

A photograph of two men in a workshop setting. On the left, a Black man in a light blue polo shirt is gesturing with his right hand towards the right. On the right, a white man with glasses and a blue work jacket is looking at the first man. The background is a blurred industrial environment with large windows and machinery.

# Rising through the ranks

**How to spearhead talent growth and bridge the skills gap through apprenticeships**

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# Foreword

With The Open University (OU) turning 50 this year, we have been celebrating our core mission of opening up education for all. Since the launch of our apprenticeship programmes in 2016, higher and degree apprenticeships have played a key part in this endeavour.

Over the past few years we've successfully helped many employers widen their talent pool by providing new opportunities in work-based higher education. Our offering has supported employees in many roles and sectors learn new skills and fulfil their potential in a way that aligns perfectly with the OU's values and addresses the skills shortage in the UK.

According to the latest figures, one in 12 of all degree apprentices in England are on OU programmes (Department for Education 2017/18). We are working with companies such as IBM, who use the apprenticeship levy in England, to develop their digital, management and leadership skills. We are also working with NHS Trusts to train new nurses and address local needs.

Apprenticeships are a key ingredient in any talent strategy. Not only do they utilise the apprenticeship levy, they also future proof an organisation's workforce by giving employees new skills and knowledge that can immediately be applied in the workplace.

We now live in a world where many job roles are changing. Both employers and employees

will need to become more adaptable and flexible when it comes to planning for the future – this is where apprenticeships can really come into their own.

For HR and L&D professionals looking to embed or make better use of apprenticeships in their talent development provision, this whitepaper offers some useful insights into how apprenticeships can play a unique and effective role in addressing an organisation's skills gaps.

We hope you are able to embrace the opportunities apprenticeships offer your workforce and open up education to all in your organisation.



**Viren Patel**

**Director Global Business,  
Business Development Unit  
The Open University**







# The race for talent

**The race for talent has never been more heated. With employment levels at historic highs, employers across the country are struggling to fill roles.**

A survey by the British Chambers of Commerce found that 70% of service firms and 79% of manufacturers that attempted to recruit in the first quarter of 2019 encountered difficulties – close to the highest levels recorded since the survey began 30 years ago and part of a general upward trend (BCC 2019).

The labour market is only going to get tougher for employers as the UK prepares to leave the European Union. To make things even more challenging, there are fewer 18 year olds joining the workforce as a result of lower birth rates at the start of the millennium – a trend that is set to continue into the 2020s (ONS 2018).

Employers struggling to recruit from a narrowing pool of talent also have to contend with growing skills shortages. The OU Business Barometer found that in 2019 more than three in five organisations (63%) in the UK were experiencing skills shortages, resulting in 62% of senior business leaders

stating that this impacted on their ability to adapt to change (OU 2019a). In PWC’s annual global survey of CEOs, one in three (34%) said that lack of availability of key skills threatened their organisation’s growth prospects and more than half (55%) said it prevented them from innovating effectively (PWC 2019). The Federation of Small Businesses also reported that nearly a third (30%) of small businesses struggled to find individuals with the appropriate skills, resulting in two-thirds of them experiencing a direct financial impact (FSB 2017).

## The future of work

At the same time, technology is transforming the nature of work.

Every sector is being impacted by technology, resulting in the creation of many new jobs. More than 8 out of 10 jobs in 2030 have not yet been invented, according to research by the Institute of the Future (IFTF 2017) – however, many existing jobs will become obsolete. McKinsey, the global

management consultancy, anticipates that 45% of work activities could be automated by existing technologies (Chui, Manyika & Miremadi 2015). The OU has identified that employers expect 37% of roles in their workplace to alter significantly in the next five years, affecting as many as 12 million workers in the UK (OU 2019b).

### **How can businesses rise to this challenge?**

In this dynamic and rapidly changing environment, there is a pressing need for workers to continuously acquire new knowledge and skills. Many will need to change careers several times to keep pace. Lifelong learning will be a necessity to adapt and thrive in a technologically evolving business environment.

Apprenticeships enable businesses to rise to this challenge and access the skills needed to drive performance, deliver results and be successful.

