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“Brunel or Becks?”

Will the future blueprint for education make aspiring to be an engineer as attractive an option as becoming a footballer?

With all the media hype coming from Westminster perhaps the Great British public could be forgiven for assuming that UK Engineering is well on the road to recovery. The truth is it has never really left us. It is perhaps more accurate to recognise that the traditional face of UK Engineering that has changed considerably over recent years. The entire sector has become leaner, more agile, more customer focussed and most importantly has found ways to diversify in the global marketplace...this pace and form of change on the whole it has produced the framework for an industrial success story.

Why have we - the UK public - generally been so negative about this success? Put simply it is proof of the validity of the old adage that headline news focuses on the bad news first. As a consequence the negative images of UK engineering has produced a serious impact on the sector. What the UK Government is now putting at the forefront of any future engineering development - and what many in the engineering sector recognise to be the real problem, is addressing a serious and worrisome skills shortage.

As 'Think Tanks' look at the future of the engineering sector, there is a recognition that there is no realistic 'fast track' or 'quick fix' to the dilemma. However, at least now we are seeing something being done. The long and continuous cry from the UK professional bodies (today's engineers) to bring back apprenticeships is now moving and starting to pick up pace, particularly with the development of industry supported University Technical Colleges (UTC). Nothing new here though! Many readers from an earlier generation will remember 'Technical Colleges'. These institutions were great servants in development of the engineers of yesteryear. The approach of these institutions worked and we have the living proof!

So, something is being done and you could say anything is better than nothing. However, it is no use us bemoaning the low number of school leavers coming forward for apprenticeships, or the poor quality engineering undergraduates, if industry or nationally, very little is being done to sell engineering as an attractive option for school-leavers. Our future and urgent attention needs to be focused on the very early stages of education. This process has started, but progress is slow. Slow uptakes could mean that the UTC's could be closing before they are up and running. Research from the UK Engineering Council and Engineering Employers Federation both show the critical importance of engaging potential engineers at a young age. Beyond the UK it is possible to witness youngsters from primary school age saying they want to be an engineer when they grow up. In the UK, youthful aspirations are more likely to be expected in terms of becoming a footballer or pop star.

The situation is not all bad news. The engineering sector itself is surviving well and with relative success. The UK is still recognised globally as one of the leading innovators and developers in new products. For example, do you use a Hoover, or a Dyson? "God save the Queen" is regularly played at F1 for the manufacturer. The apparent dinosaurs of past glories have had to move with the times or die. Ninety seven percent of UK engineering companies are now SME's. This compares to twenty-five years ago when they consisted of just fewer than fifty percent of the

engineering sector. Subsequently, the sector itself has learnt to diversify into new products and markets as a means for competitive survival.

UK Engineering has survived some very tough times in the past and, despite negative publicity, it is still here. The UK has increasingly been branded as purely a service country, but arguably for every service company you can find an engineering company that actually makes something. The reality is that 'Engineering' as we knew and imagined it has changed and diversified considerably in order to survive and importantly succeed. The major problem facing UK Engineering now, is how to effectively resource and address a widening skills gap in order to ensure its future survival. Are we really doing enough to make becoming an engineer as attractive an option as aspiring to become a footballer or pop star?

A closing thought, albeit thanks to Jeremy Clarkson, officially our second greatest Briton is Isambard Kingdom Brunel, but would an average seven year old know who he was in comparison to David Beckham?