Retention and achievement focusing on success

What?
- measure success
- raise expectations
- focus on retention
- focus on achievement.

Why?
Learners’ achievements are an important measure of success in work-based learning. In its broadest sense, ‘achievement’ is anything a learner gains by being on a programme. For some learners, turning up to work on time, staying there for a whole day and working productively may be a considerable achievement. Achievement may also be defined by qualifications.

Retention relates closely to achievement. In general, the longer learners stay on a programme, the more likely they are to achieve their goals. By definition, learners who leave before they complete the programme will not have achieved all their outcomes.

It is a priority to improve both retention and achievement rates in work-based learning.

Virtually everything an employer or provider does with learners has an impact on retention and achievement, either positive or negative. It’s essential to find out why learners stay and succeed, and why they leave. It should then be possible to accentuate the positive features of the programme and reduce the negative features.

- What would a more retention and achievement-centred marketing process look like?
- What would retention and achievement-centred initial assessment include?
- How can learner reviews become better focused on achievement?
- Are assessments and reviews planned with achievement in mind?

Key facts
- According to the Adult Learning Inspectorate, the average proportion of learners who achieved their full Modern Apprenticeship (MA) framework between April 2002 and June 2003 was 37%.
- When employers trained their own staff, the average achievement rate was 68%.
- The minimum targets for success rates set by the Learning and Skills Council for 2005-06 for achieving NVQs are 35% or 40%, depending on the area of learning.
- On average, 47% of learners were still in learning at the end of the planned duration of their programme, or had already achieved by then.
- Learners who leave programmes early, and have not been credited for the NVQ units they have achieved, leave without anything to show for the skills they have developed.

“...the Government believes that it is essential to accelerate the pace of reform to raise standards in the learning and skills sector so that success is achievable for all learners, regardless of where they live or with which publicly-funded provider they are enrolled.”

DfES (2002) Success for All

DfES (2002) Success for All
How?

Measure success

There are three main ways of measuring achievement:

- qualifications gained by an individual during their time on a programme
- other outcomes gained, such as goals in individual learning plans
- ‘distance travelled’ (sometimes referred to as ‘added value’).

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) asks providers to measure their success rates in terms of qualifications and outcomes. There are two measures of success in Modern Apprenticeships (MA):

- The proportion of learners leaving in the contract year that have gained the full MA framework.
- The proportion of learners leaving in the year that have gained the NVQ at the level set in the framework.

Learners’ success can also be measured in terms of the distance travelled on their programmes. This equates to the value ‘added’ by the employer or provider. Examples of distance travelled measures are:

- units of a qualification achieved
- achieved goals in the individual learning plan
- skills and knowledge developed, e.g. specific aspects of the standards for adult literacy or numeracy.

A measurement of the distance travelled by an individual learner can quite easily be extracted from progress reviews and other learner records. Using this information, it is possible to calculate the distance travelled for all learners in any period. Such a calculation would be useful in showing the achievements gained by learners who leave the programme early, without all or any of the full outcomes they were aiming to achieve.

Retention is defined as the proportion of learners starting a programme that are still in learning. Retention rates are often calculated on an annual basis. For example, if 100 learners join a programme in any one year and 15 leave before the end of the year without achieving their full outcomes, the retention rate is 85%. If in the subsequent year, a further 20 learners leave without achieving their outcomes, the retention rate for that group of learners is 65%. Retention rates for groups (cohorts) of learners can be aggregated to give an overall rate for the organisation as a whole.

Raise expectations

The key messages from successful work-based learning are:

- Know your learners and their working environment.
- Support them and raise their expectations, both of you and themselves.
- Establish a shared vision for achievement.
- Go ‘the extra mile’ to get results.

There are always going to be difficulties in the way of improved performance – the requirements of frameworks, staff shortages, financial pressures, and the vagaries of the economy or specific industry in which employers and providers operate. But successful organisations are impressive for the ways in which they take responsibility for their own performance, and decide to be effective.

These employers and providers take the message to learners positively, working with them to identify solutions to problems and asking for their contributions and ideas. They involve learners and staff in the workplace in the planning of learning, giving them responsibility and influence. They use induction, initial assessment, learner reviews and assessor visits to keep the focus on learning and progression in a whole variety of different ways.
Raising expectations of success

- Learners need regular and consistent support – support for learners was the number one influence on retention in a recent national survey.
- While employers and providers may know and understand NVQs and frameworks well, learners do not – it’s essential that they understand what they are embarking on and how they can manage learning effectively.
- Achievement is a continuous process, not something that either happens or doesn’t happen at the end of the programme – employers and providers should recognise and acknowledge achievement as it happens, and build on it.
- It’s easy for time to pass unproductively on work-based learning, e.g. waiting for a college course start date in two or three months’ time – any apparent gaps in learning should be exploited constructively to keep the focus on progression and achievement.
- Most employers and providers accept that key skills cannot any longer be left until the end of the programme – some are arranging key skills tests on employer premises, others are integrating key skills into routine planning and assessment in the workplace.