The current apprenticeship system enables employers to grow their own talent and the specific skills they need, whether this is amongst those who are leaving education and starting their first job, or those who are already in work

and looking to develop their existing skills or learn new ones. It also allows organisations to build teams with shared values and common goals, rather than buy-in the talent that is costly and unsustainable.

For those starting their careers, employers have a blank canvas to build upon; for those already in work, employers have the foundations upon which to upskill or reskill.

By providing high-quality learning, consistent support and clear career pathways, employers can transform individuals with great potential into knowledgeable specialists that can take on the myriad of challenges of the future workplace.

*“We need to embed lifelong learning in everything we think about. You’re going to have to understand the world and the way it moves around you in ways that we didn’t necessarily think were so important 30, 40 or even 50 years ago.”*

Martha Lane Fox

Chancellor, The Open University in the recent BBC Documentary, “Happy Birthday OU”







# The apprenticeship levy – ‘a huge reform’

**On 6th April 2017, the apprenticeship levy started to be collected, impacting the UK’s 17,000 largest employers with payrolls greater than £3m.**

When it was announced by George Osborne, 18 months earlier in his Autumn Statement, he described it as “a huge reform to raise the skills of the nation and address one of the enduring weaknesses of the British economy.” (Hansard 2015).

He was referring to the country’s poor productivity performance (approximately 20% below that of the rest of the G7 nations) and the low level of investment in training by UK employers, despite the critical need for skills (HM Government 2015).

The apprenticeship levy is payable by all employers operating in the UK with an annual pay bill over £3m. The devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales receive a share of the apprenticeship levy based on their respective populations, which they then determine how to allocate to their devolved responsibilities.

In England, the system is designed to give employers more direct control. This is a powerful incentive for employers to maximise the benefit of the money they pay, leading to many offering apprenticeships who had not previously. With projections showing that companies will spend all their levy during the current financial year (NAO 2019), the government’s intervention is beginning to have the desired effect.

It is easy to underestimate the value that apprenticeships can provide. Many employers are under the misconception that they are only applicable to those in junior roles and therefore only offer nominal value to their organisations. The reality is very different.

Apprenticeships provide the key ingredient to any talent strategy that seeks to leverage the potential of its people at every level of an organisation. Many businesses have built their competitive advantage as a result. After all, it is almost always the people in an organisation that determines its success.



# Apprenticeships – a key ingredient to any talent strategy

**Apprenticeships help companies thrive through a combination of building skills that are relevant and rigorous, attracting and retaining talent, and creating high-performance teams:**

- Building skills that are relevant and rigorous ensures they always meet the requirements of the organisation. Combining learning with working means that an apprentice gets practical experience by applying what they learn, as opposed to other types of learning which provide only a theoretical knowledge.
- Combining technical and creative learning develops the fusion skills that are crucial to innovation and competitiveness in an increasingly digitised and automated economy. A report by Nesta found that firms that combined STEM skills (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) with art and design skills innovate more, and experience faster employment and sales growth, than STEM-only firms (Siepel, Camerani, Pellegrino & Masucci 2016).
- Embedding quality learning and development as part of the offer to new and existing employees helps to attract and retain talent. Personal and professional development is an important feature that people are looking for from their employer to remain motivated and committed to the work they do, particularly among millennials and Generation Z employees. The 2018 Deloitte Millennial Survey found that 73% of those planning to stay with their employers for more than five years say that their organisations are strong providers of education and training (Deloitte 2018).



- Internally developing highly skilled people, who have values that closely align with those of the organisation, will contribute towards the creation of well-integrated, high-performance teams and be more loyal and committed as a result. Often those individuals and teams immediately supporting the development of an apprentice report that the experience has led to their own professional development.
- Relying on talent developed internally is frequently a more cost-effective and sustainable way to meet skills requirements than hiring workers on demand. Research by the OU confirmed that a significant majority of employers in the UK (81%) felt that developing skills through workplace training and development opportunities was a more sustainable strategy to meet the need for digital skills (OU 2019b).

