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## Skills survey report

[www.mandeweek.co.uk](http://www.mandeweek.co.uk)



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# Why skills matter to the future of UK manufacturing and engineering

## Introduction by Natig Asadullaev, Event Director, M&E Week



The UK has long enjoyed a reputation for its excellence in manufacturing and engineering, with some of the leading innovations in use around the world today having originated from these shores. With the need to tackle the

growing range of challenges facing companies today, from economic and geopolitical issues through to the need for greater environmental sustainability, the manufacturing and engineering sector needs to be able to count on a solid pipeline of new entrants bringing fresh ideas and new perspectives.

While the UK is not alone in facing difficulties in finding the skilled people it needs, there is a pressing need to understand the scale of the problem and how it can be addressed. One of the biggest challenges that has been facing the industry, for what seems like decades, is skills and how to get the right people with these skills into the industry. Because of the nature of the skill set required for manufacturing and engineering, attracting the right kind of people

means finding ways to inspire people of all ages, from the primary school classroom to the factory floor, showing them why manufacturing and engineering matters and the opportunities it offers.

It's also about improving diversity, encouraging people from all walks of society, regardless of race or gender, because that will go a long way to solving our skills problem, by giving us a much bigger pool to draw on. To do this we need to show people that manufacturing and engineering is an amazing career with so many opportunities that can take you all over the world into all manner of things.

The UK's industry is incredibly innovative – Manufacturing and Engineering Week is designed to help unlock this creativity by bringing people together from across the breadth of UK companies. By providing a platform for showcasing the great work that is going on in UK factories, we hope that the event will play a key role in attracting people into the manufacturing and engineering sector.

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# Let's fix the UK's skills shortage

## Introduction by Russell Smith, Managing Director, Hunter Selection



The UK has a long and successful history within the manufacturing and engineering sectors with products made in Britain often considered to be synonymous with quality. The sectors also play a key role in the economy with engineering accounting for almost

22% (£1.2 trillion) of the UK's economic turnover and the manufacturing sector responsible for 45% (£275 billion) of all exports. However, the success of the sectors is under threat from a skills shortage which could have significant consequences for the future.

Skills shortages have always been an issue during my 27 years of working in manufacturing and engineering recruitment, but the last few years have presented the sectors with some unique challenges which have made the problem far worse. The restrictions on movement caused by the global pandemic, for example, created serious difficulties in gaining practical skills for those training as engineers. Brexit too has had a massive impact on the availability of workers, resulting in a huge rise in demand for home grown talent to fill the gaps as European workers returned home. While the UK has some great talent within engineering and manufacturing, there just simply isn't enough people to fill the vacant positions.

Furthermore, the manufacturing and engineering sectors are known for innovation. Traditional techniques have collided with digital technology, and this brings a need for new skills not previously held by those most experienced in the sector. Often these people jump ship, taking their wealth of knowledge and expertise with them, but it is important that they are given the opportunity to reskill so that their talent is retained.

My experience is, of course, not of someone 'on the ground' working within a manufacturing or engineering environment. I can only report on what I see in my role and what the companies I work with tell me, which is why we decided to be involved in running this survey. We wanted to hear from those working day-to-day within engineering and manufacturing environments about what they think about recruitment and the skills gap in the sector. It is, after all, those who are looking to fill vacancies who are really impacted by this shortage.

For the manufacturing and engineering sectors to continue to thrive, the skill shortage is something that must be tackled as a matter of urgency and the findings of our survey are a good starting point to assess where the problem lies and how we can improve things for the future.



1. <https://www.engineeringuk.com/media/156198/key-facts-figures-2019-final-20190627.pdf>

2. <https://www.themanufacturer.com/uk-manufacturing-statistics/>

# Key survey findings and analysis

The survey was written in late April and circulated to a database of people working within manufacturing, engineering, automotive, aerospace and the oil and gas sectors. It received responses from 268 people.

## 1. What sector do you work in?

Of those surveyed, 64% stated that they worked in manufacturing (35%) or engineering (29%). The remaining worked within the automotive, aerospace and the food and beverage sectors.



