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Crisis – what crisis?

We're either in denial or don't know what to do about attracting and training talent. Whichever way you cut it, we have a crisis on our hands. *Clive Couldwell* asks the industry what we can do about it.

» Clearly, we've got a problem on our hands when our potential future talent isn't using 'AV' to describe the profession we'd like them to be a part of.

"We don't have a pool of new people coming in from school or university because no-one has ever suggested AV to them as a possible career choice and even if they did, no formal courses seem to exist to give them the skills they need," says Mark Nisbet, managing director of distributor, AVM. "'Professional AV' does not seem to appear in higher ed courses and it also seems that no-one outside the industry actually understands the definition of 'audio visual' as a career choice. Most of the good people we have migrated across are from other technically-based industries, such as telecoms or IT."

This comment is magnified right across the AV industry. Although the AVIXA Foundation is hyper-focused in its mission to increase awareness of AV as a career at the grassroots level -

CHART 1

Source: AV online research, October 2019

How would you describe your organisation's main area of business?
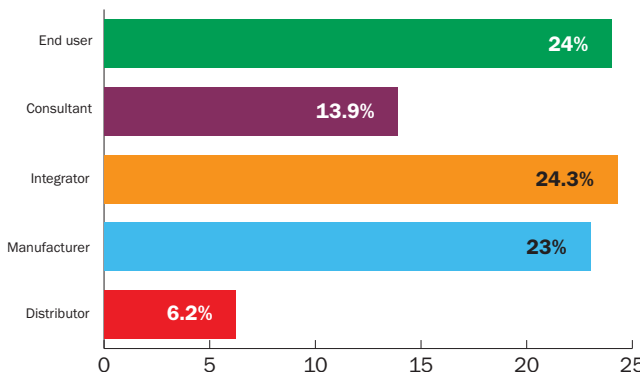
building pipelines directly from schools and community groups by providing skills training, supporting growth through scholarships, and connecting individuals with AV companies for internships and employment: "We hear time and again from our members that they need more qualified talent. This is driven by the fact our industry is performing well and the demand for work has increased with it," says AVIXA Foundation program director, Joseph Valerio. "At the same time, the youth of the world isn't aware our industry exists, or that AV even relates to their passions and skills."

Adds AV User Group chairman, Owen Ellis: "I've always thought that as an industry we do a great job of marketing ourselves to ourselves, but not to people, businesses or markets outside AV. Are we just not doing enough marketing and outreach to attract people into our industry, whether from other market sectors or straight from secondary or higher education?"

The AV industry in the UK is buoyant in terms of employment opportunities but there are not enough quality, skilled candidates to fill them. In short, we're facing a skills crisis (see Chart 10) and the industry feels it's only going to get worse (see Chart 11).

Our survey which is representative of the industry (Chart 1) shows top recruitment challenges being a shortage of staff with technical skills (top – and »

Chart 9), followed by a lack of experience and industry awareness (just 19.7 per cent) – see Chart 2. Just 8.8 per cent of the workforce is aged under 30 with the majority aged between 31 and 45 (Chart 7).

"Most importantly, companies need to promote training to junior candidates. There also needs to be a degree of flexibility with the job spec. And it's important for employers and recruiters to look at and understand the market and the direction it's heading in. There needs to be a recruitment strategy, which consists of more foresight and planning, and an interview process developed which is thorough yet fair – avoiding decisions based on first-stage interviews," says Cheryl Aitken-Smith, managing director, Audio Visual Recruitment.

"There isn't a shortage of people looking to come into the industry, but there is a shortage of open-minded employers looking to spend a little time with candidates who have potential but may need further training. Current employers are short-staffed and only want people who can hit the ground running, which means valuable potential is left on the sidelines."

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'Smart' university classroom packed with audio visual equipment

AV roles hard to fill

There are numerous routes for someone who is looking to develop their career in the AV industry. Job roles range from junior technicians, engineers, designers, project managers to various sales positions, among others.

