

What the construction sector needs to ensure more and better apprenticeships

About EBC

Established in 1990, the European Builders Confederation - EBC - is a European professional organisation representing national associations of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises working in the construction sector. EBC sits on the European Social Dialogue Committee of Construction. EBC is a member of UEAPME (the European association of micro-enterprises and SMEs), on behalf of which it chairs the UEAPME Construction Forum.

The construction sector is of vital importance to the European economy. With 3 million enterprises and a total direct workforce of 18 million, the construction sector contributes at around 9% to the GDP of the European Union.

99.9% of the European construction sector is composed of small and medium-sized companies, which produce 80% of the construction industry's output. Small enterprises (less than 50 employees) are responsible for 60% of the production and employ 70% of the sector's working population.

Background

The construction sector generally suffers from a **lack of qualified labour**. On one hand, the economic crisis that hit construction also had a deep impact on the skills in the sector. On the other hand, employment is forecast to increase by 3.9% between 2013 and 2025 across the EU, mainly due to the need to replace employees leaving the sector, according to the [EU Skills Panorama 2014](#).

The challenges will therefore be to ensure the **training of an adequate number of new entrants** to take over from retiring professionals and **upskill the existing workforce**. Today construction workers are asked to acquire new skills related to energy efficiency and green technologies, as well as ICT skills (such as BIM management). Moreover, the sector requires not only project management skills, but also personal skills such as problem-solving and the ability to work as a team.

Providing apprenticeship systems that are adapted to the needs of the construction sector is the answer to all these challenges.

For this reason, the European Builders Confederation (EBC) became a member of the **European Alliance for Apprenticeship**, launched by the European Commission in 2013. As part of its [apprenticeship pledge](#), EBC decided to provide some recommendations for policy-makers about the needs of the construction sector to develop more and better apprenticeships in the sector.

Recommendations

■ Better involvement of SME associations and social partners in apprenticeship schemes and definition of the sector's skills

The experience demonstrates that when SME associations and social partners are included in the definition of apprenticeship schemes the outcomes are better. They can define the skills the sector requires more accurately and work more closely with governments to shape the system according to the needs of the market. This will make **employers more involved** and increases the chances they will engage in apprenticeships.

In this framework, it is fundamental that EBC is recognised as a **European Social Partner in Construction**. Our members represent national social partners in the main European countries and the lack of representativeness at European level results in an incomprehensible inconsistency that must be addressed as soon as possible.

■ Massive national campaigns to improve the image of manual trades in general and the construction sector in particular

Skilled labour in construction is lacking because of the **stigma associated to manual trades**. Some of the main factors preventing young people from joining the industry are the social pressure to stay in full time higher education; the lack of understanding by families that skilled trades mean employment opportunities; the fact that construction is a male-dominated industry. The construction sector offers **very good opportunities for young people**, both boys and girls. There is a wide variety of construction trades that can cater to all manner of characters. The starting salaries are much higher than many people expect and there is great capacity for career development.

Apprenticeship schemes offer a balance of technical skills and workplace experience, so school leavers can learn on the job and build a really meaningful career. Many people who have trained as apprentices then move on to start their own business.

One of the ways to improve the image of the sector is also to reinforce the **use of skills competitions**, such as EuroSkills, to attract young people to the construction sector.

■ Targeting women in apprenticeship schemes for construction

Construction is seen as a male domain. The overriding **stereotype** remains that women are not physically capable to be active in the construction industry. Women must not only regularly prove their technical ability; they must also show that they "fit in". As a result, women represent only 8% of the sector workforce, whereas young women account for less than 1% of employees in the sector.

However, construction is no longer a dusty sector where people just get their hands dirty. Today tasks involve less physical force and are more mechanical, thus **suited any age and gender**. Therefore, construction is a changing sector that offers several opportunities for whom is willing to take them.

As Europe faces the joint challenges of an ageing population and skills shortages, it is more important than ever to make the most of both men and women's skills. The construction sector cannot waste the talent and resources that will ensure its future well-being.

Many companies are still internally unprepared for apprenticeships to join such initiatives. Inclusion of SMEs as drivers of gender diversity in apprenticeships is a must if any major changes in the construction

sector are to be achieved. Schools and training centres should provide **vocational counselling** targeted to attract both male and female young people to the sector, without discrimination.

■ Integrating entrepreneurship education in vocational education and training curricula

The increasing attention of public policies for the development of job specific skills is good news. However, proper consideration for entrepreneurship is still very much lacking. Entrepreneurial spirit is crucial to undertaking new or innovative activities, but it is also fundamental to the generational transfer of thousands of businesses over the coming years. The development of **entrepreneurship has important benefits**, both from the economic and social point of view.

Entrepreneurship is not only a driving force for job creation, competitiveness and growth; it also contributes to personal fulfilment and the achievement of social objectives. It is therefore important to **integrate relevant subjects** to become entrepreneurs in VET centres, so that pupils have both the expertise and the stimulation to go down this path.

■ Supporting small and medium-sized companies to engage in apprenticeship

Very often small and medium-sized companies – which don't have a Human Resources Department – have the perception that hosting apprentices is burdensome. In many cases, this perception corresponds to the reality. Therefore, European Governments should first of all **minimise regulatory burdens** for companies to engage in apprenticeship schemes and make information more easily available.

Supporting measures that make apprenticeships more accessible to SMEs should be introduced (e.g. institutional setting with intermediary bodies, matching services, etcetera). Furthermore, it is fundamental to make companies well aware of the benefits of apprentices. Governments should also focus on **companies that have no experience with apprentices**, for examples with subsidies for an initial period and tailored training guidelines.

■ Better use of the European funds to promote new skills

The European funds should be used more to **develop new skills**, such as competencies for green technologies, energy efficiency and Information and Communication Technologies. They can also be used to explore new ways of training in occupational health and safety.

It is also important, however, that EU-funded projects focusing on apprenticeship in SMEs are **run by SMEs or SMEs association**, which are in better position to understand the needs of and to reach out to SMEs.