

More skills required: building up the construction sector

Study produced by Ironmongery*Direct*,
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Introduction

The UK construction industry is facing somewhat of a crisis as firms of all sizes struggle to recruit talented tradesmen. It's the biggest skills shortage the industry has faced in almost 20 years. One of the main reasons for the short fall is down to the substantial impact the recession has had on the sector. The economic crisis forced hundreds of thousands of workers out of the industry and meant many young people took the academic route rather than learning a trade.

In addition, Britain's impending departure from the EU is also likely to hit the UK's construction workforce hard as it will have an effect on the labour force that is able to come and work from continental Europe. There has been much speculation that Brexit will widen the skills gap further if the government does not listen to the construction industry's concerns.

The construction sector, however, saw little effect of Brexit in June 2016 with total contract values reaching £6.2 billion, the highest monthly figure so far in 2016, according to The Economic and Construction Market Review. So with work still coming in, the construction industry needs to address the skills issue and replace the talent that was previously lost to ensure it is business as usual.



Our Annual Industry Review, which was conducted at the start of 2016, reflected this requirement as it found that **45% of tradespeople had to turn jobs away in 2015** because they didn't have enough resource, and a quarter said they struggled to take on more staff because of a skills shortage. Furthermore, a study by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) revealed that approximately **18%** of employers said that a skills gap has damaged their growth over the last two years, with around **42%** of construction companies and tradespeople struggling to recruit workers with the right skills. It also found that the industry has to fill 232,000 new jobs in the next five years to deliver the pipeline of work that is scheduled.

So with this in mind, we wanted to conduct research to find out what effect the skills shortage is having on the UK's ability to find skilled tradespeople and importantly provide suitable solutions to attract more people to the industry. **We surveyed 1,000 people** who have required the services of a tradesperson over the past year to discover if it has been difficult to find a skilled trade professional to carry out repairs, maintenance or improvements to their home.



The Results...



36%

of the UK public have
noticed a shortage
of skilled trade
professionals



1 IN 6

people had to search
for more than 3 weeks
to find a suitable
tradesperson



A FIFTH

of the UK public had to
wait 3 weeks or more
for a tradesperson
to start a job

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What effect is the skills shortage having on the ability for people to find a great tradesperson?

We have all been there, whether it's a broken lock, faulty electrics or the need for a complete home makeover; there comes a time when we require the services of a skilled tradesperson. And when this happens, we expect to be able to find one quickly and easily so the job can be completed in a timely manner.

Looking back over the past year, we wanted to discover **how long it takes**, on average, for people to find a skilled tradesperson – and it looks like it's not been particularly easy for over half of the UK population. In fact, one in six people (**16%**) stated that it took more than three weeks to find a suitable tradesperson, while **13%** said it took up to two weeks, and **24%** said it took up to a week. The good news is that **27%** said it only took a couple of days and **21%** said they were still able to find a skilled tradesperson on the day they started looking so the problem is not too bad yet.



When asked whether they actually noticed a shortage of skilled professionals when trying to find a person for the job, a sizeable **36%** said yes. A third (**33%**) said they noticed a shortage but eventually were able to find someone, while unfortunately **3%** said they noticed a shortage and as a result couldn't find anyone suitable to undertake the job required. However, for those that didn't notice a shortage, still over a quarter (**26%**) admitted that they did have to ring around to find someone, as many tradespeople were busy - perhaps because resources are stretched because of the shortage. But reassuringly **38%** said there were plenty of tradespeople available.

Although the majority of people (**63%**) did not experience any problems as a result of the time it took to find a suitable tradesperson, it did cause a few difficulties for a fair few. Not only did it trigger complications in relation to the work that needed carrying out, it also lead to personal problems for the customer. Just over a fifth (**22%**) admitted that the inconvenience caused them emotional stress. And as a consequence of having to wait, **13%** said the problem they needed fixing got worse, with **12%** stating another problem was caused as a result. This probably explains why **6%** said the delay ended up costing them more money, with **6%** of these having to take time off work to deal with the problem, which again could have affected them financially.

