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Effective planning of work-based learning to achieve rapid progress and timely completion: Mercedes-Benz UK Limited

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Brief description

This case study explains how Mercedes-Benz plans and manages apprentice training so that apprentices quickly develop skills and knowledge, collect evidence towards their qualification, progress rapidly through their programme and complete on time.

Overview – the provider’s message

‘We wanted to provide greater clarity for learners, mentors and employers about how an apprentice’s progress at the Academy is linked to their workplace development.

Using the scheme of work for off-the-job delivery as a starting point we introduced workplace action plans that clearly demonstrate how evidence and observations are scheduled when learning has been completed. This enables mentors to support the embedding of learners’ knowledge and skills prior to assessment, by providing access to the tasks at the appropriate time.

This approach has led to good progress and productive apprentices from a very early stage in their programme and contributes to our outstanding learner outcomes and success rates.’



Helen Taylor, Apprentice Programme Operations Manager

The good practice in detail

Background

Mercedes-Benz trains about 180 apprentices a year to work in their franchised dealership network throughout the UK. About 75% of dealers have apprentices who are recruited jointly by the dealership and Mercedes-Benz through the national apprenticeship website.

Apprentices are employed by their local dealership and attend the Mercedes-Benz academy in Milton Keynes for around ten, one-week blocks of training each year. Assessors visit the apprentices at work to review their progress and assess their competence.

Smart planning

The programme is highly structured and meticulously planned. Each apprentice's programme is planned in detail from the beginning, including the subjects they will study during each block of training, when this training will take place and the actions required of their employer to reinforce this training back in the workplace. This allows Mercedes-Benz to accurately predict completion dates and achieve very good timely success rates.

Apprentices are initially surprised how quickly they develop new skills and get involved in servicing and repairing vehicles. But, as Helen Taylor explains: 'This is because we designed the programme that way. The programme is highly structured to ensure that apprentices work to their full potential and progress as fast as they are able.'

Action planning and review

Each apprentice completes a series of 14 workplace action plans during their apprenticeship; the first seven to achieve their level 2 qualification and the rest to achieve their level 3 qualification and complete their apprenticeship. The action plans are sequential and identify what skills the apprentice needs to practice, the evidence to collect for their qualification and the assessment activities required in the workplace.

The action plans contain the core activities all apprentices need to do to complete their apprenticeship and are supplemented with additional personal actions that are appropriate to each individual and their workplace. The core activities are closely aligned to the apprentice's Individual Learning Plan and to the theory and skills that they will study.

The programme is highly structured to ensure that apprentices work to their full potential and progress as fast as they are able.

Each apprentice is given a new action plan every time their assessor visits the workplace to review their progress. They review how well they have progressed with the previous plan and the clear expectation is

that all actions will have been completed. Review dates are carefully designed to drive progress and are usually about two weeks after each of the block training periods.

At the end of each block of training, a progress record is updated to show exactly what has been completed. Assessors, carrying out progress reviews in the workplace, know exactly what has been completed, and how well it was done.

At first sight, this appears to be overly structured as all apprentices follow a similar programme and assessment sequence and progress at similar rates. However, as Helen Taylor explains: 'Apprentices are recruited for their ability and expected to progress at a good rate. This simply reflects the minimum rate they should work at. Apprentices are encouraged to progress more quickly and to undertake additional skills where this is appropriate. The programme ensures that they progress at least at the rate that they are capable and maintains a good momentum.'

A quick start and continuing the momentum



The apprentices quickly begin working on vehicles and collecting evidence for their qualifications. Within two months of starting their programme they will have undertaken induction, attended their first week of training at the Academy and begun working on their first action plan.

Des James, an assessor explains: 'As soon as an apprentice joins the programme we give them and their employer the plan of training dates, and set out their first action plan. Initially, this relates to safe working and a few simple tasks, but as soon as they have

completed their first training block, they have a review and are given their first action sheet. Within days of becoming an apprentice, they are working on vehicles in the workshop. Within a few weeks they are beginning to build up evidence of what they can do.'

And this momentum is maintained throughout the programme.