These are all transformational benefits to any organisation that is dependent on its people to fulfil its value proposition. Taking the apprenticeship route is therefore an extremely powerful way for employers to respond to the economic and commercial challenges that organisations across the country are now facing.



*“The benefits we see from degree apprenticeships are considerable – not just from technical skills – but also in apprentices’ personal aspirations and confidence that the learning brings.”*

Paul Milner, Senior Early Professionals Manager, IBM





# A system for employers by employers

**Employers play a central role in defining today's apprenticeships. As part of the reforms to the system, which heralded the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, the UK Government has delegated responsibility to employers; those who know best about the skills needed. Employers in England can now set standards, manage spending, invest in their ecosystem, and develop skills across their organisation, from new starters to experienced workers.**

## 1. Setting standards

Employers within a sector can develop their own apprenticeship 'standards', by joining together to form a Trailblazer Group. The members of the [Trailblazer Group](#) work together to produce a standard, which outlines the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) required for a specific apprenticeship, and the assessment plan that specifies how the apprentice should be assessed.

The process of scrutinising and approving these standards and assessment plans has been made easier and faster, resulting in an agile system for employers to create apprenticeships that meet their skills requirements. This is critically important for employers who need a skills system capable of responding to the accelerating pace of technological and economic change.

At the time of writing, there are now 454 employer-defined standards and 145 in the process of being considered (for further details [click here](#)). Standards are being developed at a range of different levels making apprenticeships work for in-career development. There will be many more to come, as employers from across the economy develop apprenticeship standards to develop the skills and build the expertise that they require to be competitive.

## 2. Controlling spending

The [Apprenticeship Service](#) is an online platform, developed by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) through which employers in England manage their levy funds. Its features include accessing the apprenticeship funding, handling payments to training providers and forecasting spending on apprenticeships.

By November 2018, there were around 16,000 employers registered on the service, representing most levy-paying employers in England. It is widely recognised as being a successful government IT project and has been recognised as the best public sector project at the Digital Leaders Awards in 2018.

Giving employers direct control is helping to drive their involvement in getting best value from the apprenticeship system. Employers are approaching apprenticeships in the same way as they procure other services and are demanding more from learning providers and suppliers of training services.

3. Investing in the ecosystem

Employers in England can also choose to transfer up to a quarter of their levy to other employers.

This allows enterprises to develop the skills in their supply chains or across their distribution channels, to improve overall business performance, quality and productivity, as frequently happens in manufacturing. It can also be used to build the skills across a sector, improving the overall capabilities of the talent pool, especially in parts of the economy where there are specific skills shortages such as the tech sector.

Alternatively, it can be used to develop skills in the locality or community in which an employer operates, to drive social value and economic impact, particularly in major infrastructure projects or property developments.

It is something that few have used to date; the biggest challenge has been to bring together employers who want to transfer and receive funds. Nevertheless, it is an important opportunity that enables employers to build skills across their entire workforce, business ecosystem and local community.

4. Developing skills across the organisation

The common perception of apprenticeships is that they are for young people who wish to start their career in a particular trade.

However, apprenticeships now cater for the full range of roles in the economy of the 21st Century, at a number of different skills levels; from intermediate (or Level 2) apprenticeships that are the equivalent of five GCSE passes, through to degree (or Level 6 and 7) apprenticeships, that are the equivalent of a bachelor’s or master’s degree. With a range of apprenticeships available, everyone in the workforce has the opportunity to develop their skills.



The various levels of apprenticeships

Name	Level	Equivalent educational level
Intermediate	2	5 GCSE passes
Advanced	3	2 A level passes
Higher	4, 5, 6 and 7	Foundation degree and above
Degree	6 and 7	Bachelor’s or master’s degree



*“We know that digital skills are particularly lacking, and the apprenticeship levy can be used to help bridge these skills gaps.”*

This flexibility has encouraged employers to use apprenticeships for those already in the workforce who are looking to develop their existing skills or learn new ones. This includes developing management and leadership skills, such as the OU’s Senior Leader Master’s Degree Apprenticeship, which is important given that poor management is frequently cited as a source of low productivity and identified as a priority in the UK Government’s Industrial Strategy (HM Government 2017). Likewise, we know that digital skills are also particularly lacking, and the apprenticeship levy can be used to help bridge these skills gaps too.

