

How can businesses boost the offshore wind talent pipeline?



Wind farms are central to the government’s strategy for reaching net zero carbon emissions in the UK by 2050, with a target of 40 gigawatt of offshore capacity by 2030.

To help hit this target, huge projects such as the wind farms at Hornsea and Dogger Bank in the North Sea are under way. As the sector continues to grow, it will need a highly skilled workforce, including scientists, asset managers, project managers, engineers and technicians.

Research published in 2021 by the Offshore Wind Industry Council (OWIC) found that the sector needs an additional 43,800 people by 2026 to reach its 40-gigawatt target.

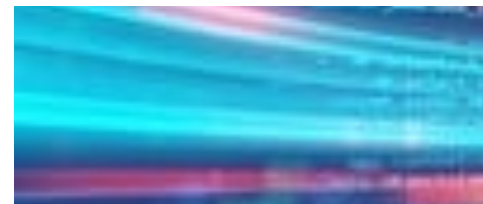
However, there is growing concern about a shortage of people with the right skills. Access to engineering talent is a particular worry as this is in short supply across all industries. A recent [Institution of Engineering and Technology \(IET\) survey](#) revealed that nearly half (49%) of all engineering businesses face a skills gap when trying to recruit.

John Weir, the Aura Talent and Skills Lead at the University of Hull, believes an offshore wind skills shortage could undo the UK government’s net zero plans if not addressed. “Competition over the available engineering talent – not just specialist engineers, but also the hands-on technicians who go out to sea to fix turbines – creates a very real practical challenge by driving up wages,” he says.

“Wage inflation makes it even tougher for offshore wind businesses, which already have a hard job getting people because the places where you want them, often quite remote coastal areas, aren’t necessarily where people want to be,” Weir adds.

Targeting more diverse recruits

Weir, whose career experience includes time as E.ON’s Head of Operational Training and Centrica’s Global Learning and Development Director, says businesses should pursue a more diverse range of new recruits as one way to help tackle the talent shortage.



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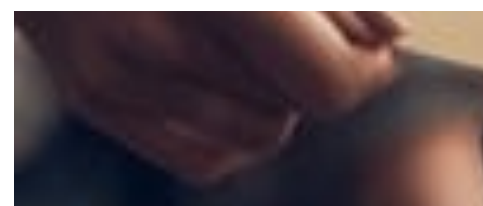
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“Some companies, including giants of the sector like Ørsted, are trying to grow talent within communities near offshore wind farms but are also targeting social mobility issues and bringing in people with different backgrounds,” he explains.

Targets set by the OWIC for an offshore wind workforce comprising 33% women and 9% BAME people by 2030 show there is industry agreement with this idea. Mission Renewable, another initiative supported by the OWIC, has been established to help former armed forces personnel make the move to renewable sectors such as offshore wind.

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Practical hurdles with apprenticeships

Offering more apprenticeships is another talent-growing solution open to businesses and, again, the OWIC is aiming for 2.5% of the 2030 workforce to be apprentices (up from 1.8% in 2020).

However, Weir worries the present short-term nature of many offshore wind projects can negatively affect opportunities to create apprenticeships. Businesses need to persuade the government to secure projects intended to last several decades, he says. This will help to attract potential apprentices because of better long-term job security and persuade colleges and other educational institutes to retrain and develop the relevant training programmes.

On the subject of educators, Weir says it is “a given” businesses need to work in partnership with them (and government policymakers) to provide training linked to career paths in offshore wind. Plans to introduce new T-level qualifications for 16 to 19-year-olds, equivalent to three A-levels and including at least 45 days of work placement, could help to address the skills shortage. But Weir suspects many offshore companies will struggle to find worthwhile projects for more than just a few of these students.

An alternative approach

If businesses are finding it hard to recruit by focusing on educational qualifications, Weir suggests an alternative route may be possible: “Scottish Power did a strength-based recruitment campaign, taking qualifications off the table completely. Instead, applicants were asked to talk about what excites them, what drives them. The company put into words rather than into qualifications what they needed and matched that up to the applicants.

“They took on people in the Highlands to work on their wind farms and those recruits have been fantastic. So perhaps the way is to start with people’s passions, aptitudes and personality and then train them up on the job,” says Weir.

He adds: “That’s just one idea. I don’t have any magic bullets on recruitment. Maybe the answer is to focus on a few clear initiatives and then properly measure and review them to see what’s working and what isn’t.”

Whatever the challenges, Weir is confident recruiters will find people, especially among younger generations, who are interested in the prospect of working in offshore wind. “This industry is finding the low-carbon solution we need to counter harmful climate change, so

anyone joining can feel they're part of the effort to do the right thing. Not only that, this is new, cutting-edge technology and there's lots of exciting engineering in what they'll be doing."

Using transferable skills to meet 'crazy demand'

Christopher Godwin, Business Manager for recruiter Huxley Engineering, knows from talking to clients that the competition for engineers and technicians in the offshore wind sector is fierce – and global. "Some offshore projects held up by Covid-19 are now back online and other new projects are happening too," he says. "That means there's a crazy demand for people. Once you go offshore you may as well be offshore anywhere in the world and, right now, there are opportunities to make great money by working in somewhere like Taiwan, so finding talent is a challenge."

For offshore wind businesses looking to recruit, Godwin feels one answer lies in recycling the skills of people working in the offshore oil and gas sector. "There has been some reluctance, but there's more willingness now to look at the oil and gas sector because people with that background do have some transferable skills," he explains.

Whatever recruitment approach businesses take, with the transition to renewable energy sources picking up pace, it is clear the demand for talent to work in the offshore wind sector will blow strong for the foreseeable future.

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