

Hackathon

Employer Forums on Degree Apprenticeship programmes: facilitating stakeholder engagement and learning

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Abstract

Success in apprenticeship programmes is a collective endeavour. This paper presents an initiative which supports work-based mentors working alongside The Open University on the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA). Through a regular programme of online meetings – which we term ‘Employer Forums’ – we provide work-based mentors with a community of practice to share and develop knowledge together. Feedback gathered from the nearly 200 mentors who have attended sessions to date confirm that they value the opportunity to attend and contribute. Attendance benefits carry over into the tripartite relationship between apprentice, workplace mentor and HEI Tutor, furthering confidence, and effective working relationships.

Keywords

Degree Apprenticeship, work-based learning, Employer Forum, Tripartite relationship, off-the-job learning.

Rationale

Degree apprenticeships are a growing route into Higher Education. Rather than applying directly to university to study (as for traditional undergraduate programmes) degree apprenticeship learners access apprenticeship programmes through their workplace. As a result, they i) earn a salary whilst studying; ii) are funded for their degree through the apprenticeship levy; iii) are provided with a day a week to study by their employer; iv) use their workplace as a site of learning (rather than through case studies); and v) are provided with additional support from both their employer and the Higher Education Institution (HEI) they are studying through (Bloomfield et al, 2024). It is within this fifth element – the additional support provided through their employer as part of the ‘tripartite relationship’ of workplace mentor, HEI Tutor, and apprentice - that this paper is focused upon.

The workplace mentor role is fundamental to the success of a degree apprenticeship programmes (Roberts et al, 2019). However, HEI Tutors¹ have reported that interactions with some workplace mentors has been limited to formal, mandated tripartite review meetings. There are many time-consuming compliance and day-to-day support issues that need to be addressed within tripartite review meetings, which reduces the opportunity to discuss wider aspects, and a more strategic overview, of the apprenticeship programme. Getting a strategic overview in early, ensures apprentices capture the best opportunities, maximise value to their organisation, and optimise the evidence in their Portfolios.

Research has shown (see e.g. Horáková et al, 2024, Quew-Jones and Rowe, 2022, Roberts et. al, 2019) that the day-to-day employer role facilitating apprentices' development in the workplace as a workplace mentor, is not easy. This might explain some lack of engagement of workplace mentors beyond the tripartite meetings that has been reported by HEI Tutors. Myers et al (2025) highlight that the workplace mentor role – which is often carried out by the apprentices' line manager – often feels unseen, under-appreciated and unsupported.

Approach

In 2023, the team delivering the CMDA within The Open University Business School introduced Employer Forums to help address some of the challenges of the workplace mentor role. The aim was to enhance workplace mentors' knowledge, recognition, and confidence, and increase their engagement in both the tripartite relationship and curriculum development. Though much of the content could be provided within the tripartite relationship (and is when time allows), the workplace mentors have appreciated the wider perspective of the Employer Forum, and the safe space it

¹These are also termed ‘Higher Education Tripartite Practitioners’ by Charlton & Power-Mason (2025)

provides to ask ‘stupid questions’ that they might feel uncomfortable asking in a tripartite meeting.

The Open University now offers Employer Forums twice a year for workplace mentors supporting every level of the CMDA programme. The Forums are each scheduled to last an hour, and they take place on Microsoft Teams to make them more accessible for the workplace mentors to attend.

In year one the Forums typically focus on orientating line managers and providing a programme overview, whereas by year three, we are offering guidance on supervising the compulsory CMDA project in the workplace and helping an apprentice complete their portfolio on time.

During early Employer Forums, we found that workplace mentors supporting apprentices in the NHS were seeking more tailored support on how to support areas of the apprenticeship Standard, such as ‘finance’ and ‘marketing,’ within the health sector context. We therefore also now run two additional NHS focused Employer Forums each year, which frequently lead to contact exchanges between different Trusts.

Employer Forum Content

Bringing learning into practice

We start each Employer Forum reminding mentors how learning on an apprenticeship is quite different to learning on a traditional degree, where a student has an independent dyadic relationship with their HEI. We re-emphasise that on a degree apprenticeship only around 20% of the learning time takes place in the ‘classroom’ (termed ‘off-the-job’ learning). Each Forum underscores that the remaining approximately 80% of the learning (termed ‘on-the-job’) needs to take place in the workplace (Chadwick et al., 2024), and the workplace mentor is the key facilitator of success in that learning.

Within the Forums we discuss expectations and share ideas for good practice, including the need to meet regularly with apprentices to talk through classroom ideas and how they might be contextualised to an individual workplace. We also re-emphasise how mentors should be providing opportunities for apprentices to try out some of the ideas within their work, such as providing supervision responsibilities, getting apprentices involved in recruitment processes, and allocating them roles in projects.

To give further weight to our guidance, we regularly bring in representatives from the End Point Assessment Organisation to join our Employer Forums. We use this opportunity to help demystify the process around End Point Assessment which builds confidence for the workplace mentor and, by proxy, the apprentice.

Developing Knowledge, Skills, and Behaviours together

One of the findings from our research with workplace mentors (Myers et al, 2025) was that they sometimes feel uncomfortable not knowing the academic content that their apprentices are studying. They may not have the subject expertise (in our case business and management), and/or they might not have had the opportunity to study at degree-level themselves. The workplace mentors do not want to be seen as lacking competence or out of their depth in front of their apprentices and/or HEI Tutors and hence are less likely to bring this up in tripartite meetings. We therefore spend time in the Employer Forums exploring some of the module content together, to help workplace mentors feel more comfortable talking through the module ideas and the application of those ideas in the workplace.

