

Apprentice of our time



APPRENTICE OF OUR TIME

What we've learnt from our Apprentices

*"The Apprenticeship has given me a **real insight** into the working world and the direction I want to take"*

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Introduction

We are two years into the ten year project, Apprentice of Our Time. Inspired by Michael Apted's BBC 2 Programme Seven Up and Professor Robert Winston's Child of Our Time, we launched Apprentice of our Time at the start of 2020 with the purpose of tracking twenty apprentices during ten years of their careers.

Back in early 2020 we couldn't have predicted the impact just one year could have made to the lives and careers of our apprentices. Embarking on Apprentice of Our Time, we expected to gather insight at a slow and steady pace. However, the global pandemic's impact on the world of work changed the development of our Apprentices at an incredible rate. This has given us an accelerated rich insight into the resilience and tenacity of the Apprentices and employers.

This report summarises the findings from interviews conducted throughout 2021 and shows the progress made against the recommendations from 2020's first year report.



Methodology

Apprentice of Our Time involves interviews with twenty apprentices from a range of clients, industry areas, job roles and apprenticeship standards.

- ▶ Apprentices were contacted to form part of the study in 2020.
- ▶ Every six months whilst 'on programme', the Apprentices are interviewed about their development, career progression, their perception of the value of Apprenticeships, what they would recommend to others about Apprenticeships, and where they predict they will be in five years' time.
- ▶ Each interview lasts 30-45 minutes and is conducted by telephone or video conferencing.
- ▶ After completing the Apprenticeship, they will be interviewed every twelve months.

Purpose

Our Apprentices' insights are sought to provide guidance to Kaplan as their provider, and those following in their footsteps.

Responses from the interviews are kept anonymous, but insights and findings will be shared in an annual report and we will utilise the Apprentices' insights to inform programme amendments and adjustments to our provision.

We analyse progress made since the previous year's recommendations.



Findings

Where are they now?

Of the initial group:

- ▶ Eleven are still on their current apprenticeship and working for a range of employers of different sizes from industry, practice, financial services and one in a charity.
- ▶ Five have completed their current apprenticeship and are still working in the accounting and financial services sectors.
- ▶ One has completed their apprenticeship at an insurance business and is taking a gap year before returning to the next level apprenticeship. She attributed taking the gap year to the confidence she'd gained during her apprenticeship and being encouraged to grasp opportunities. She was determined to return to work for her employer after her travel break and continue with her career development. Her employer was fully supportive and allowed her the time off to grow as an individual.
- ▶ Three have left their apprenticeship and the sector.
 - ▷ Of these three, two completed their apprenticeship and one left the sector without completing the apprenticeship.
 - ▷ Of these three, one agreed to continue to be interviewed. This Apprentice is working for a global retail company.

In order to keep our number at 20, we included two new learners into the project in 2021.

Holding the interviews throughout the pandemic in 2021 meant we were able to give our Apprentices an opportunity to pause and reflect back on their year and what the turbulent previous twelve months had meant to their careers. Did the pandemic rob our school leaver Apprentices of the opportunity to grow their network and shine in the workplace rather than being behind a screen? Did they feel they had missed opportunities or had the pandemic allowed them to work more flexibly?

As we held the interviews, restrictions were slowly being lifted: there was a renewed sense of hope that things would slowly return to a new normal. What that meant for each of our Apprentices was something different. We report below on the findings of the interviews.

"The pandemic has made me stronger as a person and I am even more determined to grow as an individual"



*"The Apprenticeship
has made me more
knowledgable
and I definitely feel
more professional"*



1) The new 'normal' working environment, how the adjustment has taken shape

Until 19 July 2021, working from home wherever possible was the Government's recommendation. Employers adopted new 'normal' ways of working with hybrid and flexible work arrangements. We asked our Apprentices where they had been based for work in 2021 and how they felt about any changes from pre-pandemic.

- 10%** were office based full-time (these were Apprentices working in call centre or front line facing environments with covid safe working arrangements).
- 90%** worked from home until July 2021.
- 55%** worked from home for some or all of the week from August to December 2021.
- 90%** of apprentices wanted hybrid working arrangements to continue beyond the pandemic, having the flexibility to work from home and still have 'the office experience'. The keenness for the occasional office environment was in no small part due to the social aspects of working life, with many having not met their colleagues in person during Covid.
- 5%** By the end of 2021, only 5% of the Apprentices were working entirely from home.

Many commented that although they had suitable home working environments and equipment, the lack of a commute meant they felt they were working longer hours and completing more work than if they had gone into the office. The minority stuck to a regular work routine including walking their dog and taking a proper lunch break to get away from their desks.

