

# BINGHAM

Skills shortage? *Tony Bingham* insists that the specialist contractor is no longer master of his work force. The old employee has become his own master.



## THE VITAL ROLE OF THE CITB

If the builders are anxious about the shortage of skilled labour so, too, are the specialist sub-contractors. They do 80% of the work on site; 100% on some. The sub-contractors I am talking about are the companies who are nominated or named, or domestic supply-and-fix sub-contractors.

They carry out the steelwork, roofing, H&V, interiors – you name it. These firms are equally concerned about rebuilding their labour force now that things are busier.

So, what's new? It's only another management problem. The new ingredient this time is that we have gone "self-employed". Some have gone, some going, some hanging on. Like the builder with these indirect men, the specialist contractor faces a new problem.

It is this: he is no longer master of his work force. The old employee has become his own master. Further, it is this new boss who decides whether to employ more people and engage apprentices (but this might be too sweeping in all cases).

There are now a massive 500 000 indirect labour-only operatives. It's growing, too. Don't get sidetracked by the wailing and beating of breasts over the position.

No. Concentrate on the objective. How do we increase labour now and can we stimulate more apprentice training? And how do we do this, given that

many companies no longer have direct employees?

Consider first the specialist sub-contractor or builder who has an entire team of indirect chaps.

These people have been part and parcel of his company's activities on a continuous basis. Each man has his 714 certificate, is independent, but simply goes from job to job with his permanent company.

For most purposes, these chaps are employees. They earn by the measure. How do you put a youngster in here? It's easy. The indirect man is always on the lookout for a good "gofer".

A lad can be worth his weight in gold. The lad earns for the fitter or tradesmen. At the same time he learns.

The lad's boss is not the company. It is the fitter he is with. Nevertheless he is a trainee. There are thousands of lads already in this capacity.

But be certain of this: the new

I know have developed exceptionally good companies by using this arrangement. Service can be excellent.

The labour-master is an extraordinary person: his men will invariably be self-employed, too.

He takes on inexperienced blokes and lads and pairs them up with experienced people. Be certain: this fellow takes on and trains umpteen young and old, albeit in his own way.

But now we are convinced things are busier, could we switch back to the traditional system? Can our specialist contractor or builder go back to engaging direct employees?

The odds are poor. Try advertising for direct men. Depressing, isn't it? Some parts of the country employ 100% indirect men. Once the man crosses from employee to indirect he will not come back.

In essence, he feels free. Don't you want to be your own

workshop schemes. What I mean is this: the role of the Construction Industry Training Board is vital.

It would be superb if these new indirect bosses could be coaxed to use the training agency. But they won't.

The difficulty with the board is the quarrel over levy. The 2% penalty is the culprit; it was the daftest piece of public relations ever devised. The board tried to use the swingeing 2% levy on labour-only payments to bully specialists and builders into not using indirect men. It did not work.

Instead it caused many good companies to turn their backs on the board; they are very angry indeed.

To make matters worse, the board thought it could become a YTS agency only. It has ignored requests for adult training in the specialist sector. . . until recently. It has ignored, too, the usefulness of management training for specialists.

The upshot of this misdirection is that the training by specialists, insofar as operatives are concerned, remains half-cocked. They need the facilities of the CITB.

Stop messing about. The people who are employing new men and boys on site are 500 000 indirect operatives. They can do without the training board and muddle on.

But with the board things would be so much better.

The board has to reach past the specialist sub-contractor and builder into the hearts and minds and pockets of the new bosses, to persuade them that it is worth their while plugging into the superb facilities and willing staff.

But, for heaven's sake, when you reach his pocket, do not steal 2% from him. Put money in. Attract him first. Then draw him into a modest levy later.

The labour-only sub-contractor, this indirect man, is not an obstacle to the shortage of labour, not an obstacle to the training of apprentices: he is the answer.

This is the first in a monthly series on sub-contracting by Tony Bingham, a director of ACS building consultants, of Biggleswade, Bedfordshire.

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self-employed boss takes on and trains many people, albeit in his own way.

Consider next the company that has a basic work force, probably self-employed, but tops up with more indirect blokes as and when needed.

These people are itinerant by nature, often well-known within their industry. Some very good, some less good, some rotten. They too again are their own masters. Always they are on the lookout for a good lad. It pays hands down.

Moreover, our indirect chap is always looking for a good adult who can learn quickly. So, be certain again: the itinerant worker takes on people and teaches them albeit in his own way.

Then there is the company which has its work carried out by one or more labour-masters. Several specialist contractors

boss?

Whether you like it or loathe it you have to lump it. So let us look carefully at the way of increasing labour availability and apprentices via the indirect bosses. There are two problems to deal with.

First, the indirect boss does not have much feel for future workload. He is not consulted by companies about the long-term demands. So he reacts to demand for labour in the short term only: "I want more men next week."

Second is the method of training new men and boys. They start as labourers. They learn at the elbow of the experienced operative. That is slow and erratic. The outcome is to produce good from good, rough from rough.

The answer has to be a combination of this on-site training with off-site formal