

Upskilling for a brighter future

Closing the skills gap is just one of the challenges of a fast-developing industry. PES was keen to broaden its own learning on the subject, with Michael Middlemast, CEO of MBC Renewables Ltd. How can personal development help retain staff and grow the sector?

PES: It's lovely to speak with you Michael. Perhaps it would be worth starting with a short introduction to MBC Renewables Ltd and your fit within the solar industry if we may?

Michael Middlemast: Thank you for speaking with us. MBC Renewables Ltd offers a wide range of consulting services to the international renewable energy industry, including design, training and turnkey project development.

PES: How has business been over the last couple of years or so? Is demand for your services increasing as the drive towards net zero moves forward?

MM: Prior to our development and EPC work, we focused primarily on training. As the industry expanded so did the skills gap, so MBC tried to fill that. Knowledge is a strong commodity right now.

Our Safely Testing & Commissioning PV Arrays course has been popular with journeymen and electricians but we have also had a strong uptake on our more sales focused/commercial courses.

As the training side of our business continues to grow, the design and project development work just never ceases at the moment. Interest in renewable energy is at the highest I've seen in my 15 years in the industry.

In this area, we focus primarily on medium to large scale commercial developments, a sector I am pleased to say is expanding. Over the last three years we've surveyed, designed and developed over 2GWp of solar PV.

The mission of MBC Renewables Ltd is to deliver safe, reliable assets that generate

profit and reduce carbon emissions. So far, we're doing well at that.

PES: Are you mainly focused in the UK, or do you have a more international reach?

MM: We partner with renewable energy companies from across the globe and have extensive, provable experience in the European, North American and Indian renewable energy markets.

In July 2021 we began delivering courses to a Middle Eastern and African audience via our training partner Green Energy Academy, based in Cairo, Egypt.

We support the North American and Californian renewable energy industry via CALSAA, the California Solar + Storage Association.

On home turf, we recently helped to test and commission a uniquely mounted 2MW commercial rooftop array in County Durham, England.

PES: What kind of value are your customers looking for? Are they mainly focused on training their staff so that they have the necessary skills in-house?

MM: Training is just part of the overall relationship for us.

If the client requires training, we are certified to provide that. If they require design support we have the software, hardware and experience. And if they need a project taken from survey to design to installation, commissioning and O&M we can do that, no problem.

I believe it is important to be flexible in business and especially so in this volatile energy market.



Michael Middlemast

So, the value we offer is that an extreme flexibility to step into aspects of your business you may not have covered yet. There are not many companies that offer this flexibility and indeed we ourselves look for partners and not clients.

PES: How important is it that companies do invest in this area going forward? It must help them to retain staff and to keep things running efficiently at what is an extremely demanding time in the industry.

MM: It is our belief that the key to success for renewable energy is consumer confidence. That is confidence in the technology, in the installation and most of all confidence in the people doing the work.

By training staff, investing in quality



workmanship and products we can instill that confidence with ease.

PES: How can MBC Renewables help with this?

MM: Our two-pronged approach supports your sales process while at the same time upskilling your team. We teach your staff to do what we do.

This may sound like we're putting ourselves out of a job, but the more projects you win, the more your business expands and the more business MBC Renewables gets.

It is therefore in our interest to deliver for you.

In this respect, like I mentioned previously, we look for partners not customers. It comes down to our mission, we want to deliver safe, reliable renewable energy assets that generate a profit and reduce carbon emissions.

If you're in this industry to make a quick buck we're not for you.

PES: In terms of engineering, procurement and construction, what are some of the main challenges you're seeing?

MM: We have identified several points of the value chain we feel could be improved upon. The first is in design. Often, designers are pressured by commercial leaders to get a design out quickly or without key information which sets us up to fail.

We solve this by educating the renewable energy salesman on what information the designer needs to produce an accurate report. We actually provide an RFI, or request for information, template to the students of our Renewable Energy Industry training course.

There is then the lack of experience with solar energy installers. I often see unsafe manual handling of modules, walking on modules, misunderstanding of testing

procedures and the list goes on.

These are simple issues we can solve with our Safely Testing and Commissioning Solar PV Arrays course.

PES: How are things changing in the industry as far as you are aware?

MM: With the current global economic and political climate being as it is, renewable energy is seeing a massive surge in demand. While we believe this is certainly a move in the right direction for the global energy mix, we must ensure renewable energy assets are installed correctly.

There is no point having all these GWs of clean energy if they don't work.

PES: What do you think the next two or three years may look like, commercially and for the domestic solar market too?

MM: In the commercial sector we believe more and more business owners will move away from the PPA and leasing models of old and into CAPEX funding. This is due to the return on investment, for solar PV in particular, becoming so attractive in 2022 and beyond.

Large scale commercial solar will have a large part to play in decentralizing renewable energy production away from large scale plants, residential solar arrays will contribute to this too.

Batteries in the residential sector will become increasingly popular, however they must be installed and maintained correctly or we'll have big issues on our hands.

It is likely that we will see huge growth in the O&M sector over the next three years to capitalize.

PES: And for MBC in particular? Are there new projects in the pipeline or new training courses that you are planning that you can reveal to us?

MM: Well, we operate under a strict NDA with our partners so can't say too much, but we're currently working on a charity project for a local dog and cat shelter which I'm excited for. I did want to take all the dogs home on the survey, but my wife didn't allow it.

We're also helping local parish leaders assess their renewable energy options for 18 of their properties in rural North Eastern England. The energy crisis has hit these parts of the country hard and community centers/town halls could become heating hubs for the elderly.

Training wise, we've refocused our courses and they are the best they have ever been. We've invested in new test equipment from TIS, a green screen, top of the range cameras, all the techy stuff you need.

Based on customer feedback we have added two survey courses, one for residential properties and one for commercial, check out the future dates below.

There are more details on our website. Thanks for your time.

www.mbcrenewables.com

Survey courses

Residential Renewable Energy Survey Course: September 28th

Commercial Renewable Energy Survey Course: September 29th

Renewable Energy Design and Simulation Training with PVSol: October 14th

Safely Testing & Commissioning Solar PV Arrays CPD Certified Course: October 17th & 18th

Renewable Energy Industry Training, Jump Start Your Business: October 27th & 28th