



SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Employer Roundtable
Managing
Expectations

No. 12

Thursday 8th
April 2021
10am - 11:30am

Overview

Many HR professionals are existing in a gap between expectations and reality. With the government rolling out new programmes and businesses keen to use their levy pot and get back on track post-pandemic, can HR leads keep every stakeholder happy and stay 'at the heart' of the post-16 skills agenda?

In this Roundtable, we discussed how employers feel about the increased expectations from the government and their own businesses.

Key areas discussed in this roundtable were;

1. Expectations on employers from the Government
2. Expectations on HR leads from within the business

Attendees of the twelfth roundtable include:



With many more attending...

PwC
Vodafone
Sky
Legal and General

Mitie
Clarion Futures
RSM
Channel 4
AQA

WSP
Cabinet Office,
Civil Service

Key Points

1

The Governments' post-16 skills initiatives are coming from a good place, but more substance and practical guidance is needed for employers to implement them.

2

More needs to be done by the Government to understand the practicalities of implementing programmes, including team capacity, type of business and the challenges associated with work-based learning and remote working.

3

The Government should provide more support for the training providers who partner with employers.

4

The Government should also look to review their activity to reduce stigma around apprenticeships and review the weight given by Ofsted to schools and colleges that encourage the University route.

5

Many businesses are avoiding implementing schemes other than apprenticeships until they are settled post-pandemic due to capacity.

6

Quality wins over quantity every time. Many employers feel they should be implementing new programmes but argue that they would rather focus on apprenticeships than crowd the workforce with multiple programmes.

Expectations from the Government



In January 2021, the Government released their 'Skills for Jobs' whitepaper, outlining their intentions to provide a Lifetime Skills Guarantee to all UK citizens. At face value, this guarantee shows a step in the right direction with the Government putting an enhanced focus on work-based learning.

But does this pledge provide enough substance for employers and providers about what is expected of them? Will it allow them to implement the promises practically? And how do employers feel about the claims they are 'At the heart of post-16 skills'? We took these questions to our employer partners to find out.

The conversation



The general consensus from attendees around this topic was not a positive one. The whitepaper release seems to have loaded even greater expectations and pressure on HR leads than they were already experiencing. While employers think the initiatives are coming from a good place, ultimately, there are too many initiatives and not enough support.

Employers are concerned that the Government statement 'Employers are at the heart of post-16 skills', shifts responsibility for the success or failure of the schemes onto employers, with many questioning 'What does this mean?' and 'Do employers want to be at the heart of it?'. While this makes a great headline, between the report publication in January and the April Roundtable, none of the activity from the whitepaper has been actioned by the Government.

While employers are committed to playing their part, the lack of practical advice and direction around the 'guarantee' means they are not prepared or equipped to pick up the enormous mantle of leading the post-16 skills agenda. One attendee stated that they feel employers are already making good headway with apprenticeships but recognised that training providers also need support. Employer and provider partnerships are essential to ensuring employers can continue to provide as many post-16 opportunities as possible within their business.

Many of the employers attending this Roundtable believe that the Government needs to understand the varying types of employers utilising the programmes and the practicalities of implementing them. Large employers may have the levy budget but only have the capacity for a small apprenticeship division due to factors like their HR team's size or the roles and working styles within their business. These factors will significantly affect the Government aspiration to have 'employers at the heart of post-16 skills' as employers can't put these plans into practice.

Our attendees expressed concerns about the number of schemes available. While employers do not technically have to invest in any of the programmes, they feel pressure from the Government to review and implement all possible avenues. Many think that T-Levels, Traineeships, and the Kickstart programme are good, but would prefer to implement them when they are back in the office and can give individuals proper face time.

Kickstart was a key topic for this group, with many keen to invest time and effort into the scheme. But issues such as a lack of advice, a slow system, and no clear definition of how this interacts with other programmes aren't making their lives any easier. One business has even had university graduates applying through the Kickstart scheme, which is understandable given the economic climate but does not seem to be in the spirit of the initiative.

Our attendees expressed broader issues regarding the stigma around apprenticeships and the weight Ofsted accredits to schools and colleges that encourage students to attend University. These issues are not something employers can combat alone. While expectations have been placed on employers, and they are ready to rise to the challenge, the Government will find it hard to achieve the drastic change it wants without changes at the start of the process.

Expectations from the Business



As explored in the first half of the Roundtable, the Government expectations of employers and their HR leads are high. With HR leads already feeling the pressure, how are their business leaders responding to these increased expectations? What impact are internal forces having on those who have to implement post-16 skills programmes? And how does this affect the type of programmes they decide to roll out?

The conversation



Many of the attendees know that their hiring strategy and use of the Government schemes will be driven by the broader business strategy. In 2020, businesses had to completely transform themselves to cope during the pandemic, including making redundancies and reducing new hires. Many employers have not had time to evaluate new schemes as apprenticeships are working so well for them already. As businesses start to find their new normal, many of the Roundtable attendees are waiting to understand the new strategy before investing in new programmes.

However, that does not stop business leaders, colleagues, and peers from getting excited about the new initiatives without understanding the full practicalities, including resource, eligibility, and impact. The schemes have been widely advertised and promoted in the national press, which is great for generating interest in young people and their advisors. But many participants felt it was challenging to have to translate the advantages and disadvantages of each programme to others when decision making. All of this increases the business expectations on HR leads.

To avoid becoming overwhelmed with choice, one attendee suggested seeing all the post-16 skills programmes as an 'offering' from which you can pick and choose. This individual then shared information about the pros/cons of each programme and the support needed by government and within the organisation, to make this possible.

The overriding opinion from our attendees is that quality wins over quantity every time.

Many employers are heavily invested in apprenticeships. They know that the format works for their business, they can demonstrate clear benefits and ROI, and the programmes are the right length which provides consistency for the apprentice and the organisation. They also have recruitment processes in place that ensure they attract quality candidates for these roles, ensuring a meaningful and valuable experience for all involved.

Despite business expectations, one participant isn't considering T-Levels or Traineeships for their business. Even though it might be the 'right thing to do', the programme lengths being shorter and more sporadic would disrupt their

organisation. They aren't sure the Government has thought about the real value for the employer or the individual.

Another attendee echoed earlier comments that T-Levels, Traineeships and Kickstart won't work for their business until they have readjusted to being in the office. As HR professionals, they know that for these programmes to be effective, they need to implement them face to face.

As discussed in previous Roundtable events, access to technology is a significant barrier to employment for some young people, especially those eligible for the Kickstart scheme. Remote working isn't practical in these scenarios, and the timing of the launch of these initiatives demonstrates the Government's lack of understanding of the schemes' practicalities.

Other businesses have successfully grown their apprenticeship provision over the past year despite the external challenges. Buoyed by this growth, they are starting to look at Kickstart as a gateway to apprenticeships and grow their workforce. As an employer in the retail space, they echo other attendees comments that such programmes will be more effective if completed in person.

More from the roundtable...

If you liked what you read here, why not attend our next roundtable via our [events page](#).

You can also catch up on our previous discussions via our [resource hub](#).

If you're looking for more in-depth insights into candidate behaviour, we're pleased to be able to offer you our own research into the world of early talent – read more [here](#).