Learning targets
moving individual learners forward

**What?**
- find out learners’ goals
- agree targets
- agree an action plan
- check that targets are met.

**Why?**
Having targets gives people something to aim at. Learning targets help to raise the expectations and motivation of learners. They provide something against which the learning can be measured and give a basis for improvements.

There are clear benefits to setting individual learners targets and measuring their progress against the targets:
- Learning is generally more successful when learners have specific targets.
- Carefully planned and achievable targets motivate learners.
- Targets for individual learners focus on improvements in their performance, not on comparisons with others.
- Clear targets with sensible time limits help learners to plan learning better.
- Achieving one target is a springboard for learners to move on to the next.

Despite the proven value of targets as a way of moving learners forward, they are not always used effectively.

> Too few learners were set clear short-term learning targets . . . learners were not set targets to help them move systematically and efficiently towards qualification . . . learners were uncertain as to what supervisors wanted them to do before the next review. Many learners failed to reach their target.


Inspectors evaluate learners’ success in achieving challenging targets, including their progress towards qualifications and other learning goals. Employers and providers should do the same.

Setting targets for individual learners is not the same as setting targets for retention or achievement for a course team, or the whole organisation. That’s important and is dealt with in the factsheet entitled ‘Retention and achievement’. This one concentrates on setting targets for individual learners as a way of encouraging them to move forward in their learning – and of course this will contribute to the organisation’s targets.

As with most other aspects of learning, targets work best if learners are closely involved in setting them and reviewing their own progress. The skill needed by managers and staff who support learners is in helping learners to get the right balance between targets that are challenging and achievable.

**Key facts**
- Where targets are set for learners, there are noticeable improvements in retention and achievement.
- Setting and monitoring targets for learners also helps to focus the support given to the learning.
How?

Find out learners’ goals

It’s useful to distinguish between long-term and shorter-term goals. Someone starting on a Modern Apprenticeship (MA) in motor vehicle maintenance might have ambitions like these:

- to become a qualified mechanic
- to become the service manager for a supplier of prestige cars
- to set up their own motor car repair and servicing business.

These are long-term, general goals. Not everyone has them, and some people who do have goals like these don’t want to talk about them. But they can be motivating, as long as they are not completely unrealistic, and it might help to know about them.

The same apprentice might have these medium-term goals:

- to get experience in a good garage
- to learn about the business side of vehicle maintenance as well as the technical side
- to complete the MA framework in two years.

It is definitely useful to know whether someone has goals like these, and to encourage them. Some young people will be used to thinking about goals as part of completing a record of achievement or Progress File at school. Employers and providers should ask about these when they interview potential learners.

Agree targets

It’s a good idea to start talking the language of targets with learners early on. One way of doing this is to engage learners in setting target dates for completing all the different components in their individual learning plan.

Short-term target setting can also be introduced early on. For example, the initial assessment carried out by the motor vehicle apprentice might show the need to improve writing and IT skills. One specific area for improvement could be to use formats consistently when presenting written materials. An early target for this learner might therefore be:

- use a word processor to produce a well formatted agenda for a team meeting and a covering letter to accompany it (one side of A4 for each).

Targets can also be set for processes that underpin learning, such as attendance, punctuality, completion of work on time, take up of learning support and so on. These targets may be especially useful for learners early on in their programmes.

Targets should be measurable. Ways of measuring performance include:

- grades or marks achieved by learners in assignments or tests
- an assessment of competence in carrying out a task
- a specified outcome achieved by a particular time.

In general, targets should be set at the minimum level that learners are expected to achieve, to give them the best chance of success. It’s extra cause for celebration if learners exceed the minimum. It also suggests that the next set of targets might be a touch more stretching.
When setting targets, employers and providers should give learners as much help as they need without taking over the process. Learners benefit from having the scope to explore their own strengths and limitations, and developing targets is part of this.

**Agree an action plan**

Once a target has been set, the next stage is to agree with learners how, when and where the learning will take place. There may also be discussions at this stage about any equipment and resources needed.

In the example given above, the apprentice might agree to:

- complete a worksheet in their spare time
- attend a one-hour training session to practise the skills and get feedback
- collect information from the work supervisor about the content of the next team meeting to provide relevant content for the agenda
- ask their supervisor to check the draft agenda before producing the final version.

These are all very specific actions that can be carried out in a short space of time. The level of detail needed in specifying the actions depends on a number of factors, including:

- how complex the task is
- how challenging it is – if the learner has done similar tasks before, less detail should be needed
- the learner’s confidence and skills in managing their own learning.

**Check that targets are met**

Learners need to know whether their efforts have been successful. Time should be built in for assessing learners’ work and talking with them about it. The process, known as formative assessment, benefits learning by:

- encouraging useful, productive dialogue between learners and the people supporting them
- helping learners to reflect on progress and take control of their own learning
- confirming that they are on the right track and that progress has been made
- providing the opportunity to make suggestions for further improvement.

At this stage, learners and providers can reposition the targets if necessary, or set new ones. Sometimes targets are missed and have to be re-set, perhaps using different approaches to learning. At other times learners may have reached all their targets and it’s time for the next challenge.

Learners themselves play a vital role when assessing whether targets have been met. Providers can help learners get better at this by suggesting a framework for self-assessment. For example, learners can be encouraged to ask questions like the ones shown below.

### Self-assessment questions

- Am I making good, reasonable or slow progress with this task?
- Is there anything I can do to improve my progress?
- Is there anything else I need from someone else, e.g. my tutor or supervisor?
- Are there any bits of the task I don’t understand or can’t do properly?
- Is there something about my approach to the task that needs to change?

Playing an active part in thinking about and moving their own learning forward is almost always a good motivator for learners.
When and where?

Setting and monitoring learning targets is a continuous process. The first targets should be set early on, before the learner’s first review, and the cycle should be repeated constantly until the learner has completed their programme.

Because they happen regularly, reviews are a good opportunity to set and monitor targets for learning. Assessment visits in the workplace are another opportunity. Learners may benefit from more frequent opportunities to check and re-set their learning, e.g. at the start, if they are finding it hard going, or when they are coming to the end of their programme.

Case studies and examples

Setting targets for learning

One employer has identified target-setting as an area for improvement with their modern apprentices. The training manager explains the steps taken to make improvements.

“Someone mentioned that schools are using the new Progress File. I didn’t know much about this and how it works, so I did my own research on the website and found a report showing the benefits and conditions for success.

A lot of the materials are free and I placed an order for a CD and training pack for staff. We decided to pilot the use of Progress File with a small group of apprentices on Foundation Modern Apprenticeships. Agreeing targets has been very rewarding and motivating for these learners. We have also seen how this relates to the key skill of ‘Improving own learning and performance.’”

The company approaches target-setting in a different way with learners on Advanced Modern Apprenticeship programmes. All the learning and assessment is in the workplace. Learners are set targets, which are recorded on ‘index cards’ attached to the front of the learners’ portfolios so they are visible. When a learner is assessed, the target is either signed off or amended. This is a different process from the more formal review carried out every three months.

Resources


Stay in touch

- www.lsc.gov.uk

Checklist

- Are your learners set challenging learning goals and targets?
- Are the targets clear and specific?
- Are there action plans showing how learners will work towards the targets?
- Are learners set targets as part of reviews, and is their progress monitored at the next review?
- Is your current assessment practice effective in monitoring progress and informing individual learners about how they might develop further?
- What role do learners play in setting targets and monitoring their own progress?

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