

WHY WE NEED TO MAP THE SKILLS GAP BEFORE WE CAN CLOSE IT

Ahead of the launch of the Map the Gap campaign, senior industry figures joined *BE News* and collaborating partner and sponsor Cobalt Recruitment to debate the best ways to measure the growing built environment industry skills gap . . . and then close it



INDUSTRY GUESTS:

Elizabeth Adigun, CEO and Co-founder, The HerEstate Network

Professor George Agyekum-Mensah, Head of School – Built Environment, London South Bank University

Amaya Sophia Ahmed, Co-founder, The HerEstate Network

David Barnes, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, CIOB

Andy Ellis, UK MD, Gleeds

Mark Farmer, Chair, Built Environment Futures Assembly and founder of Cast

Sarah Hayford, Founder and CEO, The Land Collective

David Hawkes, Head of Policy, ICE

Vivienne King, Chair, Patrons Group, Real Estate Balance

Charlotte Morphet, Senior Lecturer in Urban Planning, University of the Built Environment/Founder, Women in Planning

Andie Penman, Head of Asset Services UK, Cushman & Wakefield

James Porter, Head of Building Surveying, Rapleys

Maria Sinclair, MD, Cobalt Recruitment

Michele Steel, CEO, Regeneration Brainery

Terry Watts, CEO, Built Environment School Trust

Tom Wheldon, Executive Director, HBD

Chris Williamson, President, RIBA

Liz Hamson, editor-in-chief, *BE News*



A head of the launch of the 'Map the Gap' campaign in collaboration with Cobalt Recruitment, BE News editor-in-chief Liz Hamson chaired a roundtable debate at UKREiIF in Leeds to explore issues such as where the biggest skills gaps are in the built environment industry, which roles are under threat from AI and employee versus

employer sentiment towards the job market.

The sometime heated discussion, attended by some of the most dynamic skills advocates from across the industry, helped shape the Built Environment Job Prospects Survey, which form a huge part of the 'Map the Gap' campaign. The discussion also highlighted some of the very different challenges - and opportunities - across the industry.



QUESTION: Do you have an active strategy to address skills shortages in your organisation or sector?

ELLIS: We have fairly detailed recruitment planning, but I think calling it a well-defined strategy is difficult. We tend to be quite reactive because we have to respond to market conditions as best we can.

The two gaps we've seen and invested in, certainly over the last five years, are in early careers and in addressing the gender imbalance.

One of the key challenges is the lack of a visible pipeline that allows us to plan longer

term, and typically a strategy addresses long-term issues.

MORPHET: In terms of planning rather than the wider built environment industry, I think there is some sort of funding around the skills shortage, but I wouldn't say it was comprehensive or necessarily being led by the institute I'm part of.

MHCLG is interested, but perhaps it's skewed towards public sector and specific crises in terms of local government at the moment, rather than being comprehensive and thinking about the aging workforce problem, for instance,



Since the dawn of time we've been talking about a skills gap"

Maria Sinclair

QUESTION: How big is the skills gap in your sector compared with previous years?

SINCLAIR: Since the dawn of time, we've been talking about a skills gap. It's been a fundamental issue for years. I just don't think anybody really champions the wider built environment industry in the right way, and I think that has been detrimental to the number of people that we've seen coming into the industry from a broad church background.

Being able to get people around the table that have experienced different walks of life is really important. We can start to ➤



create micro task forces to encourage more people in.

KING: In the heritage world, over the last 10 years it has got worse because those with heritage trade skills are increasingly moving towards retirement. You don't have the volume of apprenticeships coming through, because heritage trades require a one-to-one relationship, as opposed to the normal approach that we take to education. So, it is steadily getting worse and it's going to reach a crisis point.

QUESTION: What are the key challenges

you are facing in finding the right people with the right skills?

HAWKES: There's a risk of the industry cannibalising itself, with the level of investment going into energy and water. With HS2, there are still 13,000 people working on that project. There's a huge amount of investment happening, and there really needs to be an understanding of the right roles in the right places.

Otherwise, everyone's going to be competing. There's a lot of under-investment in maintenance skills, for instance. People, especially in civil engineering, tend to want to

work on big shiny projects.

A combination of that attitude alongside the historic lack of investment and maintenance means we're seeing a bit of a skills crisis in maintaining the infrastructure we've got. We haven't built a reservoir since 1991. All those skills have completely leaked out.

QUESTION: What about foundational skills?

HAYFORD: That is really important, soft skills in particular. One thing we've been focusing on is the part that comes after people get into a company or role. A lot of our members



It is steadily getting worse and it's going to reach a crisis point"

Vivienne King



have been able to get into the industry successfully through our programmes, but it's almost as if the companies weren't quite ready to absorb them.

