IChemE Partner Networking Lunch – April 2026

Date: 29 April 2026

Time: 11:00 – 13:00pm (BST)

Venue: CATCH – Centre for Process and Manufacturing, Grimsby

Executive Summary

IChemE convened its Employer Partners at CATCH in April 2026 to explore the findings of the newly expanded IChemE Employment Survey and discuss what the results mean for the future workforce across the chemical engineering profession. The session brought together employers from across the process industries to reflect on workforce trends, recruitment challenges, skills development, and the changing expectations placed on both early-career and experienced engineers.

The discussion highlighted two dominant themes. Firstly, employers identified a continuing disconnect between academic preparation and workplace readiness, particularly around communication, confidence, problem definition and practical application of knowledge. Secondly, participants reinforced the growing concern around the shortage of mid-career engineers, with many organisations struggling to recruit and retain professionals in the 5–15 year experience range. These challenges were recognised as structural and long-term rather than isolated organisational issues.

Across both discussions, Employer Partners emphasised the importance of stronger collaboration between employers, universities, vocational providers and professional bodies. There was broad agreement that the profession needs clearer development pathways, more practical industry exposure, better communication around career expectations, and stronger support for career progression and mobility throughout the engineering lifecycle.

Background

The Partner Networking Lunch formed part of IChemE's ongoing Employer Partner engagement programme, which provides a forum for employers to discuss shared workforce and professional development challenges while helping shape IChemE activity and priorities. The April 2026 meeting focused specifically on the findings of the IChemE Employment Survey 2025, which for the first time incorporated both member and employer perspectives to provide a broader view of the employment landscape across the profession.

The session opened with a presentation from Judith Hutchinson, Head of Member Experience at IChemE, who outlined key findings from the survey. These included strong hiring intentions in sectors such as water, consultancy and nuclear; increasing uncertainty around future skills requirements; continued concerns regarding graduate work-readiness; and the significant shortage of mid-career engineers across almost all sectors.

Employers were then invited to reflect on how closely the survey findings aligned with their own experiences before moving into two facilitated discussions focused on strengthening early-career pathways and addressing mid-career workforce challenges.

Employment Survey Insights

Employers broadly agreed that the survey reflected many of the workforce challenges currently being experienced across the profession. The expansion of the survey beyond salary benchmarking was particularly welcomed, with several participants commenting that the additional context around workforce trends, employability skills and recruitment challenges made the findings significantly more valuable for employers and recruitment teams.

Participants noted that the findings around mid-career shortages strongly matched industry experience. Employers agreed that experienced engineers are increasingly difficult to recruit, particularly where specialist expertise or regulated-sector experience is required.

Discussion also explored the relationship between Chartered status, progression and salary expectations. While employers recognised Chartered status as an important enabler for progression and professional confidence, several participants cautioned against presenting Chartership as an automatic route to salary increases. Instead, employers emphasised that Chartered status supports broader professional capability, credibility and long-term development.

There was also strong interest in the survey findings relating to sustainability, digitalisation and future skills uncertainty. Employers acknowledged that while sustainability and AI are clearly shaping the future direction of the profession, many organisations remain uncertain about precisely which skills will be most needed in the medium to long term.

Strengthening early-career pathways

The first facilitated discussion explored how employers and education providers could work more closely together to improve how people enter the profession and become work-ready engineers.

A consistent theme throughout the discussion was that many graduates possess strong theoretical knowledge but struggle with practical workplace application. Employers highlighted that early-career engineers are often good at solving clearly defined problems but less confident at identifying problems independently or operating within ambiguous real-world situations.

Communication skills were repeatedly identified as a major development area. Employers noted that graduates often struggle to adapt communication style to different audiences and can lack confidence in face-to-face conversations, phone calls and professional interactions.

Practical industry exposure was viewed as one of the most effective ways to build confidence, judgement and professional capability. Employers strongly supported industrial placements, internships and vocational routes, with many observing that students who had completed placements generally demonstrated greater initiative, stronger communication skills and a better understanding of workplace expectations.

The discussion also explored differences between apprenticeship and degree routes into engineering. Participants acknowledged that degree programmes often develop analytical thinking and theoretical understanding, while vocational and apprenticeship pathways tend to produce individuals with stronger practical confidence and workplace awareness.

There was strong support for clearer expectation-setting around engineering careers, particularly regarding progression, responsibility and early-career development. Employers observed that some

graduates enter industry with unrealistic expectations around rapid promotion or management responsibility.

Mid-career workforce challenges

The second discussion focused on the growing shortage of mid-career engineers and explored how organisations can better attract, retain and re-engage experienced professionals.

Employers described significant recruitment difficulties across the 5–15 year experience range, particularly for specialist and leadership roles. Many organisations reported that vacancies are increasingly difficult to fill because the available talent pool is too small, while others highlighted that competition between sectors and overseas opportunities are drawing experienced engineers away from the UK market.

Participants identified several structural causes behind the shortage. These included inconsistent graduate intake over previous years, outsourcing and managed attrition, limited progression opportunities within flatter organisations, and the gradual loss of experienced professionals through retirement and international mobility.

Career progression emerged as a major factor in retention. Many employers observed that engineers often feel pressured to move into people management roles in order to progress professionally, despite wanting to remain in technical or specialist positions.

Cross-sector mobility was also discussed extensively. Employers highlighted that inconsistent job titles, industry-specific language and differing competency frameworks can make it difficult for engineers to transfer between sectors, even where their underlying technical capability is highly relevant.

Several participants suggested that IChemE could play a stronger role in supporting mid-career professionals by providing sector insights, clearer progression guidance, mid-career networking opportunities and support for engineers looking to transition between industries or return to the profession after career breaks.

However, there was also broad recognition that the mid-career skills gap is a complex, structural issue that will require continued discussion and collaboration across industry, professional institutions and education providers. Participants agreed that no single organisation can solve the challenge alone, and that further exploration through future Employer Partner meetings and wider sector discussions will be essential to developing practical, long-term approaches to workforce retention, progression and mobility.

Key themes from the discussions

- Skills gaps are increasingly behavioural and professional rather than purely technical
- Practical experience and workplace exposure remain essential for building capability and confidence
- Communication, judgement and problem definition are critical development areas for graduates
- Mid-career workforce shortages are structural and require long-term intervention
- Employers need clearer progression pathways for technical professionals
- Cross-sector mobility is hindered by inconsistent language and competency definitions

- Collaboration between employers, education providers and professional institutions is essential to strengthening workforce pathways

Next steps

IChemE will use the insights from this session to further shape its workforce, employability and professional development activity across the Employer Partner network.

This will include continued work to strengthen early-career support, improve engagement between employers and education providers, and explore how IChemE can better support mid-career development and progression. Discussions from the session will also inform future Employer Partner meetings, wider workforce planning activity, and future iterations of the IChemE Employment Survey.

The next Employer Partner meeting will take place in June 2026 in Edinburgh, aligned with the Young Engineers Awards for Innovation and Sustainability (YEAIS), and will focus on supporting the next generation of chemical engineers.

IChemE, April 2026.