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Developing talent through apprenticeships

The changing economy means that apprenticeships are undergoing reform and development. How can HR departments use this growth to develop their employee talent?

Long gone are the days when an apprenticeship meant a fresh-faced 16 year old on a building site. A changing economy means that apprenticeships in England are undergoing reform, and more businesses across a variety of sectors will be developing their workforce through these programmes.

The Government has confirmed its commitment to apprenticeships by setting a target of three million new starts by 2020, and will double spending in comparison to 2010-11 - raising £3 billion in the UK with the newly introduced levy. The reform aims to ensure apprenticeships are high quality, placing employers in charge of the design and delivery, and positioning the relationship between the apprentice and the employer at the core. Replacing the current standards will be levels of skills, knowledge and competency required in an occupation, which have been identified by the 140 employer-led groups known as

'trailblazers'. As part of these changes, an increasing number of Higher Apprenticeships have been launched in a range of career areas, such as aerospace engineering, nuclear, construction, accounting and management.

This growth means that more businesses will be thinking about how they can use apprenticeships to develop the talent they need in their organisations, including the up-skilling of existing employees. But for these schemes to be properly effective for businesses, the apprentice must get the best learning experience possible in the workplace.

To explore this issue, we recently surveyed 250 Advanced and Higher apprentices to provide insight into how they are managed in the workplace and what this means for their learning, performance, underlying job competence and core skills.

When looking at the findings, it became

apparent that a challenging, supportive and empowering work environment is a crucial element of apprentices' learning and one factor influenced their experience more than others - the role of their line manager.

Supervisor support was considered essential when it came to transferring the theoretical knowledge learned at university or college to formal training in the workplace.

As key figures in presenting apprentices with a positive learning environment, it is important that line managers are involved in the planning and delivery of the apprenticeship. This not only fosters a commitment to the programme, but their close involvement also helps organisations to secure the best results possible and develop talent aligned with the business strategy.

Affirming the advice of the CIPD's 2014 Apprenticeships That Work

report, the role of the line manager should include giving the apprentices work which will stretch their abilities and in turn identify potential skills which align with business needs. Similarly, providing apprentices with the right level of responsibility and independence can support them in developing their skills and grow into competent professionals.

When it comes to new or inexperienced employees joining the organisation as apprentices, the findings showed that support from other colleagues is also an exceptionally important factor in contributing to their performance. This includes sharing experiences and recognition of what the apprentice was expected to contribute to the team.

There is also a positive association between support and challenges. In a supportive environment, apprentices are more likely

to perceive challenging tasks involving problem solving and experimenting as positive developmental opportunities.

The availability of feedback and good levels of communication are also important to the apprentices we questioned. They value the opportunity to ask questions and receive constructive feedback on a regular basis as part of their learning and development. Investment in this type of formal training can be a considerable amount, particularly when it comes to Higher Apprenticeships where university tuition fees need to be covered, so it's imperative that apprenticeships work for the business.

With the current reform placing employers in the driving seat of the design of apprenticeship standards to guarantee that training is responsive to business needs, organisations must

address front line management involvement to maximise apprentices' learning in the workplace. The most telling - and we would argue, crucial - implications of our work are as follows:

- The senior team needs to involve line managers in the planning and delivery of apprenticeship programmes
- Line managers and more experienced colleagues should offer plenty of opportunities for apprentices to ask for and receive constructive feedback
- The management team has to craft each apprentice's workload to ensure the right level of challenge, responsibility and autonomy
- Help apprentices to understand the values and goals of the organizational as a whole, to allow them to align their skills with business needs



Helen says that it is important that line managers are involved in the planning, searching and delivery of the apprenticeship.