This paper is based on a recent comprehensive NCVER study. This study highlighted the importance of the promises and expectations between apprentices and trainees, and their employers in Australia. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to provide the perspectives of employers, trainees and apprentices at a national and/or high-level policy and practice level. The study found that apprentices, trainees and employers all make promises and have expectations when undertaking a new contract at the beginning of the ‘cycle’ of an apprenticeship or traineeship. This paper is based on three case studies from the broader research program and reports on a number of instances when the expectations and promises were different for apprentices and trainees and their employers, and provides possible explanations for these differences. In particular the paper explores the practices of ‘communication and reinforcement’ within traineeships and apprenticeships as these are critical to the fulfilment of the psychological contract and, by definition, critical to the retention of apprentices and trainees. These findings are then located within the broader theoretical framework of ‘practice architectures’ (Kemmis and Grootenboer, 2008).


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Promises and expectations between apprentices, trainees and their employers.

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Abstract

This paper is based on a recent comprehensive NCVER study. This study highlighted the importance of the promises and expectations between apprentices and trainees, and their employers in Australia. It will therefore address conference theme number four: the impacts of VET research on individual learners and groups of learners.

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to provide the perspectives of employers, trainees and apprentices at a national and/or high-level policy and practice level. Data were collected in six different ways. These methods of data collection were: interviews with twelve stakeholders; four surveys that included random samples from apprentices, trainees and employers from State Training Authority databases, apprentices and trainees employed by GTOs and GTOs as employers from Group Training Victoria and Group Training Queensland & Northern Territory; and nine case studies that were conducted in Western Australia, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland and New South Wales. There were 665 responses from the surveys.

The study found that apprentices, trainees and employers all make promises and have expectations when undertaking a new contract at the beginning of the ‘cycle’ of an apprenticeship or traineeship. There are three dimensions to this relationship: training and learning, employment conditions and the emotional and interpersonal aspects of work. During the period of the contract these dimensions transform for all parties. In addition expectations differ between the types of employer while outside influences on apprentices and trainees also affect this relationship.

This paper is based on three case studies from the broader research program and reports on a number of instances when the expectations and promises were different for apprentices and trainees and their employers, and provides possible explanations for these differences. In particular the paper explores the practices of ‘communication and reinforcement’ within traineeships and apprenticeships as these are critical to the fulfilment of the psychological contract and, by definition, critical to the retention of apprentices and trainees. These findings are then located within the broader theoretical framework of ‘practice architectures’ (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). Apprentices, trainees and employers come to the practice setting where the practices are always already prefigured (Schatzki, 2002) by ways of saying and thinking (in the cultural-discursive dimension; in the social medium of language); ways of doing things (in the material-economic dimension; in the social medium of work); and ways of relating among the different kinds of participants in these settings (in the social-political dimension; in the social medium of power).

Introduction

The latest statistics released in 2011 showed that for apprentices and trainees commencing between 2003 and 2009, attrition rates within the first 12 months remained steady, between 30.5% and 32.9%.
Attrition rates for apprentices and trainees commencing in trade occupations between 2004 and 2006, have remained steady, between 49.4% and 49.5%. (NCVER, 2011) These statistics showed that less than half of apprentices and trainees who begin an apprenticeships or traineeships, ever actually finish.

Attrition has been identified as a major concern in apprenticeships. Studies in Australia by Cully and Curtain (2001) and Callan (2000) have found that apprentices leave their contracts of training more often for job-related than training-related reasons. A study by Misko, Nguyen and Saunders (2007) found that over 23% of apprentices identified the need for improved job conditions or treatment of apprentices by employers. Smith (2001) showed that it is not uncommon for apprentices to be employed with organisations that have poorly developed training systems and training understandings.

In light of these findings, a national research project *Understanding the psychological contract in apprenticeships / traineeships to improve retention* was both timely and relevant. The framework of the psychological contract was used in this project to examine the promises and expectations of employers, apprentices and trainees had of each other, their synonymy or difference, as a way of examining the issue of retention (Smith, Walker & Brennan Kemmis, 2011).

The project was undertaken by a group of researchers, Erica Smith (University of Ballarat), Arlene Walker (Deakin University) and Ros Brennan Kemmis (Charles Sturt University) and was funded by National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). The final report was published in 2011 with the fieldwork taking place in late 2009 and 2010.

