

SKILLS THE NATION NEEDS

It takes years of training to become a qualified defence engineer like Robert Wood.

His skills and experience ensure the equipment used by our front line forces can meet the demands of modern warfare

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I'm not a number...

I'm a
defence engineer

a job worth doing, not a cash saving

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Keeping our armed forces up to scratch

ROBERT WOOD is employed by the Defence Support Group, an agency of the Ministry of Defence. He trained as an automatic test engineer and debugs test programmes purchased by MOD, but which fail to find faults on avionic systems.

“DSG provides direct support to staff deployed in theatre. I maintain and write software used to repair defence equipment too complicated to repair manually.”

A recent project was to investigate an air data computer, which was causing the flaps of Harrier jets to oscillate in mid-flight. The automatic test equipment (ATE) system used by the RAF contractor had failed to find any faults.

Robert also carried out a feasibility study to take in-house the automatic testing of Typhoon jet avionics. The bid was a reverse engineered solution, as no documentation was supplied from the original manufacturer.

“This resulted in a substantial reduction in the manufacturer’s contract, far outweighing the cost of the bid.

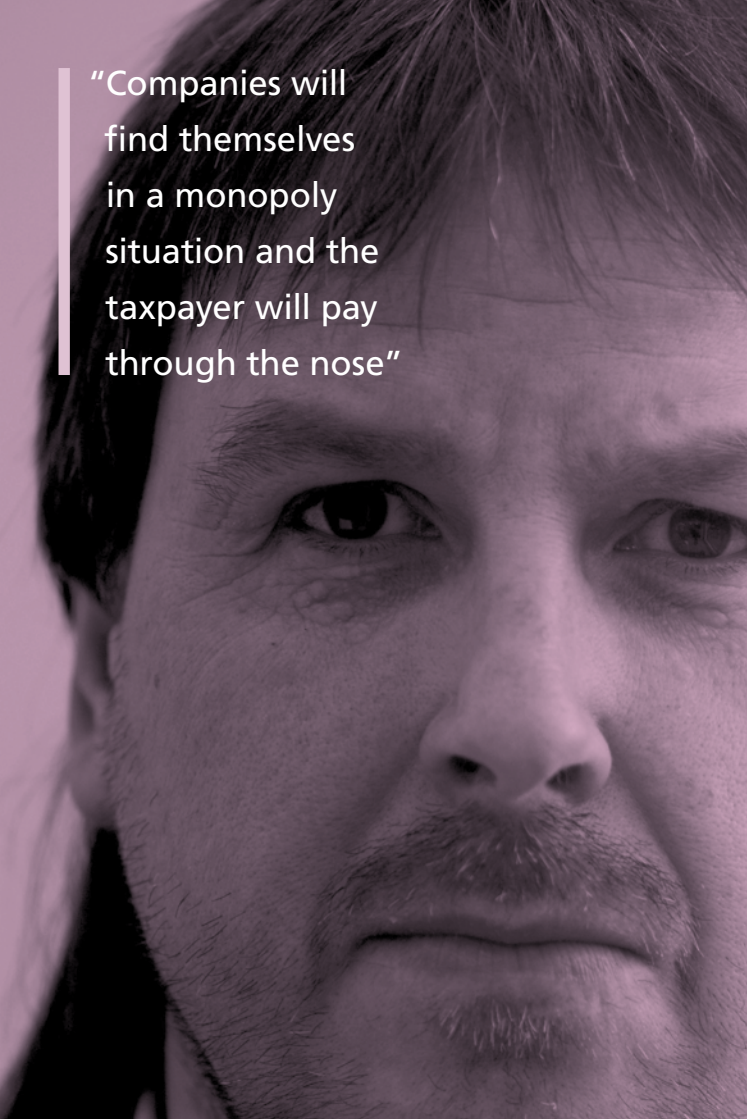


“But because our business model is volume-based, as work declines the only way to ensure a profit is to cut staff. This deters DSG from competing unless there is a high probability of winning. So work on the contract was regarded as a failure by DSG, even though the taxpayer made substantial savings.”

As a trading fund, DSG is to be reviewed to assess its viability for sale, though staff feel strongly that it is in the taxpayer’s best interests that DSG remains in the public sector.

All this makes Rob fear for the future. “Low-volume work will make become unviable because contract set-up costs and the lack of interest from industry make repairs untenable. In turn, this will lead to a loss of military capability as equipment is declared obsolete,” he said.

“Soon there will be no public sector involvement in high-tech maintenance. Because of the increasing complexity of technology and intellectual property rights, companies will find themselves in a monopoly situation and the taxpayer will pay through the nose.”



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Danger: UK defence policy is driven by cuts not strategy

The Strategic Defence and Security Review

of October 2010 left the Ministry of Defence with an 8 per cent budget cut – £5bn over four years. The staffing cuts announced by the Defence Secretary fall disproportionately on MOD civilians with 25,000 people – one-in-three staff – set to lose their jobs.

This figure is a headcount reduction

target, and savings found elsewhere cannot be used to offset staff cuts. Other cost-control measures include: rationalisation of the MOD estate; asset sales – like the Defence Support Group; renegotiating contracts; and reduced spending on allowances and commodities like energy.

Early in 2011 things got worse. Latest calculations ►



► are that MOD will have to find an additional £1.5bn of cuts per year on top of the SDSR reductions in order to plug the funding shortfall.

Since the funding announcement, MOD has been paralysed with inaction over the scale of cuts it must implement.

It has taken four months since the SDSR for unions to secure a meeting with the Secretary of State, Dr Liam Fox, for him to explain where the cuts will fall.

No details are available

of MOD's savings targets, which have only been issued to the eleven top-level budget areas. No reasons have been given for the reductions, other than that they are a 'political imperative.' MOD acknowledges that it is in a pre-redundancy situation, yet it has refused to operate its own redundancy agreement.

At the same time, like the entire defence industry, scientists and engineers in MOD are desperate for it to update its industrial

strategy, on which 300,000 jobs depend. That strategy must be reinvigorated if the UK is to maintain its defence skills and infrastructure. The alternative – an off-the-shelf strategy for procuring defence equipment – would devastate the UK defence industry and exports overseas. If ministers do not get their act together soon, the skills and facilities needed to sustain our defence industry will soon be gone for ever.

It is hard to believe

there is an organisation anywhere that operates a budget of £36bn, employs 85,000 staff and which would embark on such swingeing cuts without any consultation with staff or suppliers.



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