

Comment

The Great Training Robbery

Basic training being disguised as apprenticeships and a decline in apprenticeships is the damning assessment of the first year of the apprenticeship levy by the independent UK think-tank Reform.

If we're not careful, a customer base of homeowners who currently adore companies that take-on apprentices will become sick and cynical that 'those young people supposedly learning a trade are just underpaid, under-skilled – and being taken advantage of by their employers'.

The Apprenticeship Levy is a year-old scheme that sees big employers paying in to a fund to help all businesses with the cost of employing apprentices – that's right...a small company may not have to pay in but can draw out. So too can the big companies – they can even draw out more than they put in. And yet, small companies are failing to take their fair advantage and even big companies, particularly in the construction sector, despite paying in, are not drawing out. Woeful!

But it gets worse. There are big companies – you know some of them as they keep getting flagged-up for not paying taxes in the UK despite being seen on every High Street in the country – who know how to play the system. And they are drawing out from the Levy more than they pay in and are creating 'Mockery Apprenticeships' such as for Baristas (coffee server) and sandwich makers.

In the six months after the levy was introduced (April-October 2017), the number of people starting an apprenticeship fell by 40 per cent compared to the same period in the previous year, says the Reform report. In addition, more experienced and older workers are increasingly becoming the focus of the apprenticeship programme, at the expense of less experienced and younger employees.

Quantity rather than quality

The Conservative Party remains committed to its 2015 manifesto pledge that 3 million people will start an apprenticeship by 2020. Commentators have consistently raised concerns over this target as it prioritises the quantity of apprenticeships rather than their quality.

Coffee shop culture

The introduction of the levy has also diminished the quality of apprenticeships. The list of roles now officially counted as an 'apprenticeship' includes many low-skill and often very short training courses. These roles include serving customers in a delicatessen or coffee shop, working on a hotel reception desk, performing basic office administration and serving food and drink in a restaurant, concluded the Reform report. The report says such training courses do not meet the historical or international definition of an apprenticeship because they typically offer minimal training, represent low-wage jobs and do not constitute skilled occupations. Moreover, employers are using the levy to rebadge existing training courses as apprenticeships to shift the costs of training onto the Government instead. The most obvious examples of this relabelling are found in leadership and management skills. The list of the most popular apprenticeship standards includes becoming a 'Team Leader', 'Supervisor' or 'Manager'. Cranfield University's prestigious School of Management has even re-designated its existing Executive MBA as an apprenticeship to attract up to a 90 per cent government subsidy towards the programme costs.

Government collusion

According to Reform, almost 40 per cent of the 'apprenticeship standards' approved by the Government since 2012 fail to reach the international or historical definition of an apprenticeship. These mislabelled courses are consuming over 20 per cent of the funding available for newly designed apprenticeships. Without reform, in 2019-20 the Government will spend £600 million on courses incorrectly labelled as apprenticeships.

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