It was evident the Apprentices were acutely aware of the importance of having a balanced approach in theory, although not all achieved it in practice. The overall consensus was that a hybrid working model was the best way to find that balance. Apprentices appreciated:

- ▶ Reduction in travel costs.
- ▶ Positive productivity benefits of working from home.
- ▶ Occasional office based meetings providing opportunity to build meaningful relationships with colleagues.
- ▶ Finding a renewed sense of purpose from commuting on office days and using the commute time to separate better their 'work' and 'home' life.



2) Networking in a different way and what it meant to our Apprentices

Overall, the Apprentices believed the restrictions on office working in 2021 had a negative impact on their development. Even after the working from home restrictions were lifted in July 2021, offices were much quieter than pre Covid due to so many colleagues opting to work from home. As a result, work shadowing was much harder to achieve and Apprentices felt their professional network wasn't growing as they had anticipated.

Employers factored in virtual social events to help with relationship building and new ways of networking with colleagues and teams. Whilst this was welcomed, Apprentices didn't feel it had the same effect as networking face to face. Apprentices reported feelings of awkwardness whilst trying to engage virtually with different people on video calls.

Nonetheless, Apprentices reported trying to apply what they could glean from on-line shadowing to their wider working practices.



3) Wellbeing in the workplace and the support received

We had been keen to dig deeper into wellbeing in our 2021 interviews as our 2020 results had shown that 30% of the Apprentices found keeping a 'work life balance' was difficult to maintain while working remotely, due to still seeing emails coming in outside regular office hours.

In 2021, our research showed that 22% of apprentices felt their personal wellbeing had deteriorated in the six months from June to December 2021, due to workload and pressure on completing projects within a given timeframe.

When asked if their wellbeing could have been improved if they were in the office their short answer was no, things had generally seemed to get busier and the work environment didn't make a difference.

With the vaccine roll out, Apprentices felt more free to meet colleagues in the office, adopting the hybrid working practice but being mindful of colleagues that chose not to be vaccinated. Some employers offered a system whereby they allowed Apprentices to be in the office on a rotation basis. This increased the sense of confidence allowing Apprentices to have the opportunity to work more flexibly.

Without fail, the Apprentices' employers all addressed the matter of Apprentices' wellbeing in 2021. Examples included:

- ▶ Mental health regularly discussed in team meetings.
- ▶ Walking meetings held to ensure colleagues were able to step away from the screen.
- ▶ Being given additional annual leave purely to focus on their wellbeing to their wider working practices.



4) Loyalty to employers who value learning

In 2020, we identified that Apprentices were keen to remain with the employers who first recruited them. This was borne out again in our interviews in 2021.

- 95% of Apprentices said they were committed to long-term employment with the employer, given that employers had invested so much time and effort in their development.
- 90% were already having discussions with their managers about career progression within their companies.
- 70% of the apprentices had participated in job-rotations. The exposure to a variety of roles in different departments excited them and opened their eyes to their own career possibilities.
- 13% of the Apprentices wanted to take their Apprenticeship experience and qualification to work abroad (Australia and the Middle East), but with the same employer.

5) Confidence levels beat expectations

A frequent comment in the interviews was that Apprentices recognised how much their confidence in their abilities had developed in the previous 12 months. They noted the benefit of a work-based learning experience in relation to being able to learn from mistakes and not be brought down by fear of attempting something. With the majority of our apprentices being in their early 20s and at the start of their career journeys, this confidence in the workplace was being translated in both their careers and personal lives.

"I'm more confident in what I am doing, allowing myself to learn and not be afraid to make mistakes as apprenticeships are all about developing on the job and being able to grow as a person".

Much of the confidence gained was through on-the-job learning and job rotation.

Job rotation allowed the Apprentices to try new things, which allowed them to develop even further, learning from new experiences and taking some degree of experimentation to get better at what they were doing. Taking the skills from one rotation to the next gave them a better understanding of the organisation and the way it operated.

Working with colleagues, managers and leaders, Apprentices adapted their communication styles to become better team players and were not afraid to ask questions.

Being in the second year of their apprenticeship gave them greater confidence as they navigated the department they worked in and could look back over how much they'd changed since starting the apprenticeship.

"I'm always learning, from different stakeholders within different departments"



6) Digital Skills still taking centre stage

Almost all Apprentices felt they had grown in confidence in using digital technology as part of their daily role. It emerged that Advanced Excel skills and use of Power BI are the most common digital skills that Apprentices have learnt to help them with their role. By enhancing their knowledge on these platforms, Apprentices were also better able to understand other systems and advance in their work. But also importantly, they were creating meaningful reports which were shared with wider teams, having the benefit of getting them more workplace exposure.