### **Employers in control**

Employers in England can create apprenticeships that meet specific skills requirements, manage and administer how they recover their levy contributions, develop skills in their wider ecosystem and invest in skills across their organisations. These are all crucial levers that enable employers to decide how they use the apprenticeship system and to maximise the benefits it provides. While there are some constraints on how this works, organisations are more able, than ever before, to address specific skills gaps and develop the type of skills that they need to be successful.







## How is quality controlled?

**Over the past two years, there has been significant improvement in the quality of apprenticeships. There is a sharp increase in the use of employer-defined apprenticeship standards, which employers widely accept are better than the ‘frameworks’ they replace (NOA 2019). And there is now consensus among employers in England that the system is beginning to deliver the quality that is needed.**

This is being driven by a series of parameters that are intended to dictate high-quality outcomes. For apprenticeships in England, these include: creating a minimum duration, mandating off-the-job training, assessing apprenticeships upon completion and creating employer-driven oversight.

### **1. Minimum duration**

Every apprenticeship must last for a minimum of 12 months.

The aim here is to distinguish an apprenticeship from shorter forms of training and accreditation and establish a threshold that ensures that the apprenticeship training is comprehensive and rigorous. It is an important component of making an apprenticeship a benchmark for quality training and development.

The extended period of training gives an apprentice entry into a recognised occupation by blending on-the-job and off-the-job experience and learning, to develop competence in a skilled occupation. The resulting breadth and depth of skills enables professional and personal progression.

### **2. Mandating off-the-job training**

An apprentice needs to spend at least 20% of their time in off-the-job training; that is, time during their paid hours where they are not performing their day-to-day work responsibilities. This sets a minimum quality threshold to allow apprentices to have dedicated learning time. Some apprenticeship standards exceed 20% off-the-job training while comparable apprenticeship systems overseas are significantly higher; for example, the Swiss Apprenticeship System requires more than 30% of off-the-job training (Wolter & Joho 2018).

Off-the-job training must be directly relevant to the apprenticeship and develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) required to reach occupational competence. Such off-the-job training can take place in any location for developing the KSBs – the time can be spent in the workplace undertaking practical training, or it could be spent elsewhere learning theory or writing assignments. It can be bulked-up into intensive learning, rather than spread evenly over the duration of the apprenticeship, according to the requirements of the apprentice and employer.

### **3. Assessing apprenticeships upon completion**

At the end of their training, apprentices are required to complete an independent assessment, called an End-Point-Assessment (or EPA), to confirm that they have reached the required occupational competence.

An EPA can involve a variety of assessment methods, and an apprentice must be assessed using at least two different methods (for example, an observation and an interview). At least one of the assessment methods must be synoptic; that is, it must assess some of the knowledge, some of the skills and some of the behaviours required by the Standard. This approach provides a thorough means by which the apprentice demonstrates occupational competence.

The EPA is conducted by an organisation independent to the one delivering the apprenticeship training, except for integrated degree apprenticeships where the assessor must be independent of the training delivery team, to ensure impartiality. Although employers can choose their assessment organisation, many prefer to rely on their training provider to propose one.

### **4. Creating employer-driven oversight**

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (or IfATE) was established in England to oversee the development and approval of apprenticeships and have legal responsibility for maintaining their quality. The Institute has fifteen Route Panels, covering different employment sectors, whose members are experts in their respective industries. The panels are responsible for ensuring that apprenticeship standards are high quality and meet the needs of the respective sector.

Employers are heavily involved in its governance and oversight to ensure that the apprenticeship system maintains a level of quality that employers need to meet their skills requirements. For further details about IfATE governance [click here](#), and IfATE Route Panels [click here](#).

