



Expert Opinion - Edition 3

Getting apprentices to the finishing line

Interview with Cathy Strachan, HR Manager, Learning and Development, MBDA UK.

Cathy was awarded an MBE by the Queen in the 2020 New Year's Honours list for services to career development and to young people.

The 5% Club is hugely supportive of apprenticeships. Our members know that they are an important way of bringing much-needed new talent and fresh perspectives into a business, and of ensuring that skills are being developed according to the company's future needs. However, getting people to enrol on an apprenticeship is only half the battle. Supporting them through the apprenticeship and offering them a fulfilling career within the business is the overall objective.

The 5% Club member MBDA is a multinational integrated defence company which designs and produces missiles and missile systems for the three armed forces. MBDA has a well-established, multi-award winning apprenticeship programme, with 110 apprentices on early careers programmes (ages 17-22) and a further 30 more experienced apprentices, who undertake apprenticeships to enhance their skills later in their careers. Their apprenticeships cover a range of disciplines, from engineering, finance, and procurement to Systems Engineering and Defence Export at Masters level. Importantly, MBDA has a retention rate of over 90% of its apprentices.

In this edition of Expert Opinion, we interview Cathy Strachan to find out the secrets of MBDA's successful formula.

Q. MBDA have had apprentices for a long time – how has the Apprenticeship Levy changed your approach?

You're right, MBDA have had apprentices since the year dot! The Apprenticeship Levy hasn't had a significant impact on our approach, but what it has done is given us the opportunity to review the existing apprenticeships we offered to make sure they were at the right level and in the right subjects.

For our more experienced population, we've replaced support for further education with apprenticeships, to try and make as much use of the Levy as possible. So that's seen us expand the range of apprenticeships we offer to include things such as degree apprenticeships, MBAs and Masters for example, or CIMA, CIPS and HR qualifications.

We haven't reduced our other training budgets, so we haven't had any situations where people have been encouraged to enrol on apprenticeships they don't want to do and which doesn't really fit the business need. That kind of mismatch can have the opposite effect to the one we're after and can actually demotivate or discourage people. We look at training in the round and try to make sure that what we offer matches up with what is needed.

The Levy has provided more structure though, I would say. The apprentices typically have to write up and reflect on their learning a lot more as part of the End Point Assessment process.



Q. How do you attract young talent?

Attraction is a really interesting area. We have a recruitment team who work really hard to make sure we're targeting the right areas and the right people. We work really closely with schools around our main local areas, so Bolton, Bristol and Stevenage. I would say that we get around 90% of our early talent apprentices from that outreach, which includes work done via the STEM Ambassador scheme.

We also run a whole range of things at our different sites, for example, our 'Robot Rumble' at Stevenage. This is where apprentices mentor local school pupils to build and code robots from scratch. The school pupils then enter the robot into a competition where the robots have to battle it out in the competition arena. This year will be the 14th year we've done it. It's very popular – it really does show how fun engineering can be.

We also run teachers' days onsite to try to raise awareness of our apprenticeships. We find it a bit of a challenge sometimes that the brightest children are often encouraged to go to university rather than consider some of the amazing apprenticeships on offer, but we do our best to showcase the opportunities.

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Q. How important is it to make sure from the outset that these people will be a good fit for your business?

It's incredibly important, and that's why we put so much energy into it. We have a strengths-based interview process, which focusses on behaviour and attitudes rather than on technical skills. We select people who we feel will live our values – passion, commitment, integrity, team spirit and innovation. Passion in particular is really important – we want them to be excited by engineering.

Q. How much information do you give them about the role and what they should expect before they start or at the beginning, and how important is this?

This is another really important element of the process. We believe in full disclosure! It's really important for retention that applicants understand what they're getting into before they start so they arrive with their eyes open. So applicants get to meet existing apprentices on interview days, they get shown around the site and so on. After the job offer, there are what we call 'pre-joining days' where new apprentices get to find out what will happen when they start and so on. They can bring their parents with them if they want to.

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Before they start they get a buddy to help them through the settling process and onwards. And when they join they have a full induction process.

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Q. Do you have any areas of frustration with the Apprenticeship Levy?

We would really like to target our Levy funding to some of the areas of skills shortage we have. Unfortunately, there aren't yet enough apprenticeship standards for some of these niche areas, which means we do have unspent Levy that we'd like to be putting to use. It's a particular challenge for Masters and degree level standards.

Of course, we recognise that it takes a lot of time and effort to agree a standard that works for all employers in the trailblazer groups. I don't think anyone appreciated how complex it would be to get the standards agreed and approved.

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Q. How do you support your apprentices?

Well firstly, we take it really seriously. We want them to feel valued and supported. All of our apprentices are permanent employees from day one. They don't get to the end of the apprenticeship and have to apply for a job. We're clear from the outset that we want them to have a fulfilling career with us. More than 90% stay - we like to retain our people.

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If I just pick out two of the things we do we support them: we send them on a week away in Wales in the first year of their apprenticeship, which we call 'Life Skills'. This is largely a development programme, aimed at giving them basic skills for the world of work. So we focus on areas such as presentation skills and how to have a difficult conversation at work. But it also helps with team building and makes sure that the apprentices bond as a close knit group, which really helps with retention. We do the same in the second year, with a focus on project management.

The second thing I wanted to mention is the resilience training we offer. It's really important to support young people as they enter the world of work. It can be quite a challenging time for them, coping with the new relationships and the expectations of them. Our resilience training takes the form of two, day-long workshops run by a psychologist who focusses on equipping them with tools to cope with things including stress, anxiety and balancing studies and work.

In terms of mentoring, all of our more experienced apprentices get a mentor. For the early careers apprentices, they tend to get a mentor towards the end of their apprenticeship, but they do get a lot of support before that point, helping them to coordinate their activities and so on.

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Q. How do you communicate internally to make sure that other existing employees understand and support the apprentices and ensure a nurturing work environment for them to grow and develop in?

Apprenticeships are long established at MBDA, so they are already well understood and early career apprentices supported. A lot of people internally are themselves former apprentices, which means that they have a special insight and are very supportive.

For the more experienced employees undertaking apprenticeships, in a way, we are still finding our feet given that we are only three years in. I think one of our learnings has been that we need to engage line managers and mentors earlier, to make sure they are ready and understand all the expectations. As with everything, we learn from experience and then improve our offer.

Thank you so much to Cathy for sharing her thoughts and experiences on this topic.

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Contact:

contactus@5percentclub.org.uk

Web:

www.5percentclub.org.uk

