There are many sound reasons for creating a more diverse employee profile. At a time when Western countries are short of qualified engineers it doesn't make sense to narrow the talent pool by discriminating on the basis of gender, colour or creed, says **Jo Causon**.

the diversity advantage

ENGINEERING and technology firms have traditionally had a poor reputation when it comes to diversity. For too long, the scientific and mathematical demands of the profession – not to mention its image as one that is full of grubby, physical jobs – meant that it was seen as man's work. Alongside this was, often, the habit shared by so many professions: hiring new recruits through a network of contacts and old boys' clubs.

But in recent years it has become more and more obvious that this is not good enough. Some of this realisation has been driven by a sense of fairness or the need to comply with equal opportunities legislation, but by far the most powerful argument in favour of recruiting a diverse workforce in the UK is that skilled engineers are urgently required. This means using all the qualified people who exist in our own country – regardless of race, sex or creed – and creating a working environment that will attract engineers from overseas to work for our firms rather than those of our international competitors.

The UK, like many other countries, is desperately short of engineers, so much so that the UK Border Agency has listed 27 engineering roles as "national shortages", making it easier for companies to get visas for overseas candidates.

Recent reports suggest that a shortage of qualified engineers is likely to threaten the UK's next generation of nuclear power plants; other major projects, such as Crossrail and the building of new green power stations are also under threat. Add to that the extra experts needed to help London to prepare for the 2012 Olympic Games, and it is easy to see just how hard business will have to work to get – and keep – good staff.

Ruling out certain sections of the workforce simply because they are black, speak with an accent or use a wheelchair, for example, will make it even harder to find enough recruits to maintain or grow a business in the face of tough competition.

Diversity has a second very important business benefit: innovation. New people with new perspectives bring the new ideas that can help companies to save money, win additional customers or exploit emerging technologies.

Alongside this, people from different backgrounds can help businesses to gain access to new markets, whether that is by drawing attention to a particular client sector that is not being serviced by the current offering or facilitating global deals. A new client in, say, Singapore, might well be pleased to discover that one of your senior project leaders did his master's degree in Singapore and that another speaks fluent Malay as she grew up in Malaysia. On top of this are the benefits of broader cultural awareness among your workforce, which will become ever more important as globalisation grows.

OLD DOG, NEW TRICKS

It is also important to remember that sex, race and disability are not the only forms of discrimination. Older people are another prime source of talent who face barriers in getting into – and sometimes staying in – the workplace. Many of these barriers centre on false assumptions, such as the belief that people want the chance to retire or take it easy when they get older, or that older people are unable to learn and work with new technology.

What organisations sometimes fail to recognise is that old is almost certain to mean experienced in both the technical and commercial side of engineering. Businesses that keep their older staff on board as long as possible can benefit from that experience both directly and through the mentoring and coaching that more mature employees can provide for their more junior colleagues.

What should employers be doing to attract and retain good people of all backgrounds? The first step, according to research conducted by the Chartered

When trying to attract new employees from overseas, they will want to see proof of your organisation's diversity

Management Institute in conjunction with the Institute for Employment Studies and the Department for Work and Pensions, is to understand that different people look for work in different ways. Then, they should consider what attracts people to particular jobs or employers.

The research offers a number of interesting insights into the ways in which ethnicity relates to job-hunting techniques. For example, the most popular way overall for managers to look for work is by reading newspapers. A little over three-quarters use the Internet, while two-thirds rely on personal networks.

However, analyse these statistics by ethnicity and a slightly different picture emerges. Press advertising is more popular with black managers, white managers prefer personal networking and Asian managers prefer to search online. Any employer that relies heavily on just one of these methods risks excluding candidates who prefer other approaches.

Stephen Timms, the minister of state for employment and welfare reform, says: "This study shows that it is vital that employers take a close look at the methods they use to attract new recruits and to appeal to all groups and not just a limited band of potential employees. Understanding ▶

Don't rule out someone because of their age, young or old – they could bring unexpected diversity and/or experience to your organisation

◄ the aspirations of the whole workforce is key to recruiting and retaining the best employees."

A thoughtful, well-managed approach to diversity will improve a company's employer brand and make it a more appealing place to work. However, it is definitely best not to take a tokenistic or tick-box response to either recruitment or promotion opportunities. This will alienate staff of all backgrounds and will do nothing at all for genuinely increasing the business's depth of talent.

While most of the job candidates studied for the report are, broadly, motivated by interesting work and the chance to get ahead, there are some subtle differences that organisations should take into account when thinking about how to attract recruits.