The overall findings suggested that there were three dimensions to the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1990) between the parties involved. These dimensions were related to teaching and learning, employment conditions and the emotional and interpersonal aspects of work. Across the nine sites there was the same understanding of the reciprocal obligations and promises that had to be fulfilled if the psychological contract was to be kept intact. The following were the factors that influenced the fulfilment of the psychological contract and were crucial to the completion of the apprenticeship or traineeship:

- Regular and timely performance management.
- The availability of clear, explicit and current information for all the parties to the psychological contract contributed to the fulfilment of the psychological contract. When this was supported by parallel information and training for workplace supervisors the chances of success and completion increased.
- The past experiences of apprentices or trainees helped them to fulfil their side of the psychological contract. The age of commencement of the traineeship or apprenticeship varied across the sites and there was no clear consensus across the sites about what the ‘ideal’ age should be.
- The level of encouragement provided to the apprentices and trainees and the extent to which mistakes could be productively tolerated had an effect on the fulfillment or not of the psychological contract. Apprentices and trainees appreciated the opportunity to openly communicate with managers or supervisors, even if mistakes had been made.
- Many participants acknowledged the influence of wage rates on the fulfilment of the psychological contract. In some cases the pay rates were the ‘cement’ that bedded down the psychological contract. The training wage rates for apprentices and trainees were regarded as a disincentive to the fulfilment of the psychological contract.
If the terms of the psychological contract were made explicit, reiterated and reinforced through rewards (either tangible or emotional), the psychological contract was more likely to be fulfilled. Reward and recognition of hard work and the value of talented apprentices and trainees on the part of the company was reciprocated with increased motivation and performance on the part of the apprentice or trainee. (Smith, Waker and Brennan Kemmis, 2011, p. 43)

This paper will focus primarily on ‘communication and reinforcement’ in relation to three specific case studies which were carried out as part of the larger research project described above.

Literature Review

The literature that informs this paper focuses on the nature of the psychological contract, attrition and retention in apprenticeships and the theory of practice architectures. This literature is used and referenced throughout the paper.

Methodology

The larger project had a complex mixed method (Cameron, 2009) with several phases. Firstly national expert interviews were carried out, a questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from apprentices and trainees and in the final stage of the data collection, case studies were carried out in nine organisations across Australia; seven companies and two group training organisations. Two case studies were in regional companies with the remainder located in capital cities. Several of the companies had state-wide or national operations.

For the three case studies in this paper, the following people were interviewed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation Type</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building Co</td>
<td>1 Training Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Human Resource Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Apprentice and Training Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Apprentices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional GTO</td>
<td>1 CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Group Training Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Area Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Training Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 RTO Manager (RTO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Host employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Apprentices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Trainee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality and Gaming Co</td>
<td>1 Operations Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Human Resource Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Trainer and Assessor TAFE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Apprentice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Trainees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Interviews</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1–Case Study Interviews

The interviews were approximately thirty to sixty minutes in duration and were conducted in a variety of locations. A detailed interview protocol was used and all participants consented to each interview being
taped and transcribed for further analysis. The analysis was then undertaken according to the following themes that were generated by the research questions which the study was addressing:

- The promises of the psychological contract;
- How the psychological contract is developed;
- The impact of the stakeholders on the construction of the psychological contract;
- The impact of the fulfilled versus a breached psychological contract; and
- How mutual expectations can be made clearer.

The Theoretical Framework

The questions that frame the discussions of the promises and expectations of the different partners in the psychological contract are complex, multi dimensional and intriguing. They include questions about the influences that shape the relationships, and how an understanding of these influences could impact on the issue of apprenticeship retention and attrition. From the larger study ‘communication’ and ‘reinforcement’ were shown to be two areas where the promises and expectations of employers and apprentices were different. In this paper we have chosen to focus on ONE site – a large building and construction company in Western Australia (WA-Building) to describe these two areas of difference, the possible reasons for these differences and the impact of these differences on retention and attrition. The other two case studies were used to cross reference the findings and this work will inform a larger publication (forthcoming).

The theoretical framework below provides a way of understanding the constant and sophisticated interplay between the dimensions of reality that make up the psychological contract and it allows us to make sense of all these questions, and to continue the debate that explores possible answers. It is based on the theoretical framework of “practice architectures” (Kemmis & Grootenboer 2008). The theory of practice architectures is a theory about what practices are made of, namely, sayings, doings and relatings that are made possible, and enabled and constrained, by (respectively) cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that exist in or are brought to a site. Thus, for example, what people say in a site might be made possible by the fact that they both speak English, or that they both know concepts to do with measuring timber; what they do in the site might be made possible by the tools and materials available; how they relate to one another in the site might be made possible by their adopting the reciprocal roles of apprentice and trainer, or apprentice and tradesperson, or apprentice and employer.

