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Train to Gain

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Key Features of the Train to Gain programme

Operation date: 2006 – 2010

Target population: Employed individuals in the UK, primarily those aged 25+ without a Level 2 qualification.

Purpose: To upskill employees through vocational training to gain new skills to help them succeed in the workplace.

Introduction

Train to Gain was introduced by the then Labour government in 2006 and is considered to be their flagship employer training programme. It formed part of their skills strategy which aimed to increase the skill level of the adult population. The programme was managed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and comprised of two main components: firstly, a skills brokerage to provide employers with "impartial, independent advice on training" needs (Institute for Employment Studies, 2008, p.1) and secondly, full public funding of training for eligible employees including NVQs and leadership and management training. Training was delivered via further education colleges, private providers and voluntary organisations.

When the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government came into power in 2010, they formally scrapped Train to Gain that July and began shifting funding and focus away from workplace learning onto new apprenticeships instead. Critics within the Conservative party had argued the policy had no future as it gave money to profitable employers who were willing to pay for training themselves. A particular critic of Train to Gain was John Hayes who, whilst shadow minister for Education before the Conservatives were elected, remarked how Train to Gain was a "massive deadweight cost" because of its focus on lower-level skills.

It is interesting to see the shift in narrative with regards to skills in the current policy context with the push towards degree apprenticeships, perhaps at the neglect of lower level apprenticeships. This means it is timely to review Train to Gain and how policy makers can balance the focus on lower level qualifications alongside higher qualifications. The National Skills Fund has also recently introduced support for adults to retrain at Level 3, although there is concern that there is no similar scheme of support at Level 2.

Policy Context

The development of the Train to Gain scheme was initially driven by concerns that a relatively high proportion of the UK working-age population lacked basic and intermediate skills compared to other industrialised countries (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2001). As set out in the "In Demand Adult Skills in the 21st Century" (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2001) report, the skill level of the adult workforce needed to be improved for these three main reasons:

- higher skills contribute to higher productivity
- low-skilled individuals can be caught in a vicious circle of low pay/no pay. They are also less likely to progress in work as employer-funded development tends to be focused on the more highly qualified. This contributes to social exclusion.
- a highly-skilled workforce is more innovative and much better able to adapt to the demands of a changing economy (p.3)

Therefore increasing basic skills was seen as a government priority with the long-term aim that all adults should have the opportunity to achieve a Level 2 qualification. Subsequently, Employer Training Pilots (ETPs) were launched in England in September 2002 to test the effectiveness of offering free or heavily subsidised training to low-skilled workers to improve their basic skills and achieve their first Level 2 qualification. Following these pilots, a National Employer Training Programme (NETP) was introduced in 2005 which was later rebranded to what we know as "Train to Gain" in 2005 (Department for Education and Skills, 2005).

Prior to the national roll out of Train to Gain, Lord Leitch was commissioned in 2004 to examine the UK's "optimal skills mix in order to maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice" and to consider "how best to integrate employment and skills services" (Leitch, 2006, p.6. The report called for significant changes to the skills system notably with regards to Train to Gain. Previous Train to Gain pilots had shown that a more "demand-led" approach reflected the needs of learners which should be, "embedded across the system". Thus the report recommended that public funding for adult vocational skills development in England should go through one of two routes: Train to Gain or Learner Accounts by 2010 (Leitch, 2006, p.4).

Over its lifetime, the programme's expenditure exceeded £3.12 billion (National Audit Office, 2009; Skills Funding Agency, 2011), making it one of the most significant investments into workplace learning programmes. It was however deemed by the National Audit Office not to offer value for money over the course of its programme. The think tank, Policy Exchange, concluded the programme was "alarmingly wasteful" arguing that a considerable amount of employee training would have been funded by employers anyway, without it being subsidised by the government (Policy Exchange, 2009).

Policy Evaluation

Train to Gain and its forerunner ETPs which it was modelled, have been evaluated in a number of ways to identify what lessons can be learnt. The demise of Train to Gain is often related to the three following factors:

1. The issue of it being a 'deadweight' in terms of cost
2. The lack of employer engagement in training employees
3. Lack of monitoring and evidence relating to improved business performance

In its review of the Train to Gain programme, the National Audit Office (NAO) found it had some positive outcomes in relation to engaging some "hard-to-reach" employers that previously offered little staff training and also identified that an estimated 1.25 million adult learners had started the programme. For many of the 554,100 adult learners who had gained a qualification through the programme in April 2006 - April 2009, it was their first and many reported improved levels of confidence (NAO, 2009). However, while the overall success rate was 71%, many providers achieved much lower or highly variable success rates for their learners. In 2006–07, 26 of the largest 100 providers achieved less than 65% success (House of Commons, 2010). In addition, the NAO (2009) found that half of the employers that were involved in Train to Gain indicated they would have carried out the training without the programme. Therefore, the report pointed to this issue of 'deadweight' – meaning employers would have paid for employee training anyway in the absence of a government subsidy.

