlows, forging close links with schools has proven a key ingredient to success, and it's also something that Hood cites as vital to improve access to the trade for school leavers.

"We could perhaps be doing more ourselves but it's hard for a smaller company like ours to preach the benefits of trades and then only be able to offer one a year," Hood explains. "There's certainly scope to join forces with other firms, though, working together to better link schools with the workplace."

Access to information on trades is a hurdle recognised by all parties. It's fair to say the focus for schools in the last 15 years has been on boosting university entrants, not on promoting trades to school leavers.

"There needs to be an option for bright kids to choose a trade if they want to," insists Hood. "In my experience, for a career in engineering, youngsters

are much better served by having a practical background. There's no harm in learning a trade at 16 then pursuing a university education later on."

West Country-based electrical contractor Clarkson Evans appears to have struck the right balance, putting down solid foundations in

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Gloucestershire and now attracting a national intake to help staff its 12 regional branches.

With more than 400 employees, Clarkson Evans has found similar success to Barlows, both with their on-site training facility – proving key to apprentice progression – and in growing the business from within.

"Our apprenticeships are designed to develop the business and nurture young people to become part of our long-term team," explains Lindsey Young, HR and training director. "We have a careful selection process, which helps us pick the right candidates for the job, and for our business," she adds.

The company has taken on 100 apprentices in

the last 12 months, doubling the normal intake and reaching the highest recruitment level since their training operation moved in-house in 1998.

Prior to this, apprentices were trained through local colleges but a desire for more control over training prompted the move, which overwhelmingly has proven to be the right one, she claims.

"We can monitor if someone doesn't turn up or isn't performing well. Sometimes you don't get the level of communication with a college that you'd like," Young adds. "That said, for smaller firms, college is probably the best route, as budgets and numbers would make an in-house model too costly."

Like Barlows, the apprentice-centred business model means that the vast majority of the Clarkson Evans' staff base, more than 70%, has trained through their own apprentice scheme. "We have directors and project managers that have climbed the ladder," Young continues. "It's important that apprentices see the scope for growth; it engenders a strong sense of loyalty to the company, which is ultimately to the benefit of our business."

Clarkson Evans and Barlows are bucking national trends, and it seems to be as a result of their training philosophy. No fewer than seven in ten of Barlows' 270 employees are under 32, while a similar percentage of Clarkson Evans' are under 40.

Smaller firms may be reticent about hiring apprentices but such statistics reveal that building from modest beginnings is no barrier to significant expansion, based on a core of loyal employees, all buying into a company's philosophy.