The apprentices, trainees and employers in our study engaged in the practices of the psychological contract through the sayings, doings and relatings that are shaped – enabled and constrained – by the arrangements or practice architectures that surround them in the site (whether the workplace, for example, or a training room). These practices are formed in a sophisticated interplay between the activities of those involved, the arrangements that make these activities possible (practice architectures), and the history of the interactions between them.

The theory of practice architectures may help us to describe the different practices of apprentices and others in the workplace. By illuminating what these different participants’ practices are made of (practice architectures), it may also illuminate issues in the retention/attrition of apprentices and trainees. Practice architectures thus provide a way of thinking about how practices are held together, and how different kinds of practices (like learning, teaching, training and leading) relate to each other.
Findings and discussion

Generally, the overall project findings were similar to those observed in the three case studies. There were a number of preconditions that were needed to ensure that all parties fulfilled the psychological contract. These included sound HR procedures for recruitment and performance management, systems of reward both tangible and intangible, monitoring of training both on the job and off the job, clear lines of communication and early intervention when problems arose.

The trainees and apprentices needed to be committed to the work and the learning and surrounded by a range of economic and social support structures. The absence of one, or a combination of these, helpful pre conditions could prevent the psychological contract from being fulfilled. (Smith, Walker & Brennan Kemmis, 2011, p. 42)

The findings also suggest that best practice for the retention of apprentices and trainees needed to ensure that there was an explicit acknowledgement of the mutual expectation; constant re-iteration of responsibilities during advertising, recruitment, induction and performance management; structured early intervention programs; and rewards and recognition to improve motivation. Other strategies included providing apprentice and trainees with a fall-back position when the situation was unresolvable between the employer and apprentice, setting aside identifiable specific times and locations for training, rather than relying heavily on on-the-job training and ‘behind the scenes’ work between employers and intermediary bodies where appropriate. Another important finding was that the involvement of field officers, either in GTOs or in larger companies assisted in the fulfilment of the psychological contract as did the provision of high quality training and the exposure to a wide range of workplace experiences that contributed to the learning of the apprentice or the trainee.

It seemed evident that greater explicit attention to the psychological contract was an important need. If all parties were more aware that there were perceived obligations and what these were, then it becomes much more straightforward for people to make decisions based on realistic expectations and less likely that any party would be disappointed in the outcome. Smith, Walker & Brennan Kemmis (2011) state:

While expectations appeared to be reasonably well aligned between employers and employees, some of the methods used by the case study employers could be more widely adopted. In particular an emphasis on mutual obligations can be included in literature and marketing materials, from the pre-recruitment phase through recruitment to induction and on through performance management. Constant reinforcement of the mutual expectations is necessary to ensure that everybody is aware of what is required and expected. (p. 38)

The first year apprentices in ‘WA Building’ were placed with a host employer who was tied to the larger company commercially and legally. Generally, the first year apprentice came straight from school or with some period of time in other employment after leaving school. They may or may not have had some experience of work, but the work was generally part time. They were in late adolescence and many had not yet reached the stage where they are clear about their identity or the shape that their employment could take. They may be indecisive and ambivalent about the choices they make and the influence of friends, family and their wider peer groups were strong. Their conceptualisations of the ‘work’ involved in their apprenticeship may be vague, ill informed or incomplete. As one Training Manager remarked

I mean, some of them have just got no idea, and often you'll find that it's mum or dad that's actually pushing them into the trade. You know this is a good place to start, but what 15 or 16-year-old does have a good
idea of what they want to do and where they want to be? Some of them have a very blurred view of what the expectations are in a workplace (Training Manager).

I think the general idea is that a lot of kids just don’t have a clue what they want to do. We get a few people that are finished school and they’ve started an apprenticeship or they’ve got put off in different trades and we just help fill in for a couple of weeks with work. They still have no idea what they want to do. Youth these days seem a bit lazier than what we were back in the day and the only thing I can put it down to is that they still just don’t know what they want to do. I think it’s a big shock if you go from school to working, especially physical work after you’ve just been sitting in the classroom (4th Year Apprentice)

