Support for learners

What?
- support needs
- support systems
- mentoring
- work and career prospects.

Why?
Learners are entitled to support both for their learning and for themselves. Support and guidance for learners themselves can come from employers, providers and other agencies. Employers and providers should have a policy or strategy for guidance and support, backed up by a set of procedures.

There is a direct relationship between the quality of support given to learners and retention. Where barriers are identified and action is taken quickly, learners are more likely to stay. Over forty percent of learners who leave work-based learning programmes early cite personal and work-related problems as the main reasons for leaving. Clearly, providing more effective support would help to reduce the number of early leavers. Some employers and providers have already made the link and started to design guidance and support strategies specifically aimed at improving retention.

There are many reasons why learners don’t get on well with their learning and don’t achieve their goals. It’s important to understand what the barriers are in each individual case. Generally speaking, they fall into two main categories:
- progress with learning – e.g. planning learning, keeping up with the standards expected, balancing the demands of learning and work
- personal difficulties – e.g. financial, accommodation, relationships, care responsibilities, health.

Supporting learners effectively means being aware of their background, circumstances and personal problems. Building good relationships is at the heart of it. The better staff get to know their learners, the more likely they are to provide the support learners need, when they need it. An experienced member of staff might be able to anticipate problems before a learner even realises they exist.

Key facts
- Almost four in ten work-based learners seek help to solve problems of some kind.
- The most common problems are juggling commitments, money pressures and dealing with dependants.
- The most common need for learning support is to help tackle difficulties with basic skills.
- Learners are more likely to seek advice from their employers or training providers than any other source but many do not find the advice they are given very useful.

[Effective employers and providers] helped learners come to terms with difficulties in their lives which had proved obstacles to their participation in education and training.

Adult Learning Inspectorate (2002)
Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2001-02
How?

Support needs

The checklist below lists the main types of support learners on work-based learning programmes need. It can be used to check:

- who in the organisation provides the support – several people may be involved, including trainers, assessors, reviewers, supervisors, mentors etc.
- whether the support provided is adequate.

Advice about:

- dealing with people, e.g. supervisors, work colleagues
- managing time
- managing learning in the workplace and off the job
- personal issues
- keeping a good balance between work and private life.

Help with learning:

- deciding on career goals
- negotiating a route through the learning programme
- dealing with transitions at work and in learning
- linking on- and off-the-job learning
- providing constructive support for slow progress.

Help with achievement:

- finding the personal motivation to achieve
- finding the discipline to achieve
- overcoming isolation at work
- taking a longer-term view of prospects.

Ensuring learners’ involvement:

- in reviewing progress and targets
- in giving feedback about the learning and support received
- in the workplace.

Support systems

Learners are entitled to good, impartial advice about which programmes might be most suitable for them. This may form part of the selection or initial assessment process. Once learners are signed up to a programme, they should be covered by a system of support that is responsive, able to pick up problems quickly and help learners overcome them.

“\textit{At its best, support provision was carefully planned, targeted and integrated into the wider academic and pastoral systems . . .}”

NFER (2001) 16-19 learner support arrangements
An effective support system will have all or most of the following components:

- initial guidance
- diagnostic assessment for basic and key skills
- assessment to identify ‘at risk’ learners, at the start and while they are on the programme
- monitoring of attendance at work and off-the-job training sessions
- regular reviews and evaluation of learners’ progress
- tutorial support, giving learners unstructured time to raise issues and work out what to do about them
- welfare support, through which learners receive confidential advice and counselling on personal issues either from employer or provider staff, or from external support agencies.

The system will also include ways of improving the quality of support, e.g. through:

- staff training and development – either by specialist in-house staff or external input
- networking with colleagues within the organisation or in wider networks – a valuable opportunity to reflect on practice
- observation of staff providing support – this must be done sensitively because of the private nature of some discussions
- materials available to staff – guidance, handbooks on services and facilities available to learners, good practice case studies etc.
- feedback from learners – learner satisfaction surveys should include questions about the extent and quality of support provided.

People closest to the learner – staff, supervisors etc. – can often give good support. But they have to know that their role includes providing support for personal problems as well as helping learners with learning and work-related barriers. In many situations, these members of staff will be the ‘anchor’ for learners. They may also act as gateways to other support.

Some employers and providers may have staff whose primary role is to provide guidance and support to employees and/or learners. An example is given in the case study below. Organisations may also have access to other staff such as careers advisers or counsellors.

There must always be scope within the system for judgements made by individual staff. For example, a trainer or assessor picking up on a problem a learner is having at work should investigate the causes, and may then decide either to help the learner deal with them or call in specialist help. Similarly, a judgement should be made about whether, or how, to record the intervention.

**Mentoring**

Mentoring has an important place in work-based learning. Its purpose is to provide support and facilitate the development of skills to help ensure that the individuals being mentored will achieve successful outcomes.

Mentors give support on a broad front, helping learners with personal and social issues as well as with specifically vocational or job-related matters. Mentors can also provide advice on career and life goals, and help to initiate learners into the norms of the workplace and its culture.

**Workplace mentors should be:**

- a guide and adviser
- on the side of the learner
- more experienced in work than the learner.
Mentoring is a two-way process. Both the mentor and the learner discuss and investigate problems and suggest solutions. The mentoring relationship provides the opportunity for learners to make the learning they do at work relevant to their needs. But the relationship works best when attention to the individual is balanced with an element of direction. Mentors can help learners to learn in the way that suits them best, and they can also direct the learning.

The key benefits learners receive from the mentoring relationship are:

- individual attention
- the opportunity to explore problems, concerns and issues that interest them in the workplace, without any need for the mentor to make judgements or impose discipline
- transfer of knowledge and skills from someone with more experience
- a two-way learning process.

