

Out of sight? Invisibility, meta work and the quiet contributions of degree apprentice line managers

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Abstract

The need to meet the global economic and social challenges facing the UK has brought renewed engagement with workplaces as sites for learning and development. The importance of anticipating ongoing workforce transformations required for continued competitiveness has underscored government activities in this area. Degree apprenticeships are designed to bring together higher education and industry, supporting contemporary organisations in innovative and digitised environments. However, responding to these challenges has brought both tensions and trade-offs, including generating new forms of unseen and unacknowledged work for professionals who supervise apprentices at the operational level. Our paper examines that 'meta-work' that enables other work to take place, particularly the training and development and networking required to cement apprentice learning. However, line manager efforts tend to remain unacknowledged and unseen in the workplace, as well as largely being unstudied, despite the need for recognition and support for these individuals at both organisational and policy level.

Full paper

Since their introduction in 2014, degree apprenticeships have been promoted as a major initiative for UK tertiary education, and the centre of much media and policy discourse. These fresh iterations of long-standing workplace learning approaches have been designed to disrupt traditional dyadic approaches to study (Fabian et al, 2022). They also aim to inject a renewed impetus into national skills programmes, where workforce development and overcoming social inequalities remain particular challenges for a post-pandemic, post-Brexit Britain (see Myers et al, 2025).

Programme designs rest on combining degree-level study with centralised formal systems of 'standards' - (which are employer-led lists of knowledge, skills and behaviours). At the local level the triangular, 'Tripartite Relationship' structure sees an apprentice supported in their academic development by a higher education (HE) tutor, alongside a partnering line

manager or mentor who guides professional development 'on the job' in their workplace. However, additional complexity in teaching, learning and assessment comes from the impact of additional stakeholders – whether directly in the form of other employer representatives such as HR and mandated independent assessment, or indirectly from mandated government requirements and financial regulations. These factors contribute to mixed (and often competing) responsibilities and priorities (Mulkeen et al, 2017), which - alongside a potential lack of formal training as coach, can leave individual line managers 'underprepared' (Roberts et al, 2019) for the burden of successfully supporting an apprentice. The situation is often exacerbated in organisations where apprenticeship programme design and associated managerial responsibilities are poorly understood and/or less than visible to senior managers.

In a sector where apprentice voices (Thomas et al., 2012) and strategic level employer voices (Antcliff et al., 2016) are joined via policy with the voices of higher education providers (Quew-Jones, 2022), the contributions made by individual line managers in this role are rarely recognised in current work-based learning literature (Horáčková et al, 2024). Much of the scholarship output on employer perspectives tends to fuse together different stakeholder actions. This is despite a long theoretical tradition of considering community practices in social contexts of learning pioneered through social science research (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991) or using ecological paradigms to understand co-created practices at the micro-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1996).

One helpful way of unpacking aspects of the line manager role in supporting apprentices is to divide their duties between visible and acknowledged compliance elements (such as signing off competency assessments) and the substantive, and extensive 'behind the scenes' (Nardi and Engeström, 1999) input made towards intangible, yet time-consuming activities such as developing workplace identities and providing gatekeeping to networks. We see this as overlooked, and undervalued labour: the 'meta-work' (Aroles et al., 2023) that line managers undertake that enables the training and development of apprentices in the workplace to take place, and provides real-life contexts for the reflective scholarship that academic tutors assess as part of work-based learning degrees. Whilst the degree award brings formal recognition for the apprentices, it may be the less-noted or observed facilitation undertaken by the line manager that enables an apprentice to flourish in their organisation. Aroles et al (2023) characterise such invisible work as 'rarely' acknowledged, and '(deliberately or not) 'out of sight'' from strategic considerations despite being crucial for collective functioning in the workplace. Its guises include the sharing of tacit and contextual knowledge, of informal connections of value, and developing institutional memory.

Our study, supported by the British Academy, surfaces the activities undertaken by apprentice line managers in steering, developing and facilitating their charges within the organisation. Our current fieldwork is exploring beyond the supervisory function of ensuring compliance with the programme and supporting the academic development spearheaded by the academic tutor partner. We have adopted a qualitative approach to

understanding this hidden labour (Hatton, 2017), through multiple-stakeholder interviews, including apprentices, line managers, and other stakeholders in the process. We focus in at the micro-level of apprentice-line manager-employer-HE academic staff ecology to explore unseen practices of learning and support. At the conference we will present our initial findings from interviews with over thirty apprentices and line managers who offer important perspectives on these vital interactions at the heart of relationships for work-based learning success.