Trailblazer Scheme: Apprenticeship Standards for Data Centres

What is the Trailblazer Apprenticeship Scheme?

The trailblazer apprenticeship scheme was established to reduce duplication and complexity in apprenticeships, improve the quality of training and help match provision to industry requirements. Previously, a multiplicity of apprenticeships of varying quality, provided by a profusion of different bodies, confused candidates and employers without providing guarantees in terms of skills or learning outcomes. A new scheme emerged from the Richards Report, which recommended one standard for one role – Trailblazer Apprenticeships. Under this scheme apprenticeships must now conform to relevant apprenticeship standards that in turn must be approved by the Secretary of State at BEIS. The scheme has effectively replaced all existing apprenticeships. The premise is "earn while you learn". The Trailblazer scheme is funded by an Apprenticeship Levy. The scheme is not restricted to 16-19 year old school leavers: It is open to all ages and multiple levels.

What is the Apprenticeship Levy and who has to pay it?

The Apprenticeship Levy applies to organisations with an annual salary bill of more than £3M. They are obliged to pay 0.05% of anything over £3M (i.e. the first £3m is exempt). The objective of this funding model is to share the training burden and address perverse incentives that discourage companies from investing in training (e.g. the perception that training costs impact competitiveness because companies lose trained staff to others who offer higher salaries because they aren't spending money on training all the time).

How is an apprenticeship standard developed?

An apprenticeship standard must be employer led, and a group of at least ten employer organisations is required to develop it. This group consults organisations with relevant expertise, such as training providers, professional bodies or industry associations. Ideally the employer businesses should be of different size, structure, location, represent different parts of the industry and have different business models. This ensures that no individual company can dominate the content and that the standard they develop is robust. The standard is written on no more than two sides of A4 and provides the blueprint or template for each apprenticeship. An apprenticeship standard will only gain government approval if its content can clearly be differentiated from other standards. Once approved, each standard becomes Crown Copyright and is free to download.

How are the standards used?

If a company wants to take on apprentices, they must find candidates for whom the apprenticeship will provide a genuine learning opportunity. An individual who already possesses the skills is ineligible; this is to prevent the scheme being used to solve commercial training needs or being wasted on "tick box" exercises. Then they need to find a lead provider who will act as coordinator for them and check that the proposed apprentices are eligible. Lead providers must have been vetted by the Skills Funding Agency and could be colleges, other HE institutions or commercial training providers. Lead providers do not need to provide training as their primary role is coordination.

The lead provider acts rather like a bespoke holiday company and puts together the apprenticeship based around the specific requirements of the employer. Apprentices spend 80% of their time working for the

employer but 20% of their time must be "off job" training. The employer can cherry pick the providers and courses that best match their requirement (provided that they are also in line with the learning outcomes and objectives of the apprenticeship standard, against which the activity will be assessed). The employer may use the lead provider for some elements but is not obliged to do so. The focus of the scheme is on quality of training provision and there is scope for flexibility and feedback. All the training providers must be registered on the SFA. They have to demonstrate ability to deliver, financial stability, competency and compliance. Failure to perform can (and does) result in providers being excluded from the list.

Funding
Funding arrangements are under review but currently cover third party training and assessment and differ slightly for levy and non-levy payers. Levy payers pay the lead provider via their digital apprenticeship service account. Government then adds a 10% contribution. The employer then has access to the combined pot to pay the lead provider for the apprenticeship training and assessment. The SFA contributes £2 for each £1 of employer spend, paid directly to the training provider, bringing the total to £3.10 per £1. Non levy payers will use a co-funded model. The employer will agree a payment schedule with the lead provider, who must then prove to government that they have been paid by the employer, and then government will release its contribution to the lead provider. This model is funded 10% by the employer and 90% by government. Non levy payers will not be able to use the digital apprenticeship service until at least 2018.

Assessment
Apprentices must be assessed by a third party who is neither a training provider nor an employer. This part of the process attracts a lot of scrutiny because this stage is where there is theoretically most scope for abuse, for instance in charges. The cost of assessment can be met from the training pot. It must be possible to test against all the criteria in the assessment standard. Assessment tends to take 1-2 days but is not necessarily done all at once. Gate markers may enable a staged approach. Proprietary certifications may form part of the assessment if deemed appropriate – so industry decides what they need and what to include.   There is no need to double assess – so if a certification covers part of the apprenticeship, achieving the certification will fulfil that part of the assessment.

Apprenticeship standards relevant to data centres
A data centre is a complex environment that brings together a number of different technical disciplines, including IT, cabling and networks, telecommunications, building management, mechanical and electrical engineering.   This means that a variety of apprenticeships will be relevant to staff working in data centres, depending on the specific operating model and to some extent the size of the facility. In addition, a bespoke apprenticeship standard for a data centre technician is currently at an early stage of development. Apprenticeship standards relevant to data centres include (but are not limited to):
- Building Services Engineering Design Technician (4),
- Building Services Engineering Technician (4),
- Facilities Management Supervisor (3),
- Installation Electrician/Maintenance Electrician (3),
- Cyber Security Technologist (4),
- Infrastructure Technician (3),
- IT Solution Technician, Network Engineer(4),
- Network Cabling Installer (3),
- Electrical Power Protection and Plant Commissioning Engineer (4)

techUK activity relevant to the Trailblazer Apprenticeship Scheme

techUK strongly supports the development of apprenticeship standards relevant to data centres. While not an employer, techUK represents many employer organisations within the data centre industry and more widely across the digital technology sector. techUK takes the view that urgent action is needed to address the UK's technical skills shortage, both short term and longer term, and that the industry must present a strong apprenticeship offering to help address this shortfall. techUK is working actively with CNET training and other stakeholders to support the development of a bespoke apprenticeship standard, and with the IET (Institution of Engineering and Technology) on a programme to foster professional development for individuals working within the sector.

About techUK's Professionalism Group

techUK's Data Centre Professionalism Steering Group leads our work on skills issues relevant to the data centre sector and works closely with techUK's wider skills and talent programme. The Group comprises 15 to 20 individuals, plus secretariat. The Chairman is Tony Day of Schneider-Electric and and the Vice Chair is Mark Acton. The group has formal terms of reference and reports to the Data Centres Council. For more information please visit: https://www.techuk.org/focus/programmes/data-centres/groups/data-centre-professionalism-steering-group techUK also has a mainstream Skills, Talent and Diversity programme

For more information on techUK's data centre programme see:

http://www.techuk.org/focus/programmes/data-centres

Publications relating to technical skills include:

- Global Tech Talent Powering Global Britain

Publications relating specifically to data centre skills include:

- Silver Linings: The Implications of Brexit for the UK Data Centre Sector
- Oh my God, I forgot to Study Maths
- Why work in a data centre?

Relevant Data Centre programme overviews: 2017 Q2,   2017 Q1,   2016,

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