



# HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN TALENT IN THE BATHROOM MANUFACTURING SECTOR

On April 12, 2024, the BMA convened a select roundtable to understand better the challenge of recruiting and retaining talent in this vital industry.

Delivered under Chatham House rules, the conversation covered business culture, employee benefits, upskilling, and apprenticeships. Recommendations, advice, and solutions were identified in many areas.

## The skills challenge and attracting the right talent

The main difficulties exist around specific technical skills. As there is a general shortage of quality labour, salaries are high. This high wage inflation in a low-volume marketplace is incredibly challenging.

For specialised roles such as engineers, many are nearing retirement age. Taking on apprentices to fill the succession gap is an urgent exploration avenue. For areas like sales, recruitment is taking place outside the bathroom sector for relevant general sales experience. Benefits can be achieved by recruiting from the world of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), where they are typically more advanced in some aspects of analytics, data, and e-commerce.

With its complex value chain and technical nuances, it must be recognised that the sector offers a wealth of learning and growth opportunities. This should be used as a 'selling point', including a coordinated campaign highlighting how varied and exciting the industry is to spread the word.

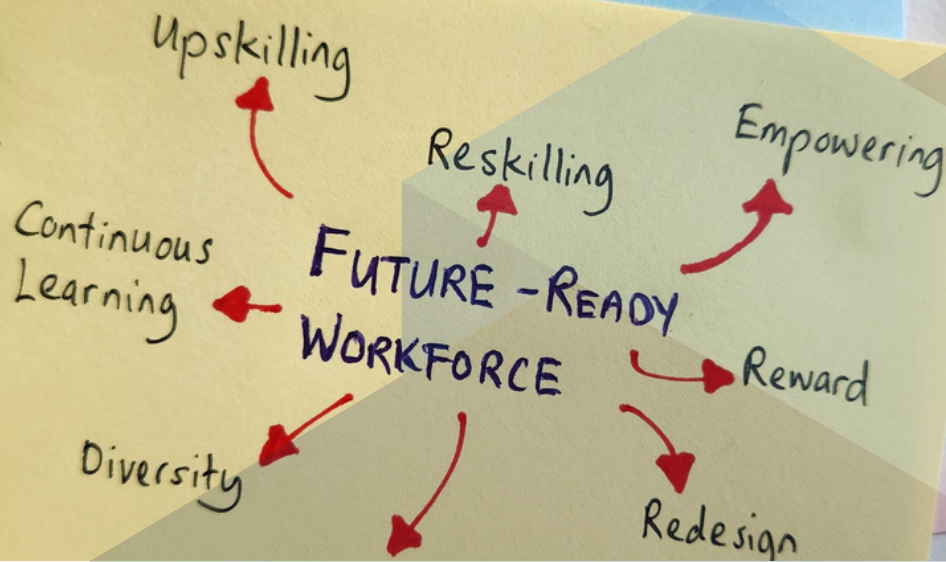
While industry experience is valuable, recruiting solely from within the sector risks perpetuating old mistakes and perspectives. However, by opening recruitment to candidates from outside the sector, new perspectives can be introduced, enriching the talent pool and potentially bringing in fresh ideas.

Staff diversity creates a good balance, but the challenge surrounding the older generation is adapting to working smarter, like using AI. Conversely, attracting younger talent into the bathroom sector could be effectively achieved through a collective effort, including short social media videos.

Recruiters have expressed that companies often don't invest enough time into the role brief. Companies must provide comprehensive details about the role, the company culture, and the relationship with the hiring manager. The lengthy process should be streamlined, from identifying the right candidate to offering a position (often around three weeks).

Organisations advise recruiters to reduce the amount of 'time-wasting' candidates, properly review candidates, develop an open and honest relationship, understand the business culture and sell the business to the candidate. Identifying a candidate's transferable skills is crucial.

**The takeaway:** Addressing the succession gap is an urgent challenge, and businesses should be open-minded when recruiting from other sectors. Collaboration with all bathroom manufacturers for a collective effort to create a vibrant future is crucial.



