



# **MAXIMISING APPRENTICESHIP SUCCESS: THE CASE FOR LEARNER ENGAGEMENT**



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## FOREWORD

As the leading edTech SaaS supplier for apprenticeships in the UK, OneFile works with hundreds of training providers and employers, supporting hundreds of thousands of learners nationwide. We care deeply about the Further Education & Skills sector and about giving our apprentices the best possible chance of success.

This report looks at the ongoing issue of apprenticeship non-completions. The figures for the number of learners dropping out of their apprenticeship prematurely are stark. They are evidence that much needs to be done in the sector to enhance the prospects of learners embarking on an apprenticeship.

Employers, training providers and the learners themselves must work together effectively to ensure apprentices have every chance to successfully complete their programme of learning, on the job and off the job. For our part, we are committed to continually enhancing our software, and our new OneFile Engage platform will enable employers, tutors and learners to stay more connected, ensuring learners have all the support they need.

This report is our latest contribution to enhancing our collective knowledge and understanding of apprenticeships and what makes them work. We believe it tells a compelling story of where we can improve together. We hope you enjoy reading it, and that it gives you valuable insights into what you and your organisation can do to support learners to make the most of their apprenticeship opportunities.

***Davinder Aujla, Executive Vice-President, OneFile***

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Apprentices, training providers and employers were interviewed for their views on issues surrounding apprenticeships and completion rates. The aim was to gain a fresh, balanced insight into the reasons behind below-target completion rates of apprenticeships nationwide.

Surveys of each group were conducted, with questions focusing on the supervision of learners, the level of engagement between employers, training providers and learners, factors in completion rates and the impact of work and training combined on the mental wellbeing of apprentices.

### **These were the key findings:**

- Apprentices need more time to complete their off-the-job (OTJ) training during work hours – something learners, employers and training providers all agree on.
- The combined pressures of on-the-job and off-the-job tasks are affecting the mental wellbeing of many apprentices – although the large majority of learners believe they have a caring employer.
- Mentors who had been through the same apprenticeship process were considered to be important in helping learners through their programme to completion.
- One in five employers interviewed found it difficult to maintain oversight of their apprentices' progress.
- More than two in five training providers said there was room for improvement in their support of learners.

Better engagement between apprentices and their employers and tutors is needed to address the competing pressures of off-the-job and on-the-job tasks for learners, said OneFile. Mentors, regular check-ins, workplace wellbeing measures and an effective apprenticeship management platform should be essential elements of an apprenticeship completion strategy.

## BACKGROUND

Too few learners complete their apprenticeships. Nearly one in two drop out of their programme before completion.

In England, learner completion rates in apprenticeships stood at around 52 per cent in 2022. Prior to the general election in July 2024, the Government's target had been 67 per cent by 2025. Even if we achieve that target in 2025, we will continue to see many tens of thousands of apprenticeship drop-outs each year.

Applying the 48 per cent drop-out rate to the 348,000 people who started their apprenticeships in England in the 2021-2022 academic year, for example, the think tank EDSK estimated that this would equate to around 163,500 apprentices not completing their course.

Yes, it is important to recognise that a positive outcome can come from a premature end to an apprenticeship, such as a job offer from another employer. Yet, recent figures do point statistically to the greater likelihood of employment for those who successfully complete their apprenticeship. Respondents who did not complete their apprenticeship were statistically less likely to secure either a permanent job (8%, compared to 29% who completed) or a promotion (7%, compared to 18% who completed) with the same employer. In other words, more often than not, an apprentice who drops out is less likely to find employment.

For this report, we interviewed learners, training providers and employers to shed fresh light on the numerous factors behind the drop-out rates. We teamed up with the Association of Apprenticeships to gain rare insights from the learners themselves and put questions to our large network of trainers. We then spoke to a select group of employers for whom apprenticeships are a key part of their recruitment strategies.

