



INCA: Labour & Skills Update

By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

Broadband Journal supports the work that INCA does to address the skills shortage in our sector and caught up with Julie Hobbins, Educational and Funding Lead to hear about the latest developments.

Good to see you Julie. What have you been up to?

The INCA Labour & Skills Special Interest Group has been busy. We've had 20 to 30 attendees at some of the most recent meetings, which is a good turnout. I've set up three working groups as subgroups to that special interest group, focusing on three areas: Diversity & Attraction, Training & Upskilling and Recruitment & Retention.

That's a huge subject area.

Yes it is, but I'm trying to keep the groups focused on making small steps forward. For instance, within those working groups, we're trying to capture some of the anecdotal information that we all know and are aware of, but there's no concrete information about it. So, things like, which are the roles that are most challenging to recruit into? And why do we think that is? Where are the skills shortages? Those kind of questions, so that we can establish that, for example, fibre engineers are actually one of the most challenging for us all to recruit into. So what could we collectively do to address that?

On the Diversity & Attraction element, obviously this is very important; we're really trying to encourage everybody to look at the benefits of having a more diverse workforce.

Which benefits everyone, but it's easier said than done.

I agree. We have work to do in that area. Our focus on attraction and the awareness of career pathways within our sector is also important, one that I believe falls between two stools. From a government policy perspective and the education department, construction is a clear pathway and digital is a clear pathway, but telecoms infrastructure falls between the two.

There are initiatives in place I believe, but you're right, there is a gap there that needs addressing.

That's right, there are local initiatives in place and lots happening with schools at a local level, but it's all very separate. I'd love us to be able to produce a toolkit that we can all use collectively, or work nationally with the Careers Enterprise Company as a sector, for instance. Everyone is trying to reinvent the same wheel; let's get some economies of scale and get some benefit in working more effectively together.

But equally, different people are going to different training organisations to meet their training needs. Do we all have a common understanding of what training is available out there, and is it the most up to date and effective training that we need? Because a lot of it is all still old copper training, and we just need the fibre stuff.

“ I believe it's much more efficient and effective to bring new young talent in, to train them up from scratch, give them the work experience that they need. This costs a lot less than recruiting some of the highly skilled and experienced folk from overseas who can command a premium, and do! So, you're saving some of those wage costs, but you're building your workforce of the future. ”

Apprenticeships are also an important element. What are you doing in that area?

We are examining what apprenticeships are out there. Are they fit for purpose, or do we need to look at some new ones? CityFibre is starting to try and get some employers round the table to discuss whether or not there is a need for a further Level 3 fibre apprenticeship, for instance. This ties in with the work that the Training and Upskilling Working Group is doing to identify if we are making the most of training opportunities available, including apprenticeships.

A lot of assessment seems underway with these working groups.

Well yes, because the sector has grown so rapidly and changed so radically in the last five years or so, the training has struggled to keep up, and to keep as relevant and up

to date and to keep the volumes that are required to bring new people in and bring them through, as well as keeping existing people upskilled and skilled. There's an awful lot to go at. It's also important that the altnets think about not just competing with each other; to get beyond that and actually look at how we work more collaboratively together. We can see that happening in the working groups.

Is the government responding to the skills shortage and if so, how?

In the last couple of weeks, we've heard that there might be a review of the government's immigration rules to try and simplify that. I know that Malcolm Corbett and his colleagues are looking quite closely at how we can encourage them to consider fibre visas to enable us to get more fibre workers in, even if it's in the short term. Whether that's even still on the agenda or not, I have no idea. Things are changing so quickly at the moment.





They certainly are! But you're right, it would be an interesting development. Salaries would need to be very competitive for contractors to come over just for a short period of time. It would have to be as competitive as going over to Dubai for a year.

Yes, but that has a detrimental impact on wages generally, and then everybody's costs increase and then it makes it less cost effective in general to do it. Which is why in the longer term I strongly believe it's much more efficient and effective to bring new young talent in, to train them up from scratch, give them the work experience that they need. This costs a lot less than recruiting some of the highly skilled and experienced folk from overseas who can command a premium, and do! So, you're saving some of those wage costs, and you're building your workforce of the future, and you're building them to your requirements, your way of working, your culture, with the latest skills, and without any bad habits built up over the years.

There's definitely a rationale for focusing more on cohorts of young people training up together and then being available to the sector as a whole. But it's a fairly major piece of work.

As usual, the technology's moving really fast. It takes a long time for the infrastructure to catch up, doesn't it?

Exactly.

What's the biggest challenge?

The biggest challenge is marrying a growing fast-moving sector with the education and training sector – aligning awareness of

network infrastructure career pathways in schools and colleges with relevant early careers training that creates the talent pipeline that we need. The work INCA is doing won't solve that overnight, but we're making a start.

It's actually trying to balance the timelines of when employers have vacancies and when training rolls off, when we're talking about bringing new talent in, and/or training them to be available for jobs that are being recruited for. The timing is often quite difficult. And pinning some of our build partners down to when they have their peaks and when they're going to need people, is a bit of a moveable feast, just because of the nature of the work. So, it's been quite challenging consider a rolling cohort of training every month that rolls off eight new trainees, that can then go into some work experience for a while, and then move into junior roles, and then start to develop into more senior roles and so on. Marrying all that up can be difficult, so that it actually is as effective as it could be.

Pulling together all these disparate efforts, which are essentially all moving in the same direction sounds like the biggest challenge of all, but the collective will is certainly there. We wish Julie and INCA luck and will catch up with them again in a few months' time.



For more information, see www.inca.coop