



smart. valid. preferred.

Lessons from Germany in selecting the right apprentices

German companies are starting to help candidates identify and apply for the right apprenticeship programme, says Howard Grosvenor.



cut-e Group
Großer Burstah 18-32
20457 Hamburg
Germany

www.cut-e.com
E-mail: info@cut-e.com
Phone: +49 40-3250 3890
Fax: +49 40-3250 3891

Version 1.0 March 2016

www.cut-e.com

Lessons from Germany in selecting the right apprentices

The UK government is taking active steps to create a 'world class apprenticeship system', in order to strengthen the economy, deliver the skills that employers need and give young people a viable alternative to university. The apprenticeship levy, for example, will create three million new apprenticeships by 2020. Other European countries are striving to do something similar. One that has got it right is Germany, and the success of their national model is something that we're all aiming to replicate.

Apprenticeships are integral to the education system in Germany and they've undoubtedly played a part in the country's economic success. Germany has a 'dual system' where apprenticeships combine theoretical training in the classroom (funded by the state) and hands-on practical experience in the workplace (funded by employers). Germany also has tradition on its side. Since the Middle Ages – and the country's medieval guild – technical skills have been highly valued in their society. Consequently, many prominent figures, such as former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, started their careers with vocational training.

The UK has its work cut out in trying to emulate this. For instance, we have a strong services sector which places less emphasis on specific, technical skills. Also, studying for an undergraduate degree has traditionally been the preferred option for our talented school leavers. But, increasingly, the times are changing. For young people, the appeal of apprenticeships – and their combination of on-the-job training and academic study without debt – is growing.

Equally, apprenticeships are becoming more attractive for employers. Grants are now available for businesses to recruit their first apprentice; trailblazer groups have developed apprenticeship standards defining the skills required in a range of professions; pioneering employers are also setting a good example. Some (called the 5% Club) have committed to create apprenticeship schemes for at least 5% of their workforce within five years.

"German companies are starting to help candidates identify and apply for the right apprenticeship programme."

Howard Grosvenor

However, the real challenge for UK employers isn't so much introducing apprenticeships, it's attracting and selecting the right applicants.

Recruiting apprentices is a different proposition from recruiting other staff. Because they're usually school leavers, your candidates will all have similar qualifications and they're unlikely to have much previous work experience (if any), which makes it difficult for them to answer competency-based questions at an interview. So how do you choose between them?

Like their German counterparts, many of the UK's leading apprentice recruiters have found that the answer is through assessment. But what should you assess for?

Essentially it all boils down to one key question: will the candidate behave in a way that fits your organisation and fits the specific role they're applying for? That's ultimately what you want to know. It's all about how well they match the role, whether they'll fit within your culture and whether they'll feel engaged and motivated to achieve their potential in your organisation.

Their behaviour will depend on their values and their attitude to learning. This will be reflected in aspects such as their reliability, punctuality and conscientiousness. Depending on the role, there may be other behaviours you require, such as teamwork or creative thinking. The information you'll need to make an objective and informed decision can usually be obtained from a range of different assessments, deployed thoughtfully at different stages from attraction through to final hiring. Such assessments include values and interests based questionnaires, skills tests, situational judgement questionnaires, interviews (face-to-face and video) ability tests, and personality measures.

The challenge of choice

One interesting challenge that many large employers of apprentices face is that of choice. Major corporations don't provide one single apprenticeship scheme. As they have many specialist divisions, they offer a whole host of apprenticeship options including practical, technical, specialist, project management, supply chain management, business management, design, maintenance and logistics. Prospective candidates are asked to choose which of these apprenticeship schemes they'd like to apply for – and sometimes they're only allowed to make one application per year.

This puts the burden of choice onto young and inexperienced candidates, who are left to decide for themselves which apprenticeship programme would be best suited for them. The stakes are high here as the programme they join will determine their ultimate career path.

One again, it seems, Germany has a model that can help here. We've worked with Siemens in Germany to develop an online 'pre-application' assessment which analyses the preferences and strengths of school leavers and helps them choose the right apprenticeship programme. The company offers 200 different apprenticeships, so the results guide young people by suggesting which programme is best suited to them. The assessment is not timed nor is it 'scored' in any way. It simply helps prospective candidates to decide which apprenticeship programme they should apply for.

As the appeal of apprenticeships grows in the UK – both for organisations and for young people – employers will need to ensure they have appropriate processes in place to select the best candidates. However, if you can help those candidates to identify and apply for the right apprenticeship programme, it creates an additional win-win situation that benefits them and you. On one hand, it enables them to pinpoint their efforts and focus their attention on a single, specific apprenticeship option. On the other, it means that your applicant pool for each apprenticeship programme will be populated with better-suited candidates.



About the author Howard Grosvenor

Howard Grosvenor is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Director of Professional Services for international assessment specialist *cut-e*, which works with large employers of apprentices in the UK, such as Airbus, BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce. He can be contacted via howard.grosvenor@cut-e.com

cut-e is world leader in the design and implementation of innovative online tests and questionnaires for recruitment, selection and development. *cut-e* helps companies identify people with the right capabilities and cultural fit to deliver optimal business results. *cut-e* carries out over 4 million assessments per year in over 70 countries and 40 languages.