Apprenticeships: silver bullet or hard slog?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review apprenticeship policy in the UK and to present examples of good practice.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach takes the form of a review of three cases.

Findings – Apprenticeships are not an easy option. An apprenticeship scheme, and indeed any training initiative, will not command support within an organisation unless it can be seen to assist the business in economic terms. Context is critical.

Practical implications – The paper argues for a more realistic assessment of the role of apprenticeship at the level of government policy and in the organisation.

Originality/value – The paper offers a different and more measured perspective on apprenticeships, which contrast with current uncritical hype and over-selling.

Keywords Apprenticeships, Workforce skills, Youth unemployment

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

In March 2013, to mark the start of National Apprenticeship Week, Prime Minister David Cameron met with young apprentices at Mercedes-Benz in Milton Keynes. There he delivered a powerful statement “I want it to be the new norm for young people to either go to university or into an apprenticeship.” Apprenticeships have now become the silver bullet of skills training: everybody is in favour of more apprenticeships.

Politically apprenticeships tick all the right boxes. They provide employment, particularly for young people who have practical rather than intellectual interests and ambitions. Effective apprenticeships offer a valuable transformation stage for young people entering the labour market. They teach recipients skills that are of evident practical value. The skills are taught in the workplace where they can best be learned. Employers have control and ownership. Moreover the interest of young people in apprenticeships is beyond dispute. Applications for a well-structured apprenticeship programme exceed the number of places by a ratio of ten to one. However there is a difference between promoting the idea at the government level and implementing an effective scheme at the level of the firm.

Apprenticeships redefined

Some six months after the Prime Minister’s Milton Keynes speech the Government published a policy statement on apprenticeships. This took the form of a long-awaited implementation plan in response to an independent report it had earlier commissioned from the Entrepreneur Doug Richard. The Richard Review had achieved a high profile when it was published in November 2012 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012). The most important recommendation was that apprenticeships should be redefined:
There has been a drift towards calling many things apprenticeships which, in fact, are not... not all instances of training on a job are apprenticeships. Apprenticeships require a new job role, a role that is new to the individual and requires them to learn a substantial amount before they can do that job effectively. An apprenticeship without a job is a form of vocational training. An apprenticeship in an old job is on-the-job training. There must be a job and the job role must be new.

After an extended period of deliberation the Government published its response to the Richard Review in October 2013 (HM Government, 2013). The purpose of an apprenticeship was now defined as “to train those aged 16 and above to achieve the Apprenticeship standard as set by employers to enable them to perform a skilled role effectively”. Potentially this implementation plan could allow, indeed encourage, employers to describe almost any training scheme as an “apprenticeship” and seek whatever funding is available.

So what is an apprenticeship and does it matter how the term is defined? Rather than seeking to answer this question directly – which would take us out of training and into politics – instead three short cases will be presented. These were prepared at the request of a Sub-Committee of the House of Lords following oral evidence given by the author. The cases are Cogent, a Sector Skills Council, Schaeffler (UK) a manufacturer of high precision engineering parts and Swarm, a rural initiative established by a social entrepreneur. As will be seen in the conclusion, when considered together they demonstrate both the opportunities and challenges of putting apprenticeships centre-stage in skills development.

The cogent higher apprenticeship framework

Cogent is the Sector Skills Council (SSC) for the science-based industries. It represents a sector which employs around 900,000 people. The industries involved rely on a constant supply of high-level skills to ensure innovation and growth. Effective and relevant apprenticeships have become an increasingly important element in meeting that challenge. As Cogent’s Chief Executive, Joanna Woolf, puts it: “The development of fit-for-purpose Apprenticeships and models through which they are delivered, is central to Cogent’s aim of securing the very best skills for industry”.

It is important to recognise that it the companies themselves who are the employers, not the SSC. In July 2011 Cogent was given financial support from the BIS Growth and Innovation Fund (GIF) to support sector employers to source and employ apprentices. This led to the creation of a new company, the Technical Apprenticeship Service, which, with Cogent’s support, has developed new frameworks for the sector. The need for a new approach reflected changing business and individual needs. Previously the industries looked to graduates. Now it needs to attract people who choose not to go to University and are seeking career progression through a more practical, in-company route. Christine Sakhardande, Programme Manager for the initiative at Cogent SSC offers the following summary of the added value and changing status:

In the past Apprenticeships have not often been seen as the preferred route to a professional scientific career and with a limited number of vocational degree routes into the science-industries, the programme will give employees and apprentices an opportunity to develop leadership skills, and provide a new route to continuing professional development.

