

# Building skills for the future

by Kerry Doig\*

The pace of change experienced over the last couple of years has not only shown us what we are all capable of, but also how exhausting the constant need to adapt and develop new skills can be.

As we begin to restore our lives to the social and work patterns we pined for throughout the various lockdowns and isolation periods, and comprehend the events across Europe, we can see yet more change and challenges lie ahead.

As an SME in an evolving market, our way has always been to tackle challenges head on. So, the prospect for post-pandemic growth in emerging technologies in the UK has laid down the gauntlet for all businesses in the engineering and construction sectors to start to plan for a future of change and challenge, but we also see this as an opportunity for



greater autonomy and self-fulfilment for all our teams – both personally and professionally.

This means we must all evolve and embrace a more future-focused people approach – to build increased team resilience and purpose and utilise sustainable business approaches to achieve the highest levels of service excellence and impact on projects we delivery for our clients.

Whilst the term sustainability naturally conjures up images of waste, nature, deforestation, and loss of wildlife in our regions, for us it also encapsulates the human

need that has been brought into sharp focus through recent events.

While striving to protect the planet, we must also take real and tangible steps to safeguard and protect the resilience and wellbeing of all our people. To make a future fit for all, we must create frameworks and pathways which ensure our teams can feel better able to control their own destiny, to work with purpose, but mindful that primary focus will naturally continue to rest in our ability to continue to support and protect our families and loved ones.

Working through the challenges of the pandemic brought a constant need to learn, adapt and regroup, at both home and work. And it's been an intense and exhausting journey for all of us, that has seen the need for rapid skills acquisition and knowledge enhancement, become more survival skills as opposed to simply an academic pursuit or curiosity.

At the same time all of this was going on, there was a background drumbeat of multiple government initiatives, legal developments, and changes, that will herald further technological and engineering challenges which will require us to adapt further.

While many of the recent changes have been implemented in order to harness the country's energy and innovation, there's no doubt it has brought into sharp focus the need to capture, protect and leverage the skills and talent available in our all our teams: to find strength and support in each other, and to adopt a future focus



Kerry Doig (left) and Dominic Doig during the opening of the Solomons Europe Papcastle Depot offices in Cumbria

which is mindful of our wider responsibilities, interfaces, and obligations. It is too easy to fall into the habit of bemoaning a sector wide 'skills shortage' when in reality, there are multiple factors at play. And a major challenge remains in ensuring that the jobs and skills in our sectors are attractive and rewarding to new and emerging talent.

The mantra 'build back better' is easy to say, but in reality, it requires grit, determination, and imagination to put into practice. This unique moment in time gives us a real opportunity to do this. There is a clear need for supporting people to be resilient, confident, innovators and disrupters: to truly achieve lasting and meaningful change and improvement in our industry.

Coming through the other side, many businesses have seen they have the skills, talent, and the will to take things to the next stage.

We want to support real growth in our people. That does not mean more training, more qualifications, more hours, more responsibility. It means the autonomy, freedom, and confidence to act responsibly and consciously, not just in respect of their professional role, but also in the impact their role may have on the wider project teams, supply chains and communities around them.

It is incumbent on all of us as businesses to invest in skills for the future, to help our people be the very best they can be, not just as professionals but as citizens and influencers in the areas and projects on which they work. We need them to increase their connection to the communities in which they work. And we want them to understand the true impact of the projects they are working on and how they may become catalysts for better places



Collaboration is key to developing the skills and expertise of team members at Solomons

and impacts in their communities.

So that is where our skills for the future focus will be. We may be a small company, but we have big hearts and minds and collectively we have the power to ignite change.

### Staying ahead of the game

To put all this into practice, in 2021 we launched our Future Skills Academy, designed to harness the knowledge, skills, and fresh perspectives of our people to support the development of our team. It is all about helping each other, and pushing each other, and always having an eye fixed on the bigger picture. It is not simply telling someone less experienced about how to do things. It is about collaborating, exploring new ideas, gaining new experiences – growing together.

The Academy focuses on the key areas of:

- Technical skills
- Digital skills
- Resilience skills.

Developing in these areas will ensure we build a team that is not just fit for the future but is constantly one step ahead of the game. It will underpin everything we do; from our career conversion training programmes and apprenticeships to the various routes open to those seeking senior positions in our company and profession. By learning together, we become stronger.

### Sharing knowledge

Our Future Skills Academy actively encourages collaboration across the business to help team members bolster their skills. As such, they regularly share their own expertise and insight to aid the development of others. These have taken the form of Future Skills Champions knowledge shares.

Mark Coburn, our North West Regional Director, and Project Quantity Surveyor Lucy Farrer, have teamed up to produce a series of Case Law Updates for

### Knowledge-sharing perspective



**Mark Coburn, FRICS, BSc (Hons), PGCert, MQSi, MACostE**

'Ensuring that the service provided to clients is of the highest quality and improves on an ongoing basis is crucial to my role as both Director and Key Account Manager. An awareness of legislative changes and case law is a vital aspect for all professional surveyors. As such it is expected that we keep abreast of key decisions within our sphere of operation and that we are able to advise clients on the impact of such decisions on existing and future contracts. Working alongside Lucy on the Case Law Updates is a fantastic way to share our knowledge and help others to develop theirs ready for application in real-life work scenarios.'

the wider team.

For the first, they homed in on three legal cases that have taken place during the last few months. For each, they delved into the background of each case and highlighted the key issues before moving onto the final judgement. They concluded by giving their expert reflections and what quantity surveyors should consider when faced with a similar scenario.

