

THE CO-OPERATIVE GROUP

Louise Timperley, Apprenticeship Manager
The Co-operative Group

The Co-operative Group is a huge retail organisation with stores and funeral homes all over the UK. The Co-op runs apprenticeships across all parts of the business, which includes their stores, funeral homes, logistics depots, and support centre. They typically have somewhere in the region of about 750 apprentices at any one time.

Currently they have 50-60 on the level 6 programme, which is the chartered manager degree apprenticeship with 20 to 30 colleagues on each annual cohort. The team leader programme has about 30 to 40 people at any one time – in warehouses and in-stores.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge is ensuring that they are making best use of the apprenticeship levy. The Co-op contributes about £5 million a year into the levy and uses around £2 million of it. The Co-op transfers about £1 million a year of their levy, as every levy-paying organisation can transfer up to 25% of its levy to others, to support organisations who don't have enough levy to support their own apprenticeship ambitions. They have also established the Co-op Levy Share service in support of tackling under-representation within apprenticeships. They have encouraged other businesses to pledge to transfer some of their unspent levy too, so that more apprenticeships can be funded more widely than within the Co-op – across all communities and sectors.

HOW MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP APPRENTICESHIPS ARE USED WITHIN THE ORGANISATION

The main reason they run management and leadership apprenticeships is for career progression, to help individuals step up and think about their own progression within the Co-op, as well as how they can develop people around them and grow the business too.

“ We use the apprenticeships to build self-confidence and to help colleagues to realise their potential. Having the structure of an apprenticeship programme and a longer programme duration rather than short, bite-sized learning about management works better for us. We can see how individuals develop and grow during the apprenticeship itself. And because it's knowledge, skills, and behaviours rather than just knowledge, we really see the major benefit of that. As the work the individuals do within the apprenticeship is linked to their job role, they can see how to apply the learnings into their work for their own development and also for the benefit of the business. ”

“ Some of our level 6 apprentices, who are perhaps quite senior in the business, might have responsibility for managing big projects, but perhaps not so much directly line managing people. So, it's great that they use that level of apprenticeship to get exposure to both sides of it. ”

Up until now, they have had higher numbers on level 6 as they have found this to be a good stage of someone's career to think about stepping up their skillset. However, more recently they are looking to grow numbers on Levels 3 and 5 to ensure that good management practice is being embedded at all stages.

THE IMPACT OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP APPRENTICESHIPS

The biggest impact has been with level 6, as colleagues are often at just the right stage to be thinking about personal growth and career development. The programme gives them a new perspective, and different ways to think about leading teams and projects. In addition, the assignments bring different groups together (from across funeral homes, stores, and the support centre) which enables greater sharing of business knowledge and insight.

“ By bringing people together you get a lot of rich insight being shared across the teams. Every team has had to identify a work-based issue that they need to solve which has been really welcomed by the senior leaders. A recent issue which has actually been implemented across the whole business was a waste reduction programme in our food stores. A team of six got together and found a really strong solution which was rolled out across the business to cut down on waste. Probably without the apprenticeship these individuals wouldn't have been working together so there are some learnings for us to take from that; it doesn't need an apprenticeship to bring people together, but there had to be that catalyst to make that happen. ”

The other impact is on the apprentices themselves, as it allows individuals who may not have had access to degree-level education previously an opportunity to access academic insight in a really practical way.

“ With the degree apprenticeship programme, we had a number of colleagues who had not been able to access degrees earlier in life and they were therefore really grateful for the opportunity to do degree level education within an apprenticeship at Co-op fully funded, at this stage in their career. ”

“ By way of example, one of our colleagues, James, completed a level two retailer apprenticeship and then progressed on to a level three team leader, and then level four retail manager, obtaining promotions in store in line with each apprenticeship. He's now working hard on the chartered manager degree apprenticeship programme and as a store manager in one of our larger stores. So, that's James's journey through the apprenticeship programme. They're the stories that we love to help to create and support across our Co-op he's certainly a huge role model apprentice for colleagues. ”

At lower levels, the impact is also around confidence building, and the impact on the business becomes more pronounced as they move through the levels and change job roles as their career develops.



“ I think the more a colleague moves through the levels the more return on investment the business gets as they progress through from... three to five and six. And I know, for example, a level seven programme has really heightened and deepened the strategic thinking of the leaders who have been involved. They have brought new ideas to the table and to the business. So, yes, I would say the impact on the individual is strong all the way through, but the impact on the business is more recognisable the higher up the levels that we go. ”

FUTURE APPRENTICESHIP PLANS

The Co-op plans to continue using apprenticeships for upskilling purposes and would also like to see an even higher level of apprenticeship recruitment. They are aiming to develop a programme where new recruits can join the business on a degree apprenticeship learning about management on the job, perhaps using a rotational programme. They would also like to develop more entry level programmes for school leavers.

ONE KEY SKILL FOR FUTURE

They would like to focus on bringing people through, developing others, and building the team around them. The theoretical aspects to management apprenticeships already address this.

“ I think within the apprenticeship there's a lot of theoretical stuff that is really useful for individuals to really understand how and why they manage people in the way they do and how other people respond to different management styles, and not everybody is built the same and will respond in the same way. ”