

Apprenticeships in the materials handling industry: the path to career success

CASE STUDIES: FEBRUARY 2012

Introduction by James Clark, Secretary-General of BITA

45% of senior managers in UK forklift truck companies started their careers as an engineering apprentice, according to a survey of British Industrial Truck Association (BITA) members carried out for National Apprentice Week in February 2012.

At a time when it's easy to dismiss an apprenticeship as "just another training course", our survey result shows that, in fact, the right kind of apprenticeship can be the ticket to a successful and rewarding career.

To illustrate the point effectively, BITA has commissioned a series of case studies based on interviews with current apprentices at (and recent graduates from) City of Bristol College, our partners in the BITA Academy (see below); plus a senior manager within the industry. We hope you find them useful!

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www.bita-academy.org

The BITA Academy was launched in November 2011 to provide a new option for apprenticeships in forklift truck engineering. It is the result of a close partnership between BITA (the British Industrial Truck Association) and City of Bristol College (one of the country's most respected forklift training centres).

BITA created the Academy in response to the observed industry trend of an ageing engineer workforce retiring faster than new recruits were coming in. Working closely with forklift manufacturers, suppliers and service firms, the BITA Academy will help provide a steady supply of fresh new engineers to keep the industry running smoothly in the years ahead.

For students, the BITA Academy will provide not only high-quality training in essential maintenance and repair techniques—but also the skills required to pursue a real career all the way to management level.

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Current Apprentices

Alex Flowers BJB Lift Trucks

At school Alex Flowers was interested in technology but was also keen to follow a career letting him be practical and hands on. After a friend working at BJB recommended forklift trucks as an area to work in, he signed up and will finish his apprenticeship this year.

“I would recommend it to anyone,” he says. “I think the practical route via an apprenticeship is better than going to university. It is great fun and you will have the time of your life while at the same time getting the knowledge you need to build a worthwhile career.

“The course at City of Bristol College gives a real holistic insight into what we do in the workplace. This depth of knowledge has given me more confidence in my decisions and to challenge people at work.”

Alex thinks that the general public knows little of the fork lift industry—and that young people are unaware of the opportunities it presents.

Alex adds: “I don’t think that people generally appreciate engineers. There is a lack of knowledge, particularly around the forklift truck industry. It is a really specialist area, requiring specialist skills, which are what this course provides.”

One of the best things about the course, from Alex’s perspective, is that his tutors have ‘been there and done it’, meaning he can tap into their experience as he thinks about his own career development path.

He adds: “The tutors here are excellent. They have in-depth knowledge but it is coupled with practical experience gained from working in engineering environments. I would like to move into management and I feel that City of Bristol College, and the course, is preparing me to realise this ambition.”

Like anyone hoping to progress with their career, he is keen to ensure he carries out his work ‘by the book’.

“The most challenging thing about the course has been the regulations that surround fork lift truck operation and maintenance. The LOLER regulations

which cover this are detailed, but vital to know to ensure legal compliance.”

Sam Wellstood Barloworld

Sam Wellstood believes the vocational emphasis of his forklift truck engineering apprenticeship means he is better equipped for the job market than contemporaries who have taken a more academic route.

“I have friends coming out of university with a degree but no experience and they are struggling to find work. Some have said to me that it was a waste of time, and they have ended up in jobs they could have done without a degree,” says Sam, who chose to pursue an apprenticeship after taking his A-Levels. He believes many school-leavers who go to university would do well to consider other options, including apprenticeships.

“There is a stereotype of engineering as greasy and mechanical—but there’s more to it than just spanners. I would definitely recommend it. It leads to a skill and gives you real employability,” adds Sam, who, as well as gaining immediate practical skills, sees his apprenticeship as the ideal stepping stone to further qualifications.

He adds: “Ideally I would like to move onto a foundation degree course, ultimately a degree and then into research and development. My current apprenticeship is helping me along this career path by providing me with a great foundation of knowledge and skills. The tutors here are first class, practical and knowledgeable.”

Dividing his time between City of Bristol College and Barloworld Handling in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, he says he has been given support to overcome the challenging aspects of the course—and gained confidence from doing so.

Sam adds: “Personally, I found the electrical side of things demanding, but I got the support I needed, worked hard and got up to speed. The harder you work, the more you will benefit.”

