

AFTER THE LEVY

Employers from all corners of industry have lambasted the apprenticeship levy standard introduced in April 2017 as being unfit for purpose; it has resulted in a 24% year-on-year drop in people starting apprenticeships. Yet many major CV fleets are finding that the new regime - though by no means perfect - is working well for them, as Steve Banner discovers

Janet Francis, apprenticeships and qualifications manager at First Bus, says: "I suspect that a lot of the critics didn't think the levy would be introduced. But we did, and we planned for it." First Bus takes on up to 60 engineering apprentices a year. Last year, three First Bus apprentices were successful in the IRTE Skills Challenge (see also special section after p22).

Businesses in the sector are showing no great eagerness to become employer-providers of training, however, and are almost all relying on third-party providers instead. "A lot of them have registered as employer-providers, but haven't implemented their registration because they are worried about being monitored by Ofsted," she says. (Although First Bus is confident that it can meet Ofsted's requirements, Francis explains that it has yet to venture down the employer-provider route.)

A key change to training is the introduction of end-point assessment of an apprentice's competence by an approved third party. "It's challenging for the individual involved, but it's challenging in a good way," says Peter Buckle, First Bus engineering trainer. "It should help our industry avoid the situation we had in the old days,

whereby an apprentice could drop through the net and be left to muddle along for the rest of his working life."

At HGV rental firm Ryder, apprentices are told from the outset that end-point assessment is what they will face, and are trained and supported accordingly. "Although not everybody responds well to exam conditions, I don't see standards-based testing as a negative," says HR director Catherine Steel.

One reason why the take-up of apprenticeships across the wider UK economy has fallen may be because many of the standards for specific apprentice training courses have yet to be agreed. This appears to be less of an issue for the road transport sector,



thanks to the activities of its employer-led Trailblazer groups. Standards have been developed for Heavy Vehicle Service And Maintenance Technician (Level 3, 36 months; <https://is.gd/oxamiz>) and Large Goods Vehicle Driver (Level 2, 12 months) among other jobs.

Still, S&B Automotive Academy would like to see the existing Level 3 apprenticeships in bus, coach and truck workshop engineering developed to Level 4, an idea enthusiastically supported by Lloyd Mason, engineering development manager at Arriva UK Bus (see also <https://is.gd/vimadi>).

He adds: "I'd like to see a Level 2 service maintenance technician standard introduced, too. Not everybody has the





aptitude or the desire to attain Level 3, or may find the three years of training they have embarked on is interrupted by illness or family problems, but may still wish to demonstrate they can handle certain workshop tasks competently."

Mason points to a key change to apprenticeship funding compared with what was in place before the levy was introduced. "There is now no upper age limit, which widens the recruitment pool," he says.

That does not mean that levy funding cannot ever be used to help existing employees improve their skills, says Nicola Bevan, talent and development manager at logistics giant Wincanton. With just over 400 apprentices in total, Wincanton is using the levy to support apprenticeships for technicians, drivers, warehouse operatives and staff who work in traffic offices, she reports, as well as training for people at a more senior level in the company. "We offered apprenticeships before, but not on the scale we do now, and we're seeing types of apprenticeship that we wouldn't have seen previously," she says. "We've got 17 different programmes running."

One Level 2 standard it is looking at adopting - which is still under development - is Express Delivery Operative. "It covers everything from

driving and customer service skills to route planning," she says.

A Level 2 apprenticeship that Ryder would like to see developed is one that covers mobile technicians engaged in trailer maintenance, says Steel. "It's a business we're involved in, with 50 mobile engineers," she observes. Also, she adds: "We're certainly considering a one-year apprenticeship for supervisors."

Something that has to be borne in mind is that for an apprenticeship to qualify for levy funding, 20% of the training has to be off-the-job, say Francis and Bevan. This means that the employees involved will have to be taken away from their regular tasks for one-fifth of the time they are at work; a familiar scenario for apprentices attending block release courses at colleges, but less familiar to senior management grades.

Returning to the subject of apprentice truck and bus technicians, do teenagers really want to work in truck and bus workshops? Francis does not deny that finding talent is a challenge, and is using existing apprentices to help persuade potential recruits that becoming an apprentice technician can be the start of an exciting and rewarding career. First Bus is doing so through initiatives such as the Young Amazing Ambassadors Network. It calculates

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The well-known national haulier has become an employer-provider, at least so far as apprenticeships for

its own drivers are concerned, by acting as a subcontractor to the National Logistics Academy, which is its main provider.

"They keep us compliant so far as Ofsted is concerned," says Dianne Musker, Eddie Stobart's commercial training manager.

With driver training academies in Cheshire and Northamptonshire, the high-profile logistics group has put 14 of its existing drivers through the large goods vehicle driver apprenticeship programme so far, with the accent on fuel-efficient driving and safe urban driving. Its aim is for 200 of its drivers to undergo the programme. "One of the benefits is that it counts as 21 hours of their driver CPC training," Musker says.

As part of their training, drivers have to achieve Level 2 in English and maths before their end-point assessment. This may require coaching in both subjects. But many of them have jumped at the chance, says Musker. "I know of one driver who admits that he's spent more time working on his English and maths with us than he ever did at school," she says.

that a 16-year-old is more likely to listen to what an 18- or 19-year-old has to say than to a middle-aged man in a suit. It's probably right. **TE**

FURTHER INFORMATION

Apprenticeship funding rules: 2018-2019 - <https://is.gd/gagaja>

IfA guidance to developing end-point assessments - <https://is.gd/bukula>

End-point assessor list - <https://is.gd/bicige>

Apprenticeship funding: rules for employer-providers (to July 2018) - <https://is.gd/pucujj>

