

Groomed for the top from start

ALICE DELAHUNTY, a 24-year-old electrical engineering graduate, has just finished her first year working for Eon UK.

Until last year, Eon, the world's largest private-sector energy-services company, was better known as Powergen. It has ambitious plans to be the world's leading power and gas company.

Delahunty specialised in renewable energy at Dublin university and was attracted by Eon's big wind-turbine project, London Array, that was being built in the Thames estuary. Her recruitment by Eon was straightforward, giving few clues as to what was to come.

"It was focused on my knowledge of the industry," she said. After a telephone interview, a day at an assessment centre and some psychometric tests, she was taken on and put to work at Eon's power consultancy, which acts for outside clients as well its parent.

She knew the company was keen on training and development. "I had expected there would be technical training and standard courses on things like presentation skills," she said. "But it was much more personally focused, with very individual training and development aimed at our strengths and weaknesses."

Delahunty said she was apprehensive about the development scheme at first. "We wondered if we were being assessed merely to determine our potential value to the organisation, but it soon became clear that this was a beneficial exercise to improve our self-awareness."

The development programme has just completed its first year and has another six months to go.

"We decided we really wanted to concentrate on development," said Alex Oakley, head of resourcing at Eon. "As an organisation, we have a strong focus on it, and the graduates

Energy company Eon develops its graduates from day one to make the most of their skills and personal attributes. Report by **Roger Eglin**

are a very important group. They are essential to our future."

In many companies, personal development begins only when people have risen to a certain level in management. But by then it may be too late, said Francesca Buck, a consultant with Kaisen, which worked with Eon on the project. "It's not uncommon for managers in their thirties, forties and fifties to tell us how much they wish they'd had an earlier opportunity to get an understanding of their skills and personality so that they could become more effective. They believe it would have helped them make better career decisions."

Eon shared this view and was keen to start developing its recruits soon after they joined the company. Oakley said: "It was better than waiting until people had got into senior leadership positions and then starting work on it. We wanted to have people working by themselves as soon as they could. In this way we get a balance between skills and personal attributes that helps people to do the job. We don't just concentrate on skills."

Eon sees its graduates as recruits starting on an uncharted journey. They have academic credentials but their potential for deployment as people and future business leaders is unknown. The company wants to overcome this by giving graduates the

opportunity to learn about themselves; to give them a deeper knowledge of who they are and the issues they need to address so they can make the most of their talents.

"Eon really does want to be world class," said Buck. "It has put a huge amount of effort into this. It wants to attract and retain the best talent. This programme demonstrates how firmly it believes that what is coming into the business is the talent, the future leaders. Not many organisations pay that much attention to first-timers."

"Often graduates may have different placements in the business, and because they are only doing them for two or three months, they are regarded as second-class citizens and given a job photocopying," said Buck.

The effort that has gone into graduate development has influenced retention. All 30 graduates hired last year have stayed, and the number taken on this year will rise to 40. This is a considerable benefit as recruiting a graduate costs about £7,000.

"I have been impressed with the level of investment and support Eon UK has given us," said Delahunty. "It's a pleasant surprise for a large company to be so open and caring, and it gives you a personal connection."

The first element in the development programme is a three-day session in which each person is assessed by a business psychologist. Delahunty found this phase "hugely enjoyable". The detailed report she got at the end of it "was scarily accurate", she said.

This phase is followed by the opportunity to take part in a series of placements throughout the business and work on corporate social responsibility projects.

Specific development programmes run in parallel with these placements with the goal of helping the graduates to develop their "personal brand".

Designed by Kaisen, this module



Delahunty: 'We learnt our strengths and how to market ourselves'

includes innovative tools or examines the graduates' "belief systems", helping individuals address any "self-limiting beliefs" that could hold them back from fulfilling their potential.

"Self-awareness is vital in the way we interact with one another," said Buck. "We wanted to help the graduates to find their real selves, discover what motivates them, and identify their natural strengths and potential shortcomings."

Actors came in and looked at the graduates, listening to their voices,

and advising them on how to read their audience when making a presentation.

"We were picking up skills we wouldn't normally expect to have," said Delahunty. "We learnt how to market ourselves, where our strengths lay and how to add value to the company," said Delahunty.

She felt that the past year had opened her eyes to opportunities in Eon. "It changes how you think of your career," she said.