

LABOUR SHORTAGES: TAKE ACTION BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!

This article was first published in HVR magazine.

Our industry faces a shortage of skilled workers and it's expected to get worse. But there are solutions beyond the obvious wages rises, and they benefit both business owners and workers, as Heating and Ventilating Contractors' Association (HVCA) president John Miller explains.

What's the strangest thing you've ever had to do in the line of duty?

If you'd put that question to me a few weeks ago, I'd have paused for thought. But ask me now and I'll answer instantly – I went skydiving. And as the photo on this page shows, I even managed to look like I enjoyed it!

I took the plunge at an indoor skydiving centre to launch HVCA Business Plus, a new initiative which flags-up the fact that the HVCA group of companies can help businesses like yours trade more efficiently and more profitably. You'll be amazed at the wide range of specialist advice, guidance, and services that are available to support your commercial activities. Hence my airborne stunt – to reflect the HVCA Business Plus advertising slogan, "I didn't know you could do that!"

You may not have known, for example, that there's a multi-faceted answer to one of the burning issues facing our industry, the shortage of skilled labour. If we are to avoid this becoming a really serious problem, we need to begin addressing it now – but many employers are unaware of the many different ways they can do this.

The construction industry has undergone an unprecedented period of expansion in the past 12 years, and at least five more years of growth are forecast. A survey by the Chartered Institute of Building found that 77 per cent of those in construction had problems recruiting last year and 72 per cent believed they would not be able to meet the demand as a result.

Work on the approaching Olympic Games is escalating the problem. According to research carried out by the sector skills councils, 13,000 construction workers and 1,500 electricians and plumbers are required to ensure the 2012 Olympic Games in London are ready on time - and they *will* be ready on time. Games-related projects have the finances to entice workers with large salaries, making staff recruitment and

retention an even bigger challenge for the industry as a whole. The last three years of the Olympics project are expected to be the most damaging.

Small to medium size companies may not have the financial clout to compete on wages, but they have something deeper to offer by rewarding staff loyalty with employee benefits such as life cover, pensions, sickness cover, and private medical insurance.

And here's another issue: say "employee benefits," and some employers will raise the drawbridge, instinctively suspecting that these benefit the workers without also benefiting the company proprietor or shareholders. But that's not true. Employee benefits can also benefit the bottom-line. As managing director of the Shouksmith Group, I have learned how important it is to our continuing success to attract and retain skilled workers.

To add this strength to your staff recruitment and retention, a good starting point is Welplan, an HVCA subsidiary that has been offering employee benefits since introducing the H&V industry's sick pay and death benefit scheme in 1955. Because Welplan provides benefits for 40,000 employers, it has the negotiating strength of a very large employer – and that makes it possible for customers with smaller companies to compete with the big boys. Employee benefits package start at just £72 per employee per year.

Another way to meet the demand for skilled labour is to develop the skills of your current staff – who, if they are developing with you, will be less inclined to drift away to a competitor. The HVCA encourages young people into the industry through Building Engineering Services Training/BEST; runs training and assessment schemes such as that of Piper Assessment/PASS; offers advice and guidance on vocational education, training and employee development; and, through its employment affairs department, can help you more broadly with engagement and management of the workforce.

All of these things add up to what I, as a managing director, think of as "the unfair advantage." By visiting www.hvcabusinessplus.co.uk, you can find out how to gain this advantage for your business. The next five years will see an industry divided between those companies who thrived and those who missed the chance. Now's the time to act.