Competing for talent

As the industry's focus increasingly turns towards the issue of training, and providing businesses with skilled workforce necessary to grow a highly technical sector, a more fundamental problem appears to be emerging: according to delegates who attended a recent round table event hosted by Bohle in Manchester, the glass and glazing industry needs to work on its recruitment skills.

Glass Times was invited to participate in and record the conversation involving a selection of influential figures in the glass and glazing industry last month, in an event hosted in Manchester by Bohle.

The facilitated discussion focused on the skills-gap and its impact on the glass processing sector. This was identified as the key challenge facing the industry at a similar roundtable event held in London in October 2017.

The aim of the day was to share individual experiences and identify the scale of the challenge companies face when recruiting skilled labour.

Among the delegates was Richard Hearn, head of training and membership for the GGF, who said the "reality check" was the skilled workers needed to carry out essential roles can't be found.

He recognised that this was not unique to the glass and glazing sector but "we don't want to reach the stage where the economy grinds to a halt because we can't find these people", he said. "We need to do more to bring new people in. We need to make this sector a career of choice for people."

Host, Bohle's UK managing director Dave Broxton, said that there had been an ongoing discussion among the chairmen of the GGF regional committees about what leadership the GGF can provide on training. Should it be a training provider? Should it come up with training modules?

However, he pointed out that the industry is diverse, and that you would have to provide training modules on a wide variety of subjects for it to be worthwhile.

"But there are areas where we can add value," Richard said, arguing the federation can take people who have a set of skills and make them better and that, for the GGF, it is about training, not about assessment.

Dave Broxton, managing director, Bohle.

Richard Hearn, head of training and membership, GGF.

Paul Gray, business development manager, The Vocational College.

"How do you get someone to come and work in a factory to press buttons?"

He said there are issues surrounding the nature of compliance – just because you can tick all the regulatory boxes, doesn't mean that what is installed is of a high quality.

"We want our training to be around delivering quality workmanship," he said.

pressing buttons

There was worry among delegates that skills are being diminished in the industry. In Germany, the Master Glazier programme takes seven years to complete, and involves college time, work placement, and internships abroad. Whereas, in the UK, people's jobs have arguably been reduced to pressing buttons on a machine.

"The glass industry used to be made up of craftsmen," Matthew Kirby, director of distribution for Saint Gobain Glass Solutions, said.

"How do you get someone to come and work in a factory to press buttons?" Tina Moorhouse, managing director of Oakland Glass, asked.

Martin Clarke, managing director of Bootle Glass, said recruitment is difficult, and that out of 18 people across his organisation, only one is under 50, and he's 28.

And this became the central focus of the afternoon's conversation – not about skilled labour per se, but about the apparent lack of interest shown by young people towards the glass and glazing industry.

"We still talk about skills and the difficulty getting skilled labour into our industry. But for me, it's gone beyond skills, it's about getting people with the right attitude," Matthew said.

Matthew said that Saint Gobain has changed the way its recruits labour – it has moved away from finding skilled labour, and instead looks for people that the company can train to fill the roles it needs.

Dave asked if the problem was down to the low levels of unemployment, and that people were applying for jobs that they don't really want.

Matthew agreed that Saint Gobain was finding recruitment pressure around shop-floor workers and drivers, and salaries were being driven up, which was affecting the business.

He said that glass itself is a real problem. "People don't want to handle or be involved with glass," he said.

Richard asked if part of this problem is down to Brexit.

...continued on p58

"We've had a huge cheap labour force, and for political reasons that is changing," he said. "Is that a contributing factor?"

Matthew said Saint Gobain had previously hired Polish nationals, and there haven't been any significant loses since the vote to leave the EU.

The point was made that companies in the glass and glazing sector don't value the role of recruitment consultants, and that they don't want to pay to recruit people.

Tina argued that the flip side to that comment was that companies don't actually have much spare cash because the margins on processed glass (particularly IGUs) are so low at the moment.

Martin said that it was difficult for small companies to invest in young entrants to the industry because there is a fear that you spend money training young people, only for them to move to another company that is offering more pay.

Richard said it was not good enough simply to train people, you need to offer a package of incentives that encourages people to stay. "It's not just about the money, it's about the attitude of the organisation," he said.

Matthew agreed that it was important to show younger people that they can progress in an organisation.

"Good people, with good attitudes and a willingness to learn get promoted," he said.

He said this works if you have the right skilled supervisors who can help young people progress, which involves promoting them beyond their own position, something a lot of people avoid doing.

Richard said that a career path involves showing employees that they can take on more responsibility.

However, both Tina and Martin said that while that might be the ideal scenario, locations in which some businesses are based don't offer those kinds of job applicants.

"Some people don't have the soft skills that make them attractive to employers," Martin said.

Richard asked if there were barriers to companies going into schools and colleges in order to persuade students to consider a career in glass and fenestration.

Paul Gray, business development manager at The Vocational College, said there were barriers, but they are slowly coming down, and there are initiatives designed to get the fenestration industry into schools.

Amanda Carr, business development, Bohle.

Martin Clarke, managing director, Bootle Glass.

Matthew Kirby, director of distribution, Saint Gobain Glass Solutions.

Christina Moorhouse, managing director, Oakland Glass.

"Some people don't have the soft skills that make them attractive to employers."

The Vocational College on the Wirrall has access to 15-20 schools in the region. It has reported that students aren't considering the glass industry as a career option; even if the construction industry as a whole generates interest among school leavers, glass itself doesn't.

"However, kids don't want to go to sixth form, they want to do something with their hands," he said. "Slowly we are taking these students, putting them through our glass academy, showing them how windows are made, putting them through a study programme – making the industry sexy again."

selling reality

Amanda Carr, Bohle's business development manager, said the advertising to students was not necessarily about selling the dream, but selling reality. Her son is going through his GCSEs, and he is being told that blue-collar work is bad, whereas academia is good. Maybe not intentionally, but the message that comes across from schools is that it's not aspirational to want to roll up your sleeves and make something.

Amanda (who used to work in further education) said she doesn't believe that the problem lies with young adults. In her experience, they want to learn and to work. "You can train anyone to do anything," she said.

One point that split the delegates was the issue of responsibility for attracting new talent to the industry; should it be the responsibility of individual companies, or some over-arching authority, such as the GGF, which could do more to fly the flag for glass and glazing?

Matthew pointed out that the industry is seeing a lot of consolidation, which is being driven by venture capitalist money.

Since recruitment and training require investment, does this run counter to purpose of venture capitalists, who are in it to make money from buying and selling businesses?

The counterpoint to this is that private investors say that they are in it for the long term and want to help companies grow and become more profitable, and that includes investing in the workforce.

However, some of the delegates around the table were not convinced by this argument, especially because the trend among private investors appears to be short term gain rather than long-term vision.

Richard explained that while the GGF can help to make the industry appealing to school leavers, it can't make companies go into schools to talk to young adults; the federation is currently working with the GQA on a campaign to promote the sector to school leavers.

On a positive note, Paul said there are lots of opportunities for companies to take on apprentices that could be fully (or almost fully) funded by government. In fact, all the steps are there to educate a school leaver and take them to management level in the glass and glazing industry.

If there was one conclusion to the round table event, hosted by Bohle, it was 'promotion'. Not only does everyone need to do more to attract new talent to the industry, but the tools available to companies to hire and train their own workforces need to be more widely publicised.