Manufacturing	94
Engineering	78
Automotive	18
Aerospace	13
Food & Beverage	12
Transportation	8
Not specified	7
Technology	7
Oil & Gas	6
Fast moving consumer goods (FMCG)	3
Pharmaceutical	3
Distribution & Logistics	2
Other:	
Construction	2
Healthcare	2
Automation	1
Several different sectors	1
Security	1
Water	1
Toolmaking	1
All the above	2
Engineering consultancy	1
Nuclear Manufacturing	1
Materials handling / forklift truck sales and maintenance	1
Medical	1
Maintenance of University Buildings, Plant and Equipment	1
Marketing	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>268</b>

## 2. How many people are employed in your business?

There was a fairly even split of people surveyed working in small, medium and large sized businesses. 28% worked within a business employing between 51 and 250 employees, while 23% worked in businesses with more than 500 employees. 21% of those surveyed worked in companies employing 25 or less people, while a further 21% surveyed were from companies with between 26 and 50 employees.

51-250	74
501-1000+	62
26-50	56
01/11/2025	31
Less than 10	24
251-500	21
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>268</b>

## 3. Does your current company employ apprentices and, if so, how many do you employ?

The benefits of apprenticeships are a true two-way street. For young people, apprenticeships provide a valuable first step to learn new skills and gain their first step on the career ladder. The best schemes will offer a true insight into every aspect of a business, providing a choice of career avenues from sales through to production.

For companies, the benefits of apprenticeships include the ability to develop and shape their future workforce by ensuring that apprentices are equipped with the required skills needed for everything from manufacturing through to sales. Furthermore, exposure to the so-called 'X-Box Generation' of digital natives can also be a useful way of introducing new technologies and approaches into a business.

Of those surveyed, 58% reported that they employed apprentices, with 60% of companies employing between one and five in their organisation, 13% employing between six and 10, and 20% employing more than 21.

<b>Does your company currently employ any apprentices?</b>	
Yes	155
No	113
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>268</b>

<b>How many apprentices are currently employed by your company?</b>	
1 to 5	95
21+	32
6 to 10	20
11 to 20	13
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>160</b>

## 4. How easy is it to find the people your business needs?

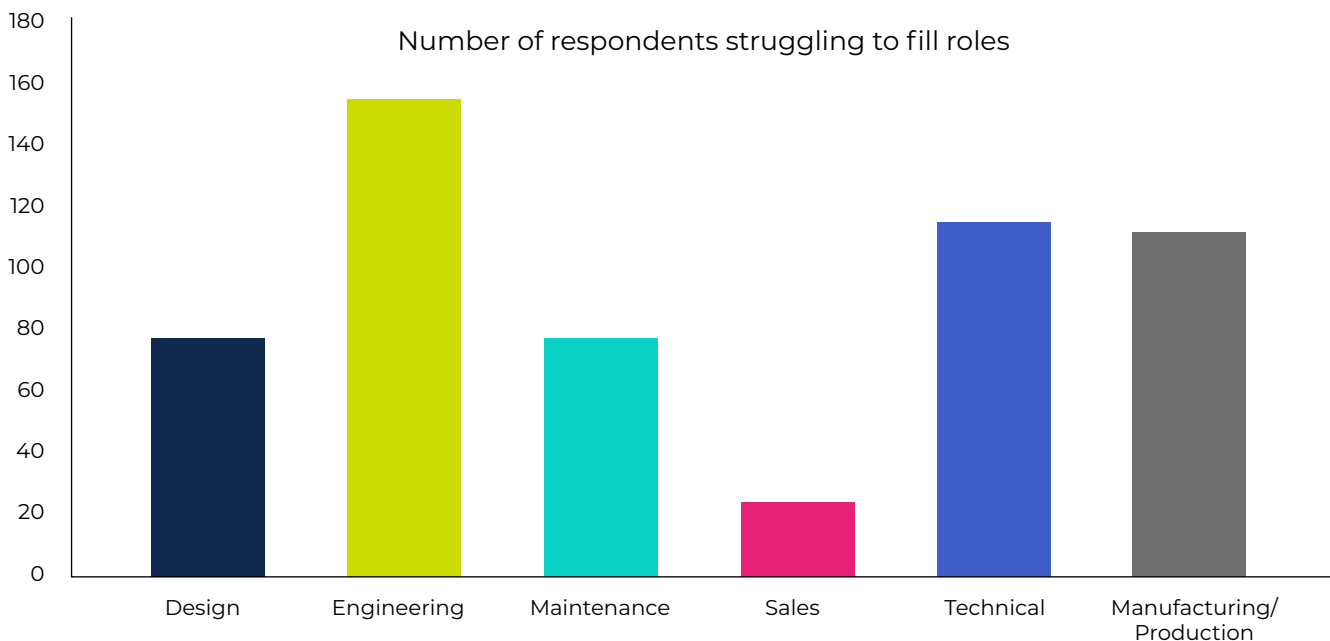
While finding skilled employees for the manufacturing and engineering sectors in particular has been getting progressively harder, the problem has been exacerbated by the combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions of European workers arising from Brexit.