55% of our apprentices said they were fully accustomed and confident in using virtual platforms to conduct meetings.

7) Financial drivers of career development

Not unsurprisingly, Apprentices' career aspirations had also developed. The most common aim for Apprentices was to complete their apprenticeship, with approximately 70% having this as their immediate next career goal. This was closely followed by an ambition to continue stepping up on the career ladder and progressing within their current firms.

70% of our apprentices undertook job rotations, which was giving them a wider experience of the business.

Whilst 80% wanted to move onto more senior roles and had ambitions for promotion, we noticed that the younger Apprentices not only aspired to lead teams and continue to develop as professionals, but were also very vocal about their personal aspirations - such as owning their own homes, working internationally, and taking on more specialist roles.

75% of our school leaver Apprentices felt that they felt financially more secure rather than going off to university and were glad they chose this route over university.

8) The development of life long and transferable skills

Unanimously, Apprentices reported they were learning life long skills which allowed them to adopt what they were learning on their apprenticeship in their personal lives. This flowed through to their wider social skills. Some Apprentices commented:

- ▶ They felt more mature compared to friends at university.
- ▶ They'd improved their communication skills significantly and were now able to have meaningful conversations with colleagues and senior leaders.
- ▶ Their apprenticeship was instrumental in developing their confidence and ability to relate to and communicate with a wide range of people.
- ▶ 80% of apprentices said the apprenticeship gave them a structure in their working day, which provided powerful motivation.

Conclusion

We have observed the transition from young student to confident professional in many of the Apprentices. It was refreshing to hear the Apprentices talk about how they are more confident, resilient and determined to progress their career. They see the value in the Apprenticeship and how it's changed them as a person. One Apprentice acknowledged how much more critically he was now thinking, and how he analysed tasks, options and improvements as a result of his apprenticeship.

Our Apprentices reported that the interview provided them with beneficial reflection time, which they valued highly. It has been equally rewarding for us as we conduct these interviews and gather rich insights into the lives of our apprentices as they navigate through life and their career.

We are proud of the professionals they are becoming.



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Recommendations

2021 recommendations

Based on the 2021 feedback we have received:

- 1 Further expansion of Digital Skills through microsoft specialist courses and classes allowing apprentices to advance their word, excel and powerpoint
- 2 Dedicated Skills and Behaviour modules in Mykaplan as well as tailored workshops
- 3 Watching the development of working practices and how our skills development must adjust in keeping with emerging trends
- 4 Continued focus on Wellbeing support, particularly where Apprentices are working remotely.

Continued themes

Last year's report identified a number of themes emerging, some of these were repeated in our findings one year on. These included the importance of wellbeing and our apprentices' loyalty to their employers.

2020's recommendations

Employers should not lose sight of the loss of learning and development opportunities for young people when working from home. Most Apprentices without caring responsibilities still crave a return to the workplace.

Hybrid working is the preferred option amongst the Apprentices.

- ▶ **Schools have more of a part to play - more time needs to be allocated in the curriculum to financial awareness and the range of professional roles.**

30% of our apprentices visited their old schools to share their experiences. They found that a shift in mindset was definitely happening and more and more school leavers were looking towards apprenticeships knowing that they would gain the experience and qualifications that would allow them to develop faster than their counterparts going off to universities.

- ▶ **Kaplan will increase even further its own range of Careers Information Advice and Guidance resources.**

We have developed further with CIAG, introducing a dedicated microsite, creating more impact by having a presence on our social channels such as Instagram live and TikTok.

- ▶ **Kaplan will develop its time management skills sessions with lessons learnt from the pandemic; guidance on email management, home working and use of productivity apps.**

With the introduction of development sessions "getting back into learning" and "hosting a virtual meeting" this became a common workplace theme allowing learners that had been on furlough the opportunity to further develop their skills.

- ▶ **Kaplan will further enhance its wellbeing information and ensure all Apprentices are directed to the microsites and content included in newsletters.**

Kaplan has enhanced its Personal Development offering, with a drive to promote our wellbeing webinar series.

See the [2020 report](#).



Acknowledgments

Once again, we would like to thank all Apprentices who have given up their time to help make this Apprentice of our Time report possible. Their honest and open discussions allow us to gain meaningful insights into the lives and careers of our apprentices, now and in the years to come. Your commentary and responses help us to improve.

Our thanks also go to their employers for permitting their Apprentices to participate in this research project.

