

# BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS

## DAVID BINKS



Apprentices are the future of landscaping, says **David Binks** – taking them on will help ensure the industry's survival and narrow the skills gap

We've all got a good 'apprentice' story, where the unwary recipient is the butt of a multitude of jokes. Some are more extreme than others – an apprentice's 'rite of passage' at one firm I know of involves something akin to a stag party stunt (cling film, gaffer tape – you get the picture). But with Balfour Beatty chief executive Leo Quinn recently saying that he thinks construction sites will be 'virtually human-free zones' by 2050, with labour-intensive tasks being undertaken by 'robo-builders', we have to ask: are apprentices going to become an endangered species?

The landscaping industry often takes its cues from construction, but in this instance, the idea that robots will take over landscaping seems an empty threat. Programming an automaton to bang down courses of bricks in a straight line seems plausible, but you cannot automate the creative flair that turns a good landscaping project into a great one. Knowing when something is 'too much' on a scheme cannot be condensed into lines of JavaScript or C++ – it's intuitive.

We need apprentices – they are the lifeblood of our industry. Without a stream of new people and new ideas flowing into our sector, it will stagnate. BALI's GoLandscape is doing a great job of encouraging young people to take up careers in landscaping, and the 'Watch This Space' garden at RHS Hampton Court is a great initiative to show budding landscape professionals the bright lights of our industry. Coupled with WorldSkills UK, events like these can often be the sparks that get people excited about landscaping, or the catalysts that make people change career. Once they've chosen this path, it is our job to encourage and educate them, to show them it's more than just a job – it's a lifestyle.

Don't get me wrong, there can be a degree of frustration involved in taking on a 17 year old who has other 'distractions' going on in their life – but an apprentice can serve as a looking-glass for your business. The off-the-cuff comments of a fresh and inexperienced pair of eyes can prove very insightful, when taken the right way. An apprentice's continual

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questioning of why things are done in a particular way, or whether there is an easier way to carry out a task, can prove tiresome – but it can also serve as a prompt to refresh

the way everyday tasks are carried out, or can bring you up to speed with other technological developments in the industry.

The Institute of Apprenticeships is aware of the extra effort that can be required when taking on a new starter, and accordingly it has restructured the way in which apprenticeships are funded. Since May 2017, companies with annual wage bills of less than £3m (so, most businesses involved in the landscaping sector) who offer apprenticeships to 16-18 year olds have not had to pay for any of the apprenticeship training, up to the maximum funding bands. Furthermore, for businesses that have less than 50 employees, there is now a £1,000 incentive for taking on a 16-18-year-old apprentice. A business can take a budding new candidate and, starting from scratch, train them in mutually beneficial areas, moulding them into the ideal employee without it costing the earth to do so. Obviously, nothing in life is ever that simple, but it is a great way of kick-starting someone's career and helping to narrow the skills gaps you might have in your business. For more information, you can check out the BALI's GoLandscape website or contact your colleges to discuss apprenticeship opportunities.

So, next time an apprentice is getting under your skin for not getting it right first time, think – would you rather that, or a Siri-esque voice telling you "I did not understand that command"?

Pictured: The 'Watch This Space' RHS Hampton Court Flower Show garden

### ABOUT DAVID BINKS

David Binks is managing director of Cheshire-based Landstruction, which was set up in 2010 and now has 30 employees. It is a Gold medal winner at RHS Chelsea and RHS Tatton Park. David also launched the Big Hedge Co., which supplies and installs mature hedging and topiary nationwide.

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