### Knowledge-sharing perspective



**Lucy Farrer, LLB (Hons), LLM, RICS FDN**

'I initially studied Law and worked in the legal profession for five years before I joined Solomons' fast-track career conversion programme to become a Quantity Surveyor. While I have spent the last three years specialising in the nuclear sector, I still hold a passion for law and have put this to good use in breaking down and applying the contractual frameworks inherent in the construction and engineering sectors. The Case Law Updates not only allow me to fulfil my own curiosity and tenacity when it comes to drilling into contracts and analysing the implications of legal case law, decisions, and disputes. Also, it is really rewarding to be able to pass it on to others in the business who can benefit from and apply it to their own work for clients, adding yet more value to the service they provide.'

The duo also hosted an online launch event for the document which looked a little closer at the cases and paying particular attention to some of the subject areas that link to the areas of law that quantity surveyors deal with, such as Breach of Contracts,

Collateral Warranties and Payment Notices, and Smash and Grab Adjudications.

Attendees were encouraged to bring their insights and questions to this open forum to increase their learning for current and future projects and contracts they are involved in.

As regular readers of Project Control Professional will recall from the May edition, Project Quantity Surveyor Josh Brown tackled the weighty subject of the importance of having an Accepted Programme for his Future Skills Champion Knowledge Share piece.

'Programmed for Success' was Josh's reflections on a recent NEC Programme workshop delivered by expert in this field, Glenn Hide of GMH Planning.

Referencing specifically the NEC3 Engineering & Construction Contract (ECC), the piece included the key points Josh took away from the workshop and draws on his own experience of just how much better life is working on a project with an Accepted Programme. His work was peer reviewed by Senior Quantity Surveyor Matthew Dennis before it was shared more widely.

Another point to touch on is the personal professional pride our people take from this knowledge sharing work. From Director level to our more junior team members, everyone is encouraged to get involved and showcase their expertise to their peers.

### Meaningful mentorship

This type of collaboration extends into all of our people's day-to-day work for clients. We place great emphasis on what we term 'meaningful mentorship'.

On joining Solomons at the start of 2021, Stephen Mills was thrown in at the deep end working on a

### Meaningful mentorship perspective



**Stephen Mills, Senior Quantity Surveyor**

'It's taken me a lot of time and effort to gather up all the knowledge I have accumulated in my head and I'm not giving that away for free! I've had to earn it, so anyone who wants to get hold of it has to earn it, too. All I've ever wanted is for people to show the right attitude, ability and have a real hunger to take on what they learn so they can go further. If they have that then I'll gladly give up what I have. Jake and George have this in spades.'

high-pressure and demanding project for a new client in Cumbria. Recently promoted to Senior Quantity Surveyor, he is now passing on his knowledge and experience to his team and empowering them to follow suit.

Planning and Commercial Assistant, Jake Vallely, soon became part of his team. While Jake had some experience, he needed bringing up on a number of things, such as NEC contracts, quantifying drawings, and other hands-on practical things that are part and parcel of this project and, more generally, what a quantity surveyor does.

Close mentoring, mixing

practical tasks with additional reading, and learning, soon brought Jake up to speed. In just 12 months he had priced up a £2.5m compensation event. No mean feat. Armed with Stephen's incredible knowledge of NEC and contract law, Jake is now cascading down his new-found skills and experience to Stephen's relatively new team member – George Duxbury, who joined Solomons on an 'Apprentice Plus' programme in early 2022. This sees our apprentices undertake a Level 6, MSc Quantity Surveying Apprenticeship. On completing a two-year MSc Quantity Surveying course, they embark on a final nine-month leg leading to an MRICS End Point Assessment and review and, if successful, Chartership.

In addition to undertaking the course, our apprentices receive in-house training and gain invaluable experience working on projects – something that is critical to bringing what they learn in an academic setting to life in the real world. Given our projects we support are typically complex, they have the opportunity to gain a huge amount of experience in a short time.

And George is certainly learning at a fast pace considering he joined armed with a Physical Geography degree and a short stint working as an outdoor instructor. This is a fantastic example of a virtuous circle of learning that epitomises the learning culture we continue to build.

### The future

Our Future Skills Academy continues to go from strength-to-strength. Not only does it bring together the many strands that make up our approach to learning at work, but it demonstrates to the wider world the steadfast

commitment we have to building our skills for the future – for our business, our people, and our profession.

Our industry is in the midst of a battle for talent. We have to be prepared for when bigger players swoop in. For us, it isn't just a case of filling gaps when they appear. We have bigger ambitions than that, and for the people who work with us.

Without question there will be challenging times ahead, but for us these are extremely exciting times. And we feel a real buzz around our sectors and the pioneering technologies and methodologies that are emerging in our industry as we venture forward.

### \*Author biography



**Kerry Doig, MADPP, PGDip ConstLaw, MACostE, MQSi**

Kerry is Strategic Director and joint founder of Solomons Europe. Kerry and partner Dominic initially started out providing dispute resolution support to ongoing projects in Germany and Spain. Returning to the UK in 2000, the team began to expand, taking on more project-based roles in the utilities, infrastructure, petrochemical, and pharmaceutical sectors. Today, Kerry's role is focused on developing others in the business

## Skills for the future

and setting the direction of the company for long-term growth and sustainability. This includes the development of resilience and apprenticeship programmes for team members, as well as regional social impact initiatives.

Solomons Europe is now 60 strong, with offices based in the North West,

Cumbria and the North East.

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