

Apprenticeship 101

Apprenticeship is a powerful workforce development tool that equips employees with the critical skills needed to thrive in today's competitive landscape. By blending hands-on training with classroom-based learning, apprenticeships help bridge skill gaps, foster loyalty, and strengthen talent pipelines—all while allowing individuals to “earn while they learn”. This model not only prepares employees with the specific competencies required for their roles but also enhances professional skills, making them more adaptable and effective team members. Apprenticeships build a diverse, skilled workforce tailored to meet the Commonwealth's unique needs, ensuring long-term stability and growth. The following document will further outline the specific benefits of apprenticeship for our organization and the strategic advantages it offers.

At its core, an apprenticeship is a structured program that combines on-the-job training with related technical instruction, providing a direct pathway to proficiency in a specific role. This approach allows organizations to shape talent from within, developing employees who are aligned with company standards and culture. Apprenticeships help to increase retention, enhance productivity, and reduce hiring costs by creating a steady pipeline of skilled workers who are well-prepared to contribute effectively. This model supports sustainable workforce growth and offers a strategic advantage in building an adaptable, high-quality workforce that meets both current and future organizational needs.

The following sections provide an in-depth look at how apprenticeship can be a transformative workforce development strategy for Commonwealth agencies.

In this document, you will discover:

- Key advantages to utilizing apprenticeship
- Definitions to understand apprenticeship
- Key stakeholders to building successful programs
- FAQs to better help you navigate apprenticeship

Key Advantages

Apprenticeships offer a powerful model for workforce development, providing a structured pathway for individuals to gain essential skills and experience. This approach combines technical training, mentorship, and professional development, preparing apprentices to excel in their roles and contribute meaningfully to the organization.

Here are some key advantages to an organization through apprenticeship:

Technical Skill Development: Apprenticeship creates an equitable pathway for workers to develop the technical skills needed to best perform the job and to grow professionally. Apprenticeship prioritizes learning and provides a theoretical approach, often classroom-based learning, to produce a fully competent and skilled workforce.

Professional Skill Development: Professional skill development is crucial for workplace success by preparing apprentices to navigate interpersonal dynamics and challenges effectively. This balance of skills creates well-rounded employees who can contribute positively to team culture, navigate workplace dynamics, and handle challenges effectively.

Mentorship: Mentorship accelerates skill-building and confidence by providing hands-on guidance and support from experienced professionals. Mentorship also enhances apprentices' technical and professional skills, preparing them for long-term success, while also helping shape future talent, fostering a culture of growth and knowledge-sharing.

Access to Fresh Perspectives and Ideas: Apprentices often bring new perspectives and innovative ideas to the workplace. Through their related technical instruction, apprentices are well-versed in the latest academic theories and technologies that are relevant to their field of study which can lead to fresh insights and solutions.

Talent Pipeline Development: Apprenticeships strengthen talent pipelines by training individuals with tailored skills that align directly with organizational and industry needs, reducing skill gaps. They also increase retention by fostering loyalty and engagement, as apprentices feel invested in and committed to their employers. Ultimately, apprenticeships build a steady stream of qualified, work-ready talent, ensuring workforce stability and continuity.

Enhanced Employer Brand: Organizations that offer apprenticeships see a significant increase in retention. Apprenticeships have a retention rate of 90%, according to the US Department of Labor. Apprenticeships also allow organizations to pass on institutional knowledge to a new group of workers through mentorship and structured on-the-job training.

Diversity of the Workplace: Apprentices come from varied educational, cultural, and social backgrounds, contributing to the diversity of the workplace. This diversity can enhance creativity, foster innovation, and improve problem-solving within teams.



Definitions

To fully understand the value and structure of apprenticeship programs, it is essential to be familiar with key terms and concepts. The following definitions provide clarity on the foundational elements of apprenticeship, helping you better understand how each component contributes to successful program outcomes and workforce development.