*“The most successful apprenticeships are embedded in the organisation’s overall talent strategy, rather than implemented simply as a way to use up levy contributions.”*





# Make your apprenticeship programme a success

**Employers across the UK, in a wide range of different sectors, are successfully using apprenticeships to meet their skills needs, develop an agile workforce and drive their competitive advantage.**

Through a variety of different strategies and tactics, these organisations tailor their apprenticeships to meet their specific requirements and maximise their value. The following list sets out many of the practical steps that organisations take to achieve this.

## **Embed in the overall talent strategy**

The most successful apprenticeships are embedded in the organisation's overall talent strategy, rather than implemented simply as a way to use up levy contributions.

In doing so, they can meet strategic objectives including increasing retention rates, attracting and developing new talent, addressing issues of hard-to-fill or critical roles and targeting top talent for senior roles. They can also support the development of new ideas and innovation, such as building in-house digital expertise in response to the rapid pace of digitisation.

## **Gain buy-in from senior leaders**

Apprenticeships are most effective where senior leaders and board members buy-in to the value of home-grown talent in building competitive advantage and driving the organisation's success. Often senior leaders will determine the areas of the organisation most suitable for apprenticeships and have hands-on involvement through mentoring.

## **Motivate existing staff**

The misguided perception that apprenticeships are only for young people starting their careers can deter existing staff and senior leaders from pursuing one. As a result, many organisations brand their apprenticeships with generic names, such as the 'Aspiring Managers Programme' or the 'Senior Leaders Programme', to generate interest. Overcoming this initial barrier then allows the organisation to communicate the value, scope and benefits of the apprenticeships on offer. The result is increased employee engagement and loyalty throughout the organisation.



### Try new recruitment channels

In addition to the recruitment channels commonly used, employers find that the government platform [Find an Apprentice](#) is a successful way to attract candidates. Employers frequently work with the training providers, colleges and universities supplying their apprenticeships to support the recruitment process. For example, the OU enables employers to advertise vacancies on the specialist recruitment website [GetMyFirstJob.co.uk](#) to target first-time jobseekers.

Where skills shortages are especially severe in a sector or a locality, competitors have joined forces to jointly build a talent pipeline. By pooling resources, they can engage with local schools and community groups (through talks, sponsorship of events, mock interviews, job fairs, project work and competitions) to build interest and attract candidates for their sector and respective organisations.

### Recruit based on attitude

Employers are finding that recruiting based on attitude, motivation and ability to learn are better indicators of success in an apprenticeship than qualifications or experience. Some organisations are looking at more than past academic results to select the candidates with the most potential to succeed. Many offer additional support with functional skills where these are missing at the outset. Those organisations that do this report a positive impact on driving social mobility and diversity.

### Involve parents

For those going from school to starting an apprenticeship, the transition from education to work can be particularly challenging. Many young people lack meaningful experience of work and are under pressure to take the traditional route to university. Involving parents is a practical way to address this. Parents' evenings enable employers to present the career opportunities made available by completing an apprenticeship while welcome days for apprentice's parents to visit the workplace can engage parents in the learning process.



*“Learning providers are increasingly delivering their content through online tutorials and webinars to meet the need for greater flexibility by employers.”*

#### **Co-develop the learning programmes**

Developing the learning programme to meet specific organisational requirements is important to maximise an organisation’s return on investment. Several employers work in partnership with their learning provider to achieve this, particularly where they have large cohorts of apprentices.

#### **Support learners**

Practical support has a crucial role to play in a successful apprenticeship. Mentoring by other employees not involved in the apprentices’ line management provides the apprentice with an independent support structure and often has a two-way benefit for the mentor. Appointing someone from the apprentices’ peer group, especially if they are still working on their apprenticeship or have recently completed it, as a ‘buddy’, is a more informal approach which can be very effective. Monthly group meetings with senior leaders will accelerate the apprentices’ broader business knowledge and understanding. Creating peer-to-peer networks with other apprentices, both within and outside of the employer’s organisation, provides collegiate support that underpins personal and professional development

#### **Offer performance-related pay**

Rewarding apprentices with bonuses and pay increases, based on how they are progressing in their studies, is a powerful way of demonstrating the value of their learning and encourages a long-term approach to professional development.