FLEXI-TIME

Women, for example, place more weight on flexibility and opportunities for flexible working when considering job opportunities. Fortunately, this is relatively easy to offer in one form or another. A survey by Atkins earlier this summer found that almost half of engineering firms now offer flexible hours, while 40 per cent allow home working. Some offer term-time working to both male and female staff. Only 6 per cent of those surveyed said that flexible working was very difficult to accommodate in their business environment.

Alun Griffiths, Atkins' group HR director, says that flexible working is a necessary benefit that helps employers to compete in a tight market. "In the engineering and design sectors, the problem of skills shortages is very well documented and it is essential that we look to keep hold of as much of the talent we have nurtured as we possibly can," he says.

"Women, in particular, often feel they have to choose between having a family or progressing in their careers, but this doesn't have to be the case. Our survey suggests companies are beginning to see the importance of offering flexible working but I think we still have a long way to go to make sure people have a genuine choice. This means not just being able to find a role for flexible workers, but giving them real opportunities for career development at the same time."

Also attractive – in this case, particularly to non-white job-hunters – was the prospect of being part of a culturally mixed workforce. There is the potential here to create a positive circle, as an organisation with a diverse

'Creating a pro-diversity workplace does not simply mean sticking a page about Ramadan into the staff handbook or renaming the cleaner's cupboard 'the breast-pump room''

workforce and a reputation for supporting diversity will attract more applicants, thus increasing diversity still further. Understandably, people feel more comfortable working for an organisation that is open to difference than one that expects all staff to fit a particular mould.

Interestingly, other Chartered Management Institute research suggests that members of Generation Y, the young recruits coming through university and graduate training programmes at the moment, also place a high degree of importance on an ethical corporate culture that supports diversity. This is turn

means that companies wanting to snap up the best young engineers coming out of university should think hard about demonstrating the values they offer as well as the salaries they pay when recruiting.

However, creating a pro-diversity workplace does not simply mean sticking a page about Ramadan into the staff handbook or renaming the cleaner's cupboard 'the breast-pumping room' when someone returns from maternity leave.

Diversity training and policies are all very well but it takes real action for them to make a difference. For a start, they must be led by senior management and they have to be implemented in a way that makes diversity a part of everyday corporate culture.

And it is important not to let diversity awareness overwhelm corporate cohesion. All staff need to respect each others' differences while supporting the company's core values and ethos. Diversity is about listening to a range of viewpoints; this can be challenging but it can also be immensely rewarding both in the culture it creates and the specific benefits and innovation that it can bring.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

One of the biggest pitfalls to avoid when dealing with diversity is that of stereotyping people based on, say, their religion or sexuality. A project manager who does not assign a Jewish engineer to a project that will involve working late on some Fridays might think that she is being sensitive but may leave the engineer upset that he is not being given challenging new work. Equally, a manager who does not assign a female engineer to site work because he is worried that she will be harassed by male builders is unfairly limiting her options.

It is important to treat people as individuals, which is why it is much better to ask than to make assumptions. Managers also have to be careful not to be so worried about appearing too PC (or not PC enough) that they tie

themselves in knots over questions such as time off for religious holidays. Again, this is where a good, clear policy can help by outlining a position that is fair to employees of all religions and none.

All of these techniques should help engineering and technology firms to attract and retain good qualified engineers. But taking a step back and looking at the bigger picture offers a number of other ways in which businesses can begin to attract new people to the profession. The more people graduate from university with engineering degrees or complete apprenticeships, the more talent there will be available.

As a starting point, consider talking to local schools. Offering to speak to primary school pupils about how bridges are made or explaining to the local girls' secondary school how the Large Hadron Collider was built will help to capture their imagination; then explain that anyone of any background who studies hard could be an engineer. This is one of the areas where it is helpful if a non-traditional engineer is able to give the talk, as it can help to break down young peoples' stereotypes about who can be an engineer or a technical specialist.

Equally, talking about the way in which apprenticeships and on-the-job training provide an alternative to university may help young people see that there are a number of ways to obtain qualifications. And do not rule out older people, either; adult apprenticeships and retraining schemes can also be valuable sources of talent. A 55-year-old new graduate may not have much engineering experience but he or she will be able to bring a wide range of other skills to the workplace.

Finally, you may wish to consider joining forces with an industry body or other professional group to visit overseas universities. This allows you to entice their new graduates to consider a job in a UK firm – but don't forget that they will want to see evidence of your organisation's diversity. ■