The findings are indeed insightful and point to the need for a refresh in how together with suppliers, employers, and training providers, can drive up apprenticeship completion rates. This report features analysis from our own technical leads and concludes with our own call to action to the new Government and sector leaders.

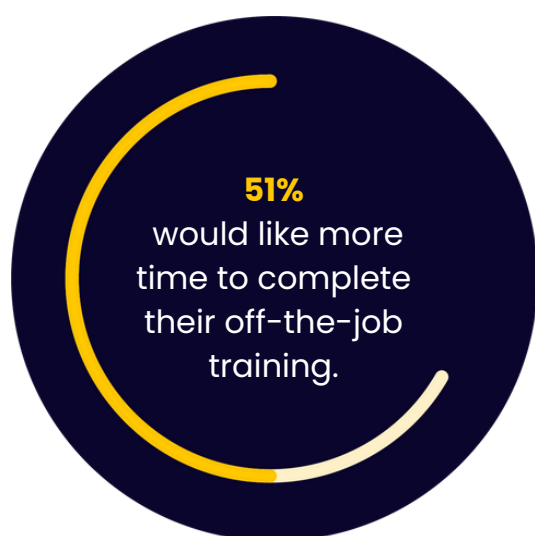
# THE LEARNERS: WHAT DO APPRENTICES THINK ABOUT COMPLETING THEIR APPRENTICESHIP?

What do apprentices themselves think about their apprenticeships, and the support they have in place?

OneFile teamed up with the Association of Apprenticeships (AoA) to find out, with an online questionnaire of AoA members<sup>[1]</sup> on a series of issues relating to apprenticeships. The focus of the survey was on engagement, support for learners and factors that had an influence on completion rates.

First, OneFile asked learners what would make completing their apprenticeships easier to achieve without lowering educational standards. More than half (51%) said they would like more time to complete their off-the-job training. More than half (53%) said they would benefit from a mentor who had been through the same process as them.

More enjoyable or engaging content and activities (39.49%), better pay to cover costs (33%) and better access to useful resources (30.26%) also scored highly. More than one in four (28%) wanted work experience more relevant to their apprenticeships subject and the same share of interviewees said more frequent contact with their tutor would make completion easier.<sup>[1]</sup>



[1] 195 apprentices participated in the survey in January and February 2024

## Enough tutor support?

So, how often does your tutor check in with you? OneFile asked. The most popular frequency of tutor check-ins, according to our participants, was monthly (40%), followed by quarterly (32%) and bi-monthly (12%).

OneFile then asked learners if they felt their tutor had given them enough support with their off-the-job training. More than half (56%) said yes, with more than one in three (35%) saying 'not always'.

## Off-the-job training

Logging off-the-job (OTJ) hours is an important task for the learner as they build evidence towards completion. How easy or difficult did they find the process? The largest proportion (35%) found it 'just about manageable', with 31% finding it 'easy' and 17% 'very easy'. More than 17% found logging their OTJ hours quite difficult or very difficult.

Apprentices sometimes say that they're not given enough time by their employer to complete OTJ during work hours. OneFile asked interviewees if their employer gave them enough time? Most **(64%)** said 'yes', with around a quarter **(24%)** reporting 'not always' and 12% saying 'no'.

It can be a challenge for some apprentices to achieve their 20% (or average six hours per week) OTJ learning, so OneFile asked learners how easy or difficult they found the task.

The biggest proportion **(34%)** found it 'just about manageable'.

Nearly a third **(31.28%)** found it 'easy' and **15.38%** 'very easy'.

However, **15%** said the task was 'quite difficult' and **4%** 'very difficult'.



**OneFile asked those who had not found OTJ learning easy for their thoughts on what could be done to make it easier. This is what they said:**

“Be given more time by my line manager, dedicated days / hours every week”

“I am unclear as to what exactly counts towards OTJ learning, therefore if I had a better understanding, maybe I could advocate my needs for it with my employer”

“Make employers let you study at home where it's more comfortable”

“It would be beneficial when the school holidays come around for employers to check in with their apprentice/s and set direct activities which meet the OTJ requirements to ensure the minimum hours are still being met”

“Colleagues not double booking me for meetings would help!”

