

Where are today's Brunels?

Engineers are vital to all walks of life, but few members of the public realise this. **Ian Ling**, president of the Society of Operations Engineers, says individuals engineers need to talk more about what they do.

We have great architects today; Norman Foster and Richard Rogers are practically household names, for example. But does the majority of the public recognise the names of engineers in the same way—and appreciate that, without those engineers, life as we know it in the twenty-first century would collapse entirely? I would say they do not.

The lack of great individual engineers is a fairly modern phenomenon. Aside from the nineteenth century greats, such as Thomas Telford and Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the UK has produced great minds like Sidney Camm, R. J. Mitchell, Nigel Gresley and Frank Whittle in the early part of the last century alone.

However, come the 1960s, the names of great engineers start to disappear. This is, I believe, because it is teamwork that succeeds in the modern business world and individual engineers are not named, unlike their architectural colleagues.

Public support is there

That is not to say that architects are hogging the limelight for themselves. When the Richard Rogers Partnership received the 2006 Stirling Prize for Architecture, Rogers himself acknowledged the work of the team—and we thank him for recognising engineers in that way.

Jack Pringle, president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, also acknowledged the work of engineers in the press last year, so we know the support is there.

I believe the lack of great names is down to the fact that we engineers fail to blow our own trumpets—we just get on with the job. The result is that the greater majority of society is totally unaware of the fact that life, in all aspects of today's world, starts with engineers.

With the problem identified, what is the solution? It would not be right to change the modern business world, moving it away from teamwork and back to the individualist days of Brunel—recapturing old glories will not put the greatness back into the profession.

More awareness needed

It is down to us. And by 'us' I mean individual engineers as well as institutions like the Society of Operations Engineers and the Institution of Civil Engineers. The next generation has to be made aware of what engineering is and what

it has to offer in terms of excitement and job satisfaction.

With the Olympics developments, new nuclear build, replacement of coal-fired generation plants and upgrading of water and effluent systems, the demand for more engineers in the future looms large—not just in the UK but worldwide.

If we are to get more students to enter engineering as a career there has to be a way to attract them. With the UK's intention to have 50% of young people going to university, there has been an increase in the variety of degrees offered. Many of these are seen as 'easy' and do not have the rigour of an engineering degree.

Need for degree funding

Moreover, now that fees are leading to graduates facing debts of £10 000 when entering industry, the three-year degree for media studies as opposed to the four-year engineering degree is undoubtedly an attraction for the student with no firm commitment.

Perhaps there should be a subsidy for engineering and science degrees. Industrial companies, even smaller ones, need to look ahead and fund more students. The armed forces already give bursaries and funding to students to take degrees to attract and secure its professional intake.

At a more junior level, the Science and Engineering Ambassador scheme needs to be supported to awaken interest at an early moment in the education cycle.

Engineering is a broad and fulfilling discipline and I am proud to be associated with it. I want to see others going out there talking to colleagues, schools, colleges and saying, 'I'm an engineer; this is what I do for you and it's something you can be part of too'.



Developments such as London 2012 will help to sustain the demand for engineers

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