#### **Leverage technology**

Many employers already use Facebook groups to create peer support groups and collegiate learning for their apprentices. Learning providers are increasingly delivering their content through online tutorials and webinars to meet the need for greater flexibility by employers, while virtual classrooms reduce the need to congregate apprentices in a single location to be taught in a conventional classroom. Virtual reality is being used to train apprentices in simulated environments before they apply their learning in the workplace – an approach that is only going to become more prevalent. Many apprentices cite the flexibility provided by technology as essential to their success.





# What does the future hold for apprenticeships?

**The apprenticeship system has gone through a period of significant change. In just two years, the system in England has become employer-led, delivering benefits to businesses as a result of the increased control that they now have over how the system operates.**

As a result, apprenticeship numbers in England have risen by 7% in the first three quarters of 2018/19 compared with the same period the year before, and the number of higher-level apprenticeships has jumped up by 68% (Department for Education 2019). It is anticipated that employers are likely to spend more on apprenticeships than their levy payments next year (NAO 2019).

This has laid the foundations for a skills system capable of responding to the massive commercial and economic challenges ahead. With Brexit likely to impact an already challenging recruitment environment and the process of digitisation affecting every sector, it has never been

more important to spearhead the development of talent. Businesses have started to respond to this challenge, with more than half (53%) of the employers in the OU Business Barometer research increasing their training budgets in the last 12 months.

The apprenticeship system provides organisations with the tools they need to achieve this. Employers in England have a range of different controls to adapt the system to their requirements, together with a robust quality framework to ensure rigorous and relevant learning. Maximising the opportunities of this framework to recruit, develop and build talent needs to be a priority for every employer.



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## Anthony Impey MBE

Technology entrepreneur & apprenticeship advocate

 [/anthony-impey-mbe](https://www.linkedin.com/company/anthony-impey-mbe)

## About the Author

Anthony Impey MBE is an experienced entrepreneur and business leader with a track-record in starting, building and operating businesses and not-for-profit organisations in the tech and apprenticeships sectors.

He is founder of Optimity, an internet provider which he started and built into one of the leading providers of wireless internet services. Before that, he started and sold Touchbase Networks, a start-up telecoms company, and worked for Silicon Valley start-up WellInvested, a start-up digital business.

He also founded TechCity Stars and Tech Up Nation, not-for-profit organisations that delivered apprenticeships to develop talent for the tech sector and kick-start the careers

of young Londoners, many of whom came from disadvantaged backgrounds.

He works extensively on helping to shape national apprenticeship policy, and chairs the Federation of Small Business Apprenticeships & Skills Policy Board, the government's Apprenticeship Stakeholder Board and the Mayor of London's Apprenticeship Advisory Group (as part of the Skills for Londoners Business Partnership).

He was awarded an MBE in the 2018 New Year's Honours for Services to Apprenticeships and Small Business.

