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Leading the way

An update from Management

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I chatted with a neighbour over the garden fence a few months ago. She was frustrated - not with her hedges or the weather but her broadband. "The kids can't do their homework, my Teams calls freeze, and don't even get me started on streaming Netflix," she sighed, waving her phone as if trying to catch a wayward signal. The main issue? There is no fibre connection in her area. The bigger problem? There isn't an available installer to set one up. It got me thinking...

We live in a country that prides itself on innovation, fintech, and digital connectivity. However, the infrastructure needed to support these ambitions is hampered by a shortage of workers - it's not a lack of policies, cables, or funding, but people. We are discussing the fibre workforce - the unsung heroes who bridge the gap from street cabinets to living rooms. Currently, we need many more of them. I do not say this lightly. According to a 2023 report by the National Infrastructure Commission, the UK will require around 30,000 fibre engineers by 2025 to meet its national rollout goals. This is a significant challenge, especially as recruitment pipelines are drying up faster than an English canal in July.

The techUK Digital Infrastructure Task Group has also identified this shortage as a critical bottleneck hindering the nationwide deployment of Fibre-to-the-Premises (FTTP). While investment is flowing in - companies like Openreach, Virgin Media, CityFibre, Netomnia, BRSK, and numerous alternative networks are progressing - the labour shortage remains the weakest link in our efforts. With all the excitement surrounding 5G, gigabit speeds, and "the cloud," more people are likely to pursue a career in fibre. However, here's the catch: many individuals don't realize it's a viable option.

When I first entered this industry - bright-eyed and fueled by caffeine - I couldn't even spell FTTP, let alone grasp its national significance. However, I quickly learned that fibre optics are not just about faster cat videos; they are crucial for remote healthcare, resilient education, and enabling local businesses to expand globally.

Fibre serves as the foundation of digital Britain. Despite this importance, we have not effectively branded the profession of fibre installation. It truly is a highimpact, future-proof career. So, why are we falling short? Part of the challenge lies in perception. Many people still view fibre installation as merely a "manual" job. It demands a sophisticated understanding of network architecture, splicing techniques, digital mapping, and safety compliance. It combines hands-on work with high-tech skills—an appealing blend for tinkerers and thinkers. Unfortunately, too few schools, colleges, or job centres present it this way. Last year, a mentor of mine visited a sixth-form college to discuss careers in fibre optics, and most students looked at him as if he had brought in a fossil. One student even asked, "Isn't that just fixing phones?" However, by the end of the session, he had a dozen students excited about the opportunity to shadow industry engineers. Their interest grew once they saw fibre optics' technology, tools, and real-world impact. That's one solution: outreach. We need to engage with young people before they finalize their career paths. Schools, apprenticeship programs, and community hubs must participate in this initiative. It's not just about speaking to students; it's about showing them what's possible. We should invite students to visit network operation centres and allow them to try fusion splicing or cable pulling in safe, supervised environments. Let's bring fibre optics into the classroom—not just through Wi-Fi.

Of course, young people aren't our only hope. There is a hidden workforce—veterans, career switchers, and tradespeople looking to upskill—who already possess many essential qualities such as discipline, problem-solving skills, and physical dexterity. We must create opportunities for these groups instead of placing obstacles in their way. This begins with making training pathways more accessible. The current qualification landscape resembles a tangled mess. With NVQs, vendor-specific certifications, and short courses available, it can be confusing, fragmented, and often expensive. We need unified and recognizable credentials that employers can trust and learners can navigate without confusion. For example, the City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate in Communications Cabling is a step in the right direction, but we need a comprehensive offering—not just a selection of appetizers The recent announcement of redundancy plans at Openreach has sparked significant concern within the telecommunications community. Michael Coyle, a Training and Assessing Manager, highlighted a critical issue:

> "Openreach is going ahead with redundancy plans; I understand that, but what I don't understand is the lack of change regarding qualifications. Engineers who leave the company, whether or not they remain in telecoms, lose all their qualifications, making it harder for them to continue in the industry."