I know it's controversial to say, but I think that is true, unfortunately. You can talk until you're blue in the face, and you can endorse all the charities you like, but if you want to truly recruit people from different backgrounds, whether that be in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, you are going to have to accept that they see things differently.

A book I'd really encourage everyone to read is The Culture Map. Erin Meyer is brilliant, and it talks about how people from different cultures bring different things to businesses.

QUESTION: What is being done to address skills shortages?

AHMED: The demand for degree apprenticeships has definitely risen, especially I think due to social media, for example TikTok. However, we also need to recognise that the accessibility point for degree apprenticeships is only 0.7%.

So, there's an uplift in demand, but the supply isn't there. Already we have over 1,000 young girls who want to do degree apprenticeships, who want to get into the built environment industry.

PORTER: The quality of the graduates

who've gone through the apprenticeship scheme that we take on is far superior to the graduates who've gone through university.

They've already had years in the industry, so they get their degree much like a university student, but they know how to answer a phone. They have people skills, they have drive, they can write a report that's commercially-minded for us. They hit the ground running. They're just leagues above what comes out of the university.

AGYEKUM-MENSAH: When we say the degree apprenticeships are superior, maybe it's because they are in the industry already. The content of degree apprenticeships and full-time degrees is similar, but the difference is the degree apprenticeship is like working; they know what they are doing. But it doesn't mean that the skills and the competencies are different.

People in the industry don't really understand degree apprenticeships. There is that misinterpretation of what a degree apprenticeship is. What the industry needs to do to support the degree apprenticeship.

ADIGUN: There's a really high demand for apprenticeships, but in the first year, up to 50% of apprentices leave. I was one of that 50%, because I was an apprentice site manager. However, I didn't think that my talent was being nurtured and I don't think I was being pushed to my fullest point.



They looked at me as, "You're an apprentice, so you do all the laminating, you print out papers, you write the notes in the meeting."

PENMAN: Something as employers we need to accept is that if we're going to take on these shining stars, we need to know how we can keep them and look after them.

We need to give them a better quality experience, and so I'm very careful about taking them on if I don't think that I can put them in a team or in an environment or

geography, where they'll get the best quality experience, because they'll go. And what a tragic waste that is.

We need to do something more within our industry to upskill our people. The thing is, you'll come and work in the organisation that I'm in, and you'll love it until you suddenly find that you've got nowhere to go, and we then get another gap. I see that gap all the time. I hear, 'Andie, bring along some of your top female talent.' There is only one other woman on our UK board, other than me, as of this year.



We need to do something more within our industry to upskill our people"

Andie Penman



QUESTION: In what ways is technology impacting the way companies are hiring or the way candidates are applying for jobs?

WILLIAMSON: I was on a panel. I was the oldest. A young lady, who was the youngest, had gone into the built environment sector through TikTok. Quite a lot of people get their information from that. Making what we do interesting to young people, and showing them the variety of skills, is something I'd like to see. I think AI is going to change the industry.



We're going to need more community engagement consultants, we're going to need more stakeholder management, the things that AI can't do.

QUESTION: What should we be doing that we currently are not doing to 'Map the Gap'?

FARMER: The reality is things have changed. The industry has modernised, but by the same token, a lot of progress has been derailed by economic conditions in the last four or five years.

There was a head of steam building around a whole series of initiatives, which unfortunately is tied into economic cycles. When we have a downturn, which we've had effectively since 2022, the head room and appetite to invest in skills training, innovation, digital, goes south.

QUESTION: What is the one big change that could really move the dial on the skills gap front in the next 12 months?

BARNES: I'm just going to say stability. By that, I mean there have been a lot of initiatives around construction skills, such as boot camps and V levels, and we need a bit of stability before chop-changing policy.

STEELE: Better messaging about the opportunity cost of not sorting this out, of not delivering the homes that the country needs,

of not delivering the investment plans.

WATTS: We've got a broken system. We can't fix it by fixing apprenticeships. The industry isn't responding to the needs of the market. We haven't got the right culture, but we've got an opportunity. Very soon, we aren't going to have big, bulky qualifications. We'll have much more unitised qualifications.

We'll need different ways of measuring them, different ways of training for them, and different ways of delivering them. The problem is there is no leadership. CITB looks at 17 trades, three professions, when actually there are probably three times as many professions as there are tracks.

We haven't got a clear idea of what the gaps are. Industry is on a very short term cycle. It takes five years to train someone. They don't invest in long-term training, so they tend not to take people on. And we really need to look holistically at the system and work out how we can use technology. □



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Mark Farmer



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