“I would suggest stricter rules to organisations who do not allow the time which could be made if you had to describe more in the off the job calculator. I would also suggest set days or more anonymous ways if the student doesn't feel like they are getting the time”





## Relevant work experience

Giving appropriate on-the-job work experience and training is the employer's responsibility, but we know this does not always happen. OneFile asked learners if their employer had given them enough relevant work experience for their apprenticeship subject. The majority (72.31%) simply said 'yes'. More than a quarter, either said 'no' (8.21%) or 'not always' (19.49%).

## Impact of apprenticeship on mental wellbeing

The profile of work-related mental illness has grown in recent years and its impact on work performance is well documented. OneFile asked survey participants if their apprenticeship had ever made them feel stressed or anxious over the past 12 months. More than a half said yes, with nearly a quarter (24.62%) saying 'yes, often' and a larger proportion (29.74%) reporting 'yes, sometimes'. One in five (20%) said 'occasionally'.

For those who answered yes or occasionally, OneFile followed this query with a multiple choice on the causes of their stress or anxiety. The most common causes?

- Not being able to manage the demands of the job/college work - **56.82%**
- Impact on my work-life balance - **43.75%**
- Not completely understanding what's required of me - **43.18%**
- Worries about the end point assessment - **39.20%**
- Not receiving enough support and / or information - **36.36%**
- Feeling out of control with how I am being asked to work - **27.27%**

Then OneFile asked those participants who reported experiencing stress or anxiety to comment further. Comments included:



"At the start of my role it was a lot of self teaching which would stress me out as i couldn't meet deadlines until I managed to learn majority of the tasks"

"If I fail it puts me behind the imposed timetable set on me"

"During gateway I often worked into my evenings to ensure my work and EPA prep had both been done"

"The apprenticeship wage puts pressure on me, as a 23-year-old who rents"

"Anxiety has increased with work stressors and there is not enough balance to cope with this at home with doing full time work and university"

"Financial struggles on the apprenticeship salary"

"Learning materials are too vague so require further explanation or not all the materials have been shared/materials are hard to find. too many reflection logs! Not always beneficial"

"Not enough study time approaching exams. Lots of exams and lots of content to learn for the exams"



Studies tell us of the importance of our managers on our mental health and wellbeing. According to 69% of people in one survey, their managers had the greatest impact on their mental health than any other factor.

Did our apprentices feel they had a caring employer who kept an eye on their wellbeing? More than four in five (86.67%) said 'yes', while 13.33% said 'no'.

# TRAINING PROVIDERS: ARE TUTORS DOING EVERYTHING THEY CAN TO GET THEIR LEARNERS OVER THE LINE?

The importance of the training provider in apprenticeships cannot be overstated. They are responsible for delivering the off-the-job training that complements the on-the-job learning provided by the employer.

So what do training providers think about apprenticeships and completion rates? OneFile surveyed more than 1,000 training providers, including independent providers, FE colleges and in-house trainers. They were asked a series of questions about the support their learners received and what could be done to enhance apprenticeships and improve completion rates. This was a group with learners across the age categories and apprenticeship levels, with Advanced (Level 3) and Intermediate (Level 2) accounting for most of the programmes taught by our participants.

First, OneFile asked these training providers how confident they were that they and their clients (apprentice employers) were giving their learners enough support to complete their apprenticeships. Most were 'very confident' (46%) or 'confident' (35%) that they were. Another 15% were 'quite confident'. The remainder were 'not confident'.

We asked, do you think there is room for improvement in the amount of support you, as a training provider, are giving to your learner(s) to help them complete their apprenticeship(s)?

More than half (57%) said 'no', and 43% said 'yes'.