Our survey revealed that a staggering 78% of respondents are finding it more difficult to find the people needed for their business. Of the remaining people surveyed, just 7% reported that they were finding it easy or very easy to recruit people, while 13% were unsure.

How easy is it to find the people your business needs?	
Harder than normal	131
Much harder than normal	79
Don't know	37
Easy	14
Very easy	7
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>268</b>

## 5. Which roles are you finding hard to fill?

Participants in the survey were given a list of six job areas and asked whether they were finding them hard to fill. 57% of respondents surveyed reported finding engineering positions difficult to fill, while 42% reported struggling to recruit for manufacturing and technical roles. Sales roles are the easiest to fill, with just 9% of respondents citing it as difficult to find the candidates they need.



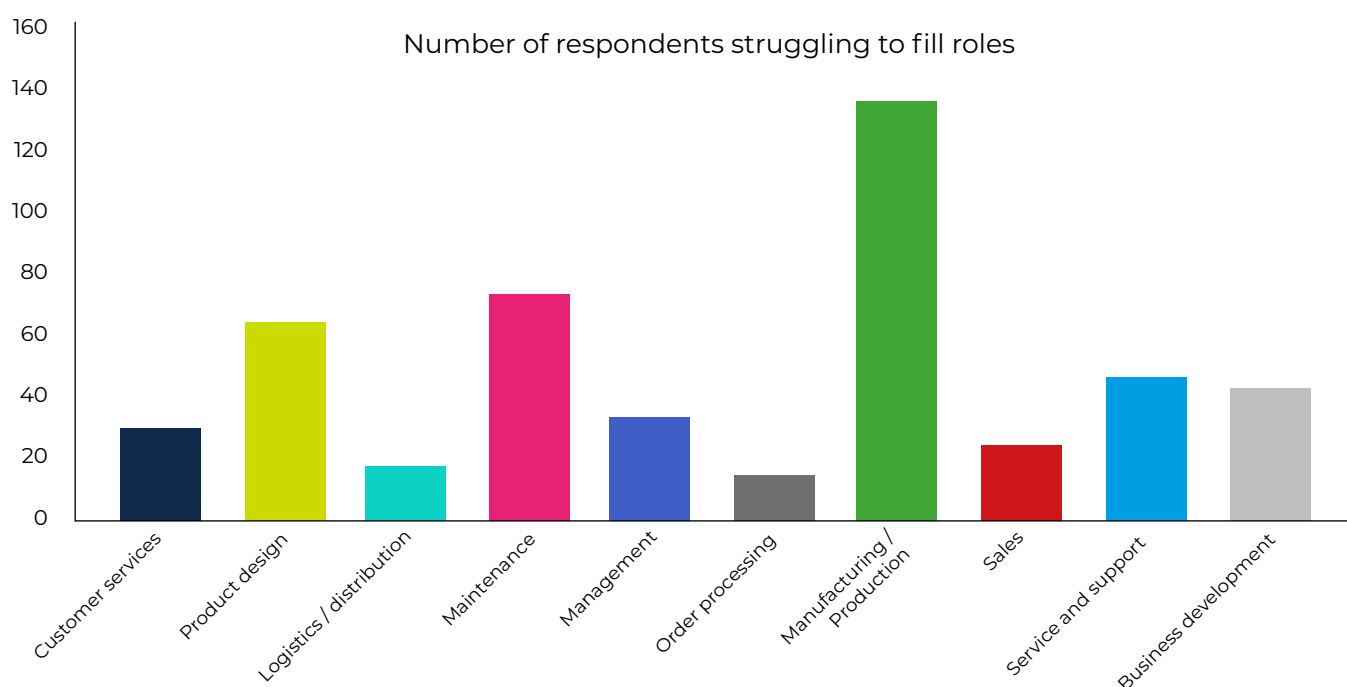
## 6. What do you think makes vacancies hard to fill?

