

Benefits of FM industry apprenticeships

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Insight from [DMA Group](#) managing director Steve McGregor

I often reflect on the route I took with my apprenticeship, because I didn't fully grasp its importance initially. Mine began in 1980 around a structured, four-year guided development programme.

It offered a broad skill set and exposed apprentices to many opportunities. The objective was to cultivate well-rounded professionals, while also allowing for specialisation based on individual interests. However, student apprenticeship spots were limited, with only 15 of us accepted into HM Naval Dockyard, Chatham, which marked the final intake.

Following this period, there were attempts to condense the apprenticeship model into shorter, cheaper schemes, such as the ill-fated YTS programmes. This shift devalued the investment in comprehensive training and mentorship. Looking back, it seems the industry prioritised immediate results and cost efficiency over long-term talent development.

Despite various factors, including the changes that came with Brexit, the industry itself played a role in creating the talent shortage we face today. However, there's now a widespread acknowledgment of the need to address this issue by revitalising proper apprenticeship programmes that provide genuine career opportunities for young people.

At DMA Group, we can already take inspiration from our current senior leadership team, which is enriched by many people who followed a trade-based apprenticeship. These experiences are deeply embedded with each person because they were very well-structured programmes over three or four years – we will be seeking to develop a skills development programme that creates real life chances for real people.

One of DMA Group's past apprentices won Asian Apprentice of the Year during his training and is still

working within the business in a full-time qualified position. Through our guided development approach, we hope to inspire more of these stories and upskill a generation into long-lasting, meaningful employment.

It's essential to recognise the legacy of apprenticeship programmes and to make them appealing to new generations. Embracing modernisation and innovation is crucial to attract and retain talent in the engineering sector, and our own tech-enabled service management platform, BiO®, plays a crucial role in doing that.

However, recruitment, particularly in engineering, has been our main challenge. In fact, it's a common issue across the industry. We've been in a constant cycle of hiring, although we've been fortunate to have dedicated, long-serving engineers who understand our business inside out. They've been integral to our journey, contributing to our successes and embodying our values of teamwork, respect, and quality. Individuals who align with our values and who demonstrate competency tend to stay with us for the long haul.

However, we've experienced significant turnover during probation periods. Some candidates interview well but struggle to adapt to our company culture, which emphasises the role of technology in driving efficiency and customer service. There's been a sense of "tech fatigue" in the industry, where technology initiatives are often perceived as gimmicks rather than transformative tools. Our commitment to leveraging technology to do better is non-negotiable.

That high probationary turnover rate was costly and disruptive, prompting us to rethink our recruitment strategy. So, we decided to focus on internal recruitment, bringing on board Louise Kitcatt as our new Talent Acquisition Manager, who could authentically represent our values and culture. Louise has quickly immersed herself in our ethos, effectively communicating our identity to potential hires even before they join us. This approach not only aligns with our values but also makes commercial sense, reducing the expenses associated with unsuccessful recruitment efforts.

Since Louise joined, we've witnessed a positive transformation in our recruitment process. While it's still early days, her ability to represent our values and convey our culture has significantly improved candidate engagement and retention.

We are extremely proud of what we are building with our apprenticeship scheme, and it's vital that the industry recognises the value these bring in terms of forging a specific and solid career path. Engineering apprenticeships follow the conventional multi-year model that combines on-the-job work experience with our qualified engineers alongside day-release for college-based work.

Younger generations of employees are critical to addressing skills shortages in this space. Not only will they grow to account for a larger proportion of the workforce as time passes, but they also have the potential to help upskill experienced engineers, as well as those over 50 who are coming back into work. Unless this group of people are attracted in volume to engineering from schools, colleges, and universities we will not see a step change in the quality of what we do.