According to AVR's Aitken-Smith, field service engineers, commissioning engineers, AV system designers/installation engineers are particularly hard to fill at the moment. "All these positions come with the possibility for advancements. The beauty of it all is that you are not pigeonholed into one type of role just because you entered the industry in that position. Skills can be transferred into other areas with the right level of effort and commitment," says Aitken-Smith.

"However, people won't come into this industry just for the money. It's more due to an interest or passion for some element of the industry. Also, while there may be qualifications in different parts of the industry - there is no universally-recognised, AV-specific degree available at universities."

Adds Crestron Europe's HR director, Annelies Kampert: "We notice that it is especially hard to fill the roles of technical support and sales support, as they require a combination of skills in AV and in IT, with an outgoing, patient and helpful personality, and extensive knowledge of languages, given how internationally we operate."

Are we paying enough?

According to Graeme Massey, managing director of JacobsMassey, salaries have risen within the past six to 12 months but lag behind other technical sectors, such as broadcast and IT. "In general, salaries within the AV industry are forty to fifty per cent lower than those within the IT sector," says Massey. For example, a post graduate (no experience) in IT database management would typically earn £30,000+. A graduate coming into AV would be paid around £18-20,000.

"Compared to the film production sector though, they are higher," says Aitken-Smith.
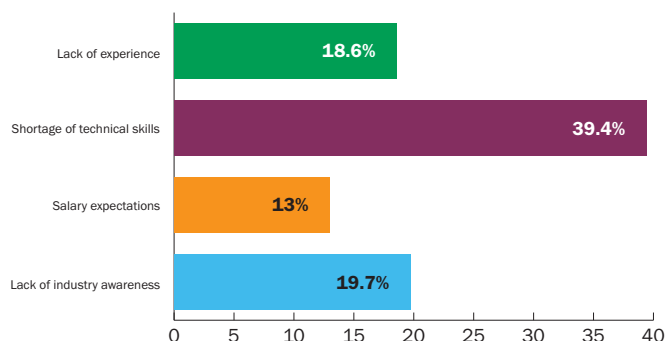
Planning for the future

"AV has to go as a brand, but not as an industry," says Simon Harris-Briggs, global account manager, Avocor. "We


CHART 2
Source: AV online research, October 2019

What are your top recruitment challenges?

Lack of experience	18.6%
Shortage of technical skills	39.4%
Salary expectations	13%
Lack of industry awareness	19.7%

(x-axis: 0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40)

CHART 3
Source: AV online research, October 2019

Do you operate a graduate recruitment programme?

Yes	21.3%
No	73.6%

(x-axis: 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80)
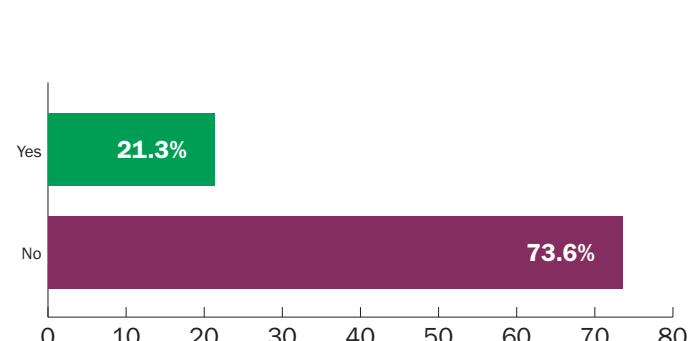
Student lecture in modern university classroom using, guess what? AV

know within education and the curriculum there is a huge push for programming and IT, and it leads the way with our millennials, so we should sit AV under IT. By doing this, the industry will know the next generation are not only IT but also AV specialists," he adds. "If I was running a company today and looking for a graduate, I would be more in favour of an educated IT/AV student than a separate strand."

Crestron Europe's Kampert has actually moved towards ICT profiles instead of purely AV professionals and has managed to find five suitable candi-

dates in one month (the company hires five to 10 grads a year).