Focus on retention

Why do work-based learners leave early, before completing their programmes? In the LSC’s national survey on learner satisfaction, just over a quarter of learners had either recently left their programmes early or were seriously thinking of doing so. They gave six main reasons for leaving early.

Reasons for leaving early

- Got a job or changed jobs – 39%.
- Problems with training – 19%.
- Problems at work, including no help from employer – 16%.
- Personal reasons, including health – 14%.
- On the wrong programme – 11%.
- Financial reasons – 9%.

Problems with training were: poor quality trainers (8%), poor management (5%), too much work (5%) and trainers kept changing (1%). Obviously employers and providers can do something about these, if they learn about them in time.

They can also make an impact on some of the other reasons. The main problem learners experience at work is not getting enough support from their line manager or supervisor. This can be tackled at reviews.

Although it is not possible to be a hundred percent certain that a learner is on the right programme, more thorough selection and initial assessment processes can definitely make a difference. Early identification of personal problems and better support for learners may also help to reduce the likelihood of early leaving.

It is inevitable that some learners will get or change jobs before the end of their programme. But this shouldn’t necessarily mean they leave the programme. If they get to know about a learner’s intentions in time, employers and providers can take the opportunity to keep the learner in learning until they do complete.

It’s important to recognise that most decisions to leave are a result of rational decisions by learners to respond to the difficulties they face. In some cases, it’s the right decision. The job of the employer or provider is to anticipate or recognise the difficulties a learner might be facing, acknowledge the difficulties and take active steps to help the learner find a good way round them.
The main ways in which retention can be improved at different stages of the work-based learning cycle are:

- Recruitment and selection – recruit with integrity and improve guidance given to learners on what's expected of them.
- Initial assessment, induction and planning – pay particular attention to establishing individual learners’ needs, and build a group ethos and identity.
- Training and assessment – monitor and follow up poor attendance, identify learners ‘at risk’, provide support for learning, set and monitor targets, improve the quality of teaching.

**Focus on achievement**

The first, and most important, task in raising achievement is to ensure that learners stay on the programme long enough to complete the learning and achieve their goals. Improving rates of achievement is always underpinned by strategies to improve retention.

Employers and providers can also develop strategies that focus specifically on achievement. These strategies are likely to involve:

- learners
- trainers and assessors
- the organisation as a whole.

Developing and maintaining learners’ motivation is essential to raise achievement. Four possible strategies are outlined below.

**Motivating learners to succeed**

- Celebrate success – presentations and awards, certificates for unit achievement, fast-track opportunities, feedback and praise.
- Establish a group ethos – get learners to help and encourage each other, raise the self-esteem of unconfident learners through group interaction, don’t underestimate the importance of social bonds between learners.
- Attendance – create high expectations of attendance, follow up absences quickly, reward good attendance, investigate the root causes of poor attendance, e.g. problems on the programme.
- Respond to learners’ individual learning styles – provide a variety of learning opportunities, help learners to understand their own learning preferences and develop other ways to learn, develop learners’ skills in self-reflection, e.g. through the key skill of improve own learning and performance.

The biggest challenge for trainers and assessors is to respond to individual learners’ needs in the context of their programmes. Programmes should be designed flexibly to accommodate individuals, and trainers can make continual adjustments to their teaching styles.

Learners also benefit from a recognition that training is shared between trainers, workplace supervisors and others, and that the learning has been coordinated as much as possible. Good teamwork underpins good learning. Examples include:

- learning plans that show visually the links between different types of learning in a period
- better pacing and scheduling of units so that learners progress from relatively easy to relatively difficult topics.

A practical strategy that can have immediate effects on achievement is to develop the key skills expertise of vocational trainers, so they are able to support learners more effectively. Another is to provide tutorial support to learners that concentrates on identifying and removing barriers to learning, recognising that this may be a long process for some learners.
All learners are registered initially on Foundation MAs. Progression to the Advanced apprenticeship is seen as a ‘carrot’ and learners are motivated to move rapidly through their FMA. Progress is monitored closely by training staff and heads of sections, who ‘sponsor’ recruits. Training officers provide sponsors with regular reports on learners' progress both with their NVQ and in the college-based work.

