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Using a life coach to support apprentices: Inter Training Services

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Brief description

This example demonstrates how an independent 'life coach' working with learners identified as having personal challenges can improve their prospects, and lead to successful completion of apprenticeship programmes.

Overview – the provider's message

'Like most work-based learning providers some of our learners have personal problems that are taking their mind off training and work. Our trainers/assessors (TAs) provide as much sympathy, help and time as they can. However, dealing with issues such as deaths in the family, personal relationships or leaving home is complex. Learners can be deeply affected, and the TAs are stretched in terms of their time and expertise. To support learners, we introduced the services of a 'life coach' who works with the most difficult cases, not just to explore solutions but to help learners help themselves. It is at no cost to our company as we claim additional funds for this service. As a result, more learners stay on programme, our success rates have improved, employers are happy with the additional support their staff receive, TAs can focus more on training and assessment and – perhaps most importantly – the young people are better placed to get on with their lives'.



Lesley Ellis, Director

The good practice in detail

Two years ago, success rates were low and TAs were facing increasing pressures to deal with young hairdressing apprentices' ever more complex personal problems. In addition some

employers, in difficult economic times, could not always afford the time and flexibility to support their young staff as they had previously.

As part of the solution, ITS decided to use an independent 'life coach' to work with some learners. Two years later the life coach has worked with nearly 30 young people, virtually all of whom have gone on to complete their apprenticeships, partly because they are more able to cope with personal challenges in their lives. Ofsted inspectors commended this approach in the 2011 inspection [report](#), which said: '...a specialist "life coach" is used well to support learners with specific personal problems'.

A specialist and experienced 'life coach', [Kay Bolton](#), was employed by the company. She happens to have a background in hairdressing, ITS's main programme, but this is not critical although it saves some time explaining the context. She explains: 'Lots of young people know what they don't want – not all young people know what they want, or how to focus on themselves not others'.

Referrals

The 'life coach' is alerted to potential clients by the TAs. Formal referral to the life coach is made by a manager who is also the designated person for safeguarding issues; an additional benefit as some of the problems may require safeguarding action as well. The TAs have been briefed about the life coach's work, and meet her at quarterly review meetings. Salons and learners also have general information about the service through employers' initial information packs and in learner induction, where it is covered in a safeguarding exercise. Referrals may be made at an early stage of the programme, or when significant events occur. The majority of the cases arise about a third of the way through the programme, possibly because by then the TAs have established enough of a relationship for learners to start discussing concerns. The main issues include learners' living environment, personal relationships, debt and self-confidence.



Kay Bolton

Working with learners

When Kay is alerted to a potential new case she sets up an initial meeting with the learner. Meetings almost always take place off the work premises, and often in learners' own time. A neutral meeting place gives a degree of privacy and focus, and the timing demonstrates a commitment by the learner. 'The coffee bar seems to be a welcome feature of our meetings!' says Kay.

For 16–18-year-old learners, parental consent is encouraged, but is optional. If the initial meeting suggests that there are problems that could be helped by further meetings then a programme is agreed. A confidentiality contract is signed although this includes a reference to safeguarding aspects where confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Meetings follow at roughly monthly intervals, until the learner feels confident to move on, or the training programme finishes.

‘The best programmes do not just help the learner get through their apprenticeship; they help them approach the rest of their life with more self-confidence and a greater ability to tackle their problems themselves.’

ITS bids for additional social needs funding from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), as outlined in the [SFA guidance](#). In exceptional circumstances the learner may, either initially or as the sessions continue, be referred to therapists or other specialists.

For the majority of learners the sessions themselves are effective enough. The emphasis is, as Kay says, on: 'Raising their awareness of how to take responsibility for their own behaviour'.

The sessions may include specific advice on such things as benefits, budgeting, or housing but generally learners are encouraged to seek that advice themselves. The key to this approach is coaching not welfare support. Full discussions of learners' perceived or actual problems result in identification of possible options. There may be exercises, such as goal-setting, and every session ends with targets in the form of an agreement: 'What are you going to do...?' The programme is evaluated every three months, and is only continued if the learner feels that they are benefiting. There is also an end of programme evaluation.

And learners benefit from this approach. One said: 'The coaching has made a big difference and helped me through a really bad patch. I was ready to give up and leave the salon because I just couldn't cope with all that was going on. I can see now that I had become quite a pain to work with – I was often late and took odd days off which made the other assistants dislike me. Kay helped me get myself sorted out and I really enjoy going into work again and I will complete my apprenticeship on target.' Another added: 'I wasn't sure what to expect when I saw Kay at first and I was a bit nervous but she is friendly and told me how it works. It was hard sometimes to put it all into words but the exercises helped and Kay is really patient and nice.' A third commented that: 'It all got on top of me and I was about to leave hairdressing when my TA said I should see Kay. Kay helped me see things differently and made me realise there was stuff I could do which would change things for the better. My personal life is a lot better than what it was and I'm focused on getting my level 2 and going on to the advanced apprenticeship. My boss says I'm like a different person and more confident.'

Confidentiality and progress monitoring

Safeguarding aside, the sessions are confidential. However, Kay uses an electronic visit log to record the actual event and any significant points that can be shared. When she attends the quarterly meetings to discuss learner progress she will hear about other aspects of a learner's programme, and will remind TAs in general terms of the work she is doing with their learner. Salon owners will usually be aware of the programme, and in many cases they are delighted to have the additional personal support. However, again confidentiality has its place, and if all the meetings are outside normal working hours there may be no need to involve the salon – unless the learner wishes it (for example, when coping with a death in the family).



Beverley Slynn

The impact

The 'life coach' has been a great success in helping young people whose circumstances may make them vulnerable through a difficult period in their lives. It has been a contributory factor in success rates rising by around 10 percentage points in two years. Beverley Slynn, the Finance and Contracts Manager, explains: 'Coaching support for our most vulnerable

learners makes so much sense. It has improved our success rates and is a good selling point to employers and learners.'

Provider background

Inter Training Services Limited (ITS) is based in Horndean, near Portsmouth, and specialises in delivering intermediate and advanced apprenticeship programmes in hairdressing for businesses in Surrey, Berkshire and Hampshire.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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