

What's our objective for getting behind Apprentices & Trainees?

There are hard business reasons for Costain getting behind apprenticeships. Skilled staff are more likely to get their tasks 'right first time' and contribute to the quality that is a Costain trademark and which has given it such a strong brand reputation.

"We have a lot of people doing NVQs. We have accreditation as an NVQ supplier, with about 90 people doing the qualification at present."

**Val Thompstone,
Skills and Development
Advisor**

Testimonial: Diego Rendon

"I am on the Cooling the Tube Project and leave inspired everyday at the opportunities the industry has to offer." Diego joined Costain through capital experience.

For centuries, apprenticeships provided the only access route to skilled trades or crafts and the ceremony marking the end of an apprenticeship – typically after seven years – was one of the highlights of a person's life. In some countries (notably Germany) they have never gone away. But in the UK, with the decline of manufacturing in favour of service industries, they gradually withered. They were regarded as old-fashioned, an anachronism in the age of computers, media studies and financial services.

The tide seems to be turning. Possibly the UK's most influential businessman, Baron Sugar, toured the country early in 2009 saying how strongly he welcomed the reappearance of apprenticeships. Costain's clients are also keen to see the Group doing its part to support communities, by taking on local youngsters as apprentices.

There's another reason for the renewed attention being paid to apprentices by the Group: "It's been recognised that we've focused so heavily on graduates that we've not done enough about the front line people," admits Costain's Skills and Development Advisor, Val Thompstone.

Improving skills is vital for the longer term. The Group has some very experienced, highly regarded senior general foremen, but most of them are getting towards the ends of their working lives and it has been realised that new blood is needed to fill their boots some years down the line. When those foremen eventually go, an awful lot of experience will go with them.

Costain relies on its supply chain on projects and there has to be a cohort of skilled site personnel with the necessary expertise to supervise them. The foremen are the 'senior NCOs' of the site, not only ensuring that instructions from the project management team are carried out, but also having the skills and self-confidence to use their initiative to solve day-to-day problems that crop up.

That is being remedied. There are presently 18 technician apprentices undergoing training across the Costain Group. Some have been recruited straight from school, however, the majority are already Costain employees who the company is helping towards their BTEC and NVQ qualifications.

“This is the first year we’ve done this,” says Val. “Rather than recruit just new people we asked existing staff if they would be interested in being put forward for the apprenticeship scheme. In our construction and engineering sectors they get day release for college and are signed up for NVQ Level 3 in Construction and Contracting Operations.” In the energy and process sectors Costain has seven apprentices in a range of roles, from electrical through to design and drafting.

Costain initially sought reaction to its apprenticeship plans through its project management forum and received a positive response. The next step was for the project managers to nominate candidates with suitable talents from among their project teams.

“The apprentices get day release to go to college during term time; ideally they would also get a couple of hours a week on-site to study,” says Val.

So far, experience has been good: the apprentices have shown enthusiasm for their roles and not one has dropped out.

Besides formal apprenticeships, Costain also undertakes significant amounts of other forms of training. “We have a lot of people doing NVQs. We have accreditation as an NVQ supplier, with about 90 people doing the qualification at present.”

These require a substantial commitment from the trainees. A Level 4 NVQ takes up to 18 months, a Level 3 another 12-14 months.

Training obviously involves a cost for any company. To help mitigate this, Costain has partnered with Construction Skills, (formerly known as the Construction Industry Training Board) and ECITB, which provide grants to help offset Costain’s expenditure.

For further details on the Costain Apprenticeship Programme please contact val.thompson@costain.com

Testimonial:

**Mike Field FICE,
Construction
Superintendent,
St Pancras International**



“Having recently attended a seminar entitled ‘Plugging the Gap’ at the Institution of Civil Engineers, which specifically explored apprenticeships and the skills gap, I am convinced that Costain has the right approach in training them and also giving them an opportunity to progress to all levels of management within the business. Having listened to all the speakers, some of whom are major players in the industry, of ALL the presentations COSTAIN, I believe, is the only one approaching the problem of future leaders via the apprenticeship route (long may it continue).”