

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING SUCCESSFUL WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH EMPLOYERS

SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

MARCH 2024

Introduction

Related course: Working Successfully with Employers

What is this resource for: This resource is designed to help you reflect upon the live CPD session. Allowing you to approach and consider how you work with your employers to help deliver the most effective apprenticeship programme for all stakeholders. This document will also have very clear questions that we need 'to ask ourselves' within the process and allow opportunities for improvement/development of our own processes.

Successful relationships between employers and providers are at the root of high-quality apprenticeships. The engagement extends beyond strategic curriculum planning into programme design and delivery.

When the relationship is not productive, it can have a significant impact on the motivation of apprentices to continue with the programme and remain as an employee.

What role do you think can employers play in:

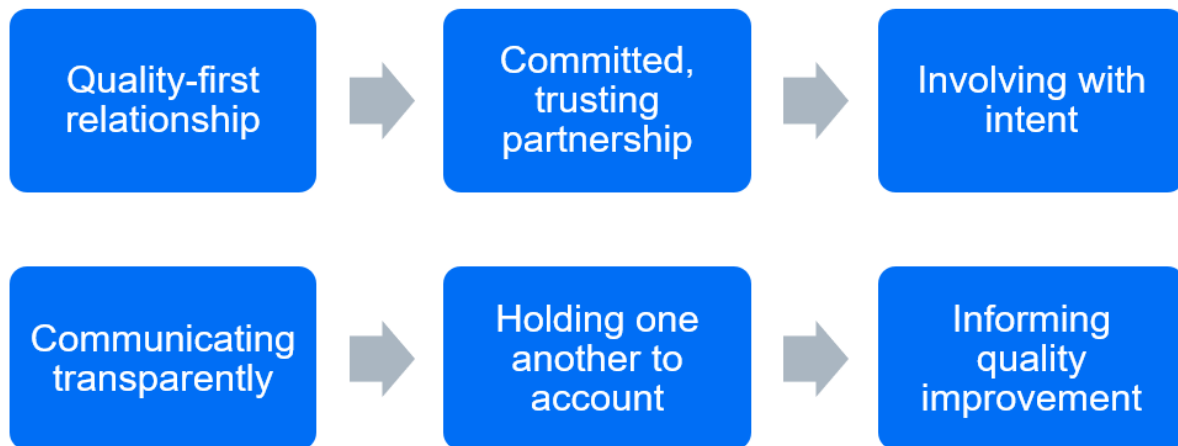
- Strategic curriculum planning
- Programme design
- Programme delivery including wider personal development
- Apprentice retention, progress, achievement, and progression



HINT: You can access publicly available feedback from employers about your organisation here: [Apprenticeship training courses](#)

How to use this resource

Under the six headings shown in the diagram below, there are four questions to help you reflect on your current approach to building and maintaining successful employer relationships. Each section suggests ideas to evolve your approach further.



HINT: Bring colleagues together from different departments in your organisation to undertake the reflective exercise and plan for changes you would like to make. This could for example include business development, account management, lecturers, trainers or coaches. Don't forget there may be people who work with employers outside of your apprenticeship provision who you might want to involve to bring consistency to your model.

Quality-first relationship

- What 'ideal' behaviours do you look for in employers to drive high-quality apprenticeships?
- What 'ideal' behaviours do you look for in your own team to drive high-quality interactions with employers?
- How well are these behaviours communicated to all stakeholders?
- How effectively does this set high expectations for all stakeholders?

Ideas to consider

- Create or review your customer relationship management strategy. Ensure it expresses high expectations for both you and the employers you work with.
- Spend time with your team agreeing on the behaviours an employer exhibits for an apprenticeship to be successful. Equally, capture the behaviours least likely to result in success and how you can mitigate against them.
- Reflect on your approach to articulating high expectations and behaviours amongst your team and the employers you work with. Identify how you communicate to and support employers to enact them.
- Review the resources you use to train your team who engage with employers. Capture how it could be improved to better develop the knowledge and skills needed to underpin a quality-first approach.

“Leaders and managers develop strong and sustained relationships with employers. They work collaboratively with them to understand the needs of their sector and to adapt and modify the design of the curriculum. Employers appreciate leaders’ high expectations and, specifically on healthcare programmes, the imperative to have high standards for patient safety and to preserve public confidence.”

University of Huddersfield, Ofsted Report

Committed and trusting

- How do you ensure employers understand what they are committing to?
- How do you take account of the different roles within an employer's organisation e.g. a central HR function and the line manager of the employer?
- How well do you and employers explore known barriers to apprenticeship success, and take action to mitigate any risks of apprentices withdrawing or falling behind?
- What behaviours do you look for that would demonstrate there is a trusted partnership between you and the employer?

Ideas to consider

- Review the information presented before sign-up. Ensure transparency is built in from the outset. Examples include the role line managers/ mentors play in progress reviews, off-the-job learning time, and functional skills development.
- Gather feedback from employers specifically concerning the information provided before sign-up. Capture improvements that can be made to both the information shared and the method of sharing it.
- Gather feedback from line managers/ mentors about the information shared with them before the apprentice starts. Capture improvements that can be made to both the information shared and the method of sharing it.
- Build time in each year to reaffirm the commitments made by all parties, and discuss any likely barriers and actions to mitigate them.
- Ensure your communication processes recognise i. different roles in an organisation throughout the apprenticeship journey and ii. Changes in personnel as people move roles.

