

Library Apprentices – Preparation, Prospects, and Pitfalls

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust Library

Background:

Apprentices are increasing in number within the NHS and becoming an integral part of NHS services. Apprentices are placed in a wide variety of roles, from nursing to pharmacy to business administration, and provide vocational paths into a different careers within healthcare. Apprentice roles have recently begun to appear in NHS libraries in several forms, as dedicated library apprenticeships and as part of the broader business administration apprenticeship path. Apprentices typically work on placement with a team for most of their work week, with dedicated time set aside for onsite or offsite study and college work.

Benefits of having an apprentice:

- An enthusiastic learner in your team – if treated well and given development opportunities, an apprentice can bring infectious enthusiasm to their work.
- A new perspective on ways of working – Putting together a workflow for an apprentice can help you re-evaluate why you work in the way you do.
- Opportunities for staff to develop training and management skills – Professional and paraprofessional staff can develop their mentoring and supervision skills by providing guidance and support to an apprentice.

Questions to ask before employing an apprentice:

- Do you have available staff time? An apprentice position requires available managerial and professional support for training, supervision, and development.
- Do you have the budget to provide a role after the apprenticeship? Apprentice roles are often incorrectly sold as inexpensive ways of filling a staff vacancy. The purpose of the apprenticeship role is to develop someone for a job. Losing an apprentice due to lack of available vacancies costs an apprentice a job and the library the training invested in this member of staff.
- What is your motivation for getting an apprentice? Are you being pressured to employ an apprentice instead of a trained member of staff?
- What does a successfully completed apprenticeship look like to you? What would it look like to a successful apprentice?



Implementation:

Apprentices are employed by an NHS organisation on a fixed term contract of slightly over a year in length, in collaboration with a local further education college. The apprentice will spend 12 months of their contract gaining an apprenticeship in a related field (often business administration or library services) from the partner educational institution. An apprentice should usually work towards a model job description, for example a band 3 library assistant, and should be developed towards this role.

Costs of having an apprentice:

- Training time – time taken to train an apprentice may be greater than for other new starters and may go on for longer
- Supervision time – apprentices may not be self-starters or able to work without supervision. It may take more staff time to supervise an apprentice doing a task than to do it yourself
- Having to come up with varied tasks – apprentices may be bored and require more motivation. They are low paid staff so part of their compensation is in the form of training and development.

Conclusion:

Apprentices represent a new way in to library services that can complement existing pathways into library work. They can provide a route into a library and information career for those on a vocational path, and provide the first step in getting essential work experience for those looking to ultimately pursue a library qualification. Apprenticeships can bring enthusiastic and interested young people into your library service but the role and the apprentice have to be properly managed and supervised. Used correctly, the role is a valuable development tool for a new library workforce. Used as cheap labour or a stopgap and it can disadvantage the library and the apprentice.

What a library apprentice is:

- A learner – library apprentices are there to learn as much as they are there to work
- A new entrant to the workforce – an apprentice may not have had an office job, or any other paid employment, before starting with you
- A source of creativity – library apprentices can give a fresh perspective and see the library in new ways
- An enthusiastic team member – give a library apprentice engaging work and you will be rewarded by the results

What a library apprentice isn't:

- Fully trained – this is a training role and your apprentice will need to be developed.
- Cheap labour – some organisations push apprentices on teams as an inexpensive alternative to proper staffing. This is not good for the apprentice or the library.
- A dogsbody – teams sometimes give untrained staff only the team's basic or menial tasks. This can lead to a bored apprentice learning nothing and doing work badly