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# The Rise of Generation

# U

Forget X and Y. UK engineers have taken several steps backwards and become the unsustainable generation, says **Dominic Graham**

**T**he challenging economic environment is taking a heavier than average toll on the engineering sector in the UK, with 33% of UK engineers working in what they describe as an unconventional work environment, according to the latest findings from the Kelly Global Workforce Index.

The growing pressure on organisations to become leaner and more efficient is now having a real impact on the current workforce. Many employees are finding themselves taking on the work of two or even three colleagues as their employers look to increase productivity. This trend has been seen across the UK and indeed around the world, with all industries facing new challenges and employees having to evolve and adapt to take on extra workload and commitments in the workplace. However, engineers feel more affected, climbing five percentage points above the national average of 28%.

The latest findings indicate the emergence of 'Generation U', a new breed of engineers who face an unsustainable combination of long and/or unusual hours, multiple jobs, work far away from home and excessive travel as a normal part of their lives. The most common issue is 'long hours', affecting 27%, followed by unusual hours (25%), living away from home (16%), multiple jobs (15%), and excessive travel (12%). This is concerning for the engineering community as it will create a long term talent issue for the sector.

Although many roles within the engineering industry have been viewed as unconventional for years, particularly those within the oil and gas and offshore industries, the concern for UK businesses comes with the level of respondents who view their current positions as unconventional and unsustainable.

Over 39% of engineers stated they could not sustain their current working arrangement for longer than six months. It's clear that the pressure on engineers to deliver more than



ever before is causing unrest within the sector. This presents a real threat to organisations ability to retain and develop their engineering talent.

### impact on employers

It's understandable that in a volatile economy, organisations will look to reduce their wage costs and increase the productivity of those that remain. There will inevitably be a number of short-term gains in reducing costs, but the long-term impact could be detrimental. Simply increasing workloads of current employees will more than likely disengage the workforce and lead to the opposite of the intended outcome. Employees are likely to feel less committed to their employer and the business and in turn see productivity plummet. Employers who are reducing headcount will need to increase the amount of time they spend listening to their employees and implementing schemes to improve morale. Simple steps like employee forums and feedback forms that allow the workforce to share its views can really make a difference.

It's clear that the days of a job for life in the engineering sector are well behind us. The trends we have seen indicate an increasingly mobile workforce that is more open to career moves than its predecessors. Engineering employers will need to look at new and innovative ways to solve their workforce challenges. The trend towards independent contractors is a good choice for businesses looking for a more flexible resource, and for engineers looking for the opportunity to plan their work around their lifestyle.

Another potential concern for engineering employers is the long term impact that the current pressured working environment may have. Over 47% of engineers think they will have to change their career or the field in which they work in the next five years and 25% want to achieve a better work/life balance. The UK is currently not producing enough engineers to fill the predicted level of vacancies in the sector, and the same is

*“engineers who were used to developing long-term relationships with their colleagues may now find themselves in an ever changing and developing workforce”*

true for Australia and the US. According to the UK's Engineering Council there are currently 235,000 registered engineers in the UK. Within ten years it's predicted the number of roles in the UK will rise to 587,000. When you consider that there are only 20,000 engineering graduates each year, and many of those currently employed looking to exit the industry, it's clear there will be a skills deficit.

As we move forward and the 'Generation Unsustainable' get ready to move, businesses will need to prepare to invest in recruitment campaigns to attract new talent to their organisations. Currently many organisations will have an opportunity to invest in their current engineers and try to retain talent before it leaves the organisation. Businesses should invest in assessing their current talent pool and asking for views on what makes a good workplace. Putting in place some simple, low cost initiatives could save the business from increased recruitment costs in the long term.

### impact on engineers

There is no hiding from the state of the economy and currently many are predicting slow growth for the foreseeable future. Many engineers will face challenging working conditions for many years. Businesses will continue to demand more than ever from their workforce and engineers will be no different.

The increase in workforce mobility will have an impact on all engineers; a more dynamic working environment will develop and many engineers who were used to developing long-term relationships with their colleagues may now find themselves in an ever-changing and developing workforce. The ability to develop working relationships quickly will become a fundamental skill in being a successful engineer.

There will also be an increase in the amount of available opportunities. Unsustainable roles usually create fluidity in the market place. This will drive engineers to move careers and search out new horizons.

The increase in the number of opportunities to work as an independent contractor will have a positive impact on engineers looking for a more flexible way of working that suits their lifestyles. With such a high percentage, 47%, considering a career move, changing working patterns may offer a long term solution. Project work offers engineers the chance to experience working with multiple organisations across many locations. This focus on projects is expected to help engineers become highly focused, developing niche skill sets. These will put engineers in high demand, allowing them to pick and choose the contract options that best suit them. It will also allow them to demand higher wages.

*“over 39% of engineers stated they could not sustain their current working arrangement for longer than six months”*

### what does the future hold?

The key challenge for the UK engineering industry over the next ten years will be how they can retain the talent currently working in the sector and to increase the number of newly qualified engineers joining the industry.

As many engineers feel they are currently working in unsustainable roles, employers must engage their workforce, assess the talent within their business and implement plans to engage those individuals. Ensuring strong employee engagement will be key to securing their skills for the long term and will reduce longer term recruitment costs.

The biggest opportunity for the industry lies in fully embracing independent contractors as the main supply of engineering talent. This combination of flexible working for the engineer and flexible access to resource for the employer offers a balance that should sustain talent within the industry for longer than the traditional, employer/employee model.

As we move through tough economic times constant assessment of ever-changing situations is crucial to achieve long term success. Ensuring regular contact and understanding of the workforce will be key to defining a strategy that will enable engineering employers to turn the situation around, take steps forward and away from 'Generation U' and benefit from sustainable access to talent. **tce**

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