In September 2012 Cogent launched a Developing Science Professionals programme. This aims to stimulate demand; demonstrate the value of technician job roles; and position
apprenticeship pathways that lead to professional technician status as a credible ambition for school leavers and a career choice which has parity with the established science graduate route into industry. The programme is also suitable for adults looking to progress on the career ladder into higher-level roles. Currently (at November 2013) there are 74 individuals undertaking the relatively new programme, with more in the pipeline.

The programme builds on and extends Cogent’s Higher Apprenticeship in Life Sciences by offering a broader Higher Apprenticeship for Chemical and Life Science professionals with qualifications at Level 4, 5 and 6. The Higher Apprenticeship can be achieved by studying either a Foundation degree or a new HND Diploma. The Developing Science Professionals programme has also been mapped to the requirements of the new Science Council Technician Register, allowing the apprentice to gain professional recognition, initially as a Registered Technician (RSciTech) and on completion of the programme as a Registered Scientist (RSci).

There is a major challenge in meeting the needs of employees with different motivations and ambitions working in a diverse sector. Apprenticeships could be working in research and development (R&D), quality control, quality assurance, production support or in some cases pilot plant development. The framework could be implemented in life sciences, chemical sciences, process development, packaging development, or health care sciences.

The Higher Apprenticeship offers employers a choice between a work-based foundation degree through distance learning or new work-based HNDs and HNCs through a local Further Education provider. Accordingly a range of qualifications are embedded into the framework. Examples are: Foundation degree in Chemical Sciences (distance/blended learning, Manchester Metropolitan); Foundation degree in Applied Bioscience Technology (distance/blended learning, Kent); Foundation degree in Healthcare Science; BTEC HND Diploma in Chemical Science for Industry; BTEC HND Diploma in Biological Sciences for Industry; BTEC HNC Diploma in Chemical Science for Industry; BTEC HNC Diploma in Biological Sciences for Industry. Tuition fees have to be paid for each year of study and either the employer or the apprentice can cover these. At Level 6 the apprentice can top up their qualification through flexible part-time modules leading to a BSc Honours degree.

Despite the successful design of the new approach and promotional efforts there is still generally a low awareness and understanding of the benefits that Higher Apprenticeships offer. Current technician recruitment and training is, in many instances, still based on graduate entry.

Cogent are therefore keen to emphasise that employers need to be involved and take ownership for the design as well as the implementation of frameworks. Much of their efforts are directed towards securing the support and commitment of employers. The argument offered is that this approach allows companies to grow their own talent and that apprentices gain the skills and knowledge that are of importance to the employer.

However it is hoped that the legacy of this project will be a broad and flexible framework, a progression route to professional recognition and a step change in the way technicians are trained and recruited. It will appeal to young people who enjoy science, but who do not feel the university route is for them, hope that this pathway will lead to a long and rewarding careers in a strategically important sector of the economy.

Schaeffler (UK) Ltd

Schaeffler (UK) Ltd is part of the German owned Schaeffler Group of companies, a global multi-national organisation employing over 70,000 employees worldwide. One of the UK sites is Schaeffler (UK) Ltd which manufactures high precision engine components (mostly mechanical tappets) for the automotive industry. The plant was established in the mid 1950s and is located in Bynea, near Llanelli in West Wales.

Schaeffler (UK) Ltd has faced challenging times. The 1990s was a period of rapid growth. Towards the turn of the century, however, the company faced increasing competition from low labour cost countries as group production capacity was placed in Eastern Europe (Slovakia and Romania) where wages are a fraction of those in the UK.
The company responded by developing the capability to deliver higher value added products. There was a planned focus on continuous improvement, cost reduction and, as an integral component of the process, a sustained attempt to up-skill the workforce. As the Human Resource Director for Schaeffler UK, Adrian Roberts says: “Previously the investment had been in machinery, now the investment is in people”. A culture change programme of continuous improvement, training and flexibility was supported by the statement: “the rate of learning must be greater than the rate of change (L > C).”

