

THE SKILLS GAP SPOTLIGHT + HACKATHON



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SPOTLIGHT AND SPOTLIGHT+ SPEAKERS:

Nick Maclean OBE RD FRICS IRRV (Hons), President, RICS

Sarah Maclean, Joint CEO, Skills England

Mark Farmer, Chair of BEFA and Founder of Cast

Sunny-Thomas Obasuyi MRICS, Associate Partner, HartDixon

Maria Sinclair, Managing Director UK, Cobalt Recruitment

Professor Norman McLennan FRICS, Managing Director and Consultant, Rubislaw Consulting Group

Tim Richards FRICS, Partner & Head of Agency, Rapleys

Debra Yudolph, Founder and CEO, SAY Consulting

Justin Young, Chief Executive, RICS

Hannah Awonuga, CEO, Illume Executive Consulting

Chris Williamson, President, RIBA

Richard Bayfield, Vice President, ICE

Rosalind Thorpe, Director of Education and Standards, CIOB

Lindsey Richards, Immediate Past President, RTPi

Sarah Hayford, Founder and Chief Executive, The Land Collective

Vivienne King, Founder and Managing Director, Impactful Places

Terry Watts, Chief Executive, Built Environment Schools Trust

Nia Williams, Chartered Building Surveyor, Knight Frank

Julie Deeley, Director of Operation, Enable Futures CIC



Sarah Maclean



Mark Farmer

In late October, 140 leaders and rising industry stars from across the built environment industry gathered at RICS' London HQ for the first BE News Skills Gap Spotlight + Hackathon event. Their aim? Not just to debate why there is such a huge skills gap but to explore practical, creative ways to close it.

The event, which was hosted by, and held in collaboration with, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and sponsored by Walker Morris LLP, Cobalt Recruitment and Rapleys, kicked off on Monday 27 October with the first part of the Skills Gap Hackathon, during which 40 young leaders, students and apprentices thrashed out solutions to the growing skills gap with guidance from a group of industry mentors and hackathon organiser, Hackathons UK.

The energy in the building was palpable as fresh thinking was applied to the problem, and as day two of the Skills Gap Spotlight + Hackathon got under way and the hackathon participants continued to develop their innovative ideas, BE News editor-in-chief Liz Hamson threw down the gauntlet to the industry leaders attending the Spotlight and Spotlight+ sessions to be equally proactive and dynamic.

Time to be bold

In his opening remarks, Nick Maclean OBE RD FRICS IRRV (Hons), president, RICS, picked up the gauntlet, emphasising the



need for industry "collaboration" – a word that would reverberate throughout the day.

"We must be bold," said Maclean. "We must be entrepreneurial and experimental in the solutions we produce. We've got to find a solution for those who want to come into our profession, for the people who employ them and for the people who are going to use the solutions that they put forward, whether they be commercial or public servants. Bringing everyone together as collaborators is vital."

Sarah Maclean, joint CEO of Skills England, was equally forthright in the first of two keynote speeches, spelling out how critical the construction industry is to economic growth.

It "underpins everything", yet has the highest skills shortage rate of any sector, said Maclean, noting that Skills England had been established to bring coherence and momentum to a system that had become complicated and fragmented.

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Sarah Maclean



Justin Young

"Our purpose is simple - to make sure that skills and training match the skills our economy needs," she said.

The second keynote speaker, Mark Farmer, chair of BEFA and founder of Cast, pulled no punches when outlining one of the key challenges facing the industry on the skills front. He warned that AI would "come up in the rearview mirror very quickly" and have an impact on the number of people the built environment needs and the skill sets required.

The industry needed to brace itself for major disruption, he said, particularly for people in middle-senior management roles who would need to retrain and re-skill.

He added: "Digitalisation and modernisation are going to affect everything; not just construction. They are going to affect the entire economic workforce."

If the industry is going to rise to such challenges, it will need to make more meaningful progress on a number of different fronts, argued the experts participating in the panel debate that followed.

