Securing Skills for a Successful Offshore Wind Industry

Trade group RenewableUK has said that the offshore wind and marine energy sector could support 88,000 jobs in the UK by 2021, up from approximately 10,600 at present. In order to reach this target the right policies and financial conditions must be in place and, as obvious as it may seem, there will need to be an adequate amount of skilled recruits to fill these jobs.

Skills – Where Are We Now?

At the moment we are facing a significant skills gap in the industry and this needs to be addressed to reach the positive employment figures which are possible. There are two levels to this skills gap — firstly, the professional level including project managers and engineers, and secondly the operational level which consists of staff including vessel crew members and electricians. Over the next number of years we will see the ratio of operational to professional workers grow as we begin to move from the design and build phases to the operational phase.

This skills gap has been widening over the past three years but unfortunately has yet to be addressed successfully by the industry. New wind farms will bring with them new engineering challenges and it is paramount that the industry is prepared for this. When work on these projects begins there will be a need for a huge amount of skilled offshore workers and preparation needs to begin for this now.

An Outdated Approach To Training?

The 2009 Renewable Energy Directive [1] set targets for EU Member States to reach. The UK, for instance, is expected to achieve 15% of its consumption from renewable sources by 2020 – this compares to 3% in 2009. This has meant that the past few years has seen an increase in offshore wind production and this will continue to grow, which, in turn, will lead to an increase in investment and job opportunities within the industry in the coming years.

The skills gap can partly be attributed to the fact that, even though it is a rapidly growing sector, there is no industry standard for offshore training. There exists an offshore health and safety standard but outside of this there are different opinions in terms of what each company interprets as an adequate technical standard. SMEs may not be able to afford to offer training to potential employees, which makes it difficult to recruit suitable workers. Even larger companies which can afford to provide such training could benefit from a common training standard and the time and money they invest in bringing new recruits up to standard could be used to expand other parts of the business.

SMEs are the lifeblood of the renewables industry and in the past they may have

had to poach offshore workers from the oil and gas industry in order to get the skills they need. This might have been a successful tactic when jobs in the oil industry were scarce. But as new opportunities within oil and gas become more available, this has created a growing problem for SMEs. As a result, smaller companies may be tempted to employ workers who may not be up to the desired level and rely on them gaining training and experience on the job.

Closing the Gap

There are in fact many skilled workers who may be unaware that their initial career has given them the basis to successfully train to work in the renewables industry. Construction workers and fishermen are among those who may have skills that can be readily transferred to working on offshore renewables projects.

Many of these workers can be trained to utilise their qualifications or transferable skills for the offshore industry while maintaining high standards; in turn they can help any renewables developer — large or small — develop a competent, professional and well-trained workforce.

Specialist training offers the opportunity to prepare for a life working offshore and enables the transition of technical skills to be more applicable to the needs of the offshore industry. In addition an understanding of the necessary health and safety training and instruction should be provided.

But this is not enough for the future; for us to encourage the sheer numbers of skilled workers the industry will need we must start at the beginning, working with colleges and universities. Even though work is currently being undertaken to provide courses and degrees dealing with renewable energy [2], there is very limited focus on the challenges faced in the offshore industry. We, as an industry, need to work more closely with higher education institutions, encouraging them to include offshore training on their courses. Industry can provide access to the tools they need, including access to physical wind turbines and other offshore technology, and also to people who already work in the industry who can give first-hand insight. There is simply no point in having highly educated engineers or project managers with degrees in renewable energy if they can't apply this knowledge in an offshore working environment.

When training staff for working offshore in renewables it is important to have a finger on the pulse of the industry and a current working knowledge of the issues involved. You need to be aware of the challenges new recruits will face in order to help them prepare fully for the experience. This allows identification of what the industry needs.

It is going to take a united stance from companies — both large and small — to address the significant skills gap facing the renewables industry and acknowledge the clear business benefits of creating industry standards. While the value to SMEs is clear to see, larger companies also have much to gain financially by recruiting workers who could, theoretically, be offshore on their first day in the job.

What Can Be Done Now?

While we may need to wait for an industry standard to come about, companies can still address the barrier that is lack of experience. This is an obstacle that companies can ease if they start working on offshore projects collaboratively.

Acceptance of there being a skills gap within individual companies will also help to ensure the smooth running of projects. Projects may begin slowly in the first instance as agreements and permissions are granted, but once these initial stages have been passed things can move more a lot more quickly. Bearing this in mind, companies need to plan well ahead — look at what they are bidding for, what they are winning or likely to win and, once this has been taken into consideration, make sure that the necessary skills are in place to carry out each task.

What the Future Holds...

Once companies, both large and small, start to work together, mutual benefits will begin to become apparent — from cost and time savings for the larger companies, to new business opportunities for SMEs. We need to develop a more open-minded approach to the industry, helping us to become more aware and wiser to the skills and staff available to the industry. At this point we will realise how an industry standard in practical renewables training can really benefit offshore renewables as a whole.

Sizeable commercial opportunities for developers and operators are available offshore; at the same time new engineering challenges will be introduced which will require different ways of thinking, and new and innovative ways of working offshore. This will, of course, require an expanded workforce with the skills to meet these challenges. There will be a moment of realisation when the sheer scale of the skills gap becomes apparent — but by thinking and acting more collaboratively the industry can demonstrate its maturity, its resilience — and its ability to adapt for the future.

Read More [3]

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