

“Don’t be afraid to change direction if the opportunity presents itself”

Introduction

After a varied career in all sorts of engineering & management roles, I was lucky enough to land a job that suited me perfectly with Bristol City Docks, where I co-ordinate all of the engineers & electricians who keep the harbour working – our staff ensure that the harbour remains full of water, by maintaining all of the swing bridges, lock gates, etc, some of which are over 100 years old!



Image: **Ian Johnson**, Deputy Docks Engineer
– Bristol City Docks

How did you get started in your career?

Like many of the best jobs, I came to this job by a roundabout route – having finished Uni with an engineering degree, I had several jobs that gave me experience in hydraulic systems, marine engineering, commercial diving, field servicing, health & safety management and team management. Eventually I was lucky enough to find a job that involved all of these skill sets, with the Docks Engineering team!

Can you outline a typical work day?

That’s really hard – I don’t think I’ve ever had a ‘typical’ work day, as every day brings a new challenge! As well as a few hours in the office each day I’m very often out on site around the harbour working with some of our staff or external contractors. It’s my job to make sure that everything around the harbour is safely maintained or repaired so that not only does everything work properly, but anyone working on any project is as safe as possible, and the public are also kept safe.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I love the fact that I am adding to the legacy of the floating harbour, doing my part to keep such a historic & important landmark in good health for future generations. The work I and my team are involved with right now will still be relevant & valuable in 30, 40 50 years or more. Also, the view out of my office window – looking up the harbour – always reminds me that I’m fortunate enough to work in the best location in the city! Plus, if I want to get to any site on the harbour, I can jump on one of the Harbour Master boats & get there much more easily & quickly than I would in a car!

What skills are important for anyone wishing to start in your profession?

The main requirement for work in the Docks Engineering team is a good knowledge of general & hydraulic engineering, either via apprenticeship or further/higher education. Likewise, our electricians need to have experience of everything from standard consumer electrics up to 3 phase commercial installations, with proof of both academic & practical skills. Our existing staff have come from a fairly even split between the two routes, both historically and currently.

What main personal attributes do you think is important for your type of job?

Enthusiasm, flexibility, and a willingness to get mucky! We tend to look for all-rounders rather than specialists, as it's easier to train a good engineer/electrician up on a specific system than it is to train a specialist in a completely new discipline.

Do you have any tips or suggestions on how young people and adults can enter your industry?

Make sure you have a good background in an applied skill, right from GCSE's onwards – Pure maths & nuclear physics is impressive, but applied physics & design/technology is more use to us! Areas such as hydraulics & electrics are ideal – city & guilds qualifications show a good grasp of the practical aspects of these skills.

What career progression opportunities are available in your business/sector?

Because of the huge range of diverse skill sets required in running both the docks & within the council as a whole, not only can you progress your career vertically (apprentice – qualified engineer – senior engineer – management) but you can take advantage of opportunities to progress laterally, learning new skills and taking your career in new & sometimes unexpected directions!

Why is it important for your sector to attract and train young people and new entrants?

As I said earlier, as part of the docks team we are also part of a historical narrative, from 1804 to the present, and then on into the future. We need to be looking at the young people of today to identify the engineers & electricians who will be taking over responsibility for the continued existence of this incredible site in the next few years. If we can attract a good budding engineer in their teens now, and spend a few years training them up with the specific skills they need to keep everything here working, they will end up with not only a superb education but a hugely valuable skillset that will serve them well for their entire professional life.

What trends do you predict for your industry within the next 10 years? E.g. is it a growing market requiring more young entrants

As long as Bristol has the docks, we will need engineers & electricians to maintain the systems that keep the docks running (and even existing). No matter if you end up working directly within the docks team, or for one of the many specialist contractors who assist us in this process, the skills used here will be both transferrable & valuable.

General words of advice

Always be willing & ready to learn new things. Don't be afraid to change direction if the opportunity presents itself – sometimes the most random seeming skillset can benefit you in the long run!

Further contact/information

Anyone interested in either applying for apprenticeships within the council (including the docks), or gaining further general information about the council's participation in the Bristol Apprentices Program, should contact Ashleigh Richards at bristol.apprentices@bristol.gov.uk