When survey respondents were asked what they felt makes vacancies hard to fill, the most significant findings focused on a lack of sufficient applicants to make a good choice (35%), a lack of candidates with the right skills (26%) and a lack of applicants with the right experience (19%).

Insufficient applicants to make a good choice	95
Applicants lack the skills you are looking for	72
Applicants lack the relevant experience	52
Applicants lack motivation / right attitude	30
Applicants lack the necessary qualifications	13
Applicants do not present themselves well in interviews	6
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>268</b>

## 7. What areas of your business are being affected by unfilled roles?

This question elicited interesting answers. Despite survey participants reporting that they were finding it difficult to recruit staff across multiple areas of the business, by far the largest impact is being felt by manufacturing and production departments, with 50% of respondents identifying roles in these areas as the hardest to fill.



## 8. Have you considered replacing or augmenting any of the hard to fill roles with automation?

With the impact of a rising skills gap increasingly being felt across the UK's manufacturing and distribution sectors, automation and robotics offer a potential solution for taking over hard to fill roles. Developments in robotic technology, for example, are enabling robots to be deployed in a growing range of applications, including tending machines on factory floors, picking, packing and palletising, and the use of mobile robots in warehouses to transfer products between stations.

Despite this, only 36% of respondents have considered the idea of either replacing people with automation or using automation as a way of augmenting its existing workforce to address gaps in their production or distribution operations.

No	172
Yes	96
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>268</b>





## 9. Has your business been negatively impacted by Covid-19 and has recruiting for your business been negatively impacted by Covid-19?

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 caught many businesses unaware, with few if any being fully prepared for the impact it would have on their operations. As the impact of containment measures such as lockdowns, self-isolation and social distancing took effect, many found it increasingly difficult to keep their operations fully staffed or to find replacements to fill gaps arising from sickness. Of those surveyed, 67% reported that their business had been impacted either partly or completely affected by COVID-19, highlighting a need for companies to have improved measures in place to improve their resilience against future unforeseen events.

<b>Has your business been negatively impacted by COVID-19?</b>	
Yes, my business has been affected and we have had to make some adjustments	146
Yes, my business and industry sector has been completely impacted	34
No, there has been little to no change in our usual operations	88
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>268</b>

<b>Has recruiting for your business been negatively impacted by COVID-19?</b>	
No	155
Yes	113
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>268</b>

While recruitment undoubtedly holds the key to finding the additional staff needed to help provide improved resilience against future repeats of pandemic-level events, evidence from the survey shows that the lingering after-effects of the virus continue to present challenges for businesses looking for new staff. Of those surveyed, 42% reported that recruiting for their business has been negatively impacted by COVID – while respondents were not asked to give reasons, our own experience has seen a growing trend towards shifting expectations around work/life balance and the ability to work remotely, expectations around salary and perks and, amongst older workers, the willingness to reskill to handle new technologies. Many companies are also finding it harder to find the time to actively recruit, as business owners and senior staff struggle to deal with the range of other issues associated with running a company.

# Maximise your chances of finding the right candidate

While good candidates may currently be hard to find, we know from experience that finding the right one is just a matter of time. As in any walk of life, being patient and taking a thorough approach will help you to increase your chances of meeting the right applicants who can help you take your business forward.

Below are some useful tips based on our long experience that will help you to maximise your chances of both finding the right person for the job, and, once you have them, of improving your chances of retaining them:

1. Match your competitors – your candidates know they are in short supply and will be aware of what's out there. Make sure your offer at least matches the various perks and pay rates being touted by your competitors.

