

Hiring & Managing Apprentices – An Employer's Perspective

When I set up my Painting & Decorating business in 2005, I vowed not to employ anyone. Too much hassle, too much responsibility, too many regulations. However, I was soon craving company and someone to share progress with. From a practical viewpoint, demand was exceeding my capacity after 6 months and I had to revisit my preconceptions about employment and to develop a strategy to deal with the complexities involved.

Young hopefuls had started to ring me asking for work. Impressed by their initiative, I interviewed and took on a lad part time, then another on a full time basis. Through this process I realised that the act of employing someone represents a hugely valuable gift to that individual. I remembered how I had felt when I got my first (and only) job at Midland Bank – the injection of confidence, the self realisation, the relief, the dreams fulfilled. This gift is precious and needs to be carefully targeted.

Who would value it most? Who needs it most? It is not possible to take on everybody! Mine was and is a very small business with a limit on the opportunities available. Also it is a business which survives on a reputation for hands on quality, service, competence, operational efficiency and good behaviour. The people I employ therefore have to meet market led criteria, show a willingness to learn, be able and prepared to fit into the team and display the potential to become a good decorator.

So I was looking for special people, yet people who had not been previously seen as special. People who needed a leap of faith by an employer. Learning difficulties, personal circumstances, family history and disabilities can all blight employability, yet personal qualities such as honesty, humility, physical fitness, desire and ambition, if encouraged, can allow the individual to transcend other shortcomings.

I believed I had the patience, purpose and ability to provide the opportunity to those who needed it most and in the process build something unique. A business which cared as much for its employees as for its customers. A business which was not focussed on maximising income. A business with a genuine social purpose. A business committed to improvement, skill acquisition and excellence. A business which gives its customers something special in their homes, whilst getting the job done to a high standard.

As I employed successive people, a pattern began to emerge. Dyslexia, deafness, split families, drugs, depression, learning difficulties, communication problems (although fortunately not all in the same individuals). All this created a challenging mixture involving unpredictability and risk. I decided to bring some structure into managing the team.

I engaged a business improvement coach – Janet Pink of Icando Ltd to help us go through the Investors in People process. Some of the building blocks were already in place. I had developed strong trusting relationships with each of my employees. I had implemented a wide ranging and formal written performance appraisal system, focusing on development as adults and as decorators. I had encouraged an open culture by discussing all the key decisions facing the business, some of which required soul searching on my part.

liP allowed these risk reduction strategies, which encouraged commitment and loyalty, to become strengthened and joined up by adopting best practice. By implementing this and the Full Modern Apprenticeship framework as the training standard for employees, we have created the best scenario for employees as they are required to learn and perform to a set benchmark and invest effort into their own futures. Indeed, I believe it is this exposure to reality which is crucial to their long term success and self sufficiency.

Having the support of an external training provider (Chichester College) is a great benefit. Frankly it is a strain to deal with a series of personal problems, reliability issues, mistakes and other distractions without assuming total responsibility for training. I seek to reinforce and build on college work and focus attention on becoming a better team player, a more efficient worker and an excellent decorator.

Despite the fact that I attended the College myself to support my employees, one of whom had never achieved a qualification, I found it surprisingly difficult to penetrate beyond the rhetoric and develop a proper business relationship with the College. After some false starts, confrontations and persistence, I made some valuable contacts and we have achieved some significant things together.

In particular, Dan Turner became the first deaf person at Chichester to pass the Communications Key Skills modules. This enabled him to complete his Level 2 Apprenticeship in 2009. The College had provided extra support to make this possible. Dan went on to win the South East Award for Apprentice of the Year whilst the business won the regional and national Award for Employer of the Year, all endorsed by Chichester College.

However, it has not all been a bed of roses. Hiring and managing Apprentices is time consuming and frustrating. Progress can be erratic, the business of building a team causes stresses which can be nearly too much for individuals as they experience the responsibilities of team work for the first time. Whilst we are tolerant and forgiving of each others shortcomings and limitations, laziness and lack of concentration are addressed. We must not forget that our customers require the expected outcome within the agreed timescale. We must be organised, professional and well behaved. Being soft on ourselves is not a viable option. Building a good reputation benefits us all. Learning commercial reality is a good thing.

Challenges at home interfere with the ability to work, undermining team morale and customer satisfaction. Partnering with the College brings professionalism to these soft issues which need to be handled with great sensitivity if they are to be resolved successfully. The Apprentice liaison role is a crucial one at the College for all parties.

One of my Apprentices fell away from College and left her job with us because her tutor resigned and was not replaced for several months. She became disillusioned and no longer believed she would complete her Level 3 qualification. This was a great disappointment to me, a failure. It has taken a year to get back on track with my other employees. Tutors and employers need to work much more closely together to ensure that students can see that their time at College is as important as their time at work. Employers need to see regular attendance reports, details of work set and progress reports. Employees need to develop a sense of pride and professionalism and a belief that they will succeed.

I am aware that many employers take on Apprentices to 'see how they go'. Only the strongest survive, a sort of self selection. In a small business, such a random approach cannot work, the investment is too great, the resource is too valuable. Every Apprentice is precious and must achieve their potential. Small Employers like me need to develop skills, in addition to qualities, to enable them to succeed with this. Acquiring such skills is expensive – coaching fees, the cost of getting it wrong, or the long slog to getting it right. Help!

When we get it right, the sense of achievement is overwhelming. Praise from customers, praise from each other, celebration events, individual recognition, all help to define our progress as a team and as a business.

Yet, as I stand here before you, I question whether this is enough to sustain the time and energy required from me to push these young people forward. I have to say, on a human level, it is very marginal.

However, I am encouraged by my faith that I am doing good work, but I and others like me need all the help we can get.

Thank you for listening.

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