



(Pictured from Left to Right) James Bryant, Darren Smithson, Stuart Clark

Apprenticeships GET REAL

Thinking of starting an apprenticeship programme? This case study talks through the challenges and achievements that Norbar Torque Tools has met on its way to establishing a nationally recognised scheme which has reaped benefits for the company.

AS government throws its weight behind the rehabilitation of apprenticeships and vocational education companies are being firmly encouraged to take apprentices on. But for SMEs this can be a real challenge. The administrative cost of starting an apprenticeship programme can be a burden on limited resources and committing to paying an extra wage, however small, when the company as a whole may be contracting, is difficult to justify.

And there are other problems too. Apprenticeship retention, is a real concern for companies who know there are more attractive employers in their sector. One SME manufacturer in the Midlands recently explained to TM how, after taking on an apprentice who had just missed his chance to join Jaguar Land Rover, and investing optimistically in his future, the company was left high and dry when a new position at JLR opened up and the apprentice jumped ship to the bigger name.

But despite the blockers the dominant message from government, industry and education providers is that the potential benefits of apprentices far outweigh the dangers. In the following case study Norbar Torque Tools explains the business case as they see it.

Apprentices past and present



Stuart Clarke, European Sales Manager, joined Norbar in 1990 as an apprentice

“An apprenticeship is hard work but it is rewarding and instils a good grounding for your future career. You want to be challenged and continue learning whilst gaining vital work experience. After my apprenticeship I realised that my strengths were in people and progressed into sales management. Via the apprenticeship I have had a progressive career with one company. I believe Norbar’s commitment to apprenticeships accounts for its high retention rate of quality employees.”



Chris Friar started as an apprentice at Norbar in August 2010 and has two more years of apprenticeship to go.

“Gaining work experience is important, being in a working environment four out of five days a week. Once a week I attend the Trident Centre at Warwickshire College. The lecturers there have come out of industry and know what they’re talking about. It’s a challenge meeting new people and taking on new projects. I rate Norbar’s apprenticeship because friends who’ve taken apprenticeships in other companies often stay in just one department. At Norbar, they take you round the whole company and you see how the operation ties together and get the feel of the company.”

Apprenticeship case study: the business case

Norbar Torque Tools is a family run company of approximately 240 employees and a leading specialist in the design, development and production of torque tightening and measuring equipment. In the recent parliamentary Youth Unemployment Debate, Norbar was singled out by Tony Baldry MP as among the organisations in his Banbury Oxfordshire constituency that were “enhancing their work force and their future by investing in young people today”

A City & Guilds survey of 500 companies found 34% believing that apprentices will leave the company once they are qualified, but Norbar’s retention rate is high. Managing Director Neill Brodey explains: “All of our apprentices stay for

at least five years. The reasons I would give for this are good managers, a good environment and good prospects. We provide a high degree of personal attention, which is why we take on only one or two apprentices per year.

Mr Brodey continues: "Individuals who have gained the ethos of the company and have learnt valuable skills through apprenticeships can make a huge impact on the business. Nearly half of our management team were apprentices and are proof of how well this training has worked for them and the company."

How Norbar's programmes work

Wanda Stewart-Lee, Human Resources Manager, emphasises that Norbar designs specialist apprenticeship programmes; not run of the mill. "We design bespoke programmes to suit our needs. A CNC machinist will be quite different from a calibration engineer and the programme also varies if we take on more mature people with different experiences," she says.

With only 8% of small businesses having taken on apprentices in the past year, she believes that training providers can play an important role in encouraging companies to adopt the apprenticeship route.

"Training providers need to be flexible and supportive and take the pain out of monitoring apprentices as Warwickshire College does for us," says Ms Stewart-Lee. "Companies need to know what the costs of an apprentice will be, the HR time commitment required and the benefits. Colleges can help provide that information from experience with existing employers. There are specialist apprenticeship support services such as The Engineering Trust who will be able to guide employers through the process."

The cost and the pay back

Ms Stewart-Lee explains the upfront cost of apprenticeships for Norbar, and how the company calculates its return on that investment. "Because we pay our apprentices well and we devote considerable management and college attention to them during their training, the cost of putting them through the four years is approximately £100,000," she says.

"Once trained, the value added that they generate is about £24,000 per annum. It is rather like buying a machine tool for £100,000 on a five year payback, but apprentices are more rewarding to work with!"

Ms Stewart-Lee cautions however, "We do have a defined training process and this keeps costs on budget. The key is keeping the apprentice motivated and learning so that they stay and provide the return." According to Stewart-Lee the most important thing to remember when looking at apprenticeship costs

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is that apprentices are not cheap labour but a worthwhile long term investment.

For Mr Brodey, there is also a bigger picture of returns to consider. In addition to his MD role Mr Brodey is also president of the British Federation of Hand Tool Manufacturers and the long term security which apprenticeships promise to bring to his industry are a big motivator in the way he supports them at Norbar.

Ms Stewart-Lee agrees and comments: "Engineering needs to be attractive to young people and we feel it's important to play our part in promoting engineering as well as our company specifically. We hold annual Engineering Open Evenings with participation from Warwickshire College and Oxford Brookes University both to promote careers in engineering and to help us look for suitable candidates for apprenticeships.

But support for apprenticeship cannot only come from an isolated, outward facing team within the business. Ms Stewart-Lee explains that at Norbar all employees know their responsibility and the strategy for encouraging apprentices is well defined. "The workforce must share its commitment to training a young person and they can gain satisfaction in this person's success," she adds. **END**