Apprentices in their chosen trade area entered the practices and practice architectures of the trade as novices. They experienced the workplace very differently from, for instance, medical students or teacher education students who had some preparatory knowledge of university study based on their experiences of study at school – and who entered the next phase of their discipline as partially equipped students with a body of professional knowledge and learning behind them. Apprentices came into the world of work and workplace learning together with a relatively small dose of classroom learning. They were at the beginning of a process of being woven into the overall project of being a builder, held together in the sayings, doings and relatings of the practices of building and in the life project of being a builder and an autonomous adult that others can rely on. The apprentices, as newcomers to the trade, knew sometimes very little about the work and life projects of the workers around them and even less about the practice traditions that underpinned the trade. Moreover, the apprentices entered a project that is also a business; the imperatives to stay solvent and viable were a pre-eminent concern for those supervising them. Apprentices were simultaneously learners, workers and part of the production force of the business or enterprise. They came to the new workplace with their own characteristic sayings, doings and relatings that were formed in a very different workplace (school) and a very different project (getting qualifications), As young people finding themselves in life and in work, they also had a rather different life project: the project of reaching maturity and self-sufficiency. They entered the practices of WA-Building bringing with them the kinds of sayings, doings and relatings that had shaped them. These are shown in Table 2.

The three tables below summarise the sayings, doings and relating that characterise, firstly, the practice architectures that compose the practices of a first year apprentice at the point of entry into the practices of the Building and Construction industry, secondly those that compose the practices of the first year apprentice who has come into the building industry and thirdly the practices and practice architectures that could characterise the employer in a building and construction business. The apprentice and the employer inhabit slightly different spaces when they meet on the job, even though they appear to inhabit the same broad physical space. In fact, they speak slightly different languages, for example. They do slightly different kinds of things – one holds the hammer closer to the head; the other holds the hammer closer to the base of the handle; more generally, they inhabit different places in space-time and they engage in different though related activities. They relate to one another in different ways: one is acutely conscious of not being sure about how to do the job and feeling vulnerable about being evaluated; the other trying to remember that once they were in that vulnerable position but anxious to make the novice feel at home and start living the job.

Table 2. Practice Architectures of a first Year Apprentice at the point of entry into the company

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Practice architectures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sayings: In the technical, colloquial,</td>
<td>In the semantic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
professional and shared language of employment, school and leisure, in the choice of words, in conversations and their protocols with teachers, parents and in particular in conversations with peers and colleagues. For example talk about subjects, assessments, discipline, music, social media, sport and relationships. For example talk about subjects, assessments, discipline, music, social media, sport and relationships.

### Doings:

**In the carrying out of practices, For example:** following prescriptive timetables, completing assignments, participating in classes over a range of subjects, in complying or not with discipline codes, in interacting with peers and parents, in using social media and in relating to each other within a particular adolescent content.

In the material dimension; in the medium of physical space-time

**The material world:** the layout of the School, the home and the social spaces, the layout of the classroom and learning spaces, the equipment and technology available for school and leisure.

### Relatings:

The person-to-person interplay that occurs on many levels: and with differing and changing forces of influence with peers, with peers, teachers, parents and others. For example: relationships of direction (school) and supervision, of peer equality (peers) based on popularity and shared talents and interests eg. Music and social media.

In the dimension of social space; in the medium of power and solidarity

**The social-political world:** on the one hand, the system regulations, policies, rules, roles, professional associations, and politics of the industry; on the other, the lifeworld relationships encompassing friendships and solidarities, and power relationships in which people participate.

That hold together in the project of the practice (its overarching ends or purposes) of becoming a member of the trade.

That hold together against the historical background of a practice tradition.

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**Table 3: Practice Architectures of an Apprentice during the Apprenticeship**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practices (What practices are composed of)</th>
<th>Practice architectures (The arrangements that enable and constrain practices)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sayings:</strong> In the technical, colloquial, professional and shared language of employment, and leisure, in the choice of words, in conversations and their protocols with clients, customers, other employers, apprentices, supervisors, trainers, and staff from external organisations, and in particular in conversations with peers and colleagues. For example: talk about the job, the nature of the business, profitability, relationships with sub contractors, apprentices, and talk about the viability and operation of the construction</td>
<td>The cultural discursive world: the culture and discourses of employment, the discourses of the worksite and work groups and the discourses of being a ‘boss’. The culture of peer employer groups, the individual experiences of apprenticeships, the status of the particular trade or industry, the way it is regarded socially and the way it is talked about.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Doings:** in the conduct of business in the workplace, the day to day activities that range from organising work flows, maintaining materials and stocks, administering the company, overseeing the training of apprentices, negotiating with sub contractors and maintaining the overall viability of the company.

