

Developing Apprentices

St Edmundsbury Borough Council

Introduction and Summary

St. Edmundsbury Borough Council has developed apprenticeship schemes and seen their advantages to such an extent that one of the key questions they now ask whenever they have a vacancy is 'We have a vacancy, do we recruit or can we put an apprentice into the role? The council has taken a leap of faith in hiring apprentices in a range of departments and roles with the rewards proving the effort is well worth it. What they have also done is demonstrate that apprenticeships can operate across a range of roles far beyond 'traditional' apprenticeship areas.

Departments that have taken on apprentices in St Edmundsbury include (amongst others) Community Development, Tourism, Waste Management, Landscaping and Mechanics. A main driver for all of these areas was the need to have a strong succession plan to avoid the loss of skills and knowledge seeping away through the retirement of long-time workers

The council is currently training 11 apprentices, has another 25 people on the payroll who have come through the apprenticeship system. The council has also helped to create more than 70 new apprenticeships in small and medium sized enterprises in its community. Earlier in 2012 St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath Councils drew up a joint agreement that ensures a consistent and supportive approach to employing apprentices across both authorities.

Craig Young, UNISON Learning Co-ordinator, who helps to mentor the apprentices and who led the work to develop the joint agreement with Forest Heath said it is 'an essential tool in maximising the benefits to the organisation and the individuals involved.' This agreement is now becoming a blueprint for other employers in the region including the NHS in how to set up meaningful apprenticeships.

Background

St. Edmundsbury Borough Council is within the two tier county of Suffolk. It currently has 467 staff and is in a shared service partnership with a neighbouring Council, Forest Heath, and has various other joint ventures with neighbouring authorities.

The council embraced apprenticeships and wanted to be innovative and introduce them into non-traditional areas (having already had apprentices for several years on 'traditional' Business and Administration frameworks). One of the routes they chose to do this was to look at how they approved vacancies for recruitment. Any vacancy that emerged was challenged as to whether it could be an entry route for an apprentice, for example in the waste department there was a high rate of agency staff and the council seized the opportunity to convert some of these places into Apprenticeships.

However, the council saw beyond its own recruitment and workforce needs. Instead it also saw the opportunity to boost the local economy and reduce unemployment, especially amongst young people. Through seizing this opportunity apprenticeships have offered a way into the working world with the added value of a qualification that can support the future of a young person's career. West Suffolk had a rising number of NEETS and we wished to take steps to respond to the problems facing young people in obtaining employment in our area.

How Success Was Achieved

The HR team led the way forward internally to develop more opportunities for apprenticeships. They approached several managers in different departments and asked them to consider how they could make an apprenticeship work. For some this was the chance they had been waiting for, having been apprentices themselves, to give back to the industry and help bring a new generation to the work. Others were more concerned about the process, the safety and maturity of younger workers, and the 'slave labour' image of employing a young person on a lower wage but expecting them to do an actual job.

One-to-one meetings were held with the Head of HR to help dispel some of the myths and concerns and a programme of workshops was established for line managers using workplace planning data showing the ageing profile versus the average age of recruits. They also had UNISON present at the workshops to talk about the opportunities to bring in apprentices and what this could mean to the wider team. This UNISON representative was a Gardener working for St Edmundsbury who has changed careers throughout his working life and learned new skills, and who has been a passionate advocate of Lifelong Learning. It was powerful to have him talk to management about the benefits of this learning. Another key to the success of the extension of the apprenticeship scheme was that a Learning Champion was secured, one of the Corporate Directors, Sandra Pell. She helped to show that the scheme had full support from the senior management team and advocated the advantages of having an apprentice in your team such as the morale boost to other members of staff in being involved in the development of new employees whilst being introduced to qualifications themselves.

Sandra takes the viewpoint of 'Can you afford not to have apprentices?' She was instrumental in explaining the two-way advantages and explaining these to managers e.g. 'they understand social media so much more than we do and can train our staff in this whilst they are learning from the team themselves, there is a two-way passage of knowledge'. Sandra goes on to express, 'By showing apprentices everything associated to their role you are helping them to decide whether this is the career for them or not; it is equally important to help young people learn what they don't want to do as well as what is suited to them.' With this approach it has become clear that managers play a role in supporting a young person's holistic development as well as getting a new worker in the team which appeased some concerns.

