WillowDNA
A learning and knowledge company

Apprenticeships
How effective learning technology can help facilitate, manage and deliver an outstanding apprenticeship experience

In April 2017, the Apprenticeship Levy will see a rise in apprenticeship opportunities as organisations with a wage bill of more than £3m will be asked on contribute to the investment in apprenticeship schemes.

The aim is to create more than 3 million new 'high quality' apprenticeships. So what will the hallmarks be of a high quality programme? How will it engage and support young people to obtain the work experience and access to great quality training they'll need to thrive?
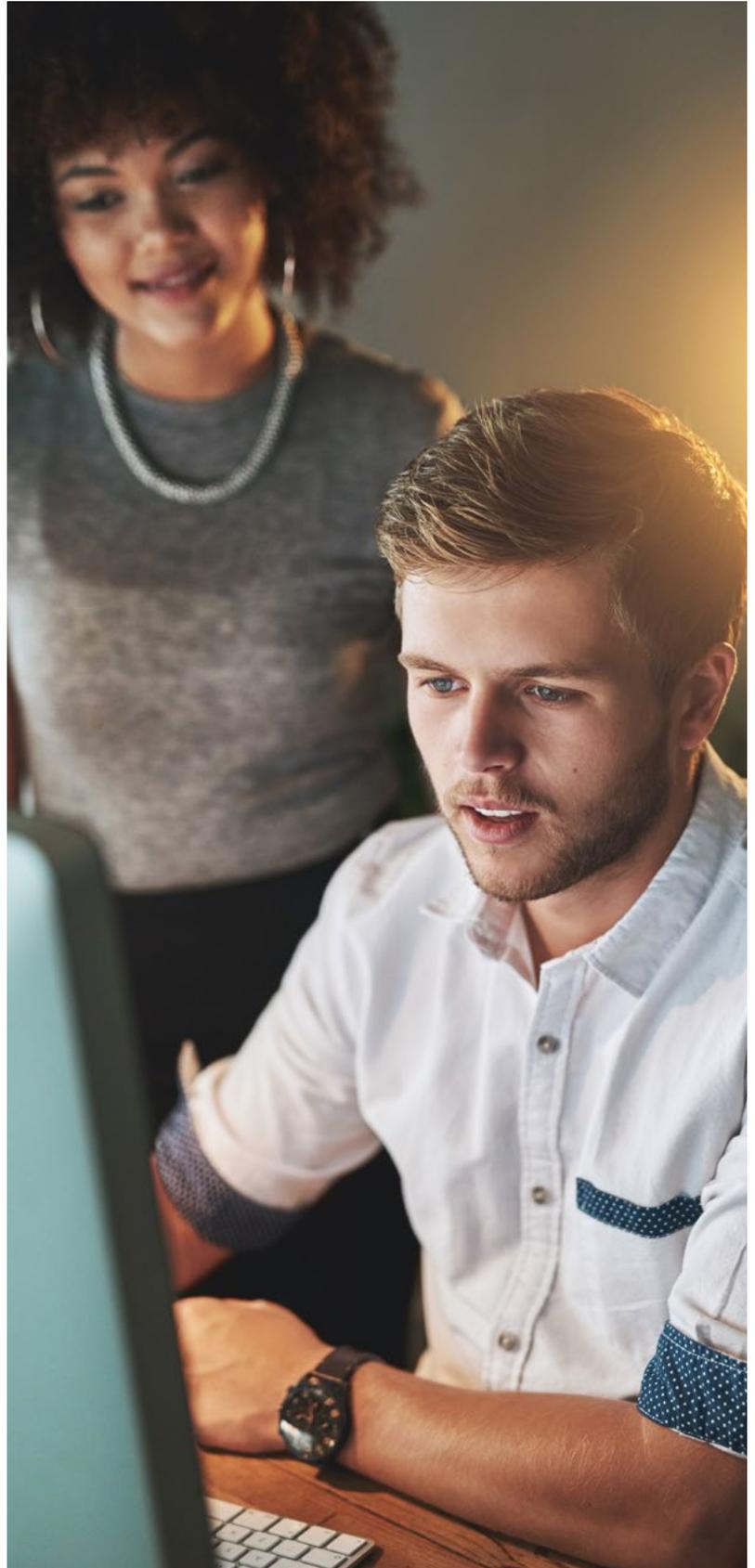
Why apprenticeships?

For the organisation…

The introduction of the Apprenticeship Trailblazers scheme was a significant milestone, as the existing standards and frameworks were put under scrutiny by employers. With its remit to ensure the skills and experience needed were relevant to the changing needs of sectors, it gave employers a stake in the future of apprenticeships.