Discussing the scale of the skills gap, the panel, which featured speakers including Nick Maclean, Cobalt Recruitment managing director UK, Maria Sinclair, and Rapleys partner and head of agency,

Tim Richards, highlighted issues such as the industry's lack of diversity, the ongoing challenges relating to talent retention and its continued overreliance on London, and called for greater collaboration.

The consensus was that a change of mindset was needed if the industry is to have any chance of significantly closing the gap by 2030, which when asked for their thoughts, the audience agreed was not likely to happen.

It was little surprise that after a networking buffet lunch, RICS chief executive Justin Young opened the afternoon Spotlight+ sessions by warning that the skills gap was likely to grow rather than narrow if urgent action was not taken.

Skills maelstrom

Young alluded to the second part of the Hackathon, which was running simultaneously to the Spotlight and Spotlight+ sessions, hailing "the energy and enthusiasm from those young people who are looking at what the answers are to the specific issues that we have here. Because, let's face it, to date, the experts haven't really got an answer. So, let's talk to the people who are absolutely in the maelstrom of the skills agenda currently, those trying to decide what their careers look like and where they need to go."

One person who has been helping those 'in the maelstrom' is Hannah Awonuga, CEO of Illume Executive Consulting. In a powerful TED-style talk, Awonuga said the "elephant in the room" when discussing how to attract more people to the industry was inclusion.

There is an institutional mindset around "who gets in, who gets on and who gets



promoted," and there is still an "eliteness" around people's expectations, said Awonuga. "When I think about the skills we are hiring for today, they are not going to be the skills we will need in 20 years. They are not the skills we hired for 20 years ago. So, our mindset needs to change. It is quite institutionalised."

If the industry wants to really focus on how to attract talent then it should give more consideration to those who want to reskill, retrain or join from different industries, she added: "Do we allow them in? Do they feel that there is a pathway? Do we create pathways? Or does it still feel quite unique?"

A joint approach

Picking up on the theme of collaboration, Justin Young was joined by RIBA president Chris Williamson, ICE vice president Richard Bayfield, CIOB director of education and standards Rosalind Thorpe and RTPI immediate past president Lindsey Richards as they debated 'The Case for a Joint Approach'.

Setting the scene by outlining some of the challenges facing their individual sectors, they agreed there was merit in a more coordinated pan-industry approach and acknowledged the need to present a more united front.

There also needs to be a more proactive approach at a company or organisation level, said Sarah Hayford, founder and CEO of The Land Collective (TLC), during an 'In conversation with...' session.

Hayford underlined the difficulty



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Hannah Awonuga



Hannah Awonuga



Sarah Hayford





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Nick Maclean



Nick Maclean



attracting people from more diverse backgrounds and talked about the work TLC and other organisations were doing to close the skills gap. Ultimately, said Hayford, only by meeting young people where they are and getting them to join the sector early, would we be able to start closing the gap.

Then, as the Hackathon reached its conclusion elsewhere in the building, it was time for a fast and furious speed workshopping session, during which participants split into groups and rotated around the room to discuss seven potential solutions with table hosts: Yudolph; Sinclair; Obasuyi; Vivienne King, founder and managing director, Impactful Places; Terry Watts, chief executive of the Built Environment Schools Trust; Nia Williams, chartered building surveyor at Knight Frank; and Julie Deeley, director of operations at Enable Futures.

RICS president Maclean wrapped up the Spotlight+ sessions by sharing key takeaways and issuing a rallying cry: "We have the opportunity for a golden age of the built environment going forward. We must change what we are telling people about what we are, which is twofold: we are facilitators of life and a catalyst for economic investment. We need to be less meek."

Finally, the Hackathon and Spotlight participants came together for a dynamic networking session. As people talked excitedly about the winning Hackathon solution and the other practical, creative ideas put forward, the message was clear: this was the end of a productive day and a half but only the beginning of a journey that will require tangible actions, not just bold statements of intent.

Full coverage of the Skills Gap Hackathon will be published separately on the BE News website. □



For more information about the BE News 'Close the Gap' campaign or BE News events, please contact:
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