Other concerns raised by managers included concerns over the amount of teaching that would be expected of them or the team and how this could be achieved to the level required by the apprentice. The HR team worked closely with West Suffolk College in setting up their apprenticeships so asked the College to talk directly with the managers to explain the process and the expectations. The College has the responsibility to advertise the apprenticeship vacancy and help the Council to choose the suitable candidate; the potential

learner is told very clearly the expectations that will be put on them both in terms of the job role and the academic work. This process has helped to ease the concerns of managers in regards to the teaching and in getting the right people in the right roles. It hasn't always been perfect first time, as Assistant Operations Manager Garry Bailey notes 'There is trial and error in recruiting the right people and employers have to be brave and admit that.'

The aim of the Council is that wherever it is possible apprentices will be encouraged to apply for, and be appointed to permanent job roles and continue on to higher qualifications. Two of the most recent apprentices have continued their learning having secured permanent roles within their teams; one has gone on to start a foundation degree in Event Management and another has continued on to the Level 3 Apprenticeship in Mechanics.

Chris Silverwood, Operations Manager for Waste and Street Scene, explains that some of the benefits felt so far by the teams working with apprentices have included, 'improving the social mix of teams' and that the young people come to the team 'without "baggage" of how to do things or certain processes, they are completely open to learning the way of the council.' Chris adds that it is vital for employers 'to have a clear system in place if a permanent position comes up halfway through someone's apprenticeship to match them to the vacancy' whilst ensuring that they complete their course. Colin Blackburn of West Suffolk College strongly supports this approach, 'writing in the completion of the framework as a condition of employment really helps to keep the apprentices focussed on the end goal'.

Line Managers have been rewarded for taking on apprentices by watching them flourish and benefitting from their work in the team. The real success that the council has had is in doing this across a wide range of occupations e.g.

- **Fleet & Technical Management** : Phil Clifford, Manager, explains, 'Tom settled in well and works hard so he provided an extra pair of hands with an aptitude and willingness to learn and do more. Now he is doing jobs on his own so we can look at charging him out which will bring in additional income.'
- **Health and Community Development**: Jane Chance, Senior Health & Community Development Officer adds that their apprentice Kirsty 'stood out because she is willing to get hands-on with the mundane work and the more interesting work. She is very motivated.'
- **Waste Management**: Tim Rice, Assistant Operations Manager felt concerned as to how to make waste management an attractive area to young people, he couldn't understand why someone would come to pick up litter and wasn't sure whether young people would be able to see the wider picture and potential after completing the apprenticeship. Now if he sees a young person has thought through that first step they have more credibility. Mark Walsh Head of Services for Waste Management adds, 'Apprentices energise other staff and boost interest in career progression and qualifications'.
- **Landscape**: Mark Felton, a Landscape Supervisor notes that, 'A positive outcome of introducing apprentices is that it is starting to break the historical links of individual workers completing specific tasks only as apprentices do a bit of everything which is more efficient.'

When asked what they would tell an employer who was considering taking on an apprentice, a group of St Edmundsbury line managers said, 'We would tell them to do it, take the leap of faith. It is tempting to put it off due to the pressures of the day job but don't!' Others added that taking on apprentices can help to 'avoid the stop gap of using temp staff and getting stuck in a false economy' and that they 'wish we'd done it sooner! We now struggle to employ skilled people because we didn't invest in training them early enough.'

The Benefits

St. Edmundsbury Borough Council has learnt that its approach has created benefits for the council overall, managers and the apprentices themselves. The benefits include:

- Eased recruitment and lower recruitment costs
- Developing managers skills as mentors
- Bringing young people's skills and viewpoints into the workplace
- Developing the future workforce through creating induction and training programmes
- Partnership with college creating further 'learning links'
- Easing difficulties of an ageing workforce
- Providing basis for succession planning
- Bringing new skills and ideas into the workforce particularly social media and new ways of working
- Success breeds success, we can see these young groups of staff in the workplace which makes it easier for new younger colleagues to feel comfortable in the Council environment
- Use of 'real' young apprentices in career and school events to promote apprenticeships
- Excellent skills with computer packages which mean a young person can really contribute with these skills meaningfully and quickly
- A good apprentice really does give as much as they take, managers have re-examined their worries that it is all give on the side of the employer

