

# THE FABRICATOR

## Comment

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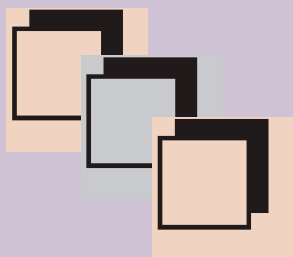
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Last month I mentioned the work-shy generation that seems to be out there. We seem to have something of a dichotomy. I keep reading that there is still a skills shortage yet politicians, in particular, go on about the high levels of unemployment. We can't find people, people can't find work. What is going on here?

First of all, maybe, you shouldn't believe everything you hear. Everyone has an agenda.

On the other hand the skills shortage is real, across industry but particularly in construction. I am tempted to blame the education system. In the fifties it totally failed to inspire me, even though I was at a grammar school. I couldn't wait to get out. The next time I got involved was with my own kids – I was in my forties by now – I was no more impressed. When I was at school the focus, the end game, was all about a job, a career. By the nineties it was all about getting into university, at that stage work didn't come into the equation. You had to have a degree, anything would do.

The government talks a lot about apprenticeships. And there are a few schemes. The GGF, for instance, has a scheme, Skilled Pathways to encourage young people to enter the industry. So good for us, but we also still need plumbers and brickies. And apprenticeships can be in anything: marketing, admin, accounts.

I am not entirely sure how a modern apprenticeship works. There is certainly an academic aspect. Historically apprenticeships were the master passing on his skills to the next generation. I served an apprenticeship in the printing trade and that was certainly how it worked. I was assigned to a 'journeyman' who was tasked to teach me how to do the job. Academia was one day and evening a week. I also made the tea, another learning curve. Printer's tea is legendary, especially on the night shift when they used condensed milk.

Last year we published an article by David Thornton, the chair of The Window Company (Contracts). He was suggesting a similar system for window fitters with experienced fitters teaching apprentices the job. A great idea; it works.

This is an area where the Germans have always been streets ahead. The system involves school, university and an apprenticeship in whatever you do. I once visited a vast German window maker. It made windows on a production line. Pretty much an assembly job. I was very surprised to discover that every one who joined learned to make wooden windows. There was a workshop where new employees spent a year learning what a window is about. How it works and how to make it from scratch. Then they were trusted to go onto the assembly line and put together PVC-U windows.

It is a totally different culture which values hand skills as much as academic knowledge.

So the challenge is to government and for trade associations for that matter. Educationalists need to take on board that it's not about degrees. That jobs in skilled trades, whether construction or elsewhere, are worthwhile; will be progressive and can be lucrative.

*John Roper*