



Pearson

How training providers have joined the academic ‘front line heroes’ as they support apprentices through the current pandemic

We spoke to Jonathan Bourne from Stockport-headquartered training provider Damar Training about how their business is responding to COVID-19 and how they are supporting employers and apprentices through this unprecedented situation to help them to ‘carry on learning’. Damar Training has a 40-year legacy of successfully delivering apprenticeship training and has worked with thousands of apprentices and many of the country’s leading employers.



Jonathan Bourne

How has your team at Damar been impacted by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?

There isn’t a single business in the country that hasn’t been significantly impacted by COVID-19 and ours is no exception. The outbreak and the measures introduced by the Government to tackle it have resulted in huge disruption and uncertainty for colleagues, apprentices and our partner-employers.

We work hard to plan apprenticeships in partnership with employers and apprentices, responding to the individual needs of both. In mid-March, those needs changed almost overnight as apprentices began to work from home, were furloughed or became busier than ever because they are front-line workers. Scheduled exam dates were cancelled as exams were put on hold and end-point assessments were no longer available for some standards.

As our partner-employers were impacted, their recruitment plans also started to change. Although some recruitment took place in March, most planned recruitment was put on hold and development programmes for existing employees were also postponed. That, coupled with a drop in completions, resulted almost immediately in a revenue shortfall which will of course grow over time.

How have you had to adapt your own business?

Faced with declining revenue for an uncertain period and then what might be a long slow return to growth, an option for some businesses might be to go into hibernation, cut costs and place everything on hold before a return to a more normal trading environment. Our view is that such an approach should be a last resort for apprenticeships where some delivery can continue.

Even though most programmes cannot continue exactly as before in such exceptional circumstances, it is at times like this when apprentices’ needs are greatest. For most of us over the past few weeks, our working days, places of work and duties have changed beyond recognition. Apprentices are being forced to learn faster than ever before, are under increased stress and so our objective has been to support them and their employers.

How has the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak impacted your learners?

The most obvious changes have been in how and where our apprentices are working. Whilst only a few apprentices have been made redundant, many more have been furloughed and almost all apprentices who are not in “front-line” roles (for example in the NHS or policing) are working at home.



At this point we don't know exactly how many are finding the emotional and other stresses brought on by the crisis challenging or are facing financial difficulty. However, we know from feedback that many are. Our default thinking in these unprecedented times has been to assume our apprentices are struggling at the moment. We feel a great deal of empathy and responsibility for all our learners.

I have been heartened to see how supportive our partner-employers have been. Most are working extremely hard to support apprentices who are home-based or have been furloughed.

What support are you giving employers and apprentices?

As soon as we had moved our team to home-working, we started speaking to our partner-employers and designed a programme of learning specifically around the skills and behaviours that we felt our apprentices would need at this time. These link to the requirements of the apprenticeship standards that we deliver but the focus is principally on individuals' needs now.

Largely delivered using **Damar OpenLearning** (our virtual learning environment) our "Working Differently" programme looks at areas such as resilience and wellbeing, time management, communication and problem solving. So far, apprentices' reflections on the content in their OneFile journal entries have been very positive, particularly about feeling better equipped to cope with the stress they are under now.

Despite the obvious challenges, it has been a time for accelerated learning for some who have been able to continue working remotely. They have had to adapt and find new coping strategies and previously untapped resilience and new skills have emerged which we've been able to help them record as part of their professional development.

What impact do you think COVID-19 will have on the sector in the future?

I am an optimist by nature. We have already seen how, in only a few weeks, businesses have been able to make changes that normally take years. We can now build a hospital in a fortnight. In apprenticeships too there will be positive change, so long as we manage to retain sector expertise through and beyond this difficult period.

Delivery methods are already changing but I also think we will see changes in how we approach content. The last few weeks have reminded me of the importance of transferable skills and behaviours in apprenticeships. We honestly don't know whether the jobs our apprentices are training for will exist in five years' time. Inevitably, they will need to acquire new knowledge (or learn how to find it) as their lives unfold. COVID-19 has really exposed that and might provide a chance to reset our thinking.