OneFile then gave our training providers a multiple choice of answers to the question: What difficulties, if any, do you face as an apprenticeship training provider? These were the most popular answers:

- Employers not giving learners time to complete 'off the job' learning in work hours - **36%**
- Lack of apprentice engagement with 'off the job' (OTJ) learning - **25%**
- Lack of regular communication with employer and learner about apprenticeship - **19%**
- Insufficient funding from Government - **17%**
- Retaining apprentices until completion of apprenticeship - **14%**
- Maintain oversight of apprenticeship - **13%**

OneFile explored the OTJ question further. Are your apprentice(s) given enough time by their employer during work hours to complete their off-the-job (OTJ) training?, we asked. Most (58%) said 'yes', 35% said 'not always' and 6% said 'no'.

Were their learners getting enough relevant work experience for their apprenticeship subject? The overwhelming majority of participants (96%) said 'yes', although one in five (21%) said yes but it had been a challenge for employers to always find relevant work experience.

### **Impact of apprenticeship on mental wellbeing**

Has an apprentice ever told you that they felt stressed or anxious about the work they were doing for you? Three in 10 (30%) said 'yes', with most of our training providers (70%) saying 'no'. Training providers reported using a variety of tools and processes to support the wellbeing of their apprentices. These included:

- Recognition, such as awards after appraisals, shout-outs on social media
- of making nominations for award schemes
- Empowering your learners to explore and develop their own ideas
- Spending time to talk to your apprentices about wellbeing in a supportive and safe environment
- Encouraging your apprentices to be part of communities important to them, such as events on topics of interest or involvement in diversity
- and inclusion networks

The large majority of training providers reported being engaged with their learners, with nearly half 'very engaged' (45%), more than a third 'engaged' (38%) and 13% 'quite engaged'.

### **How to improve completion rates**

OneFile then gave training providers a multiple choice with the question 'In your opinion, what would make it easier for your apprentice(s) to complete their apprenticeship without lowering the educational standards?' These were the responses, in order of popularity:

- More time to complete off-the-job training – **30%**
- More enjoyable or engaging content and activities – **14%**
- Having a mentor who has been through the same process as them – **14%**
- More frequent engagement with their tutor – **9%**
- Better pay to cover their costs – **9%**
- Better access to useful resources – **5%**
- Better apprenticeship management software – **3%**

OneFile wanted to hear the personal views of training providers on how the FE & Skills sector can make apprenticeships rewarding but also more achievable for learners. This is what they said:



"More enjoyable or engaging content and activities, more frequent engagement for apprentices with their tutor, and more regular 1-1s with their line manager."

"To make apprenticeships both rewarding and more achievable, FE & Skills should focus on creating flexible and personalised learning pathways that cater to the diverse needs of learners. This includes providing robust mentorship, integrating practical hands-on experiences with theoretical learning, and offering comprehensive support services such as career counselling and mental health resources. Additionally, fostering strong partnerships with industry can ensure that training is relevant and up-to-date, preparing apprentices for real-world challenges and enhancing their career prospects."

"More flexibility in apprenticeships, i.e. in their duration and content."

"For some programmes, most, the actual number of criteria are too many. Too many hoops and therefore tasks. We need more focus on employer support from a government perspective. The providers have to be so rigorous in assuring compliance, the employers not so."

"Apprenticeships for full time workers could have some mitigation around the time required for OTJ activities. I recognise that if someone is completing an apprenticeship as an apprentice (either no or very little working experience), then the current program is about right. However, the burn rate for FTE looking to complete an apprenticeship as further development, is running around 30% due to the apprenticeship requiring too heavy a commitment."

"I think having a mentor going through the same apprenticeship process is huge as they know and understand the process of becoming an apprentice and how and what to do and the learning requirements to help you get through."



# EMPLOYERS: WHAT ARE BUSINESSES AND ORGANISATIONS DOING TO MAKE APPRENTICESHIPS WORK?

Alongside learners and training providers, OneFile approached employers for their views on apprenticeships and completion rates. Nearly 90 were interviewed, with more than three-quarters (78%) employers outsourcing their apprenticeship training provision.