"We want someone experienced in AV and in IT who is outgoing, patient and helpful, has realistic salary expectations and speaks as many languages as possible. It will not come as a surprise if I tell you that those profiles are almost impossible to find. So, we adapted our plan slightly. We now focus our search on skilled people with less professional experience. We don't expect them to know everything there is to know from day one. Instead, we invest heavily in their training, and into getting them

acquainted with the culture and customer focus at Crestron," says Kampert.

"We suffer mostly from a shortage of technical skills. We counter this by offering extensive training on our solutions, service, programming and all other knowledge that is useful for the skilled people that we hire. For instance, SIMPL (the programming language that Crestron uses) is based on C# and is very visual, but we can't expect every new starter to be fluent in working with it. Which is why SIMPL and SIMPL+ are one of the many components of our extensive training."

Adds Ross Bristo, technical sales specialist at Epson UK: "Most of our employees develop the crucial skills they need before taking on their role, and then they quickly learn on the job. In addition, mentoring schemes and internal development courses – including presentational skills, management skills and Microsoft Office skills – are readily available within the business to aid employee development.

"Many businesses also now have online training platforms to support product knowledge development and competitive training. Obviously the more technical roles require specific skills and knowledge, but there are external courses available for those who need it.

"At the end of the day, enthusiasm and a hard-working attitude is vital in any form of employment, and that's what we look for with the individuals and organisations we work with," he says.

"We require a mixture of integrated and particular skillsets, and while some individuals coming out of university might not have the right technical skills for the installation process of products, more opportunities for specialised apprenticeships would help sort this minor gap.

"Right now, however, there is a high demand for products and employment, with lots of exciting projects and events on the horizon. The role of AV in the digital age is in abundance and we are always excited to see what big, bright, and beautiful examples of our kit being used will next come round the corner."

But, traditional though apprenticeships and internships are thought to be within the AV industry, Creative Personnel's managing director, Mina Machacek argues (based on feedback from the team's experiences): "At the moment, it seems like there is not »

CHART 4   *Source: AV online research, October 2019*

If yes, on average, how many graduates do you hire each year?

Fewer than 10	71.4%
11 - 25	9.5%
26 - 49	2.6%
50+	4.3%

(x-axis: 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80)
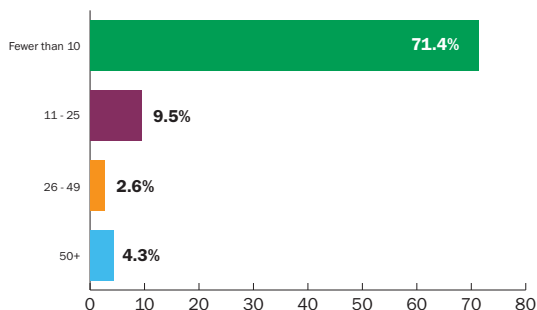
CHART 5   *Source: AV online research, October 2019*

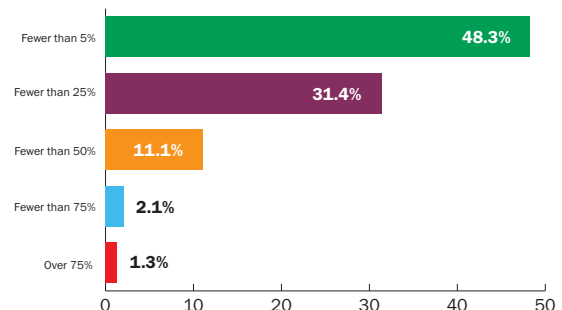**What proportion of your workforce are technical/ skilled employees under the age of 25?**

Fewer than 5%	48.3%
Fewer than 25%	31.4%
Fewer than 50%	11.1%
Fewer than 75%	2.1%
Over 75%	1.3%

(x-axis: 0 10 20 30 40 50)

CHART 6
Source: AV online research, October 2019

What is the approximate gender balance of your workforce?