One key part of the workplace mentor role is to provide work opportunities to apprentices to help them develop the knowledge, skills, and behaviours (KSBs) of the apprenticeship Standard. To complement discussions in tripartite meetings, we spend time in Employer Forums sharing examples of workplace opportunities for KSB development. Being exposed to a wider variety of examples from different workplace situations helps workplace mentors develop ideas for how they could support their own apprentices. This becomes particularly impactful in Year 3 when we discuss the requirements of the workplace project that the workplace mentor is required to agree and authorise. We share examples of previous apprentice workplace projects from across a range of functions and sectors.

In addition, we use the Employer Forums to discuss generic support, re-emphasising what the apprentices will need to do, and when, in terms of assignment writing, portfolio development, and apprenticeship projects. This backs up what they are hearing from their HEI Tutor and enables the workplace mentors to feel better informed and more able to support their apprentices.

We always make sure there is time in every Employer Forum for the workplace mentors to meet each other and discuss together, as we recognise the value that is gained from talking with others in the same boat, enabling them to generate their own community of practice beyond our sessions.

Considerations for implementation

We believe that the Employer Forums have significant benefit: there have however been challenges implementing them. One challenge relates to the rapid turnover in workplace mentors when either the apprentice or their line manager changes role during a long degree apprenticeship programme (which often happens more than once). Keeping track of the most up-to-date line manager contact details to invite to meetings is hard when operating at scale. It is also a challenge having to include introductory content for any new workplace mentors each session. Having a changing

cohort of workplace mentors each session also limits the ability to build a strong community of practice.

To enhance attendance, we have advertised sessions well in advance, sent follow-up reminders, and worked to ensure our workplace mentor database is up to date. We try and choose appropriate daytime slots (like lunchtime or shift changes in the NHS) to try and ensure session timing is as convenient as possible. We also asked our HEI Tutors - whom the workplace mentors communicate most with - to encourage attendance and remind the workplace mentors about events.

We also recognise there is a limit to the amount of time that workplace mentors can contribute to supporting their apprentices (Myers et al, 2025). That is why we have chosen to run the sessions online. We acknowledge however that they would be much more impactful if they could be face-to-face. We are also limited to the amount of content we can cover in just one hour.

There is sometimes reluctance initially for workplace mentors to speak up during Employer Forums. We have found however that once one workplace mentor braves asking a question, others usually feel more confident to join in and relay their experiences and understanding. Whilst the body of the meeting is recorded for non-attendees, we pause recording during any Q&A or breakout session to facilitate the feeling of a 'safe space.' After the event slides and recordings are circulated to all invitees, as well as provided to all Tutors so they can know what has been discussed, enhancing that Tripartite experience.

Benefits

Since introducing Employer Forums in 2023 we have had nearly 200 individuals from over 100 different organisations take part in at least one session. We have also had 50 individuals from the NHS join our Forums.

We have found that the workplace mentors really value the opportunity to attend, and that the Employer Forums have had benefit for all members of the wider tripartite relationship: the Employer, the HEI, and the Apprentice.

The Employer

The workplace mentor feels more informed and confident in their role as the employer representative at the coalface in the apprenticeship tripartite relationship. This enhances their ability to support certain areas of the standard (on-the-job learning) and better understand their role in work-based projects. This might include mentorship in how an apprentice might best manage a project within the organisation, as well facilitating helpful introductions and networking to make a better project outcome.

The employing organisation receives more support for its frontline staff facilitating apprentice development. Enhanced apprenticeship delivery also supports broader organisation learning; our research has heard directly from workplace mentors on how much they and their organisation have learned from their apprentices (Myers et al, 2025).

The HEI

As a university, we learn more about Employer needs, and gain additional insights into how to effectively support apprentices. This leads to smoother and less time intensive apprenticeships, and better final EPA grades. Learning from the Forums also feeds into future curriculum design, such as highlighting where apprentices may need more support, as in the example of marketing and finance for NHS apprentices.

The Apprentice

Most importantly, the Employer Forum events help ensure apprentices get the support they need in the workplace to support their degree apprenticeship. Their workplace mentor's attendance at the Employer Forum reinforces their organisation's commitment to supporting them on their apprenticeship programme, encourages their workplace mentor to meet with them more regularly to discuss their needs, and enhances discussions within the tripartite review meetings.

The Future

The strength of our Employer Forums has built over time. We conduct a review after each session and act on feedback from attendees to improve future Forums. We have disseminated our learning within our university which has led to similar initiatives on different Open University programmes.

We believe in inter-institutional collaboration (Power-Mason et al, 2025), and hence we hope that by sharing our experience of this initiative we may be able to enhance delivery more widely across apprenticeship providers. This is not just relevant for HEIs, but also Further Education Colleges and independent training providers delivering similar programmes. On a larger scale, this sort of collaborative support could be facilitated by professional bodies at a sectoral level (see Myers et al, 2025).

We also believe that other employer-led, or work-integrated programmes beyond apprenticeships - such as placement years and internships - could benefit from Employer Forums. This would enable employers to come together to enhance understanding of how to support learners through the additional complexities of work-based learning programmes. This will then help propagate wider skills and inter-workplace connection to support the next generation of workers.

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