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Working with employers to support apprentices through mentoring: Outsource Vocational Learning Ltd

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Brief description

This example explains how Outsource Vocational Learning Ltd trains employers' supervisors and other staff to provide mentoring support for apprentices. Since the scheme was introduced, retention has improved significantly.

Overview – the provider's message

'We used to have issues with some apprentices in the first few months – things that started out as little niggles, but then grew to become real problems. We identified that the problem was often that the staff in direct contact with the apprentices – their supervisors and colleagues – did not understand the training programme. We had buy-in from directors, but they had not always cascaded what we told them.

So we piloted awareness sessions with managers and other staff, and the feedback both from staff and the apprentices was so positive, we just had to roll it out to all our employers. It's expensive but the savings in time and frustration are enormous and well worth it. And there has been a dramatic improvement in retention – from about 68% before to 94% now.'



Nichola Hay, Director

The good practice in detail

Background

When apprenticeship training providers start working with a new employer, they are often reluctant to impose too many burdens on them. It seems simpler to suggest that they will deal with the intricacies of preparing the apprentice for assessment – the employer’s role is to provide the training that the apprentice needs to do their job, and opportunities for the assessor to observe the apprentice at work. But Outsource’s approach is different. They insist that employers are trained in the detail of how the apprenticeship programme works, and that they provide trained mentors to support the apprentice in the workplace. When Ofsted inspectors saw how well this was working, they were impressed. In their [report](#) they wrote: ‘OVL works very well with prestigious employers to establish an infrastructure that provides very effective workplace support, with training for mentors and line managers...learners benefit from well-coordinated support from trainers, assessors and employers...’

Explaining the principles

[Awareness raising sessions](#) for new employers explain the principles behind the mentoring arrangements. The main points are:

- the training is compulsory for employers’ staff working with apprentices
- the ‘mentor’ role can be filled by different people, but must not be the learner’s line manager
- the ‘mentor’ role is a good professional development opportunity – experience has shown that when people are trained to understand the role, they enjoy it and perform better
- the structure of the programme and its assessment methods makes it easier for colleagues to understand how apprentices are progressing and support them in the workplace.

Adapting the training



The approach is tailored to each employers’ needs. For example, some companies have ‘buddies’ rather than mentors. In others, learners might rotate round different departments during their apprenticeship, in which case managers from each department will need to understand the apprenticeship programme. [Workshop materials](#) are designed to reflect the identity of the employer and to support the specific role of mentor in each workplace. For some employers, [newsletters](#) are used to support mentors after their initial training.

Linking in-house and provider training

An improved understanding of the programme means that managers can participate more effectively in reviews of learners’ progress. In one company, the reviews provide an opportunity for a structured handover as the apprentice moves from one department to another. As well as the employer and the learner commenting on what has been learned so far, the incoming manager outlines the skills which will be needed for the new role, so the assessor can plan training to fill any gaps.

Apprentices are required to complete a [notebook](#) each day, outlining the tasks they have completed and reflecting on their learning. This helps them to prepare for assessment, as

they can go back over the experiences they have had at work which will form their evidence of competence. As part of their training, supervisors and mentors are told how to support their apprentices with writing up their notebooks, and what sort of content they should expect to see.

Provider background

[Outsource Vocational Learning](#) is a large national training provider, with sites at Hayes, Twickenham, Swindon and Heathrow Airport.

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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