Employment and learning

What?
- find out about opportunities
- assess opportunities
- match learners to opportunities.

Why?
Work-based learning means what it says – learning at work. It’s a great way to learn, because at work people:
- are doing a real job, with real responsibilities
- get constant feedback on how well they are doing
- are part of a team.

These are all reasons why people feel motivated at work, and the motivation spills over into their learning as well. Work provides a great natural environment for learning. Getting learners into a workplace that suits them is the first and most important task for any organisation involved in work-based learning.

Simply doing something at work – almost anything – can be a basis for learning. But only a basis. Learners also need to be given the right chances and openings to build up their knowledge and skills. So the second big task for employers and providers is to make sure that the opportunities for learning in the work environment are properly recognised and exploited.

Employers involved in government-funded learning want good people, and are prepared to help them learn the necessary skills. Questions like these are the key:
- Do supervisors give learners manageable but challenging tasks?
- Does someone take the time to show learners how to do things and give them useful, explicit feedback on their performance?
- Do learners have opportunities to ask questions about the way things are done?

If the answer’s ‘yes’, the chances are that it’s a good place for learners to learn. If it’s ‘no’, the employer has got some work to do to make the workplace fitter for learning.

Key facts
- According to the Office for National Statistics, companies spend around £14 billion a year on training employees.
- The higher the level of skills people have to start with, the more training they are likely to receive at work.
The skills businesses need most are basic skills in literacy, numeracy and using computers, technical skills and management and leadership skills.

Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) provide the structure for employees to gain these skills and to learn job-specific skills at the same time.

How?

Find out about opportunities

The job market is inherently dynamic. People leave, organisations grow, new opportunities for employment emerge all the time. Employers and providers can:

- offer a range of options to new recruits – if an employer has one apprentice, why not two?
- provide a service to parts of an organisation that are looking for their existing employees to be trained.

Not every workplace will provide good learning opportunities. There’s more on this topic in the factsheet entitled ‘Support for learning’. It’s a good idea to target parts of the organisation that are likely to benefit most from having trained and skilled employees. For example, those that:

- say they have a skills shortage
- are in a growth phase
- want to improve productivity by using new technology.

Workplaces like these are more likely to provide learners with the range and depth of work they need in order to develop their skills.

Assess opportunities

It’s important to establish the right sort of relationship with parts of the organisation that take on modern apprentices. The basic questions are:

- Is there a commitment to supporting learners?
- What are the people like, and is the general atmosphere of the workplace likely to encourage or discourage learners?
- Are the facilities and resources of a satisfactory standard?
- Are health and safety standards being met?

Here’s an example of a departmental manager with the right attitude to make work-based learning a success:

“Both the company and the staff benefit. It raises their morale and we gain from the extra skills. The more qualified staff we have, the more tasks we can delegate to them, giving them responsibility and a sense of achievement.”

The employer or provider should assess whether the workplace meets the criteria and which type of learner would be best suited to this particular environment. It’s also an opportunity to pick up specific information to give to learners about what the work involves and how it provides the basis for learning.
Match learners to opportunities

The key decision is whether a learner is suited to a particular workplace or not. If they are, employers or providers should give the learner as much information as they can about the workplace and the job. They will benefit from knowing what personal qualities and skills the job involves.

Where and when?

The process of getting learners into suitable workplaces has two main stages:

- Work done throughout the year to build links, establish relationships and understand the recruitment needs of the organisation.
- Focused, targeted efforts at filling vacancies at particular times of year or in specific target areas.

It’s a good idea for providers or large employers to keep a database of opportunities, including every part of the organisation in which learners have been placed previously. They are all potential workplaces for new recruits in future. As well as recording contacts, the database can contain valuable information about recruitment needs.

Case studies and examples

Building relationships

The training manager in a large public sector employer sees building strong relationships with departments as they keystone of the recruitment process. Over the last few years, they’ve been working closely with three departments in the organisation that between them recruit 25 to 30 young people every year.

Having a long-term relationship with the department heads means that the training manager can help them:

- anticipate and plan for their long-term recruitment needs
- provide learners and training for any interim vacancies that arise.

The training manager has this to say:

“I’ve got to know the departmental heads really well over the years, and there’s a mutual understanding which benefits both of us.

We’ve had so many people placed with them on our training programmes, that we’re usually in touch three to four times a week for one reason or another. We’ve learned how their departments work, their particular recruitment needs, and how our training programmes can fit in with them. They’ve come to trust in our ability to find them the right candidates and to train them effectively – and that’s a very satisfying result.

This ongoing relationship means we can plan ahead, up to five or six months in advance, for when they have their major recruitment drives, as well as responding to more immediate or one-off needs. By knowing well in advance about various vacancies, we’re also able to help our learners better. Even if there’s nothing suitable for them when they first come to see us, we’re sometimes able to tell them that there could be some interesting opportunities if they’re still looking for a job in a few months’ time.”
An employer’s view

Taking on modern apprentices was a logical step for one employer. As an Investor in People the company had always been serious about training its employees, putting them on specialist courses and employing people with high level skills.

When two young recruits joined the company, they were quickly registered as Foundation Modern Apprentices. The apprenticeship enabled them to gain technical skills and the broader skills which, in the employer’s view, were the key to their future.

“I see it as my responsibility as an employer to provide them with transferable skills that they can take with them if they want.”

This positive approach to learning benefited the young people throughout their apprenticeship, especially at level 3 where they had to complete challenging tasks independently and accurately. As one of them said:

“It required a certain amount of tolerance on everyone’s part since there was no chance of being able to match the speed of people who carried out a certain task every day.”

The tolerance paid off. One of the apprentices is now in charge of a department and the other helps in the induction of new employees.

Resources

- LSC (2202) An employer’s guide to Modern Apprenticeships.

Stay in touch

- www.lsc.gov.uk

Checklist

- How do you find out about where the best opportunities for learners are in the organisation?
- Do you target parts of the organisation that already have learners?
- How carefully do you assess new workplaces?
- Do you have a database of opportunities?
- Is there enough information on the database about departments or workplaces that have been contacted?