



Case study



At a glance



Challenges

- Understanding how the levy works
- Low retention rates
- Lack of transparency from providers

Vicki Gidalla, Nurseplus

Hear from our client partner...

Vicki Gidalla is a clinical compliance training director at Nurseplus, the care recruitment agency. She has been in post for four and a half years, so she has first-hand experience of how training has changed since the apprenticeship levy was introduced.

At first, she says, it was a shock: "We faced the prospect of all of this money leaving the business, yet we didn't really have proper development programmes, and our retention rates were lower than we wanted." Once the company decided the levy could not resolve these issues, it became an opportunity. "We used the levy to improve retention. In our sector, staff turnover has been historically high, but now our own management numbers, in particular, are much more stable and there are far fewer HR issues."

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It wasn't always plain sailing, especially in the first few months. "The biggest challenge was understanding the levy and how it worked," Vicki says. Working with different providers was difficult too because some were much better than others.

There were other teething problems as well: "Some providers weren't transparent. I had a few issues where some of them tried to manipulate start and stop dates in order to claim funds – and when you don't understand exactly how the process works, it can be very difficult to identify issues like that."

There was some initial confusion over what apprenticeships could offer. "But once people grasped the concept that apprenticeships complemented the work they were doing, and that they would increase their skills and knowledge, uptake rose."

"That's why we decided to go with Paragon Skills. They were not only successful at bringing on apprentices and keeping them on track but also at keeping us updated and helping us understand the process. I don't mean just in terms of the levy process, but also what apprenticeships could do for the business."

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The benefits to the company, she says, have been marked. "Retention has been the biggest positive – but also being able to offer people more than just saying 'come to work and do your job'. Investing in people makes a difference to the attitude of your workforce. They know that they're working for a company that cares for them so they will be more productive for you."

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Vicki also points out that apprenticeships can be useful in spotting and nurturing talent and that they are often more effective than internal training courses. “We have substituted internal programmes for apprenticeships – because they are far better for long-term skill development. A good example is the customer service programme. We used to run that internally. People used to absolutely love the day – but they would go away and what they learnt would become a distant memory. Now it’s an apprenticeship, and it’s more effective because it’s more long term, it’s about skills development and how it’s applied to your actual work.”

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As a result, Vicki says attitudes to apprenticeships since the levy was introduced have changed “dramatically”. “People accept that there is a levy there, so why wouldn’t you use it? They can definitely see the benefits of apprenticeships and are much more open to them in ways that they wouldn’t have been previously.” Nor, she continues, would the company have thought to offer them to all areas of the business. “We wouldn’t have offered management apprenticeships before the levy came in, for instance. And Paragon Skills have been really good at telling us what new courses are coming on stream and how they might benefit us because they understand our business model.”

Working with Paragon Skills, she says, “has been a godsend”. “My understanding of apprenticeships was limited – but they’re very forgiving if you don’t understand the terminology and the process. They’re so good at giving a basic explanation that you think, ‘Oh, it’s so simple!’”

Paragon Skills, Vicki says, helped her manage the process and made it less stressful. “They operate a really personal service, they never make you feel stupid – and for me, they are the stand out provider.”

Apprenticeships have been so successful for Nurseplus that the company now offers all employees the opportunity to enrol on one. Currently, it has 129 people – both permanent and temporary employees – on apprenticeships in health, social care and management on levels 2, 3, 4 and 5. “As an employer, it’s good that people know we look after our staff and are prepared to invest in their development,” Vicki says. And she points out that apprenticeships can be particularly useful as “stepping stones” to a future career if a position isn’t immediately available.



Would she do things differently if she had her time again? “I would have promoted apprenticeships a lot more and a lot quicker. I should have shouted a bit louder about them because our retention problems was not going to improve without taking action. Investing in your staff is a key element in keeping your staff.”

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What would she say to other businesses that were thinking about apprenticeships? “I would say that the benefits definitely outweigh the negatives of any work associated with apprenticeships. Once you get your head around them, it’s not that much work. It’s about giving something back to your staff, and happier employees are going to be much more productive and knowledgeable in their roles.”

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