Program Sponsor – The agency or program that oversees and administers the apprenticeship program. The program sponsor is responsible for designing the training plan, ensuring compliance within industry standards and regulations, and providing resources and support to all participants of the program including mentors, supervisors, educational institutions, and apprentices.

Supervisor - An individual designated by the program sponsor to supervise or have charge and direction of an apprentice. The supervisor is responsible for overseeing the apprentice's daily work activities, ensuring that they meet performance and safety standards. The supervisor provides structure, monitors progress, assigns tasks aligned with learning and goals, and collaborates with mentors to support the apprentice's skill development and growth within the program.

Mentor – An experienced professional who provides guidance, support, and knowledge to an apprentice, helping them develop both technical and soft skills. The mentor serves as a role model, helping the apprentice navigate challenges and grow within their chosen field. Mentors share their skills, knowledge, techniques, best practices, and other experience to provide a comprehensive hands-on training experience for the apprentice.

Apprentice – An individual engaged in a structured training program that combines on-the-job experience with related technical instruction to develop specific skills for a particular trade or profession. Apprentices work under the guidance of experienced mentors and supervisors, progressively building expertise while earning wages. This hands-on learning approach prepares them for skilled roles within the workforce, often leading to a certification or a journeyman status in their field.

Journeyman – A skilled worker who has completed an apprenticeship and demonstrated proficiency in their trade or profession. This person possesses the technical expertise and experience required to perform tasks independently, often meeting industry standards or certification requirements. Journeymen may work under a master in their field, mentor apprentices, or pursue further qualifications to advance within their profession.

On-the-Job Training (OJT) – Hands-on, practical training that occurs in the workplace, where apprentices learn specific job skills and tasks under the guidance of experienced mentors or supervisors. This training enables apprentices to apply theoretical knowledge directly to their work environment, gaining proficiency through real-world experience.

Related Technical Instruction (RTI) – Classroom-based or virtual learning component of an apprenticeship, where apprentices receive formal education on foundational theories, principles, and technical skills relevant to their trade. RTI complements on-the-job training by deepening apprentices' understanding of industry-specific knowledge, safety standards, and best practices needed for success in their roles.

Apprenticeship Stakeholders

Successful apprenticeships rely on collaboration among stakeholders, including executive leadership, the development team, supervisors, mentors, and unions. Together, these roles create a cohesive framework that enables apprentices to gain the skills and experience needed for long-term success.

In addition to these stakeholders, here are other roles to consider when building an apprenticeship:

Sponsor

Every Registered Apprenticeship program has a “sponsor” that is responsible for the overall operation of the program. Sponsors can be a single employer, a group of employers, Joint Apprenticeship Training Committees (JATCs), training providers, or a range of workforce intermediaries including industry associations, and community-based organizations. For Commonwealth apprenticeship programs, the “sponsor” can be the Office of Administration or the agency offering the apprenticeship.

Primary Roles/Tasks:

- Develop a training plan for the apprenticeship program
- Identify and engage a training provider to instruct the classroom/technical training component
- Oversee the program to ensure compliance with approved standards
- Explore funding streams to help with related technical instruction and best practices

Employer

The apprenticeship program has an employer who hires and treats the apprentice as an employee. Employers provide mentorship and supervision to the apprentices. For Commonwealth programs, the employer is most likely to be the agency offering the apprenticeship.

Primary Roles/Tasks:

- Identify preferred or targeted candidate pools to recruit apprentices into the program
- Ensure development of workers using an approved curriculum
- Provide mentorship to apprentices
- Supervise and meet with apprentices
- Responsible for funding the related technical instruction

Related Technical Instruction (RTI) Provider

In addition to work-based learning, apprentices enroll in related technical instruction. This will support the learning that takes place on the job.

Primary Roles/Tasks:

- Provide a workspace or lab space to practice technical skills
- Teach related material according to an approved curriculum

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

As you consider implementing or participating in an apprenticeship program, you may have questions about how it works, its requirements, and the benefits it brings to both apprentices and the organization. The following FAQs address common inquiries, providing insights and guidance to help you navigate the apprenticeship process with confidence and clarity.

