

Tunnelling operative apprentices at Tideway

Addressing a skills gap through collaboration

In early 2019, Tideway Main Works Contractors joint ventures (JVs) coordinated the recruitment into the first cohort of Tunnelling Operative apprentices in the industry, with a view to helping address a skills gap in the tunnelling sector and attract new talent into the construction industry.

The JVs secured support from the infrastructure owner, Tideway, and buy-in from their specialist labour-only supply chain who would be the apprentices' employers.

By leveraging the Tideway brand and working in collaboration, the Tideway project was able to generate 293 applications for 16 roles, 12 at Tideway and 4 at on other projects generating a vacancy fill rate of 100%. To date, retention is 82% overall and 84% at Tideway, thus improving recruitment and retention outcomes across the supply chain.



Challenges

- Attract new talent into the industry through apprenticeships and drive this down into the specialist supply chain. Tideway Main Works Contractor JVs were already achieving the project apprenticeship target of 1 new apprentice for each 50 employees.
- Some employers have been disincentivised to take on apprentices due to the up-front complexities and costs of recruitment, the losses associated with poor retention rates and the anticipated challenges of additional requirements on future contracts.
- Tier 1 Contractors (JVs) increase project costs when requesting apprentices through their labour-only supply chain.
- The training provider requires a minimum number of apprentices to make the delivery viable, industry/employers need to support the development of the associated training materials and if apprentices are not retained, this generates a risk for the employer and training provider.



Response

Re-profile the real and perceived risks by investing resources more efficiently throughout the supply chain, while continuing to leave the ultimate responsibility for employing and mentoring the apprentices to the specialist employers in the supply chain.

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| <i>Up-front costs of recruitment</i> Limited administrative functions = poorer quality recruitment processes | Coordinate the process; on Tideway this was achieved by drawing on the Tideway Alliance resources which meant the JVs was able to deliver a more efficient process on behalf of the supply chain. |
| <i>Fewer opportunities = fewer candidates</i> | By aggregating the opportunities , the Tideway JVs were able to create a more attractive offering to candidates. Underpinning this with the Tideway brand, improved candidate confidence resulting in 293 applications for 16 roles, the viable cohort size for the training provider. |
| <i>Poor retention rates</i> Smaller employers typically have less capacity for the mentoring and wrap-around support that secures good outcomes in apprenticeships | By providing supported training, the Tideway project gave a sense of a bigger context for the apprenticeships/apprentices. This supplemented the support available through the individual apprentice employers. |



Highlights

- Effective pathway for new talent entering the industry with entry level requirements and opportunities for structured development.
- Exemplary collaborative work from client, JVs and labour-only sub-contractors, that were all working together towards the same goal.
- Streamlined recruitment process.
- Apprentices were quickly integrated into the workforce and started learning from experience staff from the very start

Life changing opportunities for apprentices who will become skilled workers following their involvement on a world class project



Ideas for the future

- More face to face local engagement activities leading to recruitment.
- Offer Fairness, Inclusion and Respect toolbox talks to tunnelling teams.
- Ensure that the structure of the apprenticeship is clear from the start for both apprentices and employers
- Incentivising recruitment and ensuring that apprentices are included in the labour forecast will help to minimise commercial pressures early in the process.

About Tideway

London relies on a 150-year-old sewer system built for a population less than half its current size. As a result, millions of tonnes of raw sewage spill into the River Thames each year. This is simply unacceptable. Tideway is the company building the Thames Tideway Tunnel – a 25km super sewer deep beneath the river that will ‘intercept’ those spills and clean up London’s greatest natural asset. The work is being carried out by a number of world-class joint ventures: Balfour Beatty, Morgan Sindall and Bam Nuttall in the west; Ferrovial Agroman and Laing O’Rourke in central; Costain, Vinci and Bachy Soletanche in the east. With more than 9km of tunnels now built, the project is progressing well and on track for completion in 2024.

The labour only sub-contractors that are employing the Tunnelling Operative Apprentices directly on Tideway are Tunnelcraft, RorCon, McGinley Support Services and Reliable Contractors. Joseph Gallagher is employing the apprentices outside Tideway project. Dudley College of Technology is the training provider for the apprenticeship.