“Leaders and managers have a clear strategy to offer programmes that contribute to the local, regional and national economy. They encourage social mobility and develop employability skills through a research-informed curriculum which includes up-to-date content that meets employers’ needs.”

University of Northumbria, Ofsted Report

Involving with Intent

- How well do you involve employers in your curriculum planning cycle?
- How well do you involve employers in programme design?
- How would you describe the role employers play in delivery and its effectiveness?
- What other opportunities do you have to involve them further with purpose?

Ideas to consider

- Review your processes for programme approval and reapproval, ensuring that evidence of employer involvement in design is mandatory. Provide guidance for teams on how best to achieve this.
- Ensure any questions you ask of employers in surveys or forums ask for specific feedback on programme design. Review your processes for consolidating and acting on feedback.
- Consider industry-specific design forums, ensuring employer engagement activity has a clear purpose. It doesn't need to meet regularly which can often be a barrier for employers to attend.
- Revisit documentation that describes the employer's role in delivery. Is it clear why their involvement is important to their apprentice? Have you shared examples of what 'good' looks like?
- Consider involving employers in opportunities which develop their employees. For example, guest speaking or facilitating projects. Add value to their existing workforce, not just their apprentices.

"Apprentices' employers and industry specialists are involved in the teaching of courses."

The JGA Group, Ofsted Report

Communicating Transparently

- By listing the different touchpoints and methods for communicating with employers, what do you notice about their effectiveness?
- How well is information sharing coordinated between different people and what barriers exist?
- Based on feedback from employers, what could you do to improve communication further?
- Can you think of examples of information that is not always shared transparently? What could you do to improve this further?

Ideas to consider

- Consider both human and digital touchpoints with employers. For example, how many emails does an employer receive from you and with what intent?
- Gather employer feedback specifically concerning the touchpoints whereby the employer relationship moves from one person/ team to another in your organisation. Identify opportunities for improvement.
- Bring together a cross-departmental working group to explore the internal handover points to explore barriers and solutions to enable a smooth transition.
- Methods of communication are as important as the communication itself. Do the methods used work well for employers or, are they being driven by your preferences?

"Employers, civic organisations, and community stakeholders highly value the college's responsiveness and its collaborative approach to providing opportunities for learners and apprentices to develop skills for employment and progression."

Burton and South Derbyshire College, Ofsted Report

Holding one another to account

- How well do you share and agree upon aims, expectations and performance measures with employers?
- Do all parties understand the implications of falling below the agreed standards in a way that matters to them?
- How effective are your processes to resolve or escalate any risks or issues?
- Where issues do occur, how are these considered for future engagements with the employer?

Ideas to consider

- Agree on shared key performance indicators (KPIs) with employers. For example, retention rates are relevant to both parties.
- Jointly review the achievement of KPIs periodically with the employer. Celebrate success and agree on actions where needed to resolve issues or mitigate risk.
- Identify the number of occasions escalation processes have been used by either you or the employer. Capture emerging themes and resulting action to reduce any problems before they occur.
- Create a risk register for the employers you work with and review it periodically. Formalise actions you take when employers fall into a specific category of risk to support them in making change where needed.

“Leaders have extremely positive relationships with employers. They carefully select those they work with, prioritising those with a strong commitment to the apprenticeship and their apprentices. Leaders have high expectations of employers and insist on their continual involvement in the development and implementation of the curriculum throughout the apprenticeship.”

Educationwise Academy, Ofsted Report

Informing quality improvement

- What methods do you use for involving employers in quality assurance and improvement?
- Feedback from employers is known to be difficult to get and at times can be ambiguous. How have you tackled this and with what impact?
- How well do you use the feedback gathered to inform your strategy or programmes?
- How could you enhance your approach further?

Ideas to consider

- Ensure you are using the naturally occurring opportunities to capture feedback. For example, ask one targeted question in each round of progress reviews rather than an overall satisfaction measure. For larger employers, contract meetings are a valuable source of triangulating feedback you receive from the line manager and mentors of apprentices.
- Ensure the action you have taken resulting from feedback is shared with employers. Sometimes, their issue isn't that they weren't asked, it is that they don't know how it has been used.
- Capture case studies that demonstrate how you have taken onboard feedback from employers and the impact on apprentices. Use these as part of your marketing communications to show your responsiveness and be ready to share during the inspection.
- Ask employers how best to involve them in your quality improvement activity. For example, whilst some will only have the capacity to respond to a question in a progress review or contract meeting, others may be keen to be more actively involved.

"Leaders have developed very strong relationships with employers who value highly the training that their employees receive. Leaders revise the curriculum that they offer frequently, to ensure that the apprenticeship programmes are up-to-date and relevant. In level 4 software development lessons, for example, tutors have introduced examples of how artificial intelligence is used within the industry, in response to employers' requests."

Ginger Nut Training, Ofsted Report

"Leaders have taken effective steps to address the previously limited engagement with employers and stakeholders in Nottingham and the region. They engage widely with other education institutions, local government and local employers to local and regional skills priorities and needs. This proactive approach means that the college has a reputation for being a responsive and trusted partner within the local and regional skills offer"

Nottingham College, Ofsted Report

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