



## **An Interview with Chris Ball, Director of Atkins Nuclear Business**

### **How did you get involved in the nuclear industry?**

My degree is in nuclear engineering which is a cross between mechanical engineering and nuclear physics so my options were rather narrowed down! When I was 17 the careers advisers at my school organised for a number of visiting lecturers which led me to a choice between engineering and medicine. My Dad was an engineer so I was leaning towards engineering and there was a lecture from a Capenhurst employee which led to the nuclear industry catching my eye. I then applied for the nuclear engineering course at Manchester University. I was lucky to be sponsored by the company then known as Nuclear Electric so I started working in power generation at an early stage. As an undergraduate I worked on Sizewell B during construction, then Heysham 2 and moved to Wylfa on graduation. I made a deliberate decision to go into the nuclear industry which seemed to offer something a bit different and I certainly haven't regretted it.

### **What is your current role and how does it make an impact on the industry?**

I'm director of the nuclear business in Atkins which means that I have responsibility for everything that Atkins does in the civilian nuclear sector including UK new build, generation and decommissioning as well as international activities. I have oversight of financial, contractual and staff issues to ensure the long term sustainability of the business.

A lot of my time is spent liaising with clients and partners so my role is largely external facing. Our business is structured so that others take care of the day to day running of the business which allows me to do this. I think it's important for me to try to sell Atkins' goal of trying to do things differently. For a number of years our industry has had a habit of doing things the same way that they've been done in the past. Actually in 2010 technology has moved on a lot and it's an ability to reinvent ourselves and do things differently that will make the industry great again. I see my role in the industry as being to convince other people that it's time to do things differently. This involves talking at conferences as well as with clients and partners to try and find different ways. It will be a long journey to achieve this goal but there are individuals and organisations who are willing to listen.

### **How do you see the nuclear industry changing over the next 10 years and where do you see the biggest growth area for new recruits?**

The biggest growth area is clearly going to be nuclear new build. I think engineering is going to become sexy again and there are far more graduates being attracted into this area already. Some of these people would have ended up working in banks a few years ago. As the industry grows in the new build area I see more and more graduates coming into it.

I also see the industry reinventing itself and blowing off the cobwebs from the last forty or fifty years to become much more forward thinking. I think companies have to consider how they become forward thinking to attract the best individuals.

The other important thing to recognise is that we now live in a global marketplace. All national nuclear industries have tended to be quite inward looking. In a global industry where there are many countries looking at the prospect of new build there will be global technology, competitors and clients. Atkins and other companies have to think about how they can compete on a global basis. This will need organisations to change their makeup and adapt in order to survive. A lot of traditionally non-nuclear companies are starting to look at the industry which will create a threat but the prospects for growth also represent huge opportunities. It's very important that all companies are proactive to push the UK nuclear brand to the world.

### **What impact if any do you see the new build programme having on the decommissioning programme?**

It's a bit harder to operate globally in the decommissioning sector. There may be a move in this direction but one of the key barriers, in UK facilities for instance, is that it's difficult to accurately scope the work. This means that there is a need to work closely with the client and have a local presence. It may still be possible to operate globally but issues such as these are likely to mean that companies need to have some resource based within the relevant country.



However, one thing that's certain in decommissioning is that the UK is one of the world leaders. We are one of the leading nations in terms of timescales for decommissioning and we have a huge bank of expertise and unique selling points which we can take overseas. It's important that we recognise this and continue to invest in our decommissioning industry. Clearly there are going to be challenges as government funding becomes tighter and tighter so it's important that companies look to innovate and reduce costs wherever possible. This has already been seen on the Magnox dissolution and mini-stores projects where new approaches are going to save millions of pounds. These sorts of unique challenges create huge excitement which will help to retain people who might otherwise be tempted to move to jobs in the new build sector.

**What does your company do to encourage an educational programme in schools?**

Atkins has recently won an award for our commitment to promoting science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) in Bristol schools. We sponsor a lot of school football teams and invest money in the local community in Whitehaven. We also run science fairs in schools to try and make science interesting for students and help attract them into technical careers. This is a long term play but I think it's very important to improve STEM skills throughout the country.

**How would you convince a student or graduate to join your area of expertise?**

A work life balance is very important to graduates these days. Having been brought up in the 1980s, I think I may fall into the category of being a Thatcher child. This meant I had the importance of having a career and doing your bit for the country drummed into me. For new graduates there is much more of a balance with enjoying life as well which is exactly the right way to go. I can't attract the best people by throwing money at them because there will come a point when people say that's not really what they're after. In fact, this approach is unlikely to attract the right people. What's really important is to have a culture where people feel that they have influence and status within the organisation and are listened to. You spend a lot of your life in the office and so it's important that people can enjoy work whilst having the flexibility to enjoy their life as well.

**What does your company do to attract and retain younger staff?**

At university we sponsor students and courses and also help by advising on the content of courses. We then run our own training academy for graduates to ensure that we are demonstrating that we can provide them with a career. Therefore, our aim is to create a framework for graduate's growth once they have joined the company.

The important thing for younger staff to remember is that they should always feel empowered to speak their mind. The nuclear industry has a tendency at times to try to institutionalise people which can stop people from feeling empowered. In order to attract the best people and to get the most out of them there is a need to change this culture. A lot of the best ideas will come from people who are new to the industry and they have to be encouraged to speak their minds.

A continued policy of recruiting graduates can also help to retain staff. In 2009 we brought in a group of graduates and then in 2010 we brought in another group of graduates. This has helped people to feel part of an organisation which is growing and has also given the graduates who joined in 2009 a sense of elevated status. They no longer feel like the latest recruits through the door and have the opportunity to pass on what they have learnt to others. I was taken on at Wylfa with one other person and it was probably three or four years before the next graduate recruits came in. For that period I felt like the youngster in the team and it was difficult to move out of that mould.

**What do you think is the best advice you can give a younger member of the industry?**

I would definitely encourage them to take control of their own career. It's very easy for people to try and do the right thing for an employer if they're being told that they are doing a great job in a particular area. All of a sudden, as a result of trying to take that advice, an individual can find themselves in a position that they never really wanted. It's important that people think carefully about what they want from their career and make sure that they don't end up heading in a direction which has been determined by somebody else.



**Have you heard of the YGN and all the activities we do?**

I've attended a number of YGN social gatherings over the years! I also see adverts for seminars including the YGN rough guides although I haven't personally attended one. One of the Atkins YGN members has spoken to me about the education and training initiatives that are run for schools.

I think the YGN plays an important part in helping to create networks across organisations. Whenever I go to industry events I see that YGN members have better contacts than a lot of older people in the industry.

**How can we support you and you support us in the future?**

It would be good to see more thought pieces from the YGN. I know that the YGN does respond to consultations and I think that's very positive. What would help the industry to realise that young people have a lot to offer is to see more evidence of their opinions which are often different to those who have been in the industry for a long period of time. If I asked two people who had been in the industry for thirty years what their opinion on a topic was I would expect to get similar answers. YGN members can start from a blank piece of paper and can help the industry to change over time.

A lot of Atkins employees attend YGN events. In terms of getting the most out of these events I would encourage them to make the most of opportunities to network. Engineers sometimes tend to be introverted and don't always find it easy to network. It would be good if the events could help to encourage introverted people get more involved.

The YGN can also help to attract graduates to the industry by getting into universities. There may be a role for YGN members to attend careers events in order to present a viewpoint that graduates can relate to. A younger perspective on the industry may be more believable to students than a presentation from a corporate manager in a suit!

I'd be happy to talk to the YGN about anything that I can do to help achieve these goals.