However, the problem of deadweight had been identified before the NAO report – it was considered a significant issue with the predecessor ETPs which Train to Gain was based. An evaluation by the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated at least 90% of training funded would have taken place without government support (Abramovsky et al., 2005). Furthermore, a study by Wolf et al. (2010) concluded that government-subsidised basic skills programmes delivered at the workplace such as Train to Gain, resulted in a lack of incentive for employers to continue training programmes for their employees in the long term, once government subsidies are withdrawn (Wolf, 2009). It illustrates the gap between employers' immediate motivations to engage in workplace learning and policy-makers expectations of employers being willing to commit to workplace training as a long-term project.
This leads to the second major pitfall identified of the Train to Gain programme: engagement of employers. Anne Mazenod (2013, p.53) notes that although there is "an ambition of an employer-led vocational education and training system, a lack of employer engagement in workplace training continues to be reported in England". In the study, Mazenod (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with 10 practitioners responsible for the delivery of Train to Gain which consisted of 5 training providers and 5 government contract managers at the local level, to examine the impact of the programme. The experiences of the interviewees suggested that the inflexibility in the delivery and funding arrangements of the programme led to a shoehorning of employers needs into short-term training courses, instead of offering training specific to employers' needs. This had a negative impact on employer engagement overall. It inadvertently encouraged shorter qualifications over qualifications that may have taken longer to complete but would have been more substantial and useful for employers.

Further, significant changes to the programme eligibility criteria and funding availability also did not make for a good way to engage employers as it sent out confusing and contradictory messages and that suggested workplace training is "a production line that can be switched on and off at a short notice depending on the availability of funding" (Mazenod, 2014, p.63). This disregarded the investment needed in building long-term relationships with employers, particularly among employers who may be hesitant in investing in employee training.

The third critique of the policy relates to how businesses measured the impact of training via Train to Gain in relation to their business performance and whether employees felt they had benefited from it. An OFSTED report in 2008 found that the impact of Train to Gain on businesses was inconsistent. Although over 75% of employers surveyed had examples of ways their businesses were now more competitive or effective, fewer than 10% of employers had formal mechanisms for evaluating the impact of training on business performance (OFSTED, 2008, p.16). In addition, there has not been much research which has explored how employees undertaking training via Train to Gain felt their skills had improved, leading to the question, "did Train to Gain really skill up workers?" or was it simply a way of "badging" employees? (see OFSTED, 2008).

Conclusion

Train to Gain offers valuable lessons to reflect on and highlights the importance of upskilling adult employees through workplace training. Evaluations of the programme remind us that employer engagement in workplace training benefits from structures that ensure long-term and sustainable programmes, including funding arrangements that create stability. Evaluations also remind us that employers are unlikely to engage with programmes that are too complex, administratively burdensome and time-consuming. Furthermore, implementing changes mid-way through programme delivery, as policymakers did with Train to Gain, can lead to adverse effects on management and budget.

Train to Gain also raises a wider, timely question as to how best to incentivise employers to invest in adult further training without the need for government subsidies to encourage them to do so. In recent years we have seen a decline in formal workforce training across both “training intensity (the amount of time spent training) and training quality” (Chartered Institute of Professional Development, 2019, p. 3; Clayton & Evans, 2019). Current policy initiatives such as the National Skills Fund have been introduced to reskill adults at Level 3 and above. While this is important, there is a concern that reskilling is only being introduced at Level 3 and above. Therefore, we must also ensure that upskilling does not come at the expense of basic skills. Employees in low-skilled jobs are vulnerable and first to lose their jobs in times of uncertainty, as has been observed during the Covid-19 pandemic. So we must also ensure that training programmes include wider packages to support living costs or maintenance costs for those who need it most.

Finally, Train to Gain offers yet another example of a politicised change of policy direction and priority in education and training. Perhaps cumulative thinking and cross-party strategic planning and execution would lead to positive outcomes. The importance of lifelong learning in a labour market which is becoming increasingly agile and gig-based means it is pertinent to consider wider questions around how best to fund upskilling and reskilling opportunities for adult workers.

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