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Licence to skill: boost your business with on-the-job training



Why vocational learning is the secret to a happier and more productive workforce.

by Emma Sheppard

CEO Safaraz Ali believes work-based learning opportunities are crucial for developing your workforce

He's the co-founder of a home care company turning over £16 million, CEO of a £5 million a year training business, and creator of The BAME Apprenticeship Awards. But Safaraz Ali admits that he failed his GCSEs. "I lost my way around the age of 14," he says. "But a BTEC and a Higher National Diploma in business and finance got me back on track, so I'm a big believer in vocational qualifications." He now employs apprentices across both of his companies.

Ali went on to co-found Nationwide Care Services in 2005. It's now the second largest care provider in Birmingham, employing almost 1,000 people who deliver 25,000 hours of care a week across the Midlands. The size of the business means it's eligible to pay the government's Apprenticeship Levy – 0.5 per cent of the company's total payroll, which amounts to £82,000 per annum.

This payment can then be used by employers to fund

apprenticeships, providing real opportunities for staff to gain qualifications, and progress while they work. "It's an environment that creates an element of mentoring in the workplace and gets people to think about lifelong learning and reflective practice," Ali says of work-based training. "That raises emotional awareness and emotional intelligence. People understand their contribution and they are more involved in shaping their career progression."

The power of apprenticeships and other work-based learning opportunities, such as T Levels and traineeships, is something Ali has supported other entrepreneurs to realise through Pathway Group, a training organisation he helped to set up in 2000.

The skills and training company works with more than 4,000 people a year, across multiple sectors and career stages. "Vocational qualifications allow your people to be the best versions of themselves," Ali

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adds. “What you find is there’s quicker growth and more development. It’s empowering because it helps individuals take control of their own learning while developing skills for life. And for employers, it’s about attracting the right people, retaining them and growing the skills of your future workforce.”

For 21-year-old Zain Naveed, who has been on a business management apprenticeship at Nationwide Care Services for the past year, it’s been an opportunity to develop valuable skills in a busy working environment. “I thought about going to university to study accounting after my A Levels,” says Naveed, who is from Birmingham. “But this is more interactive and every day is different. I’m working with data, assigning calls, and I’m part of the team. As an apprentice, I bring a different viewpoint on a range of subjects, while gaining new skills. I would definitely recommend technical education.”

Faced with a fight for talent and with job vacancies at record levels, many employers see apprenticeships and work-based training as the opportunity to develop existing staff, as well as attracting new talent and individuals at the very start of their careers.

“Vocational qualifications allow your people to be the best versions of themselves”

Recent research found that 53 per cent of organisations will train more of their people using apprenticeships in 2022, compared to 2021. A third of employers say apprenticeships have helped them improve social mobility in their business, and 50 per cent believe formal professional development supports employee wellbeing. That’s backed up by a survey published by the Open University, in which 75 per cent of organisations said that apprenticeships are important to help people

without degrees, and 46 per cent felt apprenticeships support more people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds into the workforce, or to progress their careers.



Safaraz Ali started The BAME Apprenticeship Awards in 2016

There are still misconceptions surrounding work-based learning, Ali says. He started The BAME Apprenticeship Awards, now in their seventh year, to inspire those from diverse communities to consider vocational training. “The biggest problem for me is that there is still an element of people thinking that university is the first choice and vocational training is second. It’s not, it’s an alternative first choice, and we need to do more to share the benefits that technical education has to offer employers and to individuals in terms of developing skills for life.”

Ali’s advice to other entrepreneurs thinking about introducing work-based learning opportunities is to consider their talent pipeline as a whole. “Every organisation is different, but they should all have a skills matrix in terms of their current workforce and what their future aspirations are. What are they looking to achieve? What will ‘good’ look like? It’s a commitment that has to come from the top because there is an element of cost to this. But it’s absolutely a worthwhile investment.”