

# Opinion

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## Engineering an answer to skills shortage

**T**HE Year of Engineering is a government campaign to tackle the engineering skills gap and widen the pool of young people who join the profession. It is designed to increase awareness and understanding about what engineers do, among young people aged 7-16, their parents and teachers.

This is great news for organisations like ours whose objectives are to inspire the next generation of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) experts.

But, have you heard about the campaign? Is it really going to change anything?

The recent report 'Engineering UK 2018: The State Of Engineering' highlights that engineering has a key role in driving economic growth and productivity, generating 23.3% of the UK's 5.3 trillion turnover and employing 18.9% of the UK labour force. The sector is also integral to the country's ability to innovate and create investment. It also states that organisations such as the IET (Institute of Engineering and Technology) reported that 46% of engineering employers surveyed reported recruitment difficulties. This does not bode well for our country's future.

I think part of the problem is a lack of understanding about what an engineer is. Attempting to define engineering can be extremely difficult as different organisations have traditionally taken different approaches. In our experience, when asking the question, 'What does an engineer look like?' the preconception of a man in overalls, with dirty hands, is still prevalent.

I began my career as an apprentice gas service engineer. This was the job title given to me by the company I

worked for, but I soon learnt that my place in the professional engineering world was one of technician. To be honest, the politics of the 'engineering' title didn't bother me (that) much. Throughout 18 successful years with British Gas, I expanded my knowledge and expertise through training, the support of mentors, sheer hard work and a can-do attitude. I didn't sign up to the role to help diversity figures and I didn't choose it because of the title or because of the infamous skills gap.

I loved my job; I chose it because I like to solve problems and I am good at finding creative and innovative solutions.

Engineering is a great profession at all levels and throughout this Year of Engineering and beyond we should be highlighting all the brilliant opportunities we have in the sector.

But we should do it by promoting all the positive aspects of the profession and not just because it's a 'skills shortage' issue.

I'm pretty sure our young people don't make their career choices in response to all the grown-ups saying, 'By 2024 we need 203,000 people with level 3+ engineering skills.'

I had a fantastic, varied career, working all over the country, meeting lots of interesting individuals and earning great money with no student debt. These experiences have provided me with a platform to start a business doing what I love, to employ local people therefore adding to the

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economy and the ability to put my fix-it skills into action most days.

Whose job is it to ensure that people understand the exciting opportunities that a career in engineering can bring? And how can we ensure that people are clear about what engineering is and what it looks like?

I'm pretty sure that there is not a single solution to these problems, because if there was (and I have been thinking about it for a long time) I would have fixed them and I'd be basking in the glory and spoils that 'the answer' would bring. I do know this: we need to join up the dots better and we

need to sell the fact that engineering is a career for all.

There are lots of initiatives you can get involved with to help correct perceptions and promote the engineering sector, such as the STEM Ambassador Programme and the Big Bang North West, a hands-on interactive event for schools to see STEM in a real-life context.

Whether our new recruits choose an apprenticeship, technical or graduate route, stay in engineering or leave and use their engineering skills in another sector, every year should be the year of engineering in my book!

The Year of Engineering is a great place to start inspiring our region's future workforce. Get involved! Let's work together to fix things.