## The challenge of staff turnover and retention

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Historically, employers would recruit salespeople with a medium-term objective. A 12 to 18-month training period was acceptable; however, in some instances, due partly to commercial pressures, staff are often only given three to four months of training. This leads to high staff turnover as the employee does not reach targets and is dismissed. Removing this immediate pressure from staff would allow them to understand the business culture and perform better.

However, employers believe that the 'job for life' ethic is no longer a goal. Employees often become bored early on and seek the next role with a higher salary, which can lead to recycling the same names within the sector.

An excellent 'exit interview' is essential for understanding why an employee is unhappy.

**The takeaway:** Companies must consider employing people in junior positions to allow them to learn about the company's culture and needs. Removing the pressure of instant results allows staff to perform better.

## The importance of culture and employee benefits

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An organisation's culture is integral to the organisation's and the employee's success.

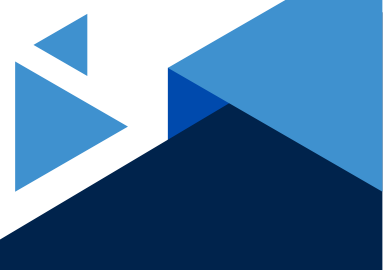
It is crucial to be flexible enough to allow people the time they need to settle into a business, understand the culture, and offer a good employee experience. Companies will recruit employees who fit their culture to ensure employees are happy and productive. This reduces the costs of employee turnover and instability in the workforce. It is far cheaper to retain staff than to recruit.

There is recognition that employee benefits are difficult for business leaders to navigate. Addressing mental health issues and menopause support, for instance, is a mainstream requirement nowadays but is still relatively new to many businesses, which may not have adapted yet.

Reverse mentoring is highlighted as a good tool for business leaders to adopt.

Working from home (WFH) and flexible work are ongoing challenges. Many organisations are now reducing their WFH offerings as they have found collaboration is suffering and it encourages too much 'silo working'. If achieving a homogenous culture is the business aim, it is difficult if certain people insist on WFH. There is a recognition that 'project work' can be effectively achieved by WFH, but this should be on a case-by-case basis. Achieving a balanced approach is complex yet vital.

**The takeaway:** Participants recognise that offering flexibility, WFH and mental health/menopause support will continue to be a requirement for retention purposes if your competitors offer it. Achieving a good balance is crucial.



## The middle management and upskilling from within

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Ignoring investment in middle management roles and equipping them with the appropriate skills applies to all industries. If not addressed, a business's culture can be adversely affected. While there are success stories, we often don't hear of them.

Apprenticeship levies can be used to upskill existing aspiring leaders. While the vacancies may not be immediately available, it is vital to continue upskilling from within, as staff will be ready to take on a role should it become available.

In addition, women still seem to lack confidence in their abilities compared to men. The gender balance is often not there, but it should be voiced and communicated where it does exist. However, the participants believe that women in leadership fail to support other women enough.

**The takeaway:** Upskilling from within the business is crucial, and success stories are a vital marketing tool.

## The challenges regarding apprenticeships

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Understanding how an existing employee can become an apprentice and how to hire them is not widely understood, resulting in many organisations not doing it. Travis Perkins is highlighted as an organisation well-versed in apprenticeship success stories.

The government announcement that non-apprentice levy-paying organisations can claim back 100% of the apprenticeship levy is not communicated widely enough.

However, participants recognise that the government's apprenticeship framework and standards are complicated and arduous. Finding the correct training provider is crucial to delivering the business outcomes it needs. Many businesses don't know where to find course information, and the bureaucracy and form-filling can put them off.

The term 'apprentice' was also cited as problematic. Mature apprentices exist, but the perception is that they are just for the younger generations.

**The takeaway:** Communication from trade associations and the construction sector about how to hire an apprentice and that mature apprenticeships exist would be beneficial.

