

CASE STUDY – ELIZABETH BOWN

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Challenging the apprenticeship stereotype

Think of an apprentice and a familiar figure springs to mind – a teenager, at the start of a new career, undertaking a manual role, and learning the ropes as they work.

Take Elizabeth Bown, for example. The 41-year-old mother-of-four owns and manages a highly successful business on the beautiful Islands of Orkney, processing and distributing locally-caught fish and organic meat from stock reared on her farm. She's one of an increasing number of workers in more senior roles who are choosing an apprenticeship to boost their skills.

"I know I'm not your typical apprentice," Elizabeth said. "But I felt the course had a lot to offer. Because it's all done on-the-job, it's one of the few qualifications I can achieve without taking time off work, which would be impossible in my position."

Elizabeth is undertaking a level 3 Modern Apprenticeship in Food and Drink Manufacture, roughly equivalent to two A-levels. Improve, the food and drink sector skills council, has revamped apprenticeships for the sector to ensure the skills delivered are relevant to the workplace, and to maximise the amount of time spent on-the-job, rather than in-class. Under the new scheme, Elizabeth has been able to tailor-make her own personal apprenticeship by choosing from a range of more than 500 modules, picking out units that will deliver the skills she needs.

"The flexibility of the course really appealed," she continued. "I've chosen modules in communications, food safety, and marketing among others. It's a bit of a mixed bag, but as managing director of the company, I have to oversee all aspects of business. Having that choice is far more useful to me than doing a course that just focuses on one thing."

Elizabeth originally trained as a vet, a job which took her from her home town in Yorkshire to the Orkneys, where she met her husband Tony. After they married she gave up her job to work on Tony's family farm and raise the couple's children. Two years ago, Elizabeth and Tony set up Jolly's Fish and Farm Produce, despite neither of them having any experience of running such a business. It now turns over £300,000 a year, employs 12 staff and distributes across the UK, and to Europe.

"We were already processing and selling our own organic meat from the farm," explained Elizabeth. "When the Jolly's premises came up for sale, it seemed like a natural progression. The premises had a larger butchery unit and would allow us to expand, sell more meat, and introduce other products."

Years before, the premises had belonged to William Jolly, a respected fishmonger. The Bowns decided to resurrect the Jolly's name and sell locally-caught fish alongside their organic meat. Now, a traditional kiln is used to smoke salmon, mackerel and kippers, while fresh fish and shellfish is also on sale. Orkney cheese and fudge complete the offering of local produce.

"The business is thriving, but it has been hard work," said Elizabeth. "I haven't had any formal training in running a business, so I've had to learn as I've gone along. That's one of the reasons I decided to complete a Modern Apprenticeship – I hope it will improve my management skills, make the running of the business more efficient, and allow us to continue to expand."

Elizabeth is not the only member of the Jolly's management team to be undertaking the programme. Martin Peace, the company's factory manager, is also embarking upon a Modern Apprenticeship, but the different nature of his job has led to him choosing alternative modules to study.

Elizabeth continued: "We are doing some of the same modules - for example, communications, as a lot of the content is about liaising with colleagues and staff, which is a vital part of both our jobs. On the other hand, Martin isn't doing anything concerned with marketing, as there's no need. He has chosen more production-focused modules, which I haven't, as they go into a level of detail that's too great for my needs."

Aberdeenshire-based Polaris Training is delivering the programme for the pair. Rather than sit exams, an assessor from Polaris visits the company once a month and watches Elizabeth and Martin at work, while they put into practice something they have learned from the latest module they have been studying. The assessor asks questions and marks them as they go along.

“It’s great because we’re not required to do anything that we’d never have to do in our every-day working lives,” explained Elizabeth. “For example, the communications module included having to structure a staff meeting and looked at how to deal with tasks such as training, ordering and staff discipline – all real-life situations. My job is carrying on as normal, but I’m starting to think about things in different ways. I now analyse myself during every task – thinking about why I’m doing it, what I want to get out of it, and whether there is a better way. It’s a real eye-opener - I’ve only been on the apprenticeship programme for a few weeks but I’m already seeing the benefits.”

The programme is expected to take around ten months to complete, but its flexible nature means there are no hard and fast rules. “It’s not like a school year where you start in September and finish in June,” said Elizabeth. “You can start at a time convenient for you, and carry out the work at a pace that fits into your life.”

So would Elizabeth recommend the programme to other managers and senior personnel? “Most definitely, particularly if, like me, they have no formal training. At level three, and with the modules I’ve picked, the Modern Apprenticeship is perfectly pitched. I have no doubt that it will be of great value to me, and to the company.”

Adult apprenticeship – the facts

What is an apprenticeship?

An apprenticeship is a work-based learning programme. Apprentices learn through a combination of on and off-the-job education and training. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, apprenticeships are available at levels two and three. Level two is the equivalent to five good GCSEs and level three to two A-levels. In Scotland, the Modern Apprenticeship is only available at level three, although Improve is leading efforts to introduce a level two programme, in order to help bridge the skills gap.

The revamped Food and Drink Apprenticeship framework, which allows apprentices to tailor-make their qualification by choosing relevant modules, is available in all the UK nations.

What skills does it deliver?

An apprenticeship is made up of several qualifications, including National Vocational Qualifications/Scottish Vocational Qualifications (NVQs/SNQs) which test practical skills, vocational qualifications such as City and Guilds certificates which test work-based knowledge, and qualifications in numeracy, communications and IT skills. The new framework for apprenticeships in food and drink manufacture covers specialist skills in all sub-sectors of the industry – bakery, meat and poultry, seafood, brewing and distilling, soft beverages, fresh produce, oil & fats, dairy, confectionery, milling and starches, animal feeds, general food processing, and food and drink wholesale.

Why are food and drink apprenticeships now open to adults?

The food and drink industry tends to attract older workers. More than half the industry's employees are aged 40 and over and the vast majority are over 25. Adult apprenticeships are a vital tool in boosting skills development for older workers.

Who's eligible for funding to do an adult apprenticeship?

All adults are eligible - however the Learning and Skills Council, the government's funding body, prioritises four groups of learners:

- Those without employment who wish to develop the skills needed for a new career (including adults on incapacity benefit).
- Those in employment who have existing skills but lack formal qualifications.
- Members of ethnic minority groups (who are currently under-represented in apprenticeships).
- Women seeking to enter the workforce after 25.

For further information, visit www.improveltd.co.uk.

Ends

Note to editors

Improve is one of 25 sector skills councils established by the government to take the lead in driving up skills in the workplace in order to promote higher productivity and stronger competitiveness for UK businesses in the global market. Funded primarily by the government, sector skills councils are also supported by employers in their sectors, whose needs they represent when stimulating change among the providers of education and skills. Sector skills councils work closely with employers to promote greater commitment to improving skills in their workforces, and with schools, colleges, universities, and private training organisations to improve the provision of basic skills training and to make vocational and occupational training more relevant to the modern commercial climate.

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