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Innovative Apprenticeships Build and Sustain Careers

Apprenticeships, a proven path to middle- and high-skilled careers, should be built on the skills employers need and use effective mentoring, according to the keynote speaker at the Institute for Apprenticeship, Training and Education Programs taking place January 18-20, 2016.

by | **Nicholas Wyman**

Canada's registered apprenticeship program has seen rapid growth in the last 15 years. Since 2006, the government's Economic Action Plan has included a number of incentives aimed at increasing apprenticeship registration and completion rates. Most recently, the government has added measures to harmonize apprenticeship requirements across provinces and improve training delivery methods. These measures include the Flexibility and Innovation in Apprenticeship Technical Training pilot project, which was launched this year and allocates \$13 million over the next four years for projects that innovate the way apprentices learn and earn.

Apprenticeships are a time-tested method of training with hands-on learning processes that are directly supervised by skilled mentors.

The government's efforts to expand and improve the apprenticeship system reflect the power that apprentice-style training has to address a number of challenges, including skills shortages in various industries and high unemployment, particularly among the youth.

Benefits of Expanding Apprenticeships

As more baby boomers reach retirement age, critical skills shortages mean that projects sit idle and revenue growth falls short of potential. The future of many high-growth sectors—including information technology, advanced manufacturing, health care and energy—relies on their success in building, continually increasing the

skills of and retaining a diverse workforce. Progressive multiyear apprenticeships are one solution to filling this tall order.

Apprenticeships are a proven method for developing the skills and competencies to step into in-demand jobs and to develop meaningful careers. Apprentices graduate with little or no student loan debt because they are paid while they learn.

Unfortunately, there is a lingering stigma against vocational training. The majority of parents and educators continue to encourage university as a better route to success, in spite of rising student loan debt and underemployment of graduates. Overcoming this perception is one of the challenges both Canada and the United States face in expanding apprenticeship participation. In competitive European countries such as Switzerland and Germany, where apprenticeship is an esteemed career pathway, 30-70% of young people undertake apprenticeships after completing secondary school. In these countries, youth unemployment rates are significantly lower than in Canada or the United States.

Another hallmark of these European-style apprenticeships is a well-established dual system of education that combines classroom learning with on-the-job training. Close collaboration among different stakeholders—educators, employers and trade unions—streamlines training delivery methods, including academic study, on-site work and mentoring, to create a clear path to technical mastery and sustainable employment. These pro-

grams are designed around the needs of business to maintain economic competitiveness by training apprentices for in-demand jobs. At the same time, they give the next generation clear pathways to meaningful, well-paying careers.

How Apprenticeships Build and Sustain Careers

My own career path began with an apprenticeship, which planted the seeds for my interest in training, mentoring and workforce development. After several years traveling the world as a chef, I pursued a related interest in hospitality human resources and later earned an executive M.B.A. degree. During the next chapter of my career, I began leading the WPC Group, a nonprofit that trains and employs apprentices throughout Australia. WPC's value in a country where the unemployment rate for the 15-to-24 age group is around 15% is priceless.

With WPC Group, I began conceptualizing structures to teach skills to unemployed individuals and engage them in the workforce. It soon became clear that government agencies were not positioned to finance, orchestrate or scale tiered apprenticeship programs within companies or across industries. These programs need to be built around the actual skills needs of companies—not just for individual apprenticeship modeling but also for large-scale efforts. Companies are the stakeholders most concerned with hiring and retaining top talent. The cornerstone of WPC's program is its unique mentoring system, which

makes assistance available not only to employees but also to employers.

WPC Group and the Skilling Australia Foundation collaborate with the Institute of Workplace Skills and Innovation, where I now work, to partner with dozens of companies, trade associations and governments worldwide to formalize multiyear progressive apprenticeship programs. At any given time, we represent 600 to 700 adults in mentored apprenticeships who learn and earn simultaneously. Eighty-two percent of these apprentices are expected to complete three- or four-year programs, receive trade certifications and earn successive raises and promotions within the companies that mentored/apprenticed them. The data we have gathered on learn-and-earn apprenticeships is guiding other organizations committed to increasing the skills of jobless young adults.

Tiered Apprenticeships Aggregate, Monitor and Streamline

Tiered apprenticeships combine academic study, on-the-job training and mentoring to impart both soft and technical skills. Effectively structured programs engage and retain top talent, setting up the current generation of workers to be the managers and leaders of tomorrow.

How an apprenticeship model is integrated within an organization is critical to its success. On-site work provides the structure for apprentices to demonstrate progressive mastery of skills. Apprenticeship programs should be vertically integrated and show a clear career ladder within an organization. Vertically integrated apprenticeships with strong organizational support lead to increased engagement and motivation.

Working under the guidance of a mentor imparts a broad range of occupational skills and supports the mastery of technical skills. Mentors provide trainees with the frame of reference they need to forge a sustainable path, including networks and training resources. As they demonstrate progressive mastery of skills under the guidance of a mentor, apprentices develop a positive sense of their role within an organization. Being a valued member of a team builds confidence, collaboration and problem-solving skills that apprentices will use throughout their lives. Apprentices who

have such positive experiences are, themselves, the best argument for the long-term value of apprentice-style training.

One Forward-Thinking Approach

Several projects in the automotive industry provide examples of success in narrowing the skills gap. WPC Group works with a large automotive business in Australia where some dealers within the network reported difficulty finding productive workers quickly. As a first step, we looked at the typical duties performed in the dealership network workshops. In most cases, mechanic apprentices did shop maintenance and other routine activities. This led to high turnover and problems attracting the next generation of workers as many apprentices said the work was not interesting or challenging.

