

Changing the face of British Gas

Since 2003, British Gas has taken steps to improve the diversity of its engineering workforce to better reflect its customer base and respond to changing demographics. It has, among other things, built strong links with schools to challenge gender stereotypes, found new ways of reaching out to under-represented groups to increase the diversity of applicants and changed the emphasis in its recruitment process from technical ability to personal attributes and attitudes. Its efforts are clearly starting to pay dividends – the proportion of female and ethnic minority engineers has doubled since 2003, and in 2008 around 13% of engineering apprentices and trainees recruited were women, and a similar proportion were from an ethnic minority background.

To say engineering is not a popular career choice for women and ethnic minorities is an understatement. According to the report, *Daring to be different: The business case for diversity on apprenticeships*, published jointly by the Apprenticeship Ambassadors Network and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in December 2007, only 2% of engineering apprentices are female and only 4% are from a black or ethnic minority (BME) background.

British Gas, however, is one of a small but growing number of organisations taking steps to encourage more women and people from BME backgrounds into the traditionally white male preserve of engineering. Such steps have resulted in a doubling of the proportions of women and ethnic minorities in the company's engineering workforce since 2003. Today, women make up 12.8% of apprentices and trainees and 13.7% are recruited from BME communities. We look at the measures taken by British Gas below.

Business case

For British Gas, there is an immediate and clear business case for diversity. Following privatisation in 1986, the gas industry became fragmented as larger companies downsized and new, smaller organisations entered the market. The overall result was that the number of engineers in the UK failed to keep up with demand, leading to an acute shortage of skilled workers. Faced with increased competition and a lack of qualified engineers, British Gas knew that it had to look beyond the traditional recruitment pool to find quality candidates. Carole Willsher, Recruitment and Diversity Specialist, explains: 'I tend to use the analogy of a pond and we're looking for the best fish. If we don't recruit women, that's over half the pond gone; if we don't recruit people from an ethnic minority background, that's about another

10% gone, and we're left with only a very small part of the pond to fish from.'

More broadly, the business case at British Gas is built on two principles. The first is the recognition that valuing diversity is simply the right thing to do for any organisation. The second is the commercial recognition that good diversity management is increasingly important as a means of maintaining business success in a highly competitive energy market.

'The British Gas brand is strong but it is important that we keep working on it,' says Carole Willsher. 'Our brand must be seen to be multi-cultural and inclusive, otherwise we risk damaging our reputation and, more critically, losing customers. It is particularly important that our engineering population reflects the diversity in local communities because they are the ones on the front line, coming into direct contact with customers in their homes.'

At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that the demographics of the country are changing, with an ageing workforce, more women in the workplace and an increasing number of people

Box 1: About British Gas

- part of the energy group Centrica, British Gas provides gas, electricity and home repair services to eight million home and business customers in England, Scotland and Wales
- it is the UK's largest operator in the installation and maintenance of domestic central heating and gas appliances, serving 16.6 million customers
- among a total workforce of 28,000, British Gas employs more than 9,000 trained engineers who carry out servicing and break-down calls
- in 2008, 2.2% of its engineering workforce were female and 4.6% were from an ethnic minority background.

from a BME background. In fact, according to the EHRC, by 2010, less than 20% of the full-time workforce will be made up of white, able-bodied men under 45.

In 2003, just 1% of British Gas's 9,000 or so engineering workforce were female and just 2.7% were ethnic minorities. To address the shortage of skilled engineers generally, British Gas announced, in 2002, a plan to recruit an additional 5,000 new engineers by 2007/08. In January 2003, the British Gas Energy Academy (the 'Academy') was set up to recruit and train these engineers (see Box 2, p.11). Integral to the Academy is a dedicated diversity team, set up to work at the grass roots level, to actively recruit more women and people from a BME background. The team's objectives are to:

- promote British Gas as an employer of choice to school children aged 13 to 16 in the field of engineering
- represent the Academy and raise awareness of the importance of a diverse workforce
- promote and develop a network of science and engineering ambassadors
- increase applications from under-represented groups.

Working with schools

British Gas recognises that breaking down the stereotypical image of engineers being predominantly white and male requires a long-term investment, starting at school level. A major part of the diversity team's role is therefore to build strong ties with schools, working with young people – and particularly girls – and encouraging them to consider a 'non-traditional' career in engineering.

