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Five steps to create greater value from your apprenticeship programme

Taking insights from the UK's largest apprentice employers, Howard Grosvenor explains how to create an apprenticeship programme that will recruit and develop enthusiastic and committed young people who will reward you with productivity, engagement and loyalty.



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Apprenticeships are a time-honoured and internationally-recognised option for developing young people. Over 100,000 organisations have already employed apprentices in the UK. With the launch of the Apprenticeship Levy in April 2017, the government aims to inspire more employers to introduce new apprenticeship programmes – or expand their existing ones – to strengthen the economy, deliver the skills that employers need and give more young people a viable alternative to university.

Despite concerns that this 'payroll tax' will lead some organisations to rebrand their graduate schemes and other training as apprenticeship programmes, the Levy has prompted many employers to think afresh about the benefits that apprenticeships can bring. The combination of on-the-job training in your organisation with off-the-job learning offers an attractive way to grow your own talent. An apprentice's learning takes place in your work context, so it provides an opportunity to develop the industry-specific expertise you need now and in the future.

From our experience of working with large employers of apprentices in the UK – including Airbus, BAE Systems, Dixons Carphone, Laing O'Rourke, O2 (Telefónica), Rolls-Royce and Tata Steel – here are five steps that will help you to create and manage an apprenticeship programme that delivers significant value:

- 1. Design the role.** Think clearly about the exact role/s that you'd like apprentices to undertake. In which areas of your organisation will they work? Where is the greatest need internally and what tasks you want them to complete? Think about the skills, competencies and technical/practical knowledge they'll need in order to do this and the learning and development they'll require. Consider who will support them and how you'll manage that. Also think about exactly what you'll offer that would entice apprentices to join you and how you'll integrate them into your organisation.

Apprenticeships can be applied to almost any job role and there are statutory requirements that apprenticeship programmes in England and Wales must meet. Job data from the O*NET database (www.onetonline.org) may help you create your job descriptions. However, your apprenticeship programme will only add value to your organisation if you think-through all of these issues at the outset and identify how apprentice training will align with your business objectives, complement your skills base and meet your future needs.

- 2. Foster an environment in which your apprentices can thrive.** It's essential to get the buy-in for your programme from the senior leaders and managers in your organisation and any trade unions. Create a convincing business case and communicate the benefits of apprenticeships to all staff. Line managers will need support to help them manage young people who are new to the world of work. If this is your first apprenticeship programme, it could create a cultural change in your organisation. Think through how you will manage that and how you will establish and maintain the 'conditions' in your workplace that are conducive to success.
- 3. Recruit the right apprentices.** The ultimate way that you'll achieve value from your apprenticeship programme is by recruiting the right people. However, recruiting apprentices is a different proposition from recruiting other staff. Because they're usually school leavers, your candidates will all have similar qualifications and they're unlikely to have much previous work experience (if any), which makes it difficult for them to answer competency-based questions at an interview. Essentially, you want to know how well they match the role, whether they'll fit within your culture and whether they'll feel engaged and motivated to achieve their potential in your organisation.

Their behaviour will depend on their values and their attitude to learning. This will be reflected in aspects such as their reliability, punctuality and conscientiousness. Depending on the role, there may be other behaviours you require, such as teamwork or creative thinking. Assessments that identify job-related selection criteria that are relevant to the requirements of the role – such as values and interests based questionnaires, ability tests, personality measures and situational judgement questionnaires – can help you make objective and informed selection decisions.

Ensure your assessments are acceptable, realistic and engaging for candidates. For example, new customisable situational judgement games in the style of WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger are now available for mobile devices. Because young people are comfortable using instant messaging to communicate in everyday life, these assessments have a strong appeal for candidates.

Check if any recruitment stipulations apply to your candidates. For example, to qualify for the Apprenticeship Levy, candidates must have been UK residents for at least three years.

It is important to undertake 'fair testing' to avoid unfair discrimination, bias or adverse impact in recruitment and to attract a wide talent pool. Groups of test takers must not be disadvantaged in their access to your assessments. Ensure your job advertisements don't contain images or descriptions that might alienate potential applicants. Best practice is to treat each candidate well, even if you're going to reject them, as you have a moral duty not to undermine their confidence.

If your organisation offers several apprenticeship schemes, this creates a challenge of choice for young and inexperienced candidates. To help, employers such as Siemens have created an online 'pre-application' assessment that analyses an individual's preferences and strengths and guides them by suggesting which apprenticeship programme is best suited to them. This helps to populate your applicant pool for each apprenticeship with better-suited candidates.

- 4. Manage the relationships.** When your successful recruits start work, provide an effective induction to the role, the team and the organisation. Ensure they understand their duties, their line of authority and their pastoral care options. Consider instigating a buddy and a mentor for each new starter, to help them settle in, adapt to the workplace and quickly contribute to the business.

Support your line managers in managing the performance of apprentices and provide appropriate on- and off-the-job training and development to grow their capabilities and meet their needs. Your managers may need additional training in aspects such as coaching and mentoring skills to help them deliver this.

- 5. Reap the rewards.** Having invested in the bespoke development your apprentices, allow them to utilise their skills. This is where the value of your investment will pay dividends. An apprenticeship programme enables you to develop enthusiastic and committed young people who will learn to work 'your way'. They get to know your organisation inside and out and – if you let them – they'll reward you with productivity, engagement and loyalty. Ensure each individual has a personal development plan to continue their learning and retain their services by offering them opportunities to develop and progress their careers.

In summary, the best way to create value from your apprenticeship programme is to design it effectively, to create a conducive work environment and to recruit the right people into the right positions who are the right fit for the organisation. Then it's simply a case of managing them effectively and reaping the rewards.



About the author Howard Grosvenor

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Founded in 2002, *cut-e* is a world leader in the design and implementation of innovative online tests, questionnaires and gamified assessments for attraction, recruitment, selection and development. We help employers to identify which candidates have the right capabilities, potential and cultural fit to benefit their business. We undertake 12 million assessments each year in over 70 countries and 40 languages.

What is the Apprenticeship Levy?

From April 2017, public, private and not-for-profit employers in the UK with a payroll of over £3m will be required to pay 0.5 per cent of their payroll bill (less an allowance of £15,000) into an online account. For every £1 they pay in, the government will contribute an additional 10p. But these funds must be spent within 18 months on apprenticeship-based training. For employers with a payroll of less than £3m, the government will co-invest in their apprenticeship programme.