We asked our employers how confident they were that their tutors were giving their learners enough support to complete their apprenticeships. The replies were largely positive, with 45% 'confident' and 43% 'very confident'. Then OneFile asked: 'Do you think there is room for improvement in the amount of support you, as employer, are giving to your apprentice(s) to help them complete their apprenticeship(s)?' This split the group exactly 50-50. Half of employers do think there is room for improvement.

With a multiple choice, OneFile asked employers if they faced any difficulties in managing their apprenticeships. Most (76%) answered the question, and could choose as many options as they wished. Asked what these difficulties were, they said:

- Finding time for apprentice to complete 'off the job' learning in work hours – **32%**
- Maintaining oversight of apprenticeship – **21%**
- Too much red tape – **20%**
- Protecting wellbeing of apprentices – **18%**
- Regular communication with tutor and learner about apprenticeship – **18%**
- Performance of apprentice 'on the job' – **13%**
- Recruiting apprentices for vacancies in my business – **13%**
- Insufficient funding from Government – **13%**
- Retaining apprentices until completion of apprenticeship – **12%**
- Inadequate apprenticeship management software – **11%**

If they found it difficult, the large majority of employers (84%) still believed that they gave their apprentices enough time during work hours to complete their OTJ training. Nearly nine out of 10 employers interviewed said their learners were getting enough relevant work experience for their apprenticeship.

We then asked employers to expand on their replies, with comments on what they could do improve their employment of apprentices. This is what they said:



"There is always room for employment and we continue to learn and improve as each one of our apprentices progresses through the program. It would be great for apprentices to receive more opportunity to shadow more experienced colleagues and spend more time with them. We do what we can."

"More regular updates with the apprentice provider and apprentice. Possibly an app that all parties can access to view development, support requirements, feedback etc."

"Attendance to all meetings, always being available for guidance and support, involved in all levels of conversations where requested to by apprentices."

"Extra time at workplace. Sometimes students aren't able to do much in own time or at college as can be overwhelming."

"Constant supervision and support from the trainers."

"To dedicate more time in providing more quality training and development on the job."

"Better communication between training provider and apprentice/tutor More training in the use of onefile and e-portfolio."

"Improvement can always be made, depending on the apprentices' needs. More support, more employer training to understand the needs and support apprentices require."

"More time for study , more freedom to put ideas into practice."



### Impact of apprenticeship on mental wellbeing

Has an apprentice ever told you that they felt stressed or anxious about the work they were doing for you? Most (69%) said 'no', but nearly a third (31%) said 'yes'.

Which measures did the employers have in place to help manage the health and wellbeing of their apprentices? These measures could be part of wider workforce measures. The most popular options chosen were:

- Mental health at work plan that promotes positive wellbeing and provides relevant information on where to access support – **24%**
- Encourage open conversations about mental health and support available – **16%**
- Provide apprentices with good working conditions – **15%**
- Mental health awareness among employees – **10%**

Options to score lower in our survey were mental health training for apprentices' line managers (0%), buddy or mentor system for apprentices (2%) and mental health first aid on site (2%). The overwhelming majority of participants (97%) described themselves as 'caring employers'.

### Engagement between employer, training provider and learner

Engagement between employer, training provider and learner is a critical factor in the successful completion of an apprenticeship. OneFile asked those employers who outsourced their apprenticeship training provision, how engaged were they with their training providers? In other words, did they communicate regularly to monitor the progress of their apprentices.

The large majority said they were engaged, with 29% 'very engaged', 48% 'engaged' and 19% 'quite engaged'.

How engaged was their training provider with your apprentice(s)? In other words, how frequently did their apprentices and their tutors meet or talk on the phone or online to discuss progress with the apprenticeship? More than two in five (40%) said 'very engaged', nearly half (48%) answered 'engaged', and 12% said 'quite engaged'.