While recognising there is little immediate impact – students are a long way from entering the recruitment pool – the aim is to raise awareness and generate interest, so that young people can base decisions about their future on knowledge rather than perception.

British Gas works with schools by running a curriculum-based series of workshops called 'It's a Gas', designed to involve and enthuse young people about engineering. The workshops use different games and challenges to get students thinking about what a career in engineering could mean to them, to demonstrate what sort of skills or characteristics they have that could help them to become an engineer, and to tackle some of the

gender stereotypes associated with engineering. They include:

- EnCon CITY – an interactive, virtual-reality, computer-based programme which demonstrates energy-saving initiatives and measures within domestic properties
- the Big Build challenge – an oversized jigsaw puzzle of a central heating system which the students have to put together, designed to help develop key skills such as communications, problem-solving and team working
- 'a day in the life of an engineer' game, in which students take on the role of an engineer – equipped with a map, they get an insight into a typical day of an engineer by having an opportunity to make some customer calls, plan out a schedule for the day including fitting in breaks and lunch, and working out their routes for the various jobs.

Building on its work with schools, British Gas is increasingly using the web to reach out further and attract more young people into engineering. For example, it has teamed up with b-live (www.b-live.com), an interactive careers and community youth website for students, and through the site offers careers content, fun quizzes, games and competitions designed to change perceptions and to encourage young people to consider a career with British Gas.

Another way the diversity team reaches out to young people is by attending school careers events. At such events, the team give away gender-specific 'freebies' such as lip gloss and emery boards as a way to attract girls to the stand. 'Not everyone will be interested in finding out more about engineering, but we do get a few who will stay and talk,' says Carole Willsher. 'It's just about having a little hook to catch them and it works quite well.'

British Gas has also forged links with external organisations such as Connexions and the Learning and Skills Council. While they cannot offer direct help with recruitment, building relationships with them is important as they can influence the career choices students might make.

Recruitment and selection

As noted earlier, one of the key objectives of the diversity team is to increase the number of applications from under-represented groups. To attract as wide a range of talent as possible, the team has introduced changes to all areas of the

recruitment and selection process, including developing partnerships with organisations that have already established relationships with their target audiences; reviewing all its policies and practices to remove any gender, race or age bias; and changing the emphasis from recruiting for technical ability to recruiting for attitude.

Outreach

The diversity team adopts a number of positive action strategies to raise awareness of the different opportunities available at British Gas among under-represented groups including running taster days and building partnerships with organisations that already work with people who are among their target audience.

Taster days

British Gas regularly runs women-only and BME taster days, with the specific aim of attracting women and ethnic minorities into engineering and apprenticeships. The day is designed to give participants a clearer understanding of the engineering opportunities at British Gas. Attendees are given a presentation on the career paths available, an opportunity to meet engineers to find out what the job is really about, and a chance to question a panel of recruitment and training experts from the Academy.

Taster days are usually planned to coincide with the availability of apprentice or trainee positions in a particular area, so that if people are interested by what they find out, they can apply while they are still keen.

Partnership working

Recognising that there are difficulties gaining access to under-represented groups, British Gas is focusing this year on developing partnerships with organisations that have already built strong links with its target audiences, including Jobcentre Plus; the London Development Agency; housing associations and specialist groups including the Windsor Fellowship, a charity that offers educational and leadership programmes to develop diverse young talent; Women and Manual Trades; and YWCA, a charity working with disadvantaged women in England and Wales. Carole Willsher explains: 'We are changing our focus slightly. Instead of just trying to get people to come to our taster days, we're going out into the community more and engaging people that way. By working in partnership with these organisations, we can access already established networks. It is mutually beneficial – they can help give us access to our target audiences while we can

provide training and employment opportunities, so it works well for all of us.'

Another way that British Gas is developing partnerships is by working with other large employers, particularly those that experience similar issues in the recruitment of a diverse workforce, such as the London Fire Brigade and BT Openreach. The aim of these relationships is to share best practice and data for benchmarking purposes. For example, says Carole Willsher: 'One of the things that London Fire Brigade has always done are the BME and women's open days. That's where we got that idea from originally.'

