

Engaging with educators to address the industry's skills shortage

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Thought piece from Richard Carr, Managing Director of Volta Compliance

With the UK engineering sector facing a skills crisis, it's essential that employers continue to invest in the next generation of professionals. In 2021, a survey from the Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) outlined the impact this crisis is having on businesses. Recruitment was flagged as a particular challenge for those employers who reported seeing skills shortages amongst applicants, and 50% stated that they struggled to find new staff.

Issues as various as COVID-19, Brexit, an aging workforce, and a lack of diversity are exacerbating the problem – but how can we address it? The IET made several key recommendations, including that employers work with educators to improve the skills pipeline.

Outreach work is something we feel strongly about at Volta Compliance. As an employer, we're looking for applicants with initiative, drive, and commitment – qualities that need to be developed and honed, often through experience.

When Garforth Academy invited me to deliver a talk to its business students in 2019, I saw an opportunity to help them gain this kind of practical experience, and quickly drew up plans for a longer-term project.

A qualified approved electrician by trade, I launched Volta Compliance in 2016. Starting a business proved to be a steep learning curve – one from which Garforth's young learners would undoubtedly benefit.

I proposed a six-month course, during which students would launch their own drone services business. With my support, they would work through ten modules, conducting research, naming, and registering

their business, coming up with core values, promises, and branding, and designing a website.

They would also learn about marketing, growth through operations, and key performance indicators, coming away with the kind of experience and insight that Volta, as an engineering employer, is keen to see in applicants.

I envisaged an extra-curricular award, based loosely on the enduring and hugely popular Duke of Edinburgh experiential-learning framework.

Garforth Academy approved this ambitious plan, and I delivered the 'Real CV Business Course' alongside its Head of Business. Five students participated, christening their business 'Dragonfly Drones'.

Offering a flexible alternative to traditional surveying and maintenance services, Dragonfly Drones took integrity, innovation, and quality as its guiding values. The students defined its key customer segments and outlined growth plans, before creating a company profile presentation that could be sent to potential employers alongside their CVs.

While the course focused on areas like IT, design, and business, it was also an opportunity for students to develop essential soft skills – including teamwork and

communication. Its Head of Business confirmed that these skills can be difficult to support in the classroom, and that the experience had helped students to realise their full potential.

For me, the course's success confirmed that businesses should take an active role in educating the next generation of engineering professionals. As the IET observes, those employers willing to engage with educators can shape the skills pipeline, and bridge gaps that are threatening our industry.

I also discovered that we can learn from our young people, whose enthusiasm and creativity will be instrumental in driving change throughout the industry.