Just as universities are now assessed on the employability of their graduates (or providing 'employment-ready' graduates into the market), so the assessment framework for apprenticeships needs to reflect today's reality, both for the organisation and for the individuals that take part.

Of course, one huge benefit of the apprenticeship model is that the employment-ready bit is by definition delivered through apprenticeships. It is so valuable in fact, that over the past few years, we have seen a rise in higher level apprenticeships in sectors that have traditionally been dominated by the graduate entry to employment. Law, accountancy and health were some of the earliest adopters.

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For individuals…

For starters, there are some very practical benefits: Financially, they can be very attractive when measured against an undergraduate route for many careers. With increases in tuition fees, apprenticeships are an ideal way to study as you earn.

It is usually felt that graduates are most valued by employers but this will change as apprenticeships spread into the traditional 'graduate only' careers such as medicine and science.

Currently, graduates do tend to earn more than non-graduates – but not in all circumstances. The quality of the degree and awarding institution plays a significant role. In April 2016, FT.com reported that graduate earnings for men were lower than non-graduates at more than one in 10 universities.

However perhaps more importantly, developing the knowledge and skills in any given profession and excelling in your role is not limited to one route. Learning within the context of a working environment can be a highly effective and engaging way to build competency and confidence.

With high quality apprenticeship provision, we have the opportunity to develop highly skilled, high performing employees. A quick look at the programmes shortlisted at this year's LPi Learning Awards is testament to this, with the winners, South West Water, providing superb programmes for highly technical roles. Many young people who were considering an undergraduate route into engineering have opted for the apprenticeship route.

For the economy…

£163 BILLION
IN BENEFIT TO UK ECONOMY

A RETURN OF £16 - £21 FOR EVERY £1 SPENT

A CEBR report for City and Guilds (December 2015) asserted that increasing vocational skills could benefit the UK economy by up to £163 billion in GDP over the next decade. With the report going on to state that apprenticeships have an economic return of £16 to £21 for every £1 of government funding, it's a compelling story. However, to deliver real value for an individual and their future outcomes, the quality of the apprenticeship programme must surely be a contributing factor.

So what makes a good apprenticeship?

Phil Romain, apprenticeships national lead at Ofsted was himself the product of what he felt was an effective apprenticeship programme. In FE Week, he shared his reflections on what he felt made for an effective apprenticeship.

"Good apprenticeships offer structured, high quality training. To some extent simply being in work will make a difference, but relying on a form of absorption by association is not enough."

This is supported by a CIPD report back in 2014 that cited a hallmark of an effective apprenticeship scheme was 'training apprentices receive on and off the job, needs to be high quality and tailored to both the apprentices' and employers' needs'.

To achieve this, employers need an effective, manageable way to deliver formal learning, provide ongoing tailored support through the journey, a way to monitor and measure progress and keep apprentices on track for success.

The role of technology

"A good Apprenticeship needs to be a meaty experience… There needs to be a good balance of on- and off-the-job training."

Moira McKerracher, Deputy Director,
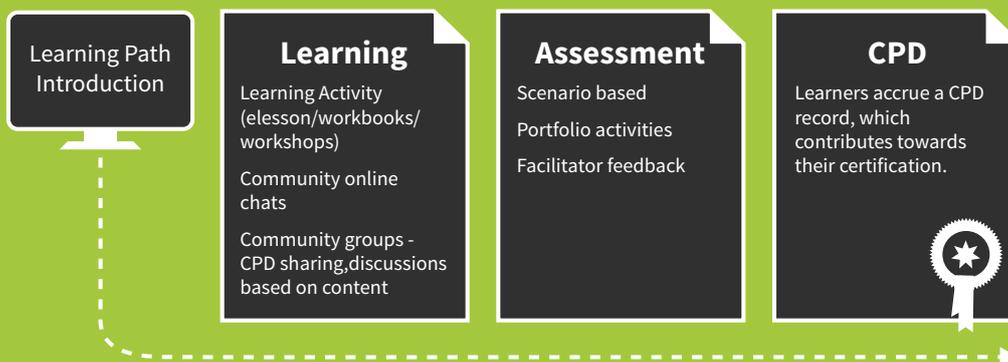UK Commission for Employment and Skills
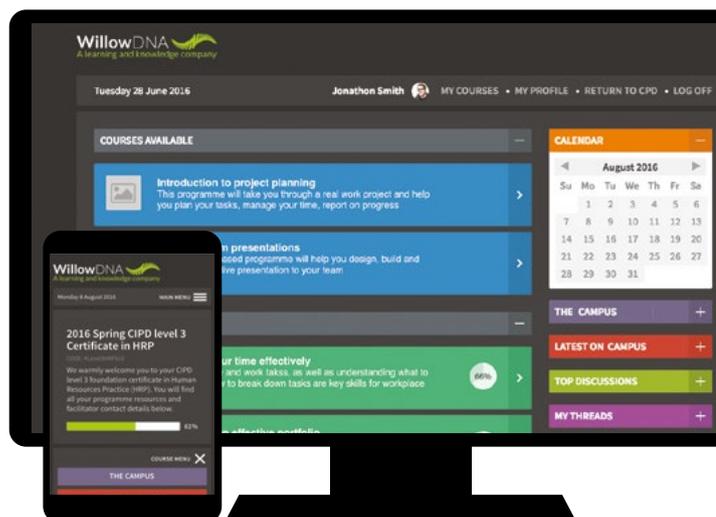
A path to success