British Gas is now looking to expand these relationships by looking for other ways to work together. Carole Willsher says: 'We are discussing several ideas at the moment, like sharing premises with BT for job interviews. Also, other organisations like BT and Land Rover go into schools and do a very similar thing to what we do. So we've talked about the possibility of not just promoting our own organisations but also promoting engineering more widely. Kids might go away and think they want to work for BT or for us but if things don't work out for one reason or another, we want them to know there may be other allied careers out there in the same sector for them to consider.'

Targeted advertising

British Gas uses a variety of ways and media to appeal to its target audiences, including:

- advertising in magazines like 'Bliss' and 'Sugar' which are aimed at teenage girls, careers-type websites like Voice and The Asian News, and the gay media
- redesigning its recruitment advertisements in terms of both images and language to reach out to people from more diverse backgrounds – see p.13 for an example of a recruitment advert
- ensuring that marketing materials such as recruitment brochures and its dedicated recruitment website (www.britishgasacademy.co.uk) portray a diverse range of individuals to help challenge stereotypical attitudes and project an inclusive image – for example, the website contains a number of real apprentice and trainee profiles including Kirk (a BME apprentice technical engineer) and Maria (a female BME trainee electrical field engineer)

- producing DVDs for schools and partner organisations.

‘It’s about continually trying to think creatively to reach our target audiences. If something doesn’t work as well as we’d hoped, then we’ll try something else,’ says Carole Willsher.

Removal of bias

All the recruitment policies, practices and literature have been reviewed to remove any gender or race bias. In addition, a thorough audit of policies and practices to remove any age bias was carried out at group level by parent company Centrica ahead of the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations in 2006. It brought to light the need to make a number of changes, the most significant of which was the removal of upper age limits for entrance to the British Gas apprenticeship scheme (previously, the scheme was targeted at young adults in the 17–23 age range).

Focus on attributes and attitudes

Given that the UK energy market is highly dynamic, with customers constantly shopping around for the best deals and the best service, the emphasis has changed in terms of what is required of engineers, shifting from their simply having the technical skills to undertake the work to the required standard to having the people skills to deliver excellent customer services. As a result, recruitment and selection of apprentices and trainees is increasingly focusing on recruiting for attitude. Examples of attributes and competencies that British Gas looks for are listed on the recruitment website and include:

- good communication, organisational and problem-solving skills
- aptitude for team work
- careful, accurate and methodical approach
- polite, tactful, friendly, professional, with a pleasant manner for dealing with customers.

With the change in emphasis away from pure technical skills to behaviours and attributes, there were initial concerns that the quality of the intake or the pass rates could drop within the Academy. Carole Willsher says: ‘We were a little worried that we would get apprentices and trainees with great people and communication skills, but who were technically not very good. But that’s not been borne out at all. The pass marks remain very high. It shows that if you’ve got the attitude to want to learn and get on, you can do really well.’

Box 2: The British Gas Energy Academy

Established in 2003, the British Gas Energy Academy (the ‘Academy’) was set up to address a severe shortage of qualified gas engineers. This was caused largely by the privatisation of the gas industry in 1986, which led to major fragmentation of the industry – large organisations were broken up while new players entered the market, and the number of qualified engineers in the UK failed to keep up with demand.

With a plan to recruit an additional 5,000 new engineers by 2007/08 to address this skills shortage, and recognising the significant financial investment this would involve, British Gas created the Academy, bringing together existing internal training centres, the recruitment function and the management of third-party training. This facility enabled British Gas to recruit and train large groups of suitable individuals to become fully competent engineers.

The Academy runs two types of training programmes for those who choose a career as an engineer: it offers apprenticeships for individuals wishing to become technical engineers responsible for central heating system maintenance and installation, and traineeships, primarily for people looking for a career change, so they become qualified engineers responsible for maintaining electrical and gas appliances.

In addition to training new recruits, the training centres are used for mandatory competency training and three-yearly assessments of trained engineers to ensure they maintain their skills and keep up to date with new information and technologies.

Today:

- the remit of the Academy has since been expanded to handle all volume recruitment for British Gas, including call centre and sales staff as well as induction and skills training for call centre and operational agents and team leaders
- all recruitment is channelled through a dedicated website, www.britishgasacademy.co.uk, which has around 38,000 visitors a month
- the Academy invests around £30 million each year recruiting and training staff
- training is delivered at a number of purpose-built facilities across the UK, stretching from Hamilton in Scotland to Thatcham in Berkshire.