**Relating:** the person-to-person interplay that occurs on many levels: and with differing forces of influence with employees, peers, with other employers, with on the job supervisors, with providers of VET training, with systemic personnel and with state based regulatory authorities. For example the personal interplays between employees of differing levels of experience, with on the job and off the job trainers, with sub contractors and clients and the multiplicity of complex relationships that occur in the social world of the employer.

**The material world:** the layout of the workplaces and work sites, and the resources and equipment and their location in time and space. For example:
- The material conditions of the workplace, the range of tools and equipment used on the work site, compliance with occupational health and safety regulations and range of sites in which the work is located and the range of social sites which the employer populates socially and commercially.

**The social-political world:** on the one hand, the system regulations, policies, unwritten protocols of employer behaviour and treatment and the politics of the being an employer in the industry. For example the legislative regulations surrounding the industry and the place and history of apprenticeships inside the industry, and the plethora of legislative compliance and OH and S regulations.. On the other, the lifeworld relationships encompassing friendships and solidarities, and power relationships in which people participate. For example the relationships that exist with employees, the regard in which the employer is held in peer groups inside the company and relationships with family and friends solidified by activities with long histories and traditions.

The host employer was part of a much larger company structure (WA-Building) that employed a total of 300 apprentices at any one time. The host employer operated in a highly competitive commercial environment where labour was drained away by the lure of very high wages in the booming mining industry. Under these conditions, the issue of retention of apprentices was linked directly to the viability and vulnerability of the business itself.

The host employer was formed and formed the practice architectures of the site in a complex interplay of commercial imperatives, the traditions of the industry, legislative and compliance frameworks and experience. This relationship is represented in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Practice Architectures of Employers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practices (What practices are composed of)</th>
<th>Practice architectures (The arrangements that enable and constrain practices)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sayings: In the technical, colloquial, professional and shared language of</td>
<td>The cultural discursive world: the culture and discourses of employment, training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
employment, training and leisure, in the choice of words, in conversations and their protocols with employers, supervisors, trainers, parents and staff from external organisations, and in particular in conversations with peers and colleagues. For example: talk about the job, work life, training and being an apprentice and talk about leisure activities, social media and relationships with peers and others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Language Medium</th>
<th>Discourses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>both on the job and off the job, the discourses of competency based teaching and assessment, the discourses of the worksite and work groups and the discourses of apprenticeships. The culture of peer groups, apprenticeships, the status of the particular trade or industry, the way it is regarded socially and the way it is talked about.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doings</th>
<th>The material world: the layout of the workplaces and work sites, and the resources and equipment and their location in time and space. For example: The material conditions of the workplace, the range of tools and equipment used on the work site, compliance with occupational health and safety regulations and range of sites in which the apprentice is located associated with their work; and the changing social sites which the apprentice populates as they mature.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the medium of language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the material dimension; in the medium of physical space-time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relatings</th>
<th>The social-political world: on the one hand, the system regulations, policies, unwritten protocols of apprentice behaviour and treatment and the politics of the industry. For example the legislative regulations surrounding an apprenticeships, OH and S regulations and the perceived role of an apprentice in the industry. On the other, the lifeworld relationships encompassing friendships and solidarities, and power relationships in which people participate. For example the relationships that exist in peer groups solidified by activities, music, sport and the forms of social media.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the dimension of social space; in the medium of power and solidarity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| That hold together in the project of the practice (its overarching ends or purposes) of becoming a member of the trade. | That hold together against the historical background of a practice tradition. |

The diagram below shows the complex array of practice architectures that an apprentice will encounter during their apprenticeship. There are many points at which conflict, tension and uncertainty and breakdown can occur.
Conclusion

From the broader project, it seemed evident that greater explicit attention to the psychological contract was an important need. If all parties were more aware that there were perceived obligations and what these were, then it became much more straightforward for people to make decisions based on realistic expectations and less likely that any party would be disappointed in the outcome. Smith, Walker & Brennan Kemmis (2011) state:

While expectations appeared to be reasonably well aligned between employers and employees, some of the methods used by the case study employers could be more widely adopted. In particular an emphasis on mutual obligations can be included in literature and marketing materials, from the pre-recruitment phase through recruitment to induction and on through performance management. Constant reinforcement of the mutual expectations is necessary to ensure that everybody is aware of what is required and expected. (p. 38)

In the WA-Building Company, it was clear that the practice architectures that surrounded the new apprentice and those that surrounded the host employer were quite different in terms of the sayings, doings and relatings that enabled and constrained their practices as they reached out to one another in the attempt to initiate the apprentice into the wider practice of a particular trade. It was also clear that

Table 5. Practice of teaching and learning on the job

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the characteristics of ‘communication’ and ‘reinforcement’ would be amongst areas of disagreement in terms of the fulfilment of these expectations on the part of the apprentice and the host employer.

