

Cross-industry gathering identifies challenges for recruiting and retaining broadcast engineers

The First Tom McGann Memorial Summit urges industry to communicate the excitement and stimulation of working in broadcasting

Hosted at the EBU in Geneva on the 24th and 25th November 2014

For the first time, broadcasters, vendors, academics and students have come together to consider the role of the broadcast engineer of the future, and identify what can be done to produce an adequate stream of suitable recruits. The event was the first Tom McGann Memorial Summit, organised by the IABM Educational Foundation in association with EBU, and held at EBU headquarters in Geneva, 23 – 24 November 2014.

The invited delegates, from all around Europe, heard first of new research, commissioned for the meeting, which identified that a shortage of well-educated, well-qualified staff was seen as a brake on growth on all sides of the industry. It was clear that the shift to IT platforms and IP connectivity places a greater demand for computer skills alongside audio and video. All parties emphasised that a solid background in mathematics was critical.

University leaders from France, Germany, Russia and UK confirmed that their broadcast engineering courses were meeting this expectation, but that it was hard to attract sufficient numbers of students to the courses. One professor said they could take twice as many students if they were available, which would go a long way to easing staff shortages.

One of the principle findings of the meeting was that the real issue is at the “input”. Not enough school students understand the attractions of a engineering career in broadcasting, so are not preparing the right subjects and looking at the right universities. Broadcasters and vendors can each help here, through mentoring, work experience, summer camps and drop-in days: simple initiatives which will bring the attractions of the industry to a wider, younger audience. Similarly, presence and co-operation between broadcasters and universities was encouraged.

The second key finding was that the move to IT and IP in broadcast means that the industry can no longer count on retaining all those who have been trained in its special skills. The industry is in competition for systems architects, network specialists and data managers with other sectors. Again, emphasis on the excitement of working in broadcasting is important, as is a programme of continuing professional development to keep challenging the engineer.

“The solutions are not primarily about money, but about communications,” said Niall Duffy, the independent consultant who chaired the two-day event. “We need broadcasters and vendors to talk to each other to share best practice and to make it practical for staff to move around. We need to reach young people before they decide their career is going to lie in a cubicle farm at some big IT company. And we need to keep fostering talent.

“The delegates at this summit went back to their offices and universities enthused and invigorated,” he added, “but we need the whole industry to pick up their responsibilities. We all work in broadcasting because it is a stimulating environment that has given us a lot of satisfaction and fun.

The first step in solving the skills shortage is to communicate that simple message to the engineers of the future.”

Work is now underway through the Foundation with the participants and their organisations to identify, secure and co-ordinate programme pledges and commitments to tackle the communication issues involved. The first aim is to inform and attract the next generation of broadcast engineers to the industry and foster their ongoing career development. The second aim is to make sure that engineers within the industry can migrate and update their skills to face the broadcast engineering challenges of the future.