Many dealer managers had overlooked the fact that their jobs require more classroom training than they did 40 years ago, and workers with only a high school education lacked the appropriate training. Most of the dealer managers realized they needed a fresh approach. Our first order of business was to replace the apprentice mechanics with apprentice technicians. The response was immediately positive as people saw this as a move from old-style automotive to modern technical-based work.

We then had to train the first-year apprentice technicians in basic automotive functions, such as doing an oil change. Once their training organization determined that they could complete this function competently, the apprentices could perform the task under the watchful eye of their supervisors, and the dealers could bill for their time. Previously, dealers

Learn More

Nicholas Wyman will be the keynote speaker at the Institute for Apprenticeship, Training and Education Programs

January 18-20, 2016, Rancho Mirage, California

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viewed entry-level hires as unproductive, as they were unable to bill for their time. With this change, the dealers saw a return on their investment in skills development, the apprentices felt they were adding value to the company and the company's bottom line improved. This initiative earned the tag line "Productive People Quickly." The program had more than 55 participants in the 16 months after it was launched, with an 83% retention rate.

Successful apprentices quickly become productive, progress into new roles and take on more responsibility. They are training for more than just a one-time opportunity. Apprenticeships provide essential skills that will be used in a range of roles throughout an individual's career. Those skills will be crucial assets because the technological innovation driving businesses worldwide requires that employees refresh their skills and understand how to apply them in new functions and industries.

Launching a Mentored Apprenticeship Model

At the core of successful apprenticeship models are two key components: on-site work and mentoring. Strategically designed apprenticeship programs aggregate, monitor and streamline the changing inputs and relationships required

to promote workers and pave paths of sustainable employment.

The following model aligns this dual focus:

- **Demonstrate long-term commitment and investment.** The world of work has been conditioned to react to and prepare for short-term agreements and short-term gains. A hearty program alters this perspective and will be more attractive.
- **Offer attractive pay and show participants a career ladder** that adds responsibilities and better-paying roles progressively within the hiring enterprise.
- **Expect a time commitment from the apprentice, typically spanning four years.** Lengthy programs are essential for both companies and apprentices to identify and reap the real value of the apprenticeship.
- **Connect each apprentice with a mentor.** Bonds of loyalty and trust that develop between apprentices and their mentors create the basis for employee satisfaction, retention and skill-building progress.
- **Partner with educational institutions,** including community colleges and vocational-technical schools that provide off-site supplemental education for employees' on-the-job learning.
- **Focus on creating measurable value for the whole enterprise.** Apprenticeships should be designed around a company's business needs. All individuals have a unique mix of innate skills, both soft and technical, that need to be interpreted and connected to an enterprise's goals. Thus, each apprentice needs a customized performance plan that aligns with enterprisewide objectives.
- **Create a progressive path.** Mentored apprenticeships need to be vertically integrated and aligned with different types of mentors.

The following is a mentor structure that my teams have found to be effective in keeping apprentices engaged and progressing toward their success models:

- **Management Level:** Senior manager, executive or business owner who leads the enterprise's workforce development and strategy. This person creates the workforce development policies and the culture to leverage employee buy-in and involvement company-

BIO

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wide. This advocate is the most critical in ensuring that the apprentice program is successful, documented and sustainable.

- **Supervisory Level:** Internal staffers or a contractor who has undertaken a trade apprenticeship and has the appropriate skill level. This person is responsible for the apprentices' day-to-day training at the worksite.

Recruiting Mentors and Apprentices

To engage participation from mentors and apprentices, an organization must break down clearly how each party benefits and contributes within the company.

To attract and engage apprentices, employers should promote the following qualities:

- An apprenticeship is not just a job, but a career pathway.
- Apprentices develop technical skills and work toward sustainable employment while earning money.
- Apprentices have the opportunity to work with more experienced employees and to function in a team-based, cross-cultural workplace.
- Apprentices are exposed to new methodologies and learn how to think analytically, rather than being limited to doing menial tasks.
- Apprentices work under managers who are trained in contemporary leadership.
- Apprenticeships are a viable avenue to experience work-life balance and become an empowered and trusted member of a team.
- Finally, apprentices should look at pay as a training wage and an opportunity to be paid to study, rather than having to spend thousands of dollars to earn a college degree and end up with debt.

Efforts to recruit mentors should highlight the value that mentors offer employers and apprentices:

- With many management roles being eliminated, mentoring often replaces traditional supervisory roles.

Takeaways

- In European countries with strong vocational work-study programs, youth unemployment rates are significantly lower than in Canada.
- Apprentices are paid while they learn, so they graduate without student loan debt.
- As baby boomers retire, the shortage of workers with the skills to replace them is expected to grow.
- Tiered apprenticeships combine academic study, on-the-job training and mentoring.
- Apprenticeships should be long-term commitments with attractive pay and a clear career ladder.
- Mentoring provides both formal training and informal, personalized coaching.

- Mentors help company leaders identify and transfer organizational knowledge while supporting, guiding and teaching less experienced employees.
- Mentoring provides formal training and an informal method of educating talent and engages tomorrow's workforce.

Mentors are experienced, trusted facilitators who coach both the apprentices and the employers. Identifying and developing mentors is as important as identifying and developing the apprentices themselves. Mentors should focus on skills that are in demand in the workplace, on motivation triggers and on how to be a team player.

Having in-demand skills as well as the ability to update and apply them quickly is a golden ticket in today's fast-changing world of work. Strategically implemented apprenticeship programs can benefit all stakeholders in the economy. They hold the promise of closing talent shortages and building a solid foundation for economic growth. At the same time, they create invaluable pathways to prosperous careers. ☺