- Fewer than 25% female — **55.1%**
- 26% - 50% female — **34.4%**
- 51% - 75% female — **5.1%**
- Over 75% female — **1.1%**
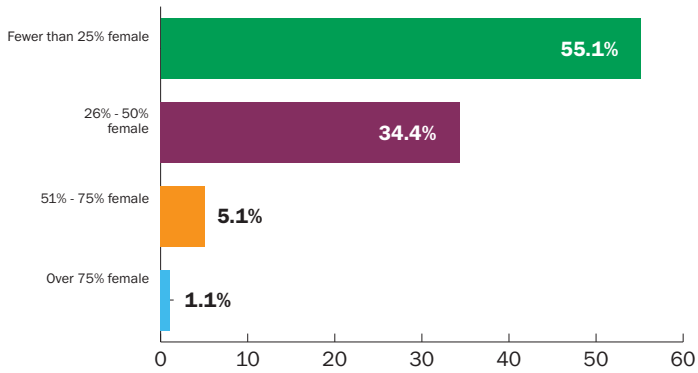
CHART 7
Source: AV online research, October 2019

What is the average age of your workforce?

- Under 30 — **8.8%**
- 31 - 45 — **74%**
- 46 and over — **15%**
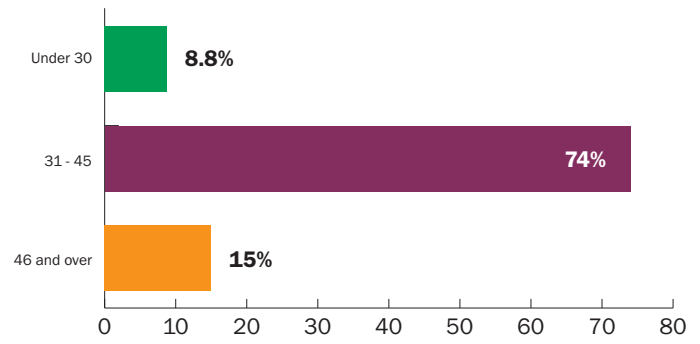
CHART 8
Source: AV online research, October 2019

The recruitment process. Are you…

- Spending more on recruitment than in the past to find applicants with the right skills? — **19%**
- Recruiting at a lower level than expected because of a perceived skills shortage? — **17.8%**
- Paying more to recruit staff with the right skills? — **11.8%**
- Hiring more freelance staff to fill the staff gap? — **22.2%**
- Leaving positions vacant because you can't find the appropriate candidate? — **19.5%**
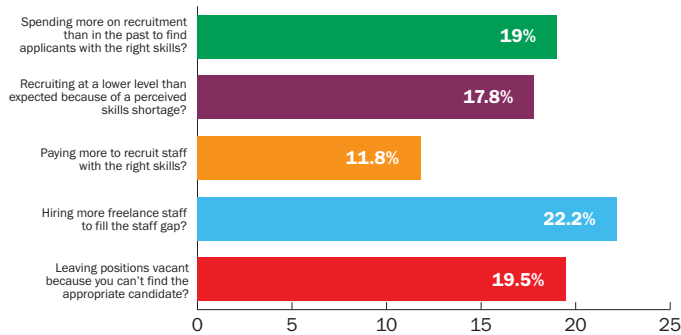
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enough effort being made in the training and development of new engineers, or those who are entering the industry. Due to business needs, our clients tend to have very little patience with new hires and, sometimes, expect too much too soon.

"While a lot of clients will state that training is on the job, their engineers are unable to provide sufficient guidance due to their own workloads and project deadlines," says Machacek.

"As clients are under great pressure to deliver projects within low margins, there is pressure to deliver rather than develop existing workforces which means that the skillbase is remaining stagnant. There are a lot of junior staff prepared to come into the industry but clients don't tend to be open to juniors as it requires more time and development than the company is capable of offering at the moment."

Clearly, the wrong approach is being adopted when training the next generation of recruits.