The Skills Piece

As with any new way of working, existing staff had to learn new skills or bring forward different skills in order to make the scheme work. These have included:

- Strong people management; not just of the apprentice but of the team to make sure they are aware of the behaviours expected, the amount of work the apprentice can do, how they will learn and how it will affect the team

- Influencing skills and how to challenge thinking in order to get employees behind the scheme
- New ways of interviewing that don't rely on the experience the candidate has or examples from previous work placements but focuses on their interests, enthusiasm and attitude
- How to give the apprentices confidence in themselves, their work and putting forward their ideas
- Bringing in other areas of work for the apprentice to experience, for example office/call centre, workshops, committee meetings, tradeshows etc is important. The manager has to challenge themselves to keep up a full and open agenda of learning
- How to pass on knowledge in a meaningful way and bring out the best in the apprentice
- Time management to ensure the apprentice gets to experience all aspects of the work but also has the time to complete their studies and portfolios without it impacting on the timetable of the rest of the team

Lessons Learnt

For any employer considering setting up their own scheme, St Edmundsbury is happy to share their blueprint and also has pointers that they have learnt along the way. These include:

- It really helped that for the first year of introducing the scheme the HR team secured funding to pay for a project worker to sit within the college. This person helped to set up the systems for advertising, interviewing and beginning the training of apprentices for apprenticeships generally across Suffolk, with a particular emphasis on supporting SME's who don't have easy access to this type of support.
- UNISON and UnionLearn held an internal apprenticeships event with lunch to engage staff in the plans to introduce more apprentices
- Some managers were not aware that the apprentice has full employment rights from their first day with no probationary period as with most new starters so guidance on this is needed at the start of the process
- The relationship between the employer and the college is really important. The college can offer a lot of support and answers to the common myths. Everyone involved needs to be aware of the amount of access the college will need to the apprentice for onsite assessments and be willing to 'share' the student's time between the learning and the doing of the role
- If no-one meets the criteria for your apprenticeship role don't appoint for the sake of it; review the job description and go out again with an advert. Making sure you get the right person for the right role is vital

- Pick up any issues as they occur and don't be afraid of the unknown; be willing to take a step into the dark. It is important to remember that it isn't work experience but offering real work
- Give the apprentice access to your internal learning systems for example Springboard /Navigator training or Health & Safety training or IT training. By including the apprentices they fill like part of the organisation rather than a separate unit
- It is really important to do career fairs and pass information through schools to explain the range of roles available in local authorities and dispel the myths surrounding them. Many apprentices will come through the National Apprenticeship Service website but it is still vital to engage locally
- Work experience is a good place to start in an employers' offer to young people and can then be developed into a full Apprenticeship offering once you've learnt some initial lessons. It opens the sector to a new generation and opens up employers to young people and their thoughts/backgrounds/aspirations
- Employers must set the behavioural standards for all staff including apprentices and make sure that it is transparent throughout the organisation. This helps existing staff as they know what to expect and can anticipate what the addition of an apprentice to their team will mean. Young people haven't experienced workplace behaviours yet and understanding these forms part of their learning experience
- The quality of the qualification must match the quality of the experience. Employers are career signposting the future workforce which is critical
- Having a Learning Champion within the senior management team to promote apprenticeships at all levels of the organisation
- Be ready for some trial and error in setting up apprenticeships and in selecting Apprentices, the more you do it the clearer/easier it becomes
- Engage managers that may have been apprentices themselves as apprenticeship champions who can speak more that the benefits of such learning within their area of expertise

The Future

When a group of current St Edmundsbury apprentices were asked what they would tell employers thinking about introducing apprenticeship schemes to their businesses they said, 'Do it, they would be helping younger people to get started. If they have a scheme that is worthwhile the community will see that and them in a better light. Young people will make use of the opportunity and will bring an open mindset with a different perspective.' They went on to add, 'Employers get to train someone the way they want them to be trained. The apprentice can be trained specifically to your needs so you get a really good employee out of it. Everyone needs training and you'd provide it in normal recruitment so why not offer it in the shape of an Apprenticeship'.