



**SCREWFIX**

# THE VOICE OF THE TRADE

Trade Skills Survey Report 2024

# INTRODUCTION

FROM JOHN MEWETT,  
CEO OF SCREWFIX

SCREWFIX



**The UK is on course to face a shortfall of 250,000 tradespeople by 2030\*. Part of this is due to the lack of fresh talent replacing those retiring from the industry and we believe more can be done to highlight just how rewarding a career in the trade can be.**

Each year we are lucky to meet hundreds of apprentices in our annual 'Screwfix Trade Apprentice' competition. The individuals have a real passion for their trade and their customers, combined with a high level of skill, ambition and determination that inspires us year after year.

We also know there are tens of thousands of untapped, talented individuals out there who would thrive in the construction industry with the right guidance, support and funding available.

Over the last decade, we have been proud to champion tradespeople across the UK. We want to understand and be a voice for what tradespeople are seeking from the new Government, especially given its exciting ambition to drive growth throughout the economy through housebuilding and the energy transition.

The insights and recommendations gathered here build on our many discussions with tradespeople, apprentices and educators, as well as a recent survey of more than 1,000 tradespeople.

It captures their thoughts as we strive to help the UK economy grow over the next five years.

John Mewett, CEO



For more information,  
please scan here



# LIFE AS A TRADESPERSON

## Most tradespeople surveyed are sole traders or working in a small business.

Three quarters are booked up for the next six months, which reflects the high demand for their skills. Yet only 17% have work planned more than a year in advance. This makes long-term business planning nigh-on impossible.

Retirement is also a worry. Many of those aged over 65 fear they may never be able to retire, and there's a real lack of young people entering the industry to take over the running of a trade business.

## Order Book

**75%** of tradespeople have work planned for the next 6 months.

**17%** have work planned more than a year in advance. This for instance makes planning beyond a challenge, for example when looking to take on a 4-year electrical apprentice.

Tradespeople will also spend four months of the year **working more than five days a week.**

## Succession Planning

More than **60%** of tradespeople surveyed were over the age of 45.

**69%** have no one to hand their business over to after retirement. This suggests we could see a further fall in those actively working in the industry soon.

**42%** of those over 65 say they will never retire or don't know when they will be able to.

## Trade business types:

47.6%



SOLE TRADER

40.1%



SMALL BUSINESS  
(2-25 people)

6.5%



SME  
(25-250 people)

5.8%



LARGE BUSINESS  
(250+ people)

“It can be a rewarding job – actually fun... It can give you great opportunities for independence, earning, travel, and the chance to work on interesting things and have a sense of achievement.”

- Maintenance Technician

“The government don't see the value of sole traders being a big part of the market, they don't get the importance in product availability and things being available on time.”

- Plumber



# WHAT MATTERS TO TRADE BUSINESSES?

## Having skilled staff available is one of the biggest concerns for tradespeople.

Our survey found that tradespeople would like a clear plan from government aimed at encouraging more people into the industry and upskilling existing staff.

There is also a desire for a clear long-term plan to encourage more people to improve the energy efficiency of their home.

Like most businesspeople, the UK's trades are concerned about the tax burden they face and the hassles of dealing with red tape and business admin.

## Our survey once again shows the links between the burdens of tax and administration.

The smaller the business, the more accounting and other administration tasks are handled by the tradesperson or an unpaid family member.

**Fewer than 25%** of sole traders hire an accountant, seeing it as a significant additional cost to their business, compared to nearly 50% of other smaller businesses, and 68% of larger businesses.

**1 in 10** sole traders have an unpaid family member helping with administration.

**68%** of sole traders spend at least an extra half a day a week on admin compared to other firms.



## Policy changes trades want to help their business:

- 77%** More direct support upskilling yourself or existing staff
- 72%** A clear plan to encourage customers to upgrade the energy efficiency of their homes
- 70%** Reduce the number of accreditations needed

**“Listen to the small business owners, and the self-employed, they’re the backbone of the countryside and also trades are hugely important to the economy.”**

- Multi-trade





# APPRENTICESHIPS AND SKILLS FOR THE TRADES

## The lack of young people coming into the trades is a big concern.

More than 80% surveyed believe that there is a shortage of apprentices joining the industry. For sole traders and smaller firms, the financial burden of taking on apprentices can be a concern. One in three believe that financial help to pay apprentice wages would encourage them to take on more young people. And one in five believe it would help if colleges were more involved in managing apprentices.