"Junior/trainee candidates are being offered training on the job, but business needs unfortunately mean that these candidates do not receive sufficient attention and/or guidance. The cost of training that is offered by industry standard bodies and manufacturers, both monetary and time, is sometimes considered too great and so can be overlooked," says Machacek.

"Companies may engage in internal training. They may send their engineer to manufacturer provided training. Others will invest in industry body training. Most prefer to offer on-the-job training though. This last one, unfortunately, means engineers are not always learning 'best practice' methods and so the quality of their work may not translate when they move to another employer."

Practical steps forward

JacobsMassey is in the process of developing the first AV Apprenticeship, authorised by the IFA which will enable companies to attract new talent with the support of their apprenticeship levy. "There is a (three-year) BSc (Hons) course in Audiovisual Technology available (Middleborough College, Sept 2020: https://bit.ly/2LJA0YM). AV as a career choice is still overshad-

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"We must be more visible to future talent whilst it's at school, college and university, and AV companies have to partner with them with pro internships."
Paul Hutton
President, ETP Europe

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owed by music, media and video production courses," says Massey.

According to Epson UK's Bristo if you ask someone working in the AV sector how they came to work in AV, the odds are that it began with a passion or an interest in one of the many different and perhaps distant branches of the AV tree that evolved in an exciting and often unpredictable way.

"What seems evident from the increasing variety of specialist courses offered by universities is that more and more people are acquiring the ideal transferable skills required for the AV industry.

"The experiential age, where the appetite for materialistic fulfilment is shifting to memorable experiences, is seeing the AV industry head in an exciting direction, with technology consistently pushing new boundaries within different sectors. We are finding that »»

Which job roles do you find toughest to fill within your company?
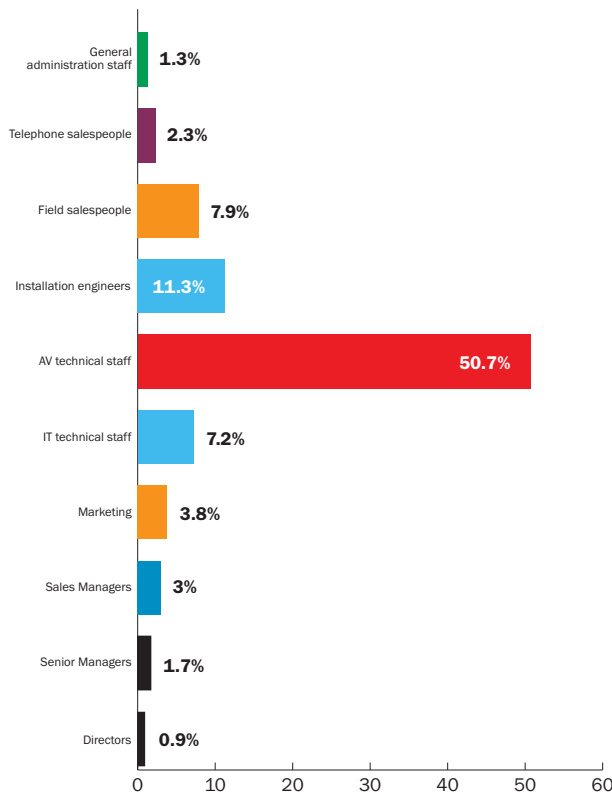
Role	%
General administration staff	1.3%
Telephone salespeople	2.3%
Field salespeople	7.9%
Installation engineers	11.3%
AV technical staff	50.7%
IT technical staff	7.2%
Marketing	3.8%
Sales Managers	3%
Senior Managers	1.7%
Directors	0.9%

Do you think the AV industry is suffering from a skills shortage?