The investment in people has paid off in business terms. The Schaeffler Group named Schaeffler (UK) Ltd as its lead plant for mechanical tappets, a key automotive project. This involved responsibility for controlling and supporting production and quality on a worldwide basis with plants in the USA, South Korea and China. Roger Evans, the plant director, had been named Welsh Business Leader of the Year (large company category) in 2006 and was awarded the MBE in 2009. However, in the spirit of continuous improvement, Roger Evans argued. “Now we have secured a future, we must plan to make the future successful. The more we do the more we want to do.” In 2012 the parent group invested several million euros in surface coating technology for tappets and as well as a state of the art deep drawing press; this has enabled the Plant to produce superior quality tappets for its customers.

Over the last 15 years the main problem facing Schaeffler (UK) Ltd has been one of survival in a changing global market. Now that the future is more secure, forward planning and succession planning across the whole workforce have become important. Here the company is able to build on a long-standing and well-regarded apprenticeship scheme. Many of the current team of management, supervisors and team Leaders are former apprentices and the programme has been always been given a high priority. As Adrian Roberts puts it:

At times we have not been able to undertake any general recruitment. However despite all the pressures only in one year has the company not taken on new apprentices.

A total of 17 apprentices have been recruited over the last five years; three-quarters of those recruited are still with the company. Schaeffler (UK) Ltd has a strong relationship with the local college, Coleg Sir Gar, in Llanelli, which has been built up over decades. Initially apprentices are recruited and employed through the college. Since 2009 a Pathways to Apprenticeships (PtA) programme has been in place in Wales and is funded by the Welsh Government and the European Social Fund. The young people spend their first year learning the general principles of engineering at the college and some of the more able are sent on placements to Schaeffler (UK) Ltd. From this group the company chooses the three of four candidates to offer an apprenticeship. This works well for Schaeffler, not least because, as the employer of choice in the area, they would otherwise be overwhelmed with applications.

The apprentices can pursue one the following traditional engineering routes and train as a toolmaker, mechanical fitter, or electrician/electronics technician. Their first year of training is spent “off the job” at Coleg Sir Gar where the apprentices obtain a good general understanding of engineering in the college’s workshops, as well as academic study. The next three years spent undertaking a structured training programme, which enables the apprentices to acquire the desired levels of competency in their chosen disciplines. Their practical training is supported by academic study which is delivered through day release once a week at Coleg Sir Gar. The majority of apprentices achieve HNC level qualifications on completion of training. Some one in five continue to study a degree at Coleg Sir Gar, with full company sponsorship. To date the apprentices have spent extended periods in maintenance and in the tool room. However the company has recently reviewed its programme and future cohorts will spend more time developing their skills and understanding of the new technologies.

Adrian Roberts views Coleg Sir Gar as a strategic partner, the Company has extremely close links, in particular with the engineering department which is viewed as one of the best in Wales. The College is focused towards the needs of business, and always has a “can do” attitude. However he says that there is work to be done with school students. He feels that abler school students can be directed away from a career in manufacturing and too many
are drawn towards other sectors such as financial services: “In schools an apprenticeship is often seen as something to consider if you are not good enough for an academic pathway”.

Swarm Norfolk

The development of an effective apprenticeship programme poses particular challenges in rural areas. There are fewer large employers and those that do exist are mainly located in the centres of population (for example Norwich in Norfolk); smaller businesses predominate and their owners need to be convinced that employing young people will benefit the business, not require extensive resources, nor demand a huge amount of bureaucratic form-filling. Travel-to-work distances can be long and many young people settle for low-paid, low-prospect work in the retail or hospitality industries – or simply give up altogether.

“Swarm” is an innovative solution designed to create apprenticeship opportunities for young people against this background. It was launched in March 2013 by Robert Ashton, a local social entrepreneur and business writer. Robert Ashton is the author of a series of books including the best selling The Entrepreneur’s Book of Checklists. He had previously chaired The Exchange, an independent County Council funded body that managed work experience schemes; he was also on the board of the Small Firms’ Enterprise Development Initiative (SFEDI). His experience in those roles, together with 20 years as a small business adviser and consultant, convinced him that a new approach was required. He was particularly critical of the way that Colleges appear to put the qualification first, the learner second and the needs of the employer lower down the list.