She adds: ‘If you are a person with a positive attitude and display the right behaviours – someone who comes across well with good manners, who will go the extra mile, those kinds of things – we actually believe that we can train just about anyone in terms of developing their technical knowledge.’

Recruitment process

The greater focus on customer service skills and personal attributes is reflected throughout the recruitment process itself. The initial application form must now be completed online. Basic biographical information is requested, and applicants are required to complete basic Maths, English and logic tests. However, the key part of the application is a personality/work style questionnaire, which is used to assess an

applicant's suitability. Applicants must respond to a series of questions designed to assess their attitude to work and people. The questionnaire is lengthy, as similar questions are asked in a number of different ways to ensure consistency of responses.

Applicants who score highly after this initial screening then have a telephone interview to confirm essential information – for example, to be eligible for the apprentice technical engineer programme, applicants must be aged at least 17, must have four GCSEs at grade C or above, and must hold a full or provisional UK driver's licence. Those who pass this stage are then invited to an assessment centre.

There are three elements to the assessment day – an interview, a role play exercise and a manual dexterity test. The interview is largely based around questions relating to the candidate's completed online questionnaire to further assess their personal attributes and competencies. Similarly, the role play is also used to assess a candidate's attitude and whether they are able to understand and assimilate information, but more importantly, to see how they deal with customers. The test involves a practical assessment, but no gas-related knowledge is required – it is simply designed to assess whether the candidate is able to follow step-by-step instructions and handle small components.

The recruitment process is lengthy but thorough and a big investment in terms of time and resources for British Gas, admits Carole Willsher. 'But it's been designed that way to ensure that we get the right people with the right skills who will fit into our organisation and help us move closer to where we want to be in terms of having a diverse engineering workforce.'

Employee engagement

British Gas was aware that its drive to improve the diversity of its engineering workforce could not be done in isolation and that it would need to break down some of the traditional attitudes of its established, predominantly white, male workforce. Carole Willsher says: 'We knew we also had to win hearts and minds within the organisation, particularly those of managers. A lot of them weren't necessarily used to dealing with women – even down to the level of dealing with maternity leave – or, in some areas, individuals from BME backgrounds, so this was a big cultural change.'

British Gas therefore ran a number of diversity workshops, primarily for its senior and middle managers, to engage them and help them understand what the organisation was trying to achieve and why it was trying to achieve it, and show them what a diverse workforce would look like 'on their patch'.

Meanwhile, all managers who are either involved in recruiting and/or managing staff and all recruitment specialists have undergone equality and diversity training to again ensure they fully understand what British Gas is trying to achieve and why, and are able to make decisions free from bias.

Ambassadors

British Gas has developed a network of engineering 'ambassadors' from its workforce – apprentices, trainees and qualified engineers – who provide support to the diversity team in recruitment and awareness-raising activities including school visits, careers events and taster days. They are able to promote a positive side to engineering and their ability to tell people first-hand what they do on a day-to-day basis and what it is really like to work for the organisation is a powerful tool in changing perceptions and in motivating young people, women and those from a BME background to consider a 'non-traditional' career in engineering.

The ambassadors are also used as role models in promotional materials such as DVDs, recruitment brochures and the Academy's dedicated website, and in media campaigns.

An additional benefit of the ambassador role is that it provides a valuable development opportunity for those who volunteer to be ambassadors, as Carole Willsher explains. 'We try and "home grow" a large proportion of our managers. As engineers, they are extremely competent but because they mostly work remotely from home, they tend to be wholly focused on the work they do. Being an ambassador gives them an opportunity to do something different from their normal day-to-day work, and as a result it helps them increase their confidence, develop new skills and ultimately progress their careers.'

Carole Willsher adds: 'The really good thing is that as well as people putting themselves forward, we have managers coming to us now and volunteering their staff who are showing potential. They recognise that the role is a development opportunity for them too.'