Looking at hosts in general, the possibility is that the host is proficient in his trade but he’s not a trainer as such, and there can be that conflict where the host sometimes assumes that their apprentice is more so like a trades assistant rather than someone they’re supposed to be training up into the same level of proficiency as themselves. That’s probably one of the areas that does tend to impact on a lot of them. (Training Manager responsible for 30 apprentices)

Before they actually commence with a host, I don’t think they [apprentices] have a great deal of expectation. There’s an expectation that I think that the person [host employer] will be open to them making mistakes and be open to them having to learn their job. There’s an expectation that probably they’ll be very accepting of the way the apprentice sees life and undertakes life. In actuality [however], from most host’s point of view, they probably see the reverse. They’ll expect the young person to assimilate into their culture within their business and in a lot of ways I think that the apprentices tend to feel like, no, they’ll keep their individuality (HR Manager)

In this very large company, senior managers have recognised that these differences are real, palpable and highly influential. The company, started by two people who began their own working lives as apprentices and who have grown their business into a multimillion dollar enterprise, introduced the role of Training Managers whose job it was to ‘escort’ the apprentices through their training and employment. This is achieved through a kind of ‘mediation’. As one of the Company Directors put it,

So I think you’ve got to understand that you’re dealing with that demographic (of the apprentices) so you need people in the businesses that are in tune with them and can sort of broker the interests of the host trainer and them. We manage it pretty intensively. (Company Director)

Two features of this mediation were directly related to the issues central to this paper: ‘communication’ and ‘reinforcement’. The Training Managers devoted time to mediating the semantic space between employers and apprentices in an explicit way:

The difficulty is integrating that mediation in the workplace when there’s such a period of change. The thing is, to get a competence in a trade or a profession you have to focus and you have to almost exclude other things to become competent in your area. So if you can work out a way of doing that, it would be very... delicate, and it can be a point of conflict because the training manager will be pushing, giving work to the host trainers, and the supervisor might have other relationships with his wider trade base, so managing that is quite tricky at times, and we also got to be very careful we don’t get host trainers saying “Yes, I’ll have an apprentice just to get the work”, but they’re not really committed to training the apprentice. Yes, and it’s cheap, but at the end of the day we want to be there for an apprentice program. That’s where we rely very heavily on the Training Managers to make sure that that’s actually happening. (HR Manager).

Secondly the Training Managers also recognised that for the apprentices there was a period of alignment during which they were ‘stirred in’ (Kemmis, et al. 2011) to the practices of the company. The apprentices needed to learn about the ethos of the large company and the practices that applied in the smaller site where they were located. This ‘stirring in’ was facilitated in a number for different ways through the creation of opportunities for explicit teaching and through directed activities.

You kind of think they might be blurring the model between parent and teacher, but sometimes that just works. All our training managers have different styles, but some of them almost are paternalistic in the way they don’t talk to them like adults. They are actually fairly directive in terms of what’s expected, but making it very clear for them what the requirements are because a lot of them have very blurred sense of what the expectations are in a workplace. So all I do is I sit people down, we give them a sandwich and we get them in when they join the group, and X and Y [founders of the company] get there and tell the story, tell
The story of where the group’s come from, what’s important to the group, and X will always talk about the apprentice program, what the vision is for the future, what our core values are, those sorts of things; so sort of to tell the story. They can’t be around there cranking all the levers, but what they can be doing is telling people what the values are that are important and why they are cranking the levers. (Training Manager)

The Training Managers has a ‘foot in both camps’ and recognised the potential areas for conflict and addressed these through close monitoring of apprentice development and welfare, and in their relationships with host employers. They provided clear communication and reinforcement to the apprentices and in this way bridged the practice architectures of both groups.

This paper has been able to provide only a small proportion of the findings of the overall research project. In particular, it has attempted to provide qualitative comments from the WA Building case studies, as it provided deep insights into the participants’ views. The authors have used the theoretical framework of practice architectures to explain why the expectations of an apprenticeship/traineeship were, on both sides, similar to those of any job, and why attrition remained as such a palpable reality. Part of the possible answer lies in examining the differences that have to be bridged between the experiences of the various parties involved and how these differences can be mediated by significant interventions.

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References