	%
Yes	80.7%
No	13.7%
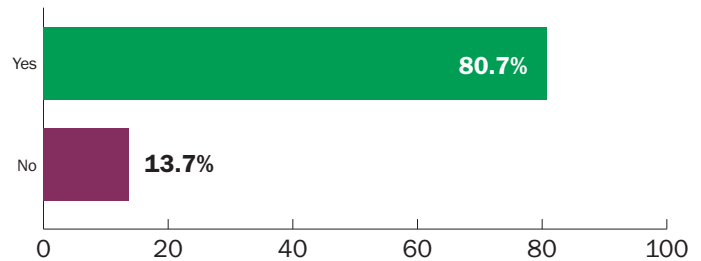
If not, do you anticipate skills shortages?

	%
Yes	68.7%
No	24.2%
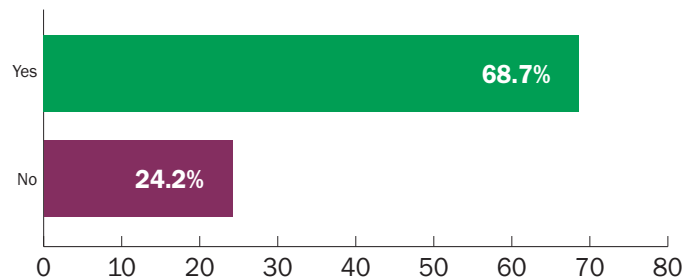
this is helping to stimulate more interest from people in pursuing careers within the sector," he says.

Having spent over 30 years as managing director of Blitz (GES), Paul Hutton is now responsible for establishing ETP Europe – part of the US multibrand entertainment technology company which owns four AV companies: LMG, Premier Event Technology and a vehicle set up to encourage younger talent into the industry - The CoiL Learning Center (https://coillearningcenter. thinkific.com/) based in Orlando.

He suggests a number of actions the industry could be doing to attract new people.

"Our industry needs to be more visible to future talent whilst they are at school, college and university. Enjoying helping out with the lights and sound on the school production used to be a path into our industry, but that won't cut it anymore. AV companies also have to take the responsibility and a commitment to partner with colleges/ universities on a professional internship programme," he says.

"Get out there. Be proactive and engage with local colleges, at least two or three. They will be receptive. Together with the college create a ten-week extensive internship, designed for college students pursuing a career in the industry. Consult with colleges on the syllabus and allow the internship period to contribute towards the exam and degree grade if possible.

"As an 'apprentice', students should receive college credit and 'compensation' while building their skills through supervised on-the-job training and classroom education at the company. They are not a cheap pair of extra hands. Companies may need to invest

"Our members need more qualified talent... but the youth of the world isn't aware our industry exists, or that AV even relates to their passion and skills."
Joseph Valerio
Director, AVIXA Foundation

in full time lecturers but the investment will return industry talent for the future. Larger companies, with more financial resource, may have to pave the way. I know some have started the process.

"Lastly, let's not just concentrate on technical roles. We need talent across the board who want to work in our exciting industry.

"Students may be interested in procurement, asset management, information systems, marketing, equipment logistics, show technology and HR.

"We need a broad spectrum of talent in our companies. Not just placing importance in people who know how to push the right buttons at the right time," he concludes.

Pixel Global AV has put into place a programme to revisit how it hires, as it considers traditional methods to be slow, can be expensive and take too long to fulfil.

"Employees, their skills and experience along with their client commitment are what differentiate us in a very competitive market, so making sure employees feel part of and share in the

company's success is critical," says Pixel Global AV's UK managing director, Jamie Hanna.

The company also looks at taking on employees from other industries with transferrable skills.

Hiring challenges include a lack of AV technical knowledge (from mid-management to senior sales), competition for candidates with appropriate skills, candidates who lack commercial awareness, high salary expectations, and multiple job offers being made to candidates.

Applicants for operational roles (project managers, designers/CAD) are scarce because they don't appear to move very often, sales personnel are more likely to move roles frequently, and a large and dynamic contractor market - larger than in most industries.

"We have started to see a return of former employees to our business, so we know we are doing something right. However, securing candidates and then retaining them proves to be one of our biggest business challenges," concludes Hanna. ■