



Hello – and welcome to our final newsletter of 2011. It seems to be the time of year to take a swipe at retail, not because of the long queues or Christmas pricing policies, but because it would seem that everything that is wrong with apprenticeships can be laid at the automatic doors of retail.

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At its busiest time of year – our thoughts turn to retail

In days of yore when we had a National Careers Service – now there's a novel idea – and I was in my final year at school, I was given two key pieces of careers advice. The first, "you're tall, join the police force", I duly ignored! The second came after I had quite spectacularly failed all my mock O levels, and that was, "don't worry, if you can't do anything else, you can always work in a shop". Well, I did work in a shop, not because I couldn't do anything else, but because I realised that it could give me a career far wider-ranging than many other sectors. Whether I wanted general retail or to learn specific trade skills such as butchery or bakery, whether I wanted admin or marketing – the list goes on.

My time in retail did a huge amount for my personal and social development, gave me an extensive knowledge, not only of sales, but of human behaviour, legislation, pricing and profitability and so on. It also tremendously improved my communication and numeracy skills. Even though I no longer work directly in retail, many of the principles I learnt then, I still apply today – much to the annoyance of my family who often find me doing the "facing up" when we go shopping!

So I find it incredibly frustrating when everything I seem to see and read about the woes of apprenticeships seems to be picking on retail! FE commentators, Chief (and former Chief) Inspectors, ministers and journalists are all guilty of it. Come on ladies and gents, let's open our eyes and look further afield! Over the last few years, I have worked with providers and employers in retail, in hospitality, in engineering, in construction, in fact, in most sector subject areas, and the same situations arose in all of them.

There are so many areas that retail is being blamed for, it's difficult to know where to start! I recall once having it pointed out that there shouldn't be an apprenticeship in retail – after all, it wasn't in the World Skills showcase! I also recall reading about retail apprenticeships equating to getting an NVQ in stacking shelves! I could of course take the same thoughtless, rude and insensitive tack against

any sector – what about an NVQ in wiring a plug, painting a wall, reversing around a corner ... come on, let's stop the pointless and frankly pretty stupid comments and think! I am willing to bet that those who make such comments have never worked in retail, otherwise they would know, as I do, just what is required.

And what about the short apprenticeships – I have just read something else this morning about them – and yes, you've guessed it, in retail! Let me say though, that in the last six months I have been on the periphery of two 12-week apprenticeship programmes – neither of which was in retail. And before we rush to take a swipe – I fully accept that these should not be classed as an apprenticeship, but wow, the impact they were having on learners who would otherwise be NEET was phenomenal: a massive increase in knowledge, a huge leap in aspiration, an incredible improvement in attendance and behaviour and a superb rate of progression into employment.

I was directed to a radio interview recently, which featured Rolls Royce and Morrison's, and was told "listen to the Morrison's guy squirm when asked about whether the government is simply funding training that would have been carried out anyway". Something of a journalistic exaggeration, though to be fair, the guy didn't answer it as well as he could – but why wasn't the same question put to Rolls Royce? Let's think about this – is the government really going to pay to train people in a job they **don't** do – of course not.

Don't get me wrong, there are indeed problems with some aspects of apprenticeships, but let's be clear, they apply in **all** sectors. So let's stop the nonsense of hitting out at retail and put our energies into how to resolve them!

Have a wonderful Christmas and New Year, enjoy the break before yet more tinkering with training and education happens – and spare a thought for all those in retail and indeed any customer-facing business who will work right up to Christmas Eve and be back in work from Boxing Day.

Merry Christmas

