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Janet Menzies: Growth of our firm stems from great support network

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Back in November 2016, our company had five employees. Now, three years later, we have 20. MAGE Control Systems had specific skill requirements for new employees as it began to grow

It's remarkable that, given the 'niche' nature of the business – working in electronic motion control and intelligent sensing technologies – that this growth could be considered rapid, remarkable and unusual. However, it was planned and brought into sharp focus the wonderful support network infrastructure that exists in Scotland.

I speak particularly of Scottish Enterprise, Business Gateway, Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Development International and in our case, South Lanarkshire Council. Honestly, we would never have been able to achieve such growth without all of their support, their advice and their belief in us.

In 2016, we required significant growth of a particular nature – the need attract and recruit young people into a highly skilled, niche engineering design company, such as graduates, interns and apprentices. This was all new to me. I came from more than 20 years in local government. As a professional social worker I had management and leadership experience including significant training and development roles, but not within STEM – science, technology, engineering and manufacturing. However, skills are transferable and so are values.

So, here we were, an SME trying to become established in Scottish engineering. We already knew that there was a huge challenge for STEM industries to develop a sustainable workforce for the future. With retirement getting ever closer on life's horizon for many, there are fears of not enough fresh talent to fill the gap.

Ceed – the Centre for Engineering Education and Development – will tell you that this is an urgent problem to be solved. The current atypical industry demographic is that of older, white men. How does that square with equality and diversity?

Unless our combined leadership in education, in business and in society can take tangible and realistic actions now, we shall fail to attract our young people into engineering. They may eschew it completely, or initially embrace it only to abandon engineering for something else. We have a lack of women and under-represented groups in STEM activities. This isn't a new problem – we've known about it for some time, hoping that, if we can encourage more young people to study STEM subjects at school, they will choose a related career path. It's certainly getting better but we're still not seeing this reflected enough in graduate and apprentice numbers.

In 2016, as an unknown SME, we had our own challenges and problems to add to this. Firstly, attracting people to the unusual nature of our work. Secondly, our recruitment competition is often large, well established, shiny corporates. Thirdly, we needed to ensure that our cultural values of diversity and inclusion was clear, authentic and visible.

First, we set about recruiting a range of young people who were interested in what we do. Our universities in Scotland are excellent but no new graduates emerge with the capability we need – they have to learn fast and apply that learning. But no one even knew we existed.

That directly relates to our second challenge – why come and work for Mage Control Systems and not Thales, Doosan Babcock or Leonardo?

Looking at these two challenges, I led a programme of engagement with employment liaison staff in Strathclyde, Stirling and Glasgow Caledonian universities and, more recently, with Glasgow University. Crucially, they helped subsidise our internships using the Santander Universities scheme for SME placements. We've had 12 engineering interns since 2017: if not for the Santander scheme, as an SME, we'd only have been able to afford six of them. A win-win-win for students, universities and for small businesses.

On hiring graduates, Business Gateway supported us by securing Scottish Enterprise Scotgrad funding – an essential enabler of our growth. This is a crucial provision for STEM SMEs in Scotland and used well, boosts the productivity required to create jobs. In 2018, Scottish SMEs provided 1.2 million jobs, with professional, scientific and technical activities and construction providing almost 28 per cent of that number.

Finally, a word on leadership and organisational culture – it's about what and who we value. It's also about what we do and what we say.

Values shape our conversations, our staff development framework, our decisions and team culture as a whole. Whatever your culture is, promote it well and it will attract the right people for your business – it's all about creating loyalty, motivation, commitment and productivity.

I say to any SME, if we can do it, you certainly can. You just need the right networks of support to create essential growth and opportunities for young people in Scotland's SMEs.

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