IN 2012, a group of partner organisations within the electrical sector began a series of discussions, led by the IET’s director of membership and professional development, Michelle Richmond, into the challenges faced at the technician level in their industry. The discussions focused on the perceived shortage of intermediate technical skills along with the problems of poor status and recognition.

The partner organisations (the IET, trade union Unite, the Joint Industry Board for the Electrical Contracting Industry, Electrical Contractors’ Association, Summitskills and the Engineering Council) formed a technical advisory panel and steering group (TAPS). Supported by sponsorship from the Gatsby Charitable Foundation (Gatsby), TAPS commissioned a research study. Gatsby had previously commissioned research across a number of sectors and confirmed the critical part that technicians play in business. Almost all of these businesses reported difficulties recruiting skilled technicians and many reported that they simply could not recruit the skills needed.

Given that future growth could be constrained by the failure to provide a sustainable supply of technicians, the TAPS team was interested in gaining the insight required to tackle the key technician-related issues faced by the industry. Its researchers interviewed 268 electricians, contractors and final-year electrical apprentices, along with 30 employers of electricians to gain their thoughts about professionalism, recognition and career pathways. Three important shortcomings were identified:

A fragmented industry – confusion exists within the electrical industry regarding competence measurement for electricians, believed by research participants to be caused by the lack of a recognised, common, overarching standard across the electrical industry.

No visible benefit or purpose to career advancement – participants confirmed that career pathways are blurred for electricians and visible benefits associated with career advancement were difficult to identify.

Lack of a nationally recognised competence within the UK – the majority of participants felt strongly about the lack of a recognised ‘standard’ in the electrical industry, and agreed that an acceptable form of recognised competence would be based on a combined, although not prescriptive, set of key competences that individuals should hold to practice as qualified electricians.

One indicator of how these shortcomings could be addressed is given by the views of the 200 participants in the survey qualified to Level 3. Nearly half of this group expressed a strong interest in finding out more about a potential electrician/technician membership package/service, and emphasised that their interest would be stronger if such a service involved a range of the key organisations within the electrical industry working together to support such a service/package. One key attraction to a potential package for electricians would be enabling electricians to gain access to relevant career support and guidance to enhance their own development and career plans.

Over half of the employers interviewed stated that they would be open to supporting and funding electrician employees in gaining professional recognition through the Engineering Technician (EngTech) award which the IET is licensed to award.

The TAPS team is keen to build on the results of the findings. It is due to begin discussions to prepare the way for the development of a potential collaborative package/service for this important sector. Qualified electricians, contractors and final-year electrical apprentices are key to ensuring that the next stage of the TAPS team’s work is focused.

Interested? Please email your name, location, job role, email and telephone contact details to: electechs@theiet.org

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