The concept underpinning Swarm is straightforward. As originally formulated a “swarm” of ten employers and ten learners/apprentices would be based round a Norfolk market town. All the apprentices, (aged 16-24, with most over 18) would be employed by one of the ten businesses who would pay them at least the minimum wage for their age (not the lower apprenticeship rate). These apprentices would study for a Level 3 Diploma in Enterprising Skills in a Business Environment (QCF); Robert Ashton’s view is that positioning the initiative at this level important since “at Level 3 they actually have to learn something; at Level 2 they simply have to show they can do something. It becomes a tick box exercise”. Off-the- job training would be delivered by City College Norwich, ideally in the local market town. The qualification would be achieved within 18 months. Where possible, employers would share experiences with the group as part of their taught sessions. This would keep the course relevant and ensure all apprentices consider other employers as well as their own.

A critical element in the Swarm concept is that the small business employer should benefit in a clear measurable way. Accordingly the first stage involves the agreement of a simple business plan. This sets out the business benefits and provides the framework for assessing and supporting the progress of the learner. The intention is to put monthly action learner sessions in place for the employers to embrace their own learning. Their track will run in parallel with that of their apprentices.

Norfolk County Council have given an initial grant to £50,000 to assist in the establishment of Swarm. Further support has been provided by three housing associations, each sponsoring a Swarm. For them the incentive is to provision of additional support to NEET youngsters within the communities they serve.

Inevitably, to get the initiative started, it has been necessary to compromise on some features of the desired model. A first group of fourteen apprentices have been identified, found places and are about to start their formal jobs, training and learning. Of this group, 11 are from the mid-Norfolk Breckland area centred round the town of Watton, where the concept was first launched. Of the remaining three, two are joining Norwich firms, willing to self-fund the Swarm support. The third is an early adopter in North Norfolk, valuable in promoting the opportunity to a group that will be based there. Another initial group is being recruited in West Norfolk. Within a year it is expected that there will be 30-40 learners on the programme.

There are a number of encouraging signs. The employers in this Breckland Swarm are a diverse group and include a management consultancy, a charity, a florist, a white goods
refurbisher and a golf course. All but two of the initial group were NEETs or on Job Seekers Allowance. The two in work, were employed in low wage, temporary posts with no prospect of advancement.

It is fair to say that Swarm has attracted a lot of support locally and interest nationally. Robert Ashton was one of six people invited to make a formal pitch/presentation to Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, when he visited Norfolk in November 2013. Robert Ashton draws a modest salary from the project, a pay-rate far lower than he earns from more lucrative conference speaking and consultancy. He is not primarily motivated by profit, but by a passion for helping young people create meaningful careers with local small businesses. He plans to grow the scheme both locally and nationally as a social franchise and is exploring this possibility with the School for Social Entrepreneurs. He would also like to develop the capacity of the small business community to deliver the training themselves, eventually perhaps offering their own certification. He finds the inflexibility of the Colleges and their funding motivated focus on “high volume/low level qualification” (for example their insistence on fixed starting-dates) understandable but frustrating.

Concluding comments

Hopefully what this paper shows it that is possible to get things right – to make progress through a well-designed initiative. However this demands energy, resources, and above all time. It can also require an imaginative and committed individual to manage the process.

A common thread throughout the three cases is that they have sought to combine the business case with the social case, or the needs of the wider community – and placed a strong emphasis on the former. An apprenticeship scheme, and indeed any training initiative, will not command support within an organisation unless it can be seen to assist the business in economic terms. The most appropriate processes, or interventions to support, accelerate and direct young people’s learning can be determined only within the context of the organisation. For this reason successful initiatives will not be readily transferrable to another business environment nor will they be scaleable (capable of being ramped up across the economy as a whole).

Apprenticeships are therefore not an easy option. However it is possible to make them succeed as the cases demonstrate. I am most grateful to the organisations for the details that they have supplied and hope that they will act as an inspiration to others.

References


Further reading


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