Graduates

David Cooke C&D Fork Trucks Ltd

David Cooke originally planned to go to university to pursue a career in computers. While on his gap year, however, he realised that what he really wanted was to become a service engineer in his family's company.

He had a rudimentary understanding of the job from working with his dad during school holidays but the apprenticeship course gave David the skills and knowledge necessary to become a fully qualified service engineer.

Since starting work full time at C&D Fork Trucks Ltd, where his job involves servicing, repairing and reconditioning trucks, David has also seen how the role requires skills that extend beyond engineering.

He says: "Customer skills are an important part of this business. You have to be able to get to the heart of a customer problem and then explain to them what has to be done. We pride ourselves in offering a personal service, and people skills are a big part of that."

Despite this, he feels that the public's impression of the industry has not caught up with reality, with the result that not enough young people are encouraged to pursue apprenticeships that can lead to satisfying and rewarding occupations.

David says: "I think there is a lack of awareness of the importance of engineering generally, and from that a lack of appreciation. Fork lift trucks are out of sight so out of mind for the public but they are a really important part of the supply chain."

"You can be successful by doing an apprenticeship, and young people should consider this. As I can demonstrate, university isn't the only route. I had a fantastic time at City of Bristol College and always looked forward to the time I spent there."

Duane Harvey JDK Services

Choosing an apprenticeship does not have to mean missing out on the new friendships and social opportunities that many university students value, as Duane Harvey found when he moved away from home to study at City of Bristol College.

Duane says: "I found it a great experience, the other students at Bristol were really friendly—it was like a little family. It is a challenge being away from home for the first time as a young person, but it is really rewarding and you make some great friends."

While the social side was a bonus, the real value for Duane lay in choosing a vocational course and, with it, a practical route into employment. He also found that it prepared him with the 'softer' skills needed to thrive in the working environment. He joined Ambassador Lift Trucks (Witham, Essex) who fully funded his apprenticeship, then moved to JDK Services where he now services, repairs and refurbishes fork lift trucks, as well as sourcing and supplying new trucks.

He says: "The course obviously provided me with the technical knowledge I needed to become qualified, but also provided lots of advice on how to deal with customers. It is important to know how to speak to them and know how to deal with the odd awkward customer."

Duane says he would recommend the career path he has chosen, adding: "I think there is a perceived lack of status around engineering and mechanical careers. My friends asked me why I wanted to work in this business but I genuinely enjoy the time I spend at work."

Senior Manager

Tim Waples, BITA President

UK Director and General Manager,
Doosan Industrial Vehicle UK Ltd

Tim Waples began his career in engineering with hydraulic and pneumatic press tool engineers Selman & Son, undertaking his apprenticeship at Wellingborough Technical College, Northants, in mechanical engineering.

He moved into fork lift truck engineering in 1981 with Komatsu, and through a number of ownership and name changes has steadily worked his way up to become the UK Director and General Manager for Doosan Industrial Vehicle UK Ltd.

He has fond memories of his apprenticeship. "In those days it was day release, rather than block release as it tends to be now," he explains. "It was a disciplined environment and taught me respect for experience while giving me good step-by-step background training."

Aside from the purely technical training, apprentices were also taught always to look at a problem or task from the customers' perspective. "We were encouraged to understand the implications for the customer of what we do, and to make sure it was done well and in a timely manner."

Tim believes that there is a 'status' issue around engineering, and that the public's impression of the industry hasn't caught up with reality of the opportunities available—but also that much of this is down to the industry itself. "We haven't been that good at promoting ourselves as an industry, and the potential for career progression that exists within it.

"There hasn't been enough investment in, or promotion of, engineering apprenticeships but this is starting to change.

"It's vital that we engage with employers and colleges to promote the opportunities that are available to pursue satisfying and rewarding careers."

With university no longer being seen as the automatic choice for bright youngsters, and also becoming a more expensive option, now is the time to look again at an apprenticeship.

"Those with an interest in engineering should really consider whether studying for a degree at university is the best way to achieve their goals, or if they should look at the apprenticeship route, to provide them with the all-important experience and employability that is so important in today's jobs market.

"When I did my apprenticeship the work/study balance could sometimes be difficult to manage. It does take commitment but if you are prepared to work hard to gain the qualifications and experience, you can really progress and do well."



Tim Waples speaking at the BITA Academy launch, 1 November 2011