Des James continues: 'If one of the assessors is not available, or someone else needs to take over an apprentice it is absolutely clear what they have done, what they are working on and what they need to do next. No time is lost at any point in the programme.'

Employers are well aware that both they and the apprentices are accountable for achieving the action plan by the next progress review. This ensures that employers focus closely on the development needs of the apprentice and that they balance the workload of the apprentice to both contribute to the needs of the business and to extend their skills. At every review the assessor, apprentice and employer are left with a clear understanding of what has been done, where the apprentice is in their programme and what to do next.

Progression from level 2 to level 3 is seamless. As soon as one action plan is complete the apprentice moves on to the next one. The progression from the final action plan



for their level 2 qualification is immediately followed by the first action plan for their level 3 qualification.

Inevitably, there are circumstances where an apprentice is unable to attend their planned training or are off work for some time. However, the programme is sufficiently flexible to accommodate this as each block of training is repeated a number of times for different groups of learners. If an apprentice misses their block of training they can catch up by joining another group for that module.

Support from employers

It is critical that employers support their apprentices to complete the actions set for them. Each franchised dealer has a nominated mentor for apprentices. This individual is responsible for the apprentice's progress and training while at work and Mercedes-Benz provides a comprehensive training programme to support them. Mentors have a very good understanding of the demands and content of the apprenticeship programme. The mentor is given a copy of the action plan after each training period and an updated copy of the apprentice's progress record. This allows the mentor to ensure that the skills and knowledge covered in the academy are reinforced and assessed in the workplace.

Des James explains: 'It works really, really well. The tasks apprentices need to do are in the front of everyone's minds so as soon as a vehicle is booked into the garage with work that will help the apprentice gather evidence, the mentor and workshop manager know to assign the apprentice to that job.'



There is no guarantee that the type of work an apprentice needs to practice will be available in the planned time. However, the close involvement of the mentor and the clear planning process helps to ensure that this is not a problem that results in slow progress or apprentices getting towards the end of their programme and missing out on some competencies. Mentors know the programme and have available to them the full set of action plans, and in particular the next few, so that they can always find useful work for apprentices that will

build on and extend their skills. This ensures that apprentices continue to develop and progress even if directly relevant tasks are not available.

In addition to the minimum requirements of the national apprenticeship framework, apprentices undertake a series of computer-based learning packages to enhance their understanding of the vehicles they work on, the company, and the opportunities available to them. These are sequenced throughout the apprenticeship and identified on their action plans.

Rob Rushby, workshop supervisor at Mercedes-Benz Milton Keynes, explains how the dealerships regard the programme: 'We want a fully operational technician as soon as possible. We need to focus on the planned tasks to enable this, whilst ensuring that the apprentice continues to be as fully productive as possible during their apprenticeship. So it's in everyone's interest to complete the tasks set.'

Coordinating on- and off-the job training

Detailed and meticulous planning ensures that on- and off-the-job training are closely aligned. The action plans that apprentices follow at work are designed to ensure that the skills developed during off-the-job training are practised, developed and assessed in the two-month period following the block training. This careful sequencing ensures that apprentices are able to extend and develop what they have learnt and are not expected to undertake tasks for which they have not been fully trained. Assessors visit each apprentice at work soon after they return from their block training to review their progress and set targets based on their new skills and knowledge. This is explained to their employer and there is a clear expectation that these actions will be completed by the next review. Ongoing actions from previous reviews are rare and lead to actions to address slow progress. This clear expectation by all of those involved that actions agreed will be completed and that work will be planned to ensure successful completion result in a culture where apprentices take responsibility for their training, are accountable for their work and take pride in what they do.

Provider background

Mercedes-Benz UK Limited has its headquarters in Milton Keynes and is engaged in the import and distribution of passenger cars, light and heavy commercial vehicles and spare parts. The company started an apprentice programme in 1995, managed through external training providers. In 2008, the company expanded its training division to incorporate delivery of apprenticeships internally. Mercedes-Benz UK Limited offers motor vehicle apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships to its franchised retail dealership network across England, Wales and Scotland. At the most recent [inspection](#) in November 2012, Mercedes-Benz UK Limited was judged to be good.

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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