Learning at work

enhancing the employer’s contribution to learning

What?
- the basics of employer engagement
- extending the employer’s contribution.

Why?

Work-based learning is a partnership between learners and employers and, in some cases, learning providers. Where employers recruit and train their own apprentices, they are expected to take on some or all of the responsibilities of a provider as well as an employer.

Employers contribute to learning to some extent simply by employing someone. Work is a natural environment for learning, and people can be expected to acquire some of the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for a job just by being there. But employers can contribute a lot more if managers and staff – especially learners’ supervisors – become involved in a purposeful, structured process designed to maximise the opportunities for learning at work.

The results of inspections carried out by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) in 2001-02 suggest that the employers are not always engaged as much as they should be.

“Few employers were fully aware of how they could help their learners . . . A few [employers] were particularly good and in these, learners were able to acquire an exceptionally broad range of skills.”


The main findings from inspection are as follows:
- Some of the best learning is provided by employers or providers that work on behalf of an association of employers.
- Few managers and supervisors have a detailed knowledge of NVQs or apprenticeship frameworks.
- Links between learning on and off the job are often fragile.

Other research, summarised below, suggests that there is plenty of scope for managers, supervisors and others to become engaged energetically in the design and delivery of work-based learning.

Key facts
- Ninety percent of employers say that the training apprentices receive is relevant to the work of their organisations, and two-thirds believe it has a positive impact on their business.
- Young people who complete a Modern Apprenticeship continue to use the skills they developed during the programme in the jobs they do later on.
How?

The basics of employer engagement

There are certain basic minimum criteria employers and providers must fulfil in government-funded learning. These basic criteria fall under three main headings:

- support for learning on the job
- support for learning off the job
- compliance with acceptable standards in health and safety and equal opportunities.

Work-based learners spend a high proportion of their time at work. Managers and supervisors should support learners on the job by providing opportunities for them to:

- develop the skills and knowledge needed for the job and NVQ
- carry out the full range of tasks required for them to develop these skills and knowledge
- demonstrate their competence.

Most employers are able and willing to provide these opportunities. Where a particular job does not require learners to carry out all the tasks required in the NVQ, whoever is responsible for learners should make it possible for them to move around within the organisation or, if necessary, take time out of the job to develop and demonstrate these skills elsewhere.

Some learning is done off the job. The amount varies between occupations, but there is an expectation that learners on government-funded programmes will spend some time away from the pressures of work. Employers must agree this and make the time available. If learners are not able to take time off as planned, e.g. because of the volume of work or the need to maintain staff ratios, managers and supervisors should ensure that learners are given the opportunity to make up the missed time.

The health and safety of learners is critical. Learners must be working in an environment where risks are properly assessed and managed. Employers are required to comply with statutory responsibilities and should be encouraged to follow best practice guidelines. Where employers are supported by providers, providers should make thorough health and safety checks of all new employers and review employers’ procedures on a regular basis.

Employers should also:

- be committed to promoting equality and diversity in the workplace
- have and implement equal opportunities policies and procedures
- have effective measures for dealing with grievances and complaints.

Extending employers’ contribution

Employers provide the basics for effective work-based learning, but they can also do more to support and enhance learning. The area in which managers, supervisors and others in the workplace can make the biggest contribution is in supporting learning on the job. The box below lists some of the ways this can be done.
### Techniques for supporting learning on the job

- **Coaching** – support to learners provided by supervisors or other designated staff, usually to improve specific aspects of job-related performance.
- **Mentoring** – continuous support to learners at work, often most useful in the early stages of the learning programme or to help learners make the transition into a new role.
- **Instruction, example and demonstration** – helping learners to acquire and practise new skills.
- **Feedback** – constant attention by supervisors to small, everyday aspects of learners’ performance on the job, enabling supervisors to give specific feedback on what has been done well and what needs to improve.
- **Reinforcement** – taking opportunities to embed learning into practice, so that what was once new becomes routine: an important stage in becoming competent.
- **Questioning** – helps to link what learners know to what they do, and so make their skills and knowledge more readily transferable from one task or situation to another.

One of the best ways for employers to adopt some or all of these techniques is by clarifying and in some cases extending the role of work supervisors. They are in most frequent and direct contact with learners and have the greatest impact on the quality of their learning at work.

Managers and staff can also be encouraged to contribute to the effectiveness of off-the-job training. They can do this in two ways:

- directly, e.g. by taking part in training sessions
- indirectly, by helping to plan work tasks so that they link closely with topics learners have covered in their training.

Some employers work closely with learning providers. These providers may supply off-the-job training, as is often the case with further education colleges. They may also carry out some of the training of apprentices, e.g. in key skills.

### Where and when?

The process of fulfilling the basic responsibilities to learners is continuous. Good learning programmes are designed so that managers and supervisors are actively engaged in helping to:

- recruit and select learners
- plan the learning for each individual
- support that individual’s learning at work
- provide time for learning away from the job
- encourage the learner to improve their performance on the job and in their learning.

### Case studies and examples

#### A supportive employer

A leading company in the UK’s telecommunications industry took the decision several years ago to take on apprentices to meet skill shortages. Today the company has around fifty MAs. Most stay on with the company after gaining their qualifications.

The company supports off-the-job training by releasing apprentices for one day a week to attend training at a local college. Another day each week is set aside for developing job-related skills in the workplace and producing evidence for the NVQ and key skills. A mentor is available to help and there are qualified assessors in each workplace.
Apprentices review progress and plan their learning every two weeks. The apprenticeship training manager explains:

“*It’s important that all our apprentices have the same opportunities to learn and progress. Our guidelines are there to ensure that they meet the demands of the apprenticeship.*

*We want our apprentices to become the managers of the future, so we make sure they get all the knowledge and experience they need.*”

As a result of the success of the MA scheme, the company now offers NVQs to other employees as well.

**A partnership approach**

One of the biggest private providers of work-based learning in the UK has set up a partnership with an employer association in the retail sector to manage a new Foundation MA framework. The purpose of the partnership is to make work-based learning accessible to companies, many of which are small businesses.

The association is responsible for marketing the FMA to member companies and recruiting learners. The provider carries out initial assessment and induction, develops learning materials, assesses learners, reviews progress and quality assures the learning and assessment process.

Companies see the benefits of the partnership. As one manager says:

“*It gives me the chance to spend more time on technical aspects of the work because I know the basic training has been covered.*”

**Resources**


**Stay in touch**

- www.dfes.gov.uk  
- www.lsc.gov.uk  
- www.realworkrealpay.gov.uk

**Checklist**

- How does the relationship between managers, supervisors and learners enhance the learning process?
- What are some of the practical benefits to learners?
- What are managers and supervisors expected to contribute to learning on the job?
- How do they support off-the-job training
- How does your organisation make sure that minimum standards in health and safety and equal opportunities are maintained at work?
- What has been done recently to extend the contribution made by managers, supervisors and others in the workplace to on-the-job learning?
- What effects has this had on the experience of learners on work-based learning programmes