

WOMEN IN  
ENGINEERING  
APPRENTICESHIPS

# Seeing the way ahead

More trainees should mean more opportunities for women, so what is holding them back? **Catherine Hufton** investigates

Traditionally apprenticeships have been largely thought of as a male domain, associated with trades such as plumbing and mechanics. But over the past decade or so, the number of apprenticeships in the UK has tripled, creating a growing number of opportunities for women. In fact, since 2010 women have outnumbered men joining an apprenticeship.

Sadly, these positive statistics don't represent the whole story and gender inequality is reflected in the standard and pay of apprenticeships. Research undertaken by Young Women's Trust shows that while women are embracing the idea of an apprenticeship, they are predominantly choosing lower-paid training schemes in areas such as health and social care, and business administration. Men, on the other hand, continue to dominate industries such as engineering, IT and construction, where the pay is higher and career prospects better.

The average starting salary for a care worker, for example, is £12,000, and 84 per cent of apprenticeships in the health and social care sector are taken up by women. By comparison, the starting salary for a mechanical engineer – where 96 per cent of the apprenticeships are taken by men – is £22,000 and can quickly rise to an average of £40,000.

Not only are female-dominated sectors more likely to be poorly paid, they also are shown to provide little to no training, as well as poor levels of permanent employment. "Young Women's Trust has found that gender stereotypes can shut women out of male-dominated sectors such as construction and engineering. Women tend to go into lower-paid sectors, are less likely to receive training during their apprenticeship and are less likely

to get a job afterwards," says Dr Carole Easton, chief executive of the trust. "Often they face sexist attitudes and a lack of support that prevents them completing their apprenticeship."

Glynn Davies started an apprenticeship in construction at 17 but quit due to the attitudes of her male colleagues. "I wanted to be a bricklayer and started an apprenticeship with City & Guilds," she says. "I was highly motivated and couldn't wait to get muddy but this soon changed. I experienced constant sexist remarks like "get us a cuppa" or "be careful, you don't want to break a nail". I approached my course coordinator but the general response was, "it's only banter". I decided to terminate my apprenticeship and go straight into the labour market."

Sadly, Ms Davies's experience is not uncommon. According to Young Women's Trust, female recruits who are vastly outnumbered by male counterparts are less likely to stay the apprenticeship course.

In addition to these kinds of challenges, poor careers advice is also believed to be a contributing factor – many women are simply unaware of all the options open to them when trying to find a job. In 2009, Chloe Magee started an apprenticeship in business administration at 16 after receiving automated careers advice at school. "I was told I should do packing at a factory," she says. "I felt I was being left behind. The only apprenticeships 'suitable for women' were admin, childcare or hairdressing. The admin option seemed to be the only one that didn't require a particular passion for the work, so I chose that." Paid £30 a week, she struggled to manage financially, felt little motivation to continue and left the course.

But it's not just the individuals themselves who are affected by

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inequality, it's the economy itself. In industries such as engineering, there is a desperate need for more trainees – a gap that could be plugged with the involvement of more women. Yet 2014 figures reveal this gap is far from being filled: for every female apprentice entering the construction sector in England there were 56 men, while there were 25 men for every woman starting an engineering apprenticeship.

But there are some success stories. Rolls-Royce has made huge steps toward changing the mindset and culture of its employees. It has made a company-wide commitment to increase female participation in its apprenticeships, graduate programmes and work-experience placements by using positive female role models to educate and inspire young women. It hopes that not only will this create a more innovative and productive workforce, but will develop a more inclusive culture that fosters greater respect among its employees.

Amey, an infrastructure services provider, is another example of a firm that is making changes to increase the diversity of its workforce. The use of stereotypical images of men in hard hats was removed from its external advertising and more young women employees have been used as role models. It has also made strong links with local schools to encourage more young women to consider a career in engineering, and hosts events across the UK in support of National Women in Engineering Day. BAE Systems, meanwhile, has more than 300 active schools ambassadors, 35 per cent of whom are women, to help make female role models more visible to young people. Its female graduates and apprentices visit schools, colleges and universities to demonstrate the benefits of a career in engineering.

So what steps are needed for engineering companies such as these to become the norm? "Employers need to work actively to recruit young women in male-dominated sectors," says Dr Easton. "Much greater provision of part-time and flexible apprenticeships would help young mothers and carers in particular, who often have to balance care with work."

She also believes that small changes can make a big difference, such as adapting the language in job advertisements to appeal to young women, explicitly welcoming female applicants and removing formal academic entry requirements for apprenticeships. "Employers can help more young women complete an apprenticeship by listening to their concerns, giving them access to mentors and improving their representation on apprenticeship schemes, because being the only woman is hard. Better support of women benefits everyone."





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