Operating in an environment in which structure and procedures are vital, the company has a strong culture of accountability. This is equally true for apprentices, who have close daily contact with a training instructor, a mentor (usually one of the site managers) and/or a senior training supervisor. Learners themselves emphasise the value they place on their training and their appreciation of the support offered by the employer, as comments like these show:

- “I’ve settled in well. I like the training and the trainers. There’s a good spirit among the apprentices.”
- “I’m being encouraged to go on to higher education. They are even willing to put me through university.”
- “I’ve got a lot of freedom to improve my qualification beyond the apprenticeship and the company pays for my extra training.”
- “Within the company, individual sectors can ‘bid’ for you to work with them when you complete if they think you are good enough.”

Resources

- Adult Learning Inspectorate (2003) Retention and Achievement Data from Work-Based Learning Inspections.
- LSC (2002) Seeking the Views of Learners: Findings from the LSC’s first national learner satisfaction survey 2001/02
- Martinez, P (2001) Improving student retention and achievement: What do we know and what do we need to find out? (LSDA)
- Martinez, P (2002) Raising achievement at Levels 1 and 2. (LSDA)
- Sawbridge, S (2001) www.raising achievement: Internet research resources on raising achievement in post-compulsory education. (LSDA)
- Smith, V and Hughes, M (2003) Making the difference: Provider support for learner retention and achievement in work-based learning. (LSDA)
- Stanton, G (2001) Lessons learned on raising quality and achievement. (LSDA)

Stay in touch

- www.lsc.gov.uk
- www.lsd.org.uk
- www.rqa.org.uk

Checklist

- What are the current success rates of MAs in your organisation, using the LSC’s measures?
- What measurements of distance travelled do you have for your learners?
- How are these measures of distance travelled used to improve the quality of learners’ experience?
- What proportion of apprentices leave before completing their full framework?
- What is the organisation doing to encourage learners to stay on and complete their learning goals?
- How do you raise expectations of success among learners and everyone involved in supporting learners?
- Why do learners leave your organisation before completing?
- How do you find out this information?
- What use do you make of it?
- What other information about reasons for leaving would it be useful to know?
- What practical steps do people supporting learners take to raise their levels of motivation?
- How does the design of your work-based learning programmes encourage and support achievement?
Two key issues for the employer or provider as a whole are:

- Programme design – breaking learning down into chunks, sequencing them, setting achievable goals, timetabling off-the-job learning to fit in with work, integrating key skills.
- Staffing – building the expertise of staff as professional trainers and educators, broadening their conceptions of teaching and learning, developing skills in specific areas, e.g. literacy and numeracy.

Success in work-based learning stems directly from two things: first, taking full responsibility for retention and achievement; second, planning and making continuous improvements to all aspects of learners’ experience. In some cases, this may involve a fundamental re-definition of roles and procedures to be followed in supporting learners in all aspects of their training, particularly in the early crucial months of training.

The success of any programme depends very much on how it is set up in the first place. It is important that everyone involved knows from the start what is expected of them, what has to be achieved and how they can play their part in achieving it.

And all the efforts to set up the programme well at the start must be matched by an imaginative, self-critical and enthusiastic approach throughout.

Case studies and examples

Early warning

One employer has tackled the problem of early leaving by developing an early warning system to identify apprentices who are at risk of failing to complete their MA framework. The ‘at risk’ policy includes a set of specific criteria to alert staff to the need for action to re-motivate and re-engage apprentices with their learning.

Criteria that trigger the ‘at risk’ process include:

- feedback from colleges, including missing classes or late submission of assignments
- signs of unhappiness at work
- failure to prepare portfolios or carry out agreed assignments for review meetings
- lack of motivation
- unexpected slowdown in achievement.

An early warning alert triggers corrective action in the form of additional visits, coaching and one-to-one discussions with the learner. Specific support given to address problem areas includes coaching learners through units or components causing particular problems and more frequent assessments.

A story of success

A large government-backed employer identifies five key strengths that contribute to its high retention rates:

- strong commitment to learner support
- high quality training on and off the job
- good pay and working conditions
- encouragement to learners to improve qualifications over and above the requirements of the MA framework
- the offer of employment at the end of the apprenticeship.

Where learners do leave early – and there are very few of them – it is usually because they realised the work was not for them or had problems in their private lives that prevented them from continuing.

But the company is not complacent, recognising that early leavers represent a considerable waste of resources to the business. In seeking to maintain high levels of retention the main focus is on improving the quality of the recruitment process and reinforcing in-house procedures for learners who may be at risk of not completing.