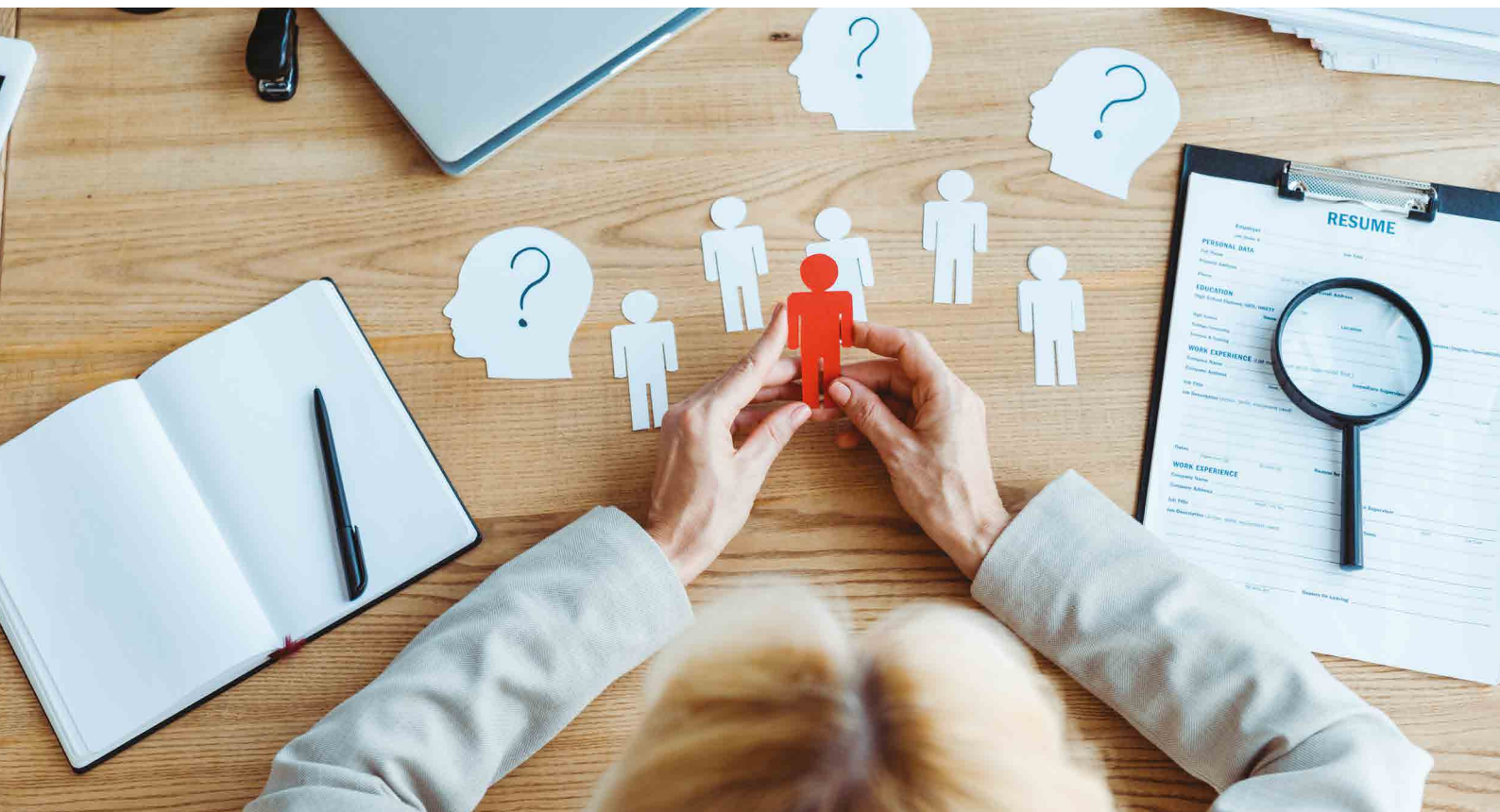


2. Control your expectations – few, if any, candidates will have the complete full package of skills, experience and attributes that you're looking for. Instead, it can pay to broaden your expectations. Remember that everyone has to start somewhere – people can always be trained to fill any gaps in their skillset.

3. Don't rush! It can often be tempting to take the first person you see, especially if you urgently need to fill gaps in your workforce. Setting a realistic timeline can help you to ensure that you see the fullest range of potential candidates, giving you time to see who's out there and increasing the chances of finding the right candidate.



4. Build a relationship with your recruiter. One of the things we most often hear from our clients is that they simply don't have the time to devote to recruitment. Our answer? That's what we're here for. Companies like Hunter Selection have the time, resources, experience and relationships needed to maximise your chances of successfully finding the right candidate.



# manufacturing + engineering week

Manufacturing and Engineering Week brings together a series of events that will showcase end-to-end manufacturing and engineering solutions, to encourage conversation, business, knowledge sharing and action.

[www.mandeweek.co.uk](http://www.mandeweek.co.uk)



## Hunter

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