Mentoring is usually a one-to-one process, but it can also be effective in small groups. It is particularly useful in helping learners to get over barriers to progress and to negotiate major transition points in their career. Wherever possible, the mentor should not be the learner’s supervisor or line manager, as this prevents the mentoring relationship from developing properly. Confidentiality, impartiality and a concern for the longer-term needs of the learner are all important features of the mentoring role.

From the mentors’ point of view, they key requirements are:

- support from the organisation
- time to see learners away from the pressures of work
- a clear role
- training and development in the role, particularly in techniques for listening, drawing learners out, motivating them etc.

**Work and career prospects**

An important part of the support provided to learners is help in thinking through their career goals and prospects. All young people are entitled to careers guidance at school. In the context of work-based learning it’s a mistake (and a wasted opportunity) to limit thinking about work to specific sessions on careers guidance. Because they are at work, learners have the opportunity to think about it much more continuously.

The process of thinking about work and prospects has four stages.

**Stages of thinking about work**

- **Stage 1** Getting a feel for the way things are – experiencing the workplace, taking things in, gaining first impressions.
- **Stage 2** Organising the experience – seeing what the work requires, e.g. linking skills learned to specific job contexts, and establishing relationships with other people.
- **Stage 3** Getting a point of view – seeing how people fit together at work, putting their own job into the context of everything else that’s happening in the workplace.
- **Stage 4** Understanding – developing a mental map of the whole experience of work, feeling confident and knowledgeable enough to question why things are done as they are, predicting events, becoming a flexible and independent worker.
Feedback from supervisors in the workplace supports the ethos of working closely together. They emphasise the importance of close contact between themselves and the training team, and the importance of the individual touch when it comes to learners:

“All our apprentices are viewed on an individual basis, as people with different learning styles and needs. The trainers make the extra effort to come up with the best solution and put different things in place for different apprentices.”

**Buddies in action**

An important feature of one employer’s programme is a recently-established ‘buddy’ system. Apprentices in their final year of training volunteer to act as mentors for new learners. Both parties benefit – new learners get support, and acting as a mentor gives the more experienced apprentices the opportunity to practise some of the supervisory skills they may not be able to carry out in their ordinary job roles.

Mentors have at least one meeting a week with the learners they support. Meetings last a minimum of half an hour, and may be much longer. The company drew up clear ground rules for the meetings. Mentors talk through any personal or work issues that new learners may not feel comfortable raising with supervisors. They also help with gathering evidence for NVQ portfolios.

The scheme was launched in September 2002, and the company says it is already paying dividends in terms of increased confidence for everyone involved. Mentors enjoy and benefit from the responsibility, while new learners benefit from a higher level of support than they would get from their supervisors alone.

**Resources**


**Stay in touch**

- www.guidancecouncil.com
- www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/iag
- www.nfer.ac.uk
- www.nicec.org.uk
- www.lDSA.org.uk
- www.nicec.org.uk

**Checklist**

- How do you identify any personal difficulties learners may have that could affect their learning adversely?
- Does the support system available to your learners include all the components listed in the factsheet?
- How do you know what to do, to improve the quality of support available to learners?
- Which other agencies are involved in supporting learners?
- Does your organisation provide learners with mentors in the workplace?
- How does the mentoring process work?
- How could it be improved?
- What steps does your organisation take to help learners through the four stages of thinking about work and future career prospects?
- Who helps learners to do this?
Employers can help to focus the process by guiding and supporting learners at appropriate stages in their programmes. For example, they can make sure that learners have the opportunities to do things like these:

- **Stage 1** – meet people at work, notice how the work is organised, gather information, e.g. during the induction process.
- **Stage 2** – compare different aspects of the organisation’s work, sort out their own and other people’s responsibilities, define the boundaries of their job.
- **Stage 3** – deal with a wider range of people, handle more complex situations, take an active part in team meetings, learn more about the organisation’s history and performance.
- **Stage 4** – explain things to other people, try out new ways of working, suggest how to do things differently, take greater responsibility for work tasks and outputs.

Seen in this way, progression becomes a natural part of learners’ journeys through work-based learning programmes rather than something stuck on at the end. Of course, it is important to give learners time and opportunity to talk about their next moves. But if they have been thinking about work all along, in the ways described above, they will be in a far better position to make a reasoned assessment of their ambitions and prospects.

Effective discussions about career prospects depend heavily on the skills, knowledge and personal qualities of the person providing the guidance and support. Learners benefit most from people who:

- have a genuine commitment to helping the individual
- use their interpersonal skills to facilitate the discussion
- are open and impartial
- provide good quality information and advice about the opportunities
- give constructive feedback about the learner’s skills and potential.

**Where and when?**

Support should be available for learners when and where they need it, as far as possible. Many employers and providers give learners telephone and mobile numbers they can use if there’s a problem. This can be particularly helpful if there is relatively little access to structured support systems, e.g. when apprentices are working on different sites.

**Case studies and examples**

**The individual touch**

The training manager in one employer takes pride in the fact that each learner on a Modern Apprenticeship ‘is a face to us’. As far as possible, individual learners keep the same training consultant all the way through their programme. Where additional support is needed from other colleagues, it is always with the involvement of the training consultant and the learner understands what is being provided (and expected of them) and why.

Their advice on establishing a good working relationship with their learners is simple: ‘Be there. Listen and act. It’s important that they’re not alone.’

Apprentices find their training consultants approachable but also have a lot of respect for them. As one said:

> My training consultant sets us tough targets but she also supports us to achieve them. The NVQ has taught me a lot and made me better at my job. Sometimes I think I do things better than more experienced staff because I’ve been taught how to do it properly."