### How to improve completion rates

OneFile then gave employers a multiple choice with the question 'In your opinion, what would make it easier for your apprentice(s) to complete their apprenticeship without lowering the educational standards?' These were the responses, in order of popularity:

- Having a mentor who has been through the same process as them - **42%**
- More time to complete off-the-job training - **34%**
- More enjoyable or engaging content and activities - **28%**
- More frequent engagement with their tutor - **22%**
- Better pay to cover their costs - **18%**
- Better access to useful resources - **16%**
- Better apprenticeship management software - **13%**

## CONCLUSIONS



The findings from our three surveys uncovered common ground for the three groups integral to the successful completion of apprenticeships: learners, employers and training providers. If we take our findings as a good representation of the bigger picture nationwide, it is clear that we have a pressure point. That is the difficulties apprentices face in keeping on top of their off-the-job learning and their on-the-job tasks.

Employers have a legal obligation to provide enough time during working hours for their apprentices to complete their OTJ work. This is clearly not happening often enough. The vast majority of employers care about their apprentices and want them to do well. Yet, the pressures of business are making it difficult for employers to comply.

A strong theme emerging from the findings was the need for mentors with similar backgrounds. It is clear that learners need more support in the workplace, and this is often best provided by someone who has been an apprentice themselves. The challenge every apprentice faces, of completing their OTJ and on-the-job tasks successfully, is unique to apprentices, so mentoring has a vital role to play.

The workload is clearly a source of stress and anxiety for many apprentices. While pressure is part and parcel of the world of work, it is a concern that this pressure is excessive for the apprentice at such an early stage of their career. More must be done now to manage the mental health and wellbeing of apprentices.

Many employers report using a range of measures to manage the health and wellbeing of their employees. OneFile believes employers must have a sharper focus on managing the health and wellbeing of their apprentices, who must study alongside their day-to-day duties at work.

# WE HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY



The system that supports apprenticeships in the UK has many moving parts, and there are a great many important stakeholders involved. This report has focused on the thoughts of the three groups integral to the success of apprenticeships: employers, training providers and the learners themselves. OneFile is an EdTech SaaS (software as a service) provider, and we work very closely with those three groups and other stakeholders, such as the Association of Apprenticeships.

It is clear to us at OneFile that today, more than ever, we need to work together more closely to ensure the precious opportunities that apprenticeships provide do not fall between the gaps. We passionately believe that technology, when used well, can close those gaps and provide simple, intuitive answers to the many problems highlighted in this report.

Apprenticeship management software has advanced the management of apprenticeships, giving employers greater oversight, training provider better learner engagement, and apprentices a platform to keep on top of their OTJ and on-the-job tasks.

Now, technology, or more specifically software powered by artificial intelligence (AI) and data science, gives us the means to do three critical things to ensure our apprentices are engaged. It can:

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Give us warning when our apprentice is at risk of dropping out. | 2. Keep the apprentice on track, with regular contact and opportunities to engage. | 3. Tailor the learning experience to the apprentice's early needs. |
|--|--|--|

OneFile Engage utilises a vast dataset, built over more than 15 years, to understand patterns and trends in apprenticeship outcomes. This extensive dataset is derived from the experiences of hundreds of thousands of apprentices, providing a broad understanding of apprenticeship dynamics and outcomes.

By leveraging advanced statistical analysis, such a system then takes this data and uses machine learning (a sub-field of AI) to essentially 'learn from experience'. That is, learn from the experiences of apprentices in your organisation, and also from those of learners across the country.



# NURTURE **EVERY** APPRENTICE

Apprenticeships are precious opportunities.  
**Every one must be nurtured.**



Engage identifies both the factors that lead to **successful completion** and the **early warning signs** of potential risks that lead to dropouts.

Real time data empowers you with actionable intelligence, boosting the likelihood of learning completion and assisting you obtain both learners and funding.



Find out more



# THANKS

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