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Shortage of qualified workforce haunts major works contractors

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Years go by and look alike for Belgian contractors of major works.

The fifth barometer of the association bringing them together, published Thursday, indicated once again the shortage of a qualified workforce as their major concern.

A total of 92% of companies from the major works sector want to hire staff, but 57% affirm their fear of not finding qualified staff. The average age of the workers tends to rise, 40% of them being 40 plus, indicates Didier Cartage, Director-General of the Association des Entrepreneurs belges de Grands Travaux (ADEB).

And yet employment is on a rising curve, the sector having hired several hundred persons last year to reach 17,814 jobs, which is an increase of 3.9% in a year. But this will not be enough if all of the large planned-for infrastructure projects (Oosterweel connection, Liège tramway, RER, etc.) get started at the same time. They would need 9,000 additional workers, estimates the ADEB.

The shortage of a qualified workforce can be explained notably by the shortage of qualifications, or technical training, according to 47% of employers. Major works need especially many engineers, but these are not prepared to work in this area specifically. "We need to do a lot of work to make the young people exploitable," explains Frédéric Loriaux, ADEB President and CIT Blaton Administrative Director.

The sector's lack of attractiveness and the arduous work it calls for are also mentioned respectively by 30% and 13% of employers. "A laborer has to work a whole week to be able to pay a painter for a day's work in his home," explains Marc Peeters, ADEB board member, who calls for a decrease of employers' charges.

The ADEB rallies 65 companies representing some 18,000 direct and 54,000 indirect jobs for a total sales revenue of 9.5 billion euros.

*Andy Sanchez
The Brussels Times*