British Gas Academy

The beautiful thing about an engineering career with British Gas is that it's open to women and men from all kinds of backgrounds. This is because it's more about using your people skills when you visit customers' homes than it is about having the technical knowledge to repair or service central heating systems (which our training will teach you anyway). We'll give you all the tools you need – which are just as likely to be a mobile phone and a laptop as a set of spanners – and a salary of £14,609 when you train, rising to £30,000 on qualification. And with more and more people in your local area calling on our services, you'll have plenty of opportunities to flourish. To find out more and apply, please visit www.britishgasacademy.co.uk/ad188

British Gas aims to provide equality of opportunity in all its employment practices, recognising the diversity of our employees and the communities in which they operate.

**Engineering
doesn't have
to be ugly.**



This recruitment advert was placed in various print and online media including The Times, The Daily Telegraph and Equality Britain.

Impact and outcomes

As a result of its efforts, British Gas has, among other things:

- promoted engineering and career opportunities to over 900,000 young people and people from under-represented groups
- started to change perceptions among school children that engineering is only a career for white men – for example, independent research on the ‘It’s a Gas’ workshops in schools reveals that after delivery of the workshops, 51% of girls said they would consider a career in engineering
- developed strong relationships with a number of women and BME groups to identify ways of partnership working
- attracted over 2,000 additional applications from under-represented groups (women and BME) over a two-year period in 2005 and 2006
- won numerous awards from a diverse range of organisations including Personnel Today, Employers Forum on Age, Women in Science and Engineering and Opportunity Now in recognition of its work and its achievements.

A look at the employee profile shows that British Gas is making good progress in changing the traditional make-up of its workforce and ensuring it is more representative of the communities it serves. In the five-year period from 2003 to 2008, the proportion of women in the engineering workforce has increased from 1% to 2.2%, while the proportion of ethnic minorities has increased from 2.7% to 4.6%. The pace of change has been modest, largely because of the size of the established engineering workforce. However, what is more encouraging is that the diversity of the apprenticeship and traineeship intake is increasing at a more significant rate – in 2008, 12.79% of apprentices and trainees recruited were female (compared to 9.34% the previous year) while 13.66% were from a BME background (compared to 8.91% the previous year).

In addition, since the removal of the upper age limits for entry to the British Gas apprenticeship and trainee schemes, the average age of starting an apprenticeship has increased from 20 to 24 years of age, 37% of the apprenticeship intake is now over the age of 25, and the oldest apprentice was 56 when recruited.

Having an engineering workforce which is increasingly reflecting both British Gas’s customer base and changing UK demographics is also delivering tangible business benefits. For example,

female engineers help to retain customers as they are often requested time and time again, particularly by female and older customers. Employing more employees from different ethnic minority backgrounds is delivering real cost savings in terms of being able to deal with customers for whom English is not their first language. Carole Willsher explains: ‘Instead of using Language Line, the translation and interpreting service, which can become very expensive, increasingly we have people within the teams who can speak a number of different languages. Engineers are now able to ask a colleague to do something simple like call a customer and explain to them that they need to go and get a spare part and will be back on Thursday.’

The benefits are not just those that can be measured in hard numbers. Culturally, British Gas has come a long way. ‘An obvious change can be found just by looking at the class pictures that are taken with the trainers and looking around the training centres,’ says Carole Willsher. ‘A few years ago, for example, if I walked into a training centre, I might see a few women around, mostly in admin, and I would probably know all of them. Now, we’ve got two female training centre managers and I see a lot more women in the classrooms.’

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the benefits of greater diversity can be seen in the classroom. Carole Willsher says: ‘The trainers comment on how the dynamics of the groups have changed – before, they would be typically training groups of 17-year-old boys. Now, in a group, you might get a mix of women, people from BME backgrounds, career changers who are typically a bit older, young people straight out of school and even people who have gone to university and are now coming back in to train as an apprentice. They say that the classes tend to be more relaxed, with more humour, and people are far more willing to share experiences and help each other out.’

Reflecting on British Gas’s progress since it embarked on its journey in 2003 to create a more diverse engineering workforce, Carole Willsher concludes: ‘We’re not at the stage that some companies are when they’re talking about women and ethnic minorities and the glass ceiling that they encounter. But we are working hard at the grass roots level to sow the seeds, to look for ways to reach out further and further to find new audiences, and if some of our measures don’t work, we do try new things. This is a long-term strategy but our efforts in bringing in more female and ethnic minority recruits are starting to make a real difference in changing the face of British Gas.’