

Case Study - NHS Blood and Transplant

NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT) is a joint England and Wales Special Health Authority. It is responsible for ensuring a safe and efficient supply of blood and associated services to the NHS in England. It is also the organ donation organisation for the UK and is responsible for matching and allocating donated organs. Apprenticeships are a recent addition to NHSBT, first launching back in August 2016 in response to the Levy and organisational challenges and have quickly become a key part of the organisation's current operation and future workforce strategy. Since 2016, NHSBT has started nearly 100 apprentices with more on the waiting list to start, and from April 2018 it plans to expand its programme significantly and surpass its 2.3% annual starts target of 130. Most importantly, apprenticeships are proving essential in helping NHSBT address strategic challenges such as its ageing workforce, a high turnover of employees in some areas and skills shortages, as well as helping improve diversity and upskilling staff.

Initial steps

As a large organisation, with centres up and down the UK, NHSBT was conscious of taking a measured approach to rolling out its apprenticeship programme, to ensure apprentices could fit in with its various operations. Driven by the upcoming introduction of the Levy and tackling strategic challenges, apprenticeships were introduced at NHSBT in August 2016, and since then the organisation has focused on embedding its apprenticeships internally, by offering opportunities to existing employees and initially promoting the benefits of recruiting at entry level. As such, 13% of its current apprenticeship cohort are new starters and 87% are existing staff. On offer are 11 different programmes, primarily at Level 2 and 3, in standards from Medical Business Admin and Logistics Operations, to Healthcare Support Services and Team Leadership.

Based on the initial success of the programme, NHSBT now plans to expand its apprenticeship offer over the next three years and tip the balance back towards taking on more new starters. From April 2018, a further 27 standards will start being rolled out, up to higher and degree level, in more digital, finance, logistics and administration roles. This also will involve more opportunities in health and science.

"Taking a strategic approach to introducing our apprenticeships was essential for us. We are a diverse organisation of almost 5,400 staff, so we needed to make sure our apprenticeships could work for everyone, everywhere." She continues: "Planning for the future is also important to us. We spent a lot of time mapping out where apprenticeships could fit into our workforce, as well as identifying the career pathways from this. We want to ensure an apprenticeship can benefit employees at all levels and offer them opportunities to continue to progress."

Laura Unitt, Organisational Development Manager – Talent and Leadership

Laying the groundwork

In fact, improving line management skill and capacity is a key area which NHSBT's apprenticeship programme has been designed to address. Of the 14 apprenticeship completions at NHSBT so far, one staff member has already received a promotion as a direct result of the learning and skills gained from their apprenticeship, and the organisation hope this is an indication of things to come.

"We've currently got 50 people on our waiting list who want to take up an apprenticeship and the overall response has been really positive. We've worked with our internal communications team to spread the apprenticeship message far and wide to ensure staff are informed and aware of the opportunities available. This has included anything from apprenticeship screensavers and blog posts, to awareness days for both employees and line managers to gain further information before committing."

"By continuously working towards embedding apprenticeships into our culture, we hope this can lay the groundwork for the next stage of our apprenticeship journey."

Laura Unitt, Organisational Development Manager – Talent and Leadership

Rebalancing the workforce

Although offering apprenticeships to existing employees has been a key focus for NHSBT at the outset, with a move towards taking on more new starters from April 2018 the organisation hopes apprenticeships will play a key role in rebalancing the age profile of its workforce.

With approximately 50% of its workforce aged 50 or over, and just 3% under the age of 25, NHSBT hope that, in due course, it can use apprenticeships to further fill entry level roles across the organisation and at higher levels in the future. This will not only bring in more young talent into the workforce but also help reduce the high turnover of employees in certain areas of NHSBT.

"Some areas of NHSBT are susceptible to a high turnover of employees – for example in our manufacturing roles at entry level. By bringing in entry level talent on apprenticeships, with opportunities to develop, we hope we can stabilise the number of employees entering and remaining with us to progress in their careers."

Laura Unitt, Organisational Development Manager – Talent and Leadership

Growing diverse talent

In addition to addressing an ageing workforce, NHSBT is also looking at apprenticeships to help support its diversity and inclusion agenda. Quarterly tracking monitoring is undertaken and reported, and a diversity and inclusion pledge has been created with targets for the next three years.

“We want NHSBT to be a great place to work and we are committed to creating a working environment that is truly inclusive. Apprenticeships are playing a vital role in helping us grow our own diverse talent.”

Laura Unitt, Organisational Development Manager – Talent and Leadership

On the horizon

Although in the early stages of implementing its apprenticeship strategy, NHSBT is already beginning to see positive results.

“Apprenticeships are a fabulous alternative to traditional learning methods. You can attract, support and retain talent in different ways and they are a clear supportive development pathway for existing employees, as well as new starters.”

Laura Unitt, Organisational Development Manager – Talent and Leadership

With apprenticeships gaining more and more momentum at NHSBT, the next three years will see apprenticeships at the organisation grow significantly in number. This, as Laura explains, will open further opportunities to bridge vital skills gaps, particularly in science roles. For example, NHSBT is currently a representative on the UK Advanced Therapies Apprenticeship Steering Group and is working with employers across the country to develop an apprenticeship which can work in these newly advanced areas.

“Apprenticeships are already delivering for NHSBT and we are excited to see the further benefits they will bring, particularly in our entry level roles. With a number of projects on the horizon, we are keen to see how apprenticeships can further support us in addressing our strategic objectives, as well as ultimately creating more opportunities for our employees. In my opinion, apprenticeships are a win-win to both the employer and the apprentice.”

Laura Unitt, Organisational Development Manager – Talent and Leadership