This situation underscores the fragmented nature of current qualification systems, where engineers' certifications are often linked to specific employers, hindering their mobility within the industry. While there are processes for transferring accreditations, as noted by Marc Henson, Specialist Manager at Openreach, the system remains cumbersome:

> "They can take their accreditation with them; I set up a process for that years ago. The leaver must make a Data Subject Access Request (DSAR) for their training and accreditation records via the front door request platform."

Establishing unified, recognizable credentials independent of any single employer is essential to address these challenges. A standardized certification system would facilitate smoother transitions for engineers between roles and enhance the overall resilience and adaptability of the UK's fibre workforce. In addition, let's talk about gender. The fibre world is still overwhelmingly male. You'll see more highvis vests than handbags on most build sites. But that's slowly changing thanks to initiatives like Women in Fibre and Tech She Can, which aim to attract and retain more women in technical roles. We have heard countless stories of ladies joining teams. At first, they doubt themselves. "I've never used a drill in my life," some laugh. But within months, they led installs, trained juniors, and won client compliments left and right. We need to open the door and permit people to walk through it. This relies on companies being willing to invest in recruitment and retention. Hiring a new engineer takes time and money; losing one can be even more costly. Company culture is essential. If you want to create a team of devoted, high-performing fibre professionals, you need to treat them like the professionals they are. This includes providing ongoing training, opportunities for career

advancement, and fair compensation. No one wants to work 60-hour weeks installing fibre in the rain for minimum wage. The work is demanding, and the rewards should reflect that effort.

Technology can also benefit us. AI-based route planning, AR-assisted splicing guides, and digital workflow applications make it easier for newcomers to handle complex tasks with less difficulty. These tools are designed to empower people rather than replace them. When I first tried AR glasses during a site survey, I felt like a blend of Iron Man and a Nano engineer, and trust me, that's a great feeling!

Technology alone cannot close the skills gap, and passion, policy, or pay alone will not be sufficient. This is a collective effort, not an individual one. Collaboration among industry, government, education, and local communities is essential. The Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology's "Wireless Infrastructure Strategy" suggests a coordinated approach, but we must accelerate our efforts. How can we apply this to our daily activities? Here are several actions that each of us—yes, you included—can take to help close the gap:

1. Mentor Someone: Take the time to guide someone else, whether you are an engineer, a manager, or a supplier. 2. Promote Apprenticeships: Share information about apprenticeships on social media, suggest them to friends, and encourage your business to fund these opportunities.
3. Host an Open Day: Invite local schools or job seekers to visit your operation and see it in person.
4. Review Your Hiring Criteria: Consider whether a degree is necessary or if a good attitude and practical skills suffice.
5. Support Women and Minorities: Provide genuine support through mentorship, visibility, and creating pathways for advancement.
6. Celebrate Your Success Stories: The more we highlight successful careers in fibre, the more we attract future talent.
7. Partner with Local Colleges: Work together to develop custom curriculums or sponsor training programs tailored to the fibre industry.

If you're reading this and considering a new career path, keep this in mind: the fibre industry is not just about cables; it's about connection in every sense. While challenging, it is also rewarding, futureproof, and fundamentally human.

As I finish writing this, I think about my neighbour, who used to struggle with buffering on Netflix but now enjoys a blazing-fast 900 Mbps connection. All of this is thanks to a local fibre installer named Dave, who transformed her internet experience in under 90 minutes.

She affectionately refers to him as her "digital knight in shining cable." Our fibre engineers are quietly building the framework for our digital future, but they cannot do it alone.

Let's invest not just in infrastructure but also in people.

We must bridge the gap, illuminate the pathways, and work together toward a future where every home, every business, and every village has the fibre they deserve.

The message is clear. Now, we need more hands to help deliver it.

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Kind regards
Wilhelm & Dirk