Question: How long is an apprenticeship?

Answer: An apprenticeship can run anywhere between 1-6 years depending on the trade, industry standards, and complexity of skills required.

Question: What is the requirement for OJT and RTI for an apprenticeship?

Answer: The OJT and RTI requirements for an apprenticeship vary. Typically, apprentices complete 2,000 hours of OJT and 144 hours of RTI per year of the program.

Question: How long does it take to build an apprenticeship program?

Answer: Building an apprenticeship program can vary widely in duration. The timeline depends on factors such as the need to develop a dedicated team, aligning with industry standards, fulfilling regulatory requirements, addressing collective bargaining agreements, defining appropriate classifications, etc. Additional considerations, such as securing funding and creating curriculum for OJT and RTI, also impact the program's development timeline.

Question: Who helps to support an active program?

Answer: This will depend on the initial stakeholders and how the program is developed. However, supporting an active apprenticeship involves collaboration across multiple roles, including executive leadership, providing strategic directions and resources, and program staff within the agency, who manage daily operations and oversee apprentices. The OA's Work-Based Learning Division also plays a key role in offering expertise, guidance, and support to ensure program quality. Additionally, union representation may be involved in ensuring alignment with collective bargaining agreements.

Question: What is the time commitment for supervisors and mentors during the apprenticeship?

Answer: Supervisors and mentors both play an important role in an apprenticeship. Supervisors are responsible for overseeing day-to-day operations, conducting regular check-ins, and ensuring that the apprentice progresses according to the training plan. Mentors serve as role models, providing additional support and guidance through regular check-ins to help apprentices gain a comprehensive understanding of their role and responsibilities. A meeting schedule between the apprentice and supervisor, as well as between the apprentice and mentor, is typically established by the program area during development to ensure consistent support and communication.

Question: What is the cost of an apprenticeship?

Answer: The cost of an apprenticeship program can vary extensively. Expenses typically include a salaried position (with benefits), related technical instruction, materials, and administrative support for each apprentice. Additional considerations may include program length, training complexity, agency funding (if available) and grant funding (if available).

Question: Will apprentices be required to have licenses ahead of time or will they earn them during the program?

Answer: Each hiring agency will determine whether apprentices need any licenses or certifications prior to starting, based on the specific role and industry requirements. Generally, however, apprenticeships are designed to include the necessary training and education for earning certifications or licenses as part of the program. This allows apprentices to gain required credentials while progressing through their apprenticeship, aligning learning with job-specific standards and qualifications.

Question: Can apprentices work immediately?

Answer: Whether an apprentice can work immediately depends on the specific program. Apprenticeships follow an "earn-while-you-learn" model, combining classroom learning with hands-on experience, allowing apprentices to gradually apply new skills in the workplace. Each program sets defined competencies and determines when it's appropriate for apprentices to practice these skills on the job, so the agency will decide what tasks are suitable as they develop the apprenticeship framework.

Question: Are hiring agencies required to hire apprentices after their program?

Answer: Apprentices are Commonwealth employees. They are subject to the same regulations, including the completion of all requirements necessary for probationary status. Upon successful completion of the apprenticeship, the journey worker will be reclassified to a higher-level position as defined by the agency when the program was developed.

Question: Do apprentices count as full-time employees for the purpose of staffing complement?

Answer: Yes, apprentices are salaried, Commonwealth positions.

Question: Is an apprentice like an intern?

Answer: No. An apprentice is a full-time employee who participates in structured, long-term training that combines paid work experience with related instruction. Apprenticeships are designed to lead directly into a specific job. Internships, on the other hand, are shorter, less structured opportunities that focus more on general work experience or exploring career interests without a formal pathway to long-term employment or specific credentials.



Have further questions?

If you have additional questions or need further assistance, please feel free to reach out to the OA, Work Based Learning team at RA-OAEntryPrograms@pa.gov. Our team is available for support and guidance in further exploring or developing apprenticeship program