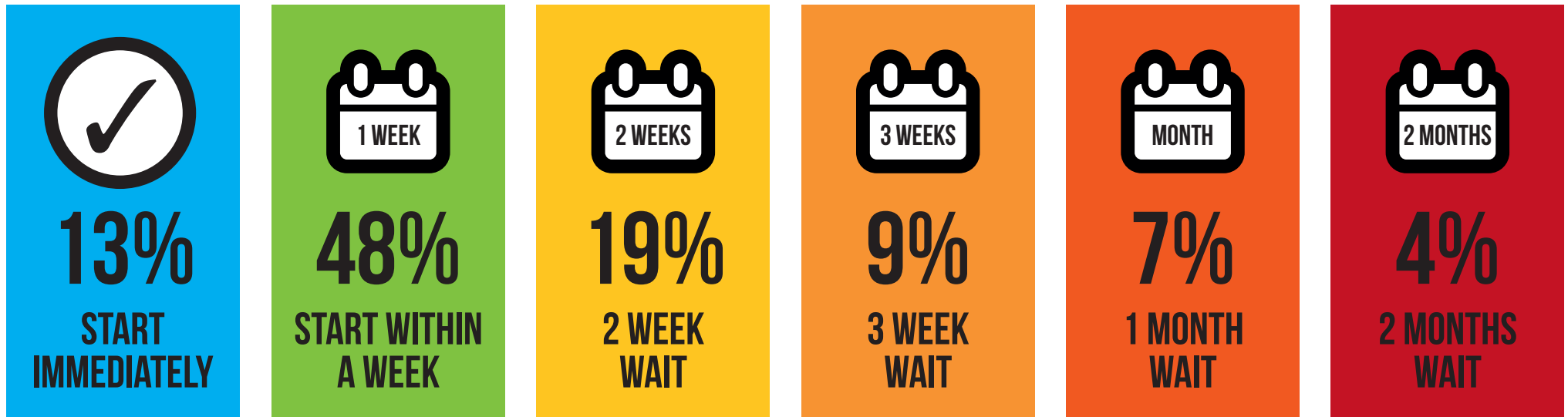
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Once a tradesperson had been found, we wanted to find out how quickly they were able to start the job to determine how busy these skilled professionals are.



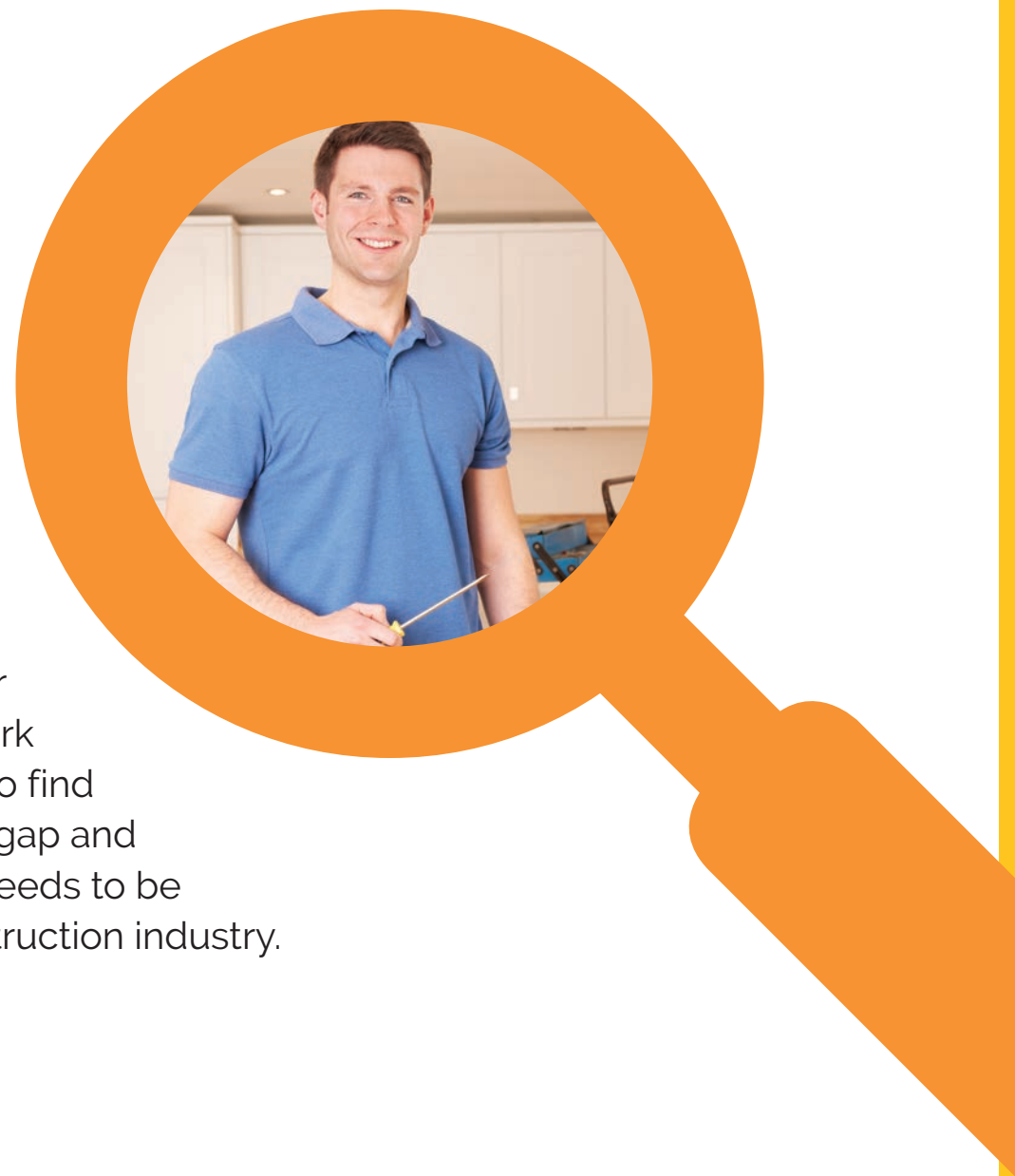
For the majority (**48%**), the tradesperson was able to start within a week but for **19%** they had to wait up to two weeks for the tradesperson to start. **9%** of the UK public had to wait for up to three weeks, **7%** a month and **4%** had to wait up to two months for the work to be carried out. For the lucky few (**13%**), the trade professional was able to start immediately.

