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THE FABRICATOR

Comment

The current buzz is all around apprenticeships. The question is 'what does an apprenticeship offer, how does it work?' I served an old-style apprenticeship in the printing trade. I was indentured to a master and then attached to a craftsman (we called them 'journeymen') who's job was to teach me. It took five years and was the common way to bring new blood into the trade. There was an academic side too, we had a school: The London School of Printing. Years later it was promoted to college. The School still feels a bit superior. (I passed an Advanced City and Guilds qualification in photo-engraving. I doubt that there are many of us left who even know what that means.)

Lots of trades ran similar systems. I number among my ageing, and mostly retired, friends: plumbers, printers and at least one brickie who served apprenticeships. The point is we were all taught by the previous generation. (And do you know that plumbers also did the glass in a building?) On page 17 David Thornton is calling for exactly that, suggesting that experienced window fitters should teach the next generation.

I think it is worth mentioning that back when I was at school almost everyone left school and went into a training scheme. Not just as apprentice artisans, there were opportunities in insurance, banking, any number of industries; one or two even joined the armed forces. In spite of it being a grammar school only one kid out of my class of around 30 went to university. A very strange guy that. The real point is that we all had a career path that, mostly, ended up with a good job and a decent wage. That is what seems to be missing these days.

It seems to me that it went downhill after someone said: 'Everyone should have the right to a degree.' A great sound bite for a politician but I don't think he thought that through. Every college suddenly became a university. People were leaving with degrees that had no relevance to the real workplace and, worse, many arrived in that workplace with expectations way beyond their capabilities. Starting at the bottom at 20 is a lot harder than starting at the bottom at 16.

So the unanswered question in this edition of The Fabricator is: 'How do we sell the industry to school and college leavers?' Most importantly, how do we train them and teach them the skills – both the practical skills and the knowledge needed in sales and management?

There is a steady skills drain from, not just, fenestration but lots of industries. Attracting young people away from academia and back into learning a practical skill and earning the necessary qualifications that go with them is a challenge for all of us. Indeed schools need to talk about practical opportunities as an option rather than just university. Talking to young people and finding out what they expect from a career is an important part of the process (Sam Nuckey, page 18).

There is though a question over CSCS cards. Required on most construction sites. Until now workers who have been in the industry for a number of years could obtain a card without gaining an NVQ – grandfather rights. From January 1st 2025 these rights will no longer exist. It will not be possible to renew existing CSCS cards after that date without an appropriate NVQ. There is a cost for this and we have to ask whether the unintended consequence might be that we lose more experienced skilled people because of it. A lot of these guys might well not be academically inclined and I can see someone who has been in the industry for, maybe 20-plus years not taking kindly to having to prove he knows how to do his job.

John Roper