A staggering 92% believe there needs to be better engagement with schools to promote trades and encourage young people away from university routes.

## Top reasons for not taking on an apprentice in the future:

"The cost of having an apprentice outweighs the benefits. I'd love the opportunity to train someone up but I simply couldn't afford it."

"My business is not big enough to sustain an apprentice."

"I'm 56 and intend to retire at 62. I'm not intending to take on any staff."

## Apprentices

Of the 80% of tradespeople believing there is a lack of new talent, 44% have never taken on an apprentice. Comparing this across business size, we see a dramatic difference:

**79% of sole traders have never had an apprentice**, with only 3.7% taking on an apprentice in the last year.

**For firms with 2-5 staff this is 45%**, with only 19% having taken on an apprentice in the last year.

**70% of large businesses** (250+ staff) have taken on an apprentice in the last 5 years.

**Half of tradespeople** had no financial support when taking on an apprentice.

**33%** of those surveyed would consider an apprentice with financial support for wages.

**19%** feel it would help if an apprentice was managed by an agency or college.

**Only 4%** felt shorter apprenticeship courses would help.

## Upskilling

There is also a great deal of interest in upskilling.

**77%** feel upskilling themselves or another member of staff would have a positive impact on their business. However, 48% have never upskilled.

**32%** of trades have trained in products linked to the green transition over the past year. 39% aspired to but have been unable, mainly due to lack of time.

**"Promote the attractiveness of trade careers to school leavers, as a serious and promising alternative to full time, higher education. It's an exciting, challenging and promising career with open ended prospects."**

- Multi-trade

site



# HOW THE GOVERNMENT CAN HELP THE TRADES

To accelerate UK growth, to build 1.5 million houses in the next 5 years, and to start energy retrofitting at scale the 15 million plus homes currently below EPC Band C, the Government can help the trade industry by:

## 1. Make business tax and regulations small business-friendly

Simplify VAT when possible, further simplify accounting demands on sole traders and SMEs, and streamline professional accreditation to be as time-efficient as possible.

## 2. Provide direct grants to SMEs to support recruitment

SMEs and sole traders need to be provided with easy to access direct grants to support taking on, training, paying and retaining apprentices<sup>1</sup>.

## 3. Encourage greater flexibility in apprentice hiring

To reflect the work tradespeople have planned, allow greater flexibility via flexi-apprenticeships and their sharing of apprentices. Provide support for the administration of apprentices using brokerage providers or paid for staff in colleges.

## 4. Make upskilling flexible and focused on when trades have time to train

Simply putting on a course does not lead to results. Skills England and the devolution of skills provision must focus on putting courses on at times that suit trades, which allow for easy levy sharing to support the cost of a course, and their time out of busy schedules.

## 5. Celebrate trade apprenticeships as having the same value as a university education

To attract talent, the grants and loans for apprentices should match those offered to their university peers. Career advice can do much more to encourage young people to take up a trade career.

<sup>1</sup> During the pandemic, a rise in the starting grant drove up apprenticeship starts by 20%, FSB, <https://www.fsb.org.uk/resources-page/small-firms-lead-calls-for-3-000-apprenticeship-incentive-for-under-25s-and-smes.html>



This document is based on a survey sent out to Screwfix Trade Customers in June 2024, receiving 1,018 responses from a balanced sample in every region of the UK. We have also used additional market research (also conducted by Screwfix) into apprentices, trade skills, energy efficiency, and in-store interviews to add to this research. These are underpinned by conversations with education providers. 3rd research was also used to back up and illustrate findings where necessary.





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