However, despite over half of those surveyed finding it challenging to find a tradesperson, **88%** were happy with the finished result. This highlights that while there might be fewer skilled tradespeople around, the ones that are available are doing a good job!

What can the sector do to improve the situation?

The skills shortage is clearly having a real impact on the construction sector. The industry is feeling the strain and is in desperate need of skilled workers to restore it to its former size before the recession took hold. However, it's clear from our research that the UK public is also noticing a shortage of talent and it's beginning to cause issues, but fortunately there is the opportunity to turn it around.

Finding a reliable and trusted tradesman is a top priority for homeowners when they need repair and maintenance work undertaking, but it's clearly becoming more challenging to find an experienced person to help them. To bridge this skills gap and prevent the issue from getting worse, immediate action needs to be taken to help support sustainable growth within the construction industry.



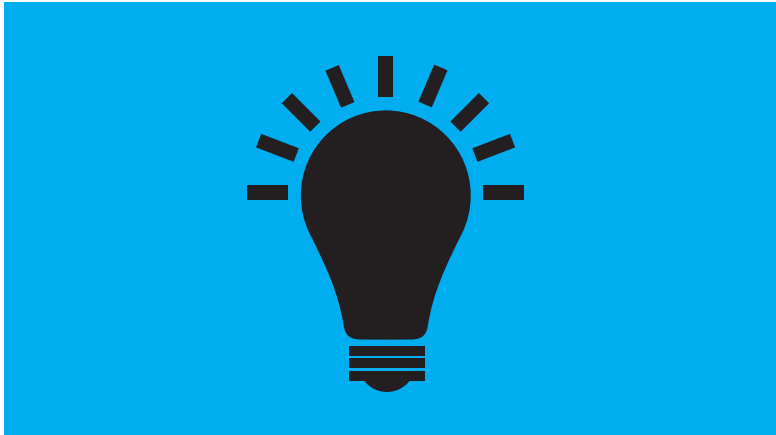
So what is the solution?

One way to attract more talent and skills to the sector is to create more apprenticeships. Currently there are not enough young people entering the profession to meet existing work requirements, nor to replace the number of workers soon to hit retirement age. This is where apprenticeships can help as they can upskill people in the areas needed, particularly when it comes to working with the latest technology to perform tasks. They can also help firms to offer attractive career prospects and assure people that this is a good sector to get involved in over the long term.

Unfortunately though, construction apprenticeships are currently in decline. According to the Building Services Research and Information Association (**BSRIA**), construction apprenticeships are down **60%** since 2009.

But with over **662,000** 16-24 year olds currently looking for work, the construction sector needs to do all it can to tap into this talent pool and effectively communicate why they should pursue a career in the building environment. Creating more training and apprenticeships is the ideal way to appeal to young people and give them the opportunity to receive hands-on, work-based experience that can lead to a rewarding career. Organisations like the **CITB** are on hand to help companies create apprenticeship schemes and find suitable apprentices if they need help to do so.





INSPIRE

Another way we can inspire young people to consider a career in construction is to target them at school age. The building sector should start working with schools more to educate children on the opportunities available, and the benefits of pursuing a vocational career within the construction sector.



UPSKILLING

Firms and tradespeople could also look at upskilling their existing staff to improve workforce quality and create more specialist talent. There are plenty of courses available across the UK, from plastering to roofing or wall insulation, meaning employees could upskill in new areas so they can take on new types of work.

EXTERNAL TRAINING

Employers could also consider combining internal training schemes with tailored programmes by external training providers. This way, employees have the chance to learn from experts and improve their training, whilst still carrying out their day-to-day jobs.



To prevent the industry from suffering due to a lack of training and skills, the whole industry needs to work together to develop the skills needed for the future and attract a new generation of workers. To prevent the problem from getting worse, it's time to act now before it's too late.

By Wayne Lysaght-Mason, Managing Director at IronmongeryDirect