

Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme

The fast track to Apprenticeship success



Introduction: about Skillnet

Delivering Advanced Level Apprenticeships isn't easy. If it were, every training provider would be matching Skillnet's 93 per cent success rate and its outstanding rating from Ofsted.

The gulf between Skillnet's achievement and that of other providers is considerable, as the average success rate for Advanced Level Apprenticeships is 17 per cent lower nationally, and across-the-board Grade 1s from Ofsted remain a pipe-dream for many.

That's why Skillnet is such an important part of the LSIS Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme, which aims to improve the volume, range, type and quality of service that learning providers offer to employers.

Skillnet's work in improving success at Advanced level (level 3) is exemplary – but those who wish they were in Skillnet's position will find encouragement in the knowledge that it was all very different only four years ago.

Skillnet's success rate for Advanced Apprenticeships then was only 48 per cent. It had 200 learners, 20 staff, a turnover of £1m, and not a single manufacturer among its motor industry clients.

Skillnet's transformational change

Today, Skillnet has 2,500 learners, 105 staff, a turnover of £10 million, and major clients including Scania, Ford, Kia and Daf.

"It's been quite a transformation in quite a short time," says Jane Firth, Skillnet's Audit and Compliance Manager. "We now have such a good reputation that other organisations in the motor industry training sector have asked us for support. We're working with them to try to get them to the position we're in."

Skillnet's turnaround began when its current directors took over the organisation four years ago. They realised right from the start that in order to work with the industry's big players as clients and raise achievement levels from that unenviable 48 per cent, they would have to embrace far higher quality standards and win the hearts and minds of everyone in the process.

That meant changing Skillnet's whole philosophy as well as improving its management and leadership, staff expertise, and technical facilities.

"We needed to have very, very high aspirations," says Jane Firth. "That was essential to maintain customer satisfaction. We also wanted high progression rates from Intermediate Level Apprenticeships to Advanced Level Apprenticeships – and that's what our customers wanted, too."

“Now, when we bring learners on to a programme at Intermediate Level, we’re already looking forward to taking them on to the Advanced Level Apprenticeship. We pitch it to them that it’s a journey we’re looking to take them on. It’s good for them to get the best qualifications they can.

“We try to minimise the risks and remove any barriers our learners might face. And if anyone is in jeopardy of falling out of the process, we have systems to get them back on course. Our learner retention and intervention process ensures that learners are flagged as at risk, then monitored and given appropriate support to try to resolve their issues or problems.”

The total-care approach to apprentices includes extra support for female apprentices. “The assessors and tutors in this industry are almost all male,” says Jane. “So we assign a female mentor to every female apprentice.”

As part of its effort to make it as easy as possible for employers to take on its apprentices, Skillnet competed for – and won – Apprenticeship Expansion Programme funding on behalf of its customers.

Employer engagement

Whether it’s dealing with the mighty Ford, Daf, Scania, or an independent dealer who runs a garage, Skillnet puts great emphasis on employer engagement.

“That’s key to the delivery of a successful programme. From the moment we first engage, we define all parties’ expectations and have service-level agreements, performance indicators, and risk assessments in place. The balance of operational targets and qualitative targets has to be right and not just focus on figures.”

One of the biggest factors in Skillnet’s success at Advanced Level Apprenticeships – and one that’s easy for others to copy – is its willingness to listen and act on what it hears. Skillnet finds out what employers want, and then gives them that.

Vital tools in that listening process are the unique Governor/Employer Panels held three times a year for each training programme. Panel meetings involve representatives from the manufacturer’s head office, the dealer network, Skillnet and the colleges.

“The panels help employers articulate their training needs and share best practice, and the minutes and findings are communicated to everyone involved,” says Jane. “That ensures they don’t feel they’re outside the process or that things are being done to them. They’re an integral part of it.

“The result is that our training service remains closely mapped to employers’ needs. The training has been adapted and new elements have been introduced to help everyone in the network improve the level of service they give their customers.”

As Ofsted noted, Skillnet’s staff have specialist knowledge of the brands they support, the manufacturers’ feedback keeps their knowledge up to date, and they’re always a step ahead when it comes to technological advances.

Skillnet operates nationally and is particularly proud of the network of delivery centres including the Scania one in Loughborough, where apprentices have state-of-the-art technical facilities, access to diagnostic equipment, and first-rate tuition.

Gaining wider recognition

Skillnet's diligence and sheer hard work has won it a wall full of awards and accolades that make it even more attractive to learners and employers alike. Skillnet achieved the Investors in People standard, ISO 9001 accreditation, Matrix, and the Training Quality Standard award in 2008 – one of the first providers in the industry to do so – and followed that with Ofsted Grade 1s and with Beacon status in 2010.

Supporting other providers – top tips for improving success rates

Jane says that being part of the SER programme gave Skillnet an excellent opportunity to support other providers on their journeys to achieving excellence.

“The SER programme has enabled Skillnet to share our experiences and provide practical advice and guidance to other providers,” she says.

Her advice to other learning providers who want to improve their success at Advanced Level Apprenticeships is:

- carry out a thorough initial assessment to ensure you have the right learners on the programme;
- ensure your employer engagement is excellent, as supportive employers who understand the training programmes help learners achieve;
- back up employer engagement with excellent systems and processes – eg, supporting learners at risk, and using female mentors;
- commit to quality and continuous improvement and test yourselves against quality standards;
- involve stakeholders and listen to their feedback so you can use it to improve your programmes.

But despite the string of successes under its belt and that 93 per cent success rate, Skillnet is far from complacent.

“We'll keep trying to improve our success rates,” says Jane. “And not all learners achieve in the time frame we want them to... yet.”

Current as at March 2011

The Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) Programme is funded by LSIS. It is a sector-led programme tasked with increasing the capacity of all providers in the learning and skills sector to work with employers and help address the current and future skills needs of their business and workforce.

The SER programme is managed in the **East of England, East Midlands and West Midlands** by ALP, the 157 Group, NIACE and AoC. It offers support in three key strands:

- Employer responsiveness
- Apprenticeship provision
- Pre-employment provision and transition into work.

The Programme offers a variety of support including workshops, webinars, coaching and tailored support.

In partnership with:

