

TUC Project on Apprenticeships

Last month, I met with Scarlet Harris, Apprenticeship Policy and Campaigns Officer and Rachael Saunders, Apprenticeships Liaison and Promotions Officer at the TUC who are driving a two year capacity boosting project running to March 2011, together with the National Apprenticeship service.

I asked them what this project means and how it will be of benefit to those taking part:



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Q: What are the aims and objectives of the project?

A: The primary aims are to boost capacity for apprenticeships and support affiliate unions to support apprentices. This essentially means giving union reps the relevant tools and up-to-date materials to promote apprenticeships within their organisations. We had identified a key need, in that some sectors had good set ups for apprenticeships, for example, ship-building where there is a long tradition of apprenticeships and, conversely, some sectors had no apprenticeships. TUC officers and trade union reps know that this is a hugely important area and that we need to ensure that the quality standard is high. Really, it's all about knowledge-sharing and informing affiliate unions and, in turn, employers about apprenticeships and the value they bring to both employer and apprentice.

Q: How is this seen from another angle?

A: We believe that through the work of this project, unions and employers can unite on a shared agenda. Often the union and employer are working on 'different sides' as it were and this provides an opportunity to work towards the same goal.

Q: How many unions and employers are involved in the project?

A: We are trying to engage with as many affiliate unions as possible but obviously not all work in sectors where there are apprentices. Our project aims to engage with at least and we expect to see this number grow.

Q: What industry sectors are covered by the project?

A: The project is not sector specific. There are almost 200 apprenticeship frameworks and there are unions involved in almost all of the relevant sectors.

Q: What are the specific phases involved in setting up this project?

A: Firstly we are mapping existing union involvement in apprenticeships. The next stage is holding regional events, joint with NAS, across the UK to raise awareness with union reps and employers. Thirdly we'll be holding training courses for reps on apprenticeships and on how to coach and mentor apprentices. Union reps are often the ideal candidates to be mentors.

Throughout 2010 we'll be providing reps with training on how to negotiate with employers to encourage them to take on more apprentices and to improve the terms and conditions of existing apprentices. This provides an important safeguard to ensure that the required standards are met throughout an apprenticeship, something that the CfA certainly knows about!

Q: So what exactly is the CfA involvement?

A: During the early part of 2010, we'll be contributing to a TUC Toolkit including case studies for reps to take to employers to help convince them of the case for taking on apprentices. We'll be working together with all Sector Skills Councils and the CfA, the Standard-Setting Body for Business & Administration to ensure the Toolkit contains relevant information.

Q: What are the challenges you have faced and are facing moving forward?

A: In an economic downturn such as we are seeing at the moment, there are less people being taken on by employers because there is less work around. A significant number of organisations have had to cease trading or drastically reduce their headcount. The good news is that many have kept their apprentices on. Longer, more established businesses realise the importance of having a longer-term view and of needing the skills offered by apprenticeships when the market picks up. The challenge for us is to encourage more employers to keep their apprentices.

Q: What is the upside for you?

A: It is great to be working on an area where employers, trade unions and the government are all working together to achieve the same aims. To maintain that unity is vital that apprenticeships that are offered are of a high quality, negotiated, with good quality training. This benefits the employer, apprentice and union. The TUC and its affiliate unions have a long history of supporting apprenticeships.

Q: You mentioned the regional events – tell me about these.

A: There are TUC events on apprenticeships being run across the country, in partnership with the National Apprenticeship Service. Some regions will be including apprenticeships within larger events, and stand alone events on apprenticeships are being run in Leeds, Bristol and Liverpool.

Speakers at the events are from the TUC and the National Apprenticeship Service and will be giving an overview of what it's all about. The aim is to target reps and officers to create a wide-range of awareness and a high level knowledge base.

Q: How does this work?

A: Again, this is about future planning for the provision of more apprenticeships within businesses and what we need to do to negotiate to ensure that more apprentices are taken on. Every region really needs to promote the opportunity to undertake training courses and share in each other's expertise.

Q: How do you see changes occurring with any changes in government that may occur soon?

A: All major political parties are committed to supporting apprenticeships, so we know that this will continue to be a priority for any future government.

Our thanks are extended to Scarlet and Rachael for providing us with the material for this interview and in future eBriefings we will be featuring Joanna Wiczak of Merseytravel who spoke at the recent TUC Congress, and Zoe Molyneaux, TUC apprentice administrator.

Watch this space!

For further information on the TUC capacity boosting project 'Apprenticeships Are Union Business' please contact Scarlet Harris at sharris@tuc.org.uk, Apprenticeship Policy and Campaigns Officer, TUC.