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EMPLOYERS NEED ACCESS TO SKILLS

By Dina Medland

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The chief executive of a global professional recruitment firm says it will take “at least a decade to make demonstrable progress” in filling an acute skills gap in the UK by means of education, better careers advice at school level, vocational skills training, and the increasing use of apprenticeships.

Alistair Cox, the boss of Hays, says there are still “around half a million vacancies at all levels” in the UK for jobs ranging from technologists to engineers to healthcare workers. He says his employer clients are demanding up to a decade of experience that is simply not available in the UK. UK business, he suggests, has to face up to the need for a multi-faceted attack on the skills shortage and to do so needs to be unfettered in its access to a global labour market.

While apprenticeships for business are a valuable way of addressing the skills gap, “we still need it to be the ‘national’ way – it is not yet deeply ingrained enough on the country’s psyche”, says Mr Cox – himself a former apprentice engineer.

In the meantime, employers have to look abroad, he says. “We need to allow businesses to target the people they need to bring them into the country.”

He says that since the UK government first imposed caps on non-EU immigration, it has listened to complaints and helped companies to navigate the visa process. But smaller companies do not have the time and energy to manage it.

He looks to Singapore as a model of a country that has got it right on having the skills it needs to progress. “With no natural resources, Singapore has needed to reinvent itself from time to time – we need to recognise in Britain that that is our competition. A globally mobile workforce knows its value,” he adds.

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