

“Growing our own talent plays a vital part in shaping the company”

San Johal



Filling the skills gap

Highways England’s ambition to become a ‘bigger scale and higher performing organisation’ involves growing their own talent. *Highways Magazine* speaks to the government company’s human resources director San Johal to find out more

It has been a year since Highways England started operating as a government company. How is that going?

We’re continuing to focus on our three imperatives of safety, customer service and the large challenge of delivering the Roads Investment Strategy (RIS). I believe we’re making progress.

Overall it’s an exciting time to work in the roads industry. We now have unprecedented levels of investment in our motorways and major A-roads, £15 billion over the next six years, which of course hasn’t happened before.

Government recently renewed its focus on skills with the launch of the Transport Infrastructure Skills Strategy. How important are apprenticeship and graduate programmes to Highways England?

Growing our own talent plays a vital part in shaping the company and developing us into a higher performing organisation.

The increased level of investment we need to deliver now and in the future means we have a need, as well as an opportunity, to promote and invest in apprenticeships more and we are committed to attracting, training and retraining good people. They will be the next generation of highways specialists that can help deliver this investment strategy and the strategies to come. Particularly in engineering we passionately believe that apprenticeships are vital.

Graduates are important too, and we are running programmes focusing on a range of professions, including finance and civil and systems engineers. These graduates are part of the skills mix we need and are going to play an important part in our ability to deliver the investment strategy. They follow a three-year programme to develop their talent and we’ll want to retain them after they finish, giving them the confidence to go for different roles.

HIGHWAYS RECRUIT

For details of the new recruitment service from *Highways Magazine* visit www.highwaysrecruit.com or contact **Tom Gardner** on **01732 459683** or by emailing tom@aladltd.co.uk



A message from the top

"I joined Highways England from the air transport sector, an industry that is traditionally thought of as exciting with a high focus on engineering and safety."

"From the outside the roads sector doesn't necessarily appear to be as interesting but I've been here for about nine months now and I can definitely say this part of the industry is as exciting as any other, especially given the levels of investment."

"Highways England can't go it alone though, delivering our ambitions will require innovation, talent, and collaboration with our supply chain partners: their expertise, their investment and their passion is vital to helping us deliver our programme safely and improve our customers' experience on our network."

Jim O'Sullivan, chief executive, **Highways England**



San with colleagues and apprentices at the 2015 West Midlands National Apprenticeship Awards

What else is Highways England doing to ensure the skills are there to deliver the huge amount of government investment?

I think we have a real opportunity to engage other parts of the employment market such as mature joiners looking to transfer their skills, for example from the military. Recently two of our suppliers won awards for recruiting ex-military personnel to skilled roles and many already had a great understanding of project management and health and safety, which makes them excellent candidates.

Of course, as well as attracting newcomers to the industry, it's vital that we make sure our existing staff get the training and continuous improvement they need not just to help us deliver what the government has committed, but also to ensure they get the development they need to build rewarding and fulfilling careers.

We need to be more imaginative with our recruitment techniques to find the skills we need and we're leading the way - searching for talent in the hard to reach and non-traditional areas and encouraging more women and black and minority ethnic candidates (BME) into the profession. ➔

APPRENTICE CASE STUDY Ryan Meacham, 26

Highways England currently has 51 apprentices across the country in four disciplines: civil engineering, business administration, human resources and ICT. The company believes apprenticeships are essential to encourage, develop and engage its leaders of the future, creating a new generation of highways professionals.

Ryan Meacham, a civil engineering technician apprentice with Highways England, joined on the BTEC Level 3 programme in 2014, having spent six years previously in the retail sector.

Ryan's first year was based in operations and maintenance under the guidance of a mentor and his activities included helping to oversee the development of pump station renewals and promoting civil engineering at events. He has since been seconded to a contractor for six months to further his understanding of on-site civil engineering and has been involved in quality assurance and environmental monitoring on the Cannington bypass.

He said: *"If you are eager to progress a career in highways engineering then Highways England should be your first thought. The flexibility of the apprenticeship and the support I have received so far has been exceptional."*

