



# Building a train reaco

“You’re hired”: the two words that every candidate on TV’s *The Apprentice* wants to hear. But even the way to winning a job with Sir Alan would agree that simply taking part gives you a unique insight

**Intimidating boardroom showdowns with Sir Alan Sugar haven’t made being an apprentice seem much fun, but training with ExxonMobil is a world away. Even if the methods differ, the principle of helping young talent to understand your business through hands-on learning is the same.**

Over 130,000 employers now offer apprenticeships. A new government campaign – backed by Sir Alan – promotes these training schemes and aims to create more to help build motivated and highly skilled workforces. ExxonMobil likewise recognises that developing young technicians is critical to taking on the world’s toughest energy challenges.

### Labour shortage

There is a shortage of skilled labour, stressed Lucinda Ingram, maintenance apprenticeship supervisor at Fawley. “People retire and we need to replace them. Over three years, we train apprentices to our standards and to fulfil the roles we need. When we are hiring people to join our technician population, it’s a tremendous advantage to apprentices that they have site experience.”

Fawley currently has more than 40 apprentices across all three years of the programme. Lucinda works with local schools, colleges and the Southampton Engineering Training Association to get the most talented youngsters.

A key aim is to attract more female recruits. “We’ve organised Girls’ Days and we have had a few females apply this year, which is encouraging, but generally they don’t seem to be switched on to engineering. We’re trying to express that it’s not a boy’s job.”

### Confidence boost

Rob Shanahan finished his apprenticeship last year. “It’s the main base to work from for the rest of your career,” said Rob, now a metals trade technician at the refinery. “You learn everything you need to know to get started. And at Fawley, you are working in one of Europe’s biggest oil



Ian Jackson

**Learning cycle:** (above) apprentice James Horne (left) with NVQ assessor Brent Fargher and Fawley’s Lucinda Ingram in the training centre; (below) Beryl production supervisor Gareth Lawson (right) shares his 14 years of experience with trainee production technician Alisdair Ramage

refineries. You’re not always in one place, so you are carrying out maintenance work on a wide range of kit.”

You have to take everything in, he advised. “The most valuable part of my apprenticeship was working in a real operating area with experienced people.”

Mentors are invaluable, agreed James Horne, a third-year electrical apprentice:

“The technicians go out of their way to show you things you wouldn’t ordinarily see. There is always someone to turn to.”

It’s not solely about developing practical skills, James added. “My confidence has improved. As you go through your apprenticeship, you’re given more responsibility. At the start, you’re observing, but later you’re working by yourself.”

### All-round experience

Apprenticeships are a big learning curve, said Lorna Groves, training co-ordinator at Fife Ethylene Plant: “The apprenticeship at Fife is a fantastic scheme that gives candidates academic qualifications and all-round experience with mentors. At the end of it, they’ve got four years of engineering experience and they’re highly marketable. If we recruit them, it’s a benefit to us that they have all this training behind them.”

Fourth-year apprentice Niall Latimer applied to ExxonMobil because of its excellent training reputation. And he’s achieved great success, having been



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those who don't make it all into industry life

named the site's Trainee of the Year.

"I've gained valuable experience," he said. "Working with instruments and control schemes was completely different to anything I had been exposed to in the past.

"Also, I've developed my people skills, as communicating between different work groups is vital in my role to ensure that operations are carried out safely and to the highest standards. I've met a lot of people at FEP, many I now consider to be friends."

## Future needs

The Upstream Technician Training Scheme, a partnership between operators, contractors, the Oil & Gas Academy and the Engineering and Construction Industry Training Board, is one of the UK's most successful apprenticeship programmes and Mobil North Sea LLC was a founding member in 1999.

Training and development co-ordinator David Cook said: "The mixture of learning on and off the job enables apprentices to develop the skills that work best for our business. It allows the knowledge and experience of our existing technicians to be transferred and enhanced so that our workforce has the practical skills and qualifications needed now and in the future."

Gareth Lawson can testify to the long-standing benefits of the scheme. He joined Mobil 14 years ago as an instrumentation apprentice and has recently been promoted to Beryl Alpha/Bravo production supervisor.

He recalled the moment he first went offshore at 18 as part of his apprenticeship. "The sheer scale is overwhelming, but it's excellent grounding. Bravo and Alpha have widely varying equipment, from the 1970s to the present day. That practical experience is invaluable. If you apply yourself, the training opportunities are there to progress through the company."



Walker Neilson

Enthusiastic talent: (above) former apprentice Rob Shanahan with pipefitter Chris Green, who supported Rob in his training; (left) Fife Trainee of the Year Niall Latimer

The learning curve is ongoing, Gareth insisted. "Apprentices learn from mentors whose experience is second to none. I learned from people who have now retired, and now I am transferring that knowledge to the next intake of apprentices. The momentum just keeps going." ●



Ian Jackson

## Prime numbers

**91%** Percentage of apprentices who complete the Upstream Technician Training Scheme and secure employment. The national average is only 55%.

**470** Number of people requesting applications for the eight places on Fife Ethylene Plant's 2009 apprenticeship scheme.

**35,000** Number of additional apprenticeships the government has pledged to create in the UK this year, adding to the current total of 250,000.