



# Expert Opinion - Edition 8

## Time to Sharpen our focus on Skills

For National Apprenticeship Week 2024, Mark Naysmith — President and CEO for Europe, the Middle East, India and Africa at WSP (Patron and Double Gold Member) offers his perspective on the national need to “sharpen our focus on Skills”.

“When we look to 2050 and the huge transformation required to decarbonise our economy and society, it’s easy to become blinkered with big questions about which technologies we’ll need and where best to deploy them.

Standardising building design through MMC? Retrofitting homes? Sustainable transport systems? Electric vehicles? Carbon Capture and Storage? Wind power or nuclear? Heat pumps or hydrogen?

Of course, the climate challenge is so great that in reality we need all of the above, in many shapes and forms, at scale and in a variety of places, to deliver net zero and create sustainable communities across the UK.

**Public debates often leave out the one thing the delivery these new technologies requires – a skilled and plentiful workforce.**

But something just as fundamental is at stake here. Public debates often leave out the one thing the de-



**I am proud that WSP, amongst many other business members of The 5% Club, recognises the fundamental importance of nurturing and growing talent in the industries we work within**

livery of each one of these technologies requires – a skilled and plentiful workforce.

Industries crucial to our net zero transition, including the infrastructure and energy sectors, will need a diverse mix of skills, from engineers, planners and scientists to data / digital



specialists and communications experts. In the energy sector alone, it is estimated that we need to recruit for 400,000 jobs between now and 2050 and more than half of them into roles that don't yet exist.

There is without doubt a great deal of work to be done to attract the brightest and the best people to help us transform existing industries and nurture new technologies to deliver a greener, cleaner future. When we look at new entrants to the workforce, data from a recent WSP survey suggests there will be challenges to achieving this, showing that significant percentages of 16–24-year-olds are not considering future careers in cru-

**... data from a recent WSP survey ... is showing that significant percentages of 16–24-year-olds are not considering future careers in crucial sectors including Construction, Utilities or Transport.**

cial sectors including Construction, Utilities or Transport. This requires us to focus harder on inspiring young people towards STEM education and careers to enable the essential pipeline of diverse new talent. But equally we must take into account the vital importance of upskilling and reskilling the existing workforce to avoid it getting left behind – in reality, many of the generation that will take us to 2050 are already in the workplace. Employers must be alive to both of these scenarios.

I am proud that WSP, amongst many other business members of [The 5% Club](#), recognises the fundamental importance of nurturing and growing talent in the industries we work within. In our most recent intake of early career professionals, we recruited 350 talented apprentices, graduates and year-in-industry students, meaning 10.9% of our UK workforce is now in Earn &

**... our most recent intake of early career professionals, we recruited 350 talented apprentices, graduates and year-in-industry students, meaning 10.9% of our UK workforce is now in Earn & Learn positions.**

Learn positions. And the impact of this extends beyond our own business: our 2022 annual ESG report reported over £3m verified social value was delivered through our apprenticeship programme.

We can't afford complacency though. The recent [Fit for](#)

[the Future](#) report from [EngineeringUK](#) identified that engineering-related apprenticeship starts in England are now 9% lower than in 2014/15. Businesses and industry need to work together with government to urgently reverse this decline. In addition, the uptake of apprenticeships varies by subject with a worrying 34% decline for engineering and manufacturing technologies. Therefore, we need a substantial increase in the number and diversity of engineers and technicians in the coming years.

The independent Review of Net Zero, led by Chris Skidmore MP, into the economic opportunities of delivering net zero found that the main barrier to creating a sufficiently skilled workforce is “confidence in existence and longevity of jobs”. This was followed by “access to and affordability of skills provision”, the “training and retraining skills pipeline”, and a “parity of

**It's only right that we acknowledge during National Apprenticeship Week the important role of early career professionals in helping to deliver this, as part of an upskilled, passionate and replenished workforce.**

esteem for entrants into trade vocations”. Clearly more needs to be done to ‘sell the dream’ of a future net zero economy for the UK and the vital role the workforce will play in that – especially those entering the workforce now.

Aside from addressing urgent environmental and climate needs, delivering well-paid green jobs and training could have massive economic benefits which in turn help drive sustainable economic growth and secure our green future. It's only right that we acknowledge during National Apprenticeship Week the important role of early career professionals in helping to deliver this, as part of an upskilled, passionate and replenished workforce. “