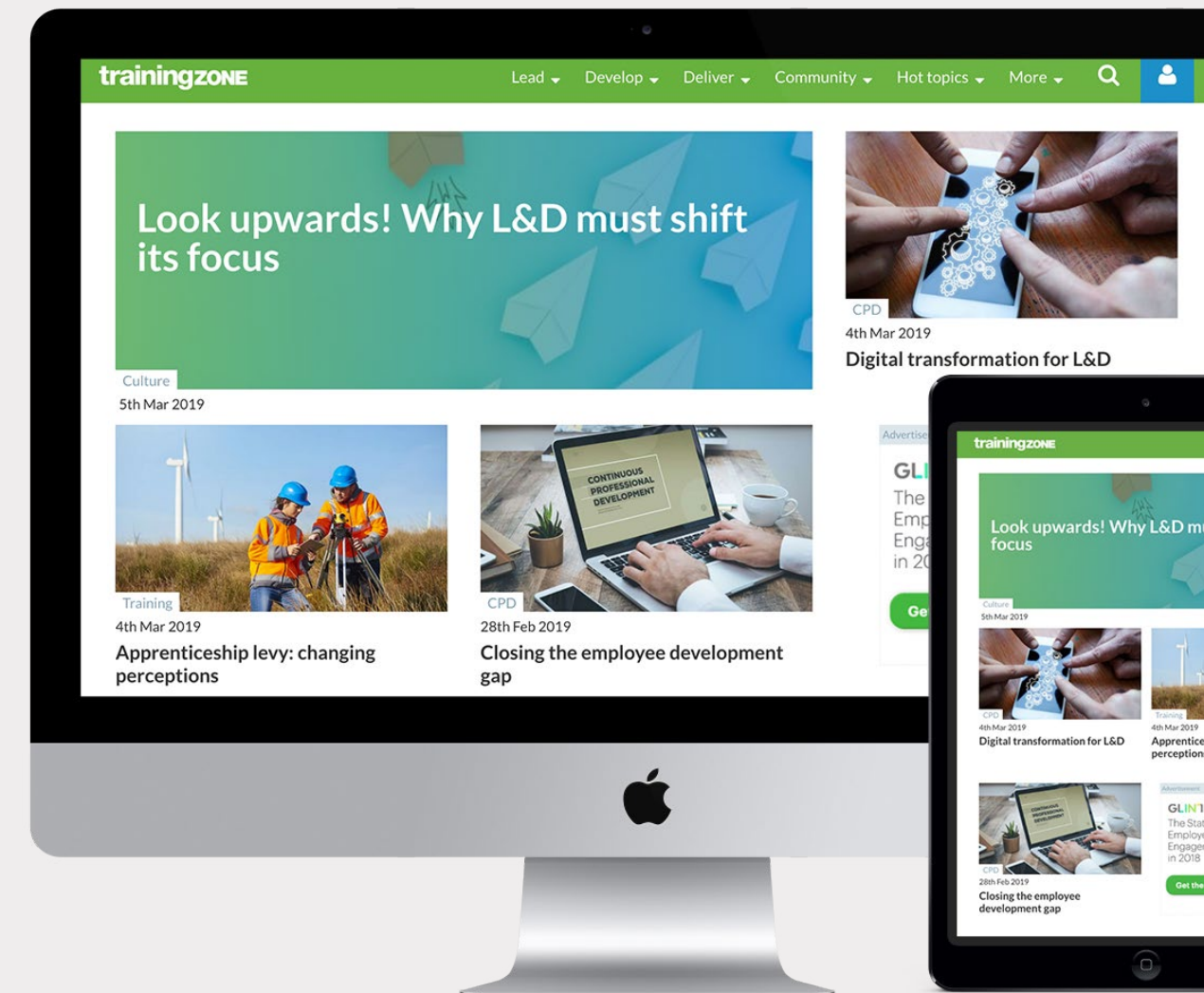


## About TrainingZone

With over 100,000 members, TrainingZone.co.uk is the largest online community for UK learning and development professionals. Profiled members can view and download reports, toolkits, guides and research papers that feature the latest insight and thinking on all the cutting edge issues within L&D and HR.

Elsewhere onsite TrainingZone also publishes in-depth features written by industry experts, as well as hosting highly interactive community areas where peers discuss and dissect the issues that really matter.

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# About The Open University

The OU is the UK's largest university and we have taught over two million students since 1969.

We work across all four nations of the UK and have a strong pedigree and a rich heritage of working with employers to understand their business challenges and provide outstanding learning and development solutions.

Over 330 organisations are partnering with the OU to use apprenticeship levy funds to offer higher and degree apprenticeships for new and existing employees.

Over 2,100 organisations are sponsoring employees on OU short courses, certificates, diplomas and other qualifications from the University's educational portfolio. The OU also has content licensing and award-validation partnerships with over 25 educational institutions in 20 countries around the world that wish to draw from the

University's extensive experience in flexible distance learning.

The University turned 50 this year and over two million people have benefited from its commitment to learning innovation. The OU's distance learning model has closely followed learning trends over the last five decades. As a result, it offers flexible, scalable, technology-based educational solutions to help employers to engage employees in learning and development and future-proof their workforce.

To find out more about how the OU can help employers, please visit the website:

[www.open.ac.uk/business](http://www.open.ac.uk/business)

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