One of the key advantages to online learning is the ability to create (and personalise) learning paths that provide evolving support and training over an extended period of time. Although college and workplace-based training centres play a key role in supporting practical skills development, an apprenticeship by its very nature is a programme that benefits from ongoing support.

Learners are in real work positions and, although apprenticeship programmes design in time for formal training, the ability to return to content, to repeat or expand on topics as needed, as well as the flexibility to study at a time that suits the learner, all help to ensure support is there when it's really needed.

An effective learning path typically combines stimulating curated content, research projects, assignments, collaborative work, feedback from managers and assessors and importantly, the opportunity for dialogue with others. Live online or location-based events are still key elements to the programme; an effective online learning path supports and enhances these events through preparing learners to get the most from off-site training as well as continue the dialogue after the event.

| Learning Path Introduction | **Learning**
Learning Activity (elesson/workbooks/workshops)

Community online chats

Community groups - CPD sharing, discussions based on content | **Assessment**
Scenario based

Portfolio activities

Facilitator feedback | **CPD**
Learners accrue a CPD record, which contributes towards their certification. |

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Support at every step

Social media and networks form a key element of the way we communicate and connect with others. We reach out for ideas, support, help and conversation through social channels on a daily basis, so an effective contemporary apprenticeship programme should utilise this.

Tackling real work challenges, collaborating on projects, asking for support from experienced staff and communicating with programme assessors and facilitators can all be made possible through effective learning platforms.

In the ATL 2016 position statement on Good Quality Apprenticeship, they state 'There should be a clear system for supervision, support and mentoring'. This requires a clear training and supervision plan in role, with an active involvement from managers. It can also be enhanced by utilising online communities and collaboration, which are available at the point of need and which provide a wide support network on which to call.

Pathway 3 - Collaboration Suite, offers students the opportunity to communicate and comment on all areas of a course.

Active learners – helping apprentices shape the programme

When The Independent published its article on the top 10 apprenticeship schemes in the UK for 2016, Ernst & Young grabbed the number one spot.

In an interview with Maggie Stilwell, Managing Partner for Talent in the UK and Ireland, EY, she says "A key part of that has been listening to and acting on feedback from our trainees, as well as involving them in shaping their own training and development. This not only helps us to stay competitive, but also ensures our trainees are prepared for a successful career in business."

In all sectors of industry, change is the norm and within the typical minimum 12-month period of an apprenticeship programme, an individual's experience will be shaped by events in society, shifts in the economy, advances in technology and more. These changes may be subtle, but the ability of the programme to reflect this and flex accordingly will help future prospect and success. However, it can be tough to change a formal learning programme that rapidly, which is where a blend with online comes into its own.

Being able to swap content in and out as needed is incredibly useful. Better still, if your programme is designed with user contributions and dialogue in mind, programme leads, assessors, managers and learners can help curate and develop the programme through sharing latest news, research and insights with others.

Rigorous assessment and effective feedback

Another hallmark of top apprenticeship programmes, such as those highlighted by the Independent newspaper's report was the provision of a formal qualification framework. This can take significant administration and orchestration by both the employer and the apprentice – submitting work for assessment, providing feedback, formal marking and tracking progress are all necessary.

Learning platforms optimised for apprenticeships, such as Pathway Cloud LMS, provide portfolio functionality, enabling apprentices to easily upload evidence in the form of written reports, video diaries, photo logs and more. Assessors log into view their cohort, access submitted work, provide feedback, marking and ongoing support.

Another key advantage of effective online apprenticeship portfolio management is access for verifiers to check on quality standards – both of submitted work and of marking and feedback.

As the number of apprentices in the workplace continues to rise, there needs to be a real focus in making the management and facilitation of schemes easy, flexible, intuitive and accessible.

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