

APPRENTICESHIP

CASE STUDY: MAKING APPRENTICESHIPS WORK

A model of close collaboration between an employer, a college and exam board OCR

What:	<i>One year Mercato data engineering Apprenticeship</i>
Where:	<i>Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMET)</i>
When:	<i>August 2013 – August 2014</i>
Who:	<i>Nine apprentices started in August 2013, ranging in age from 16 up to 27</i>
Leading to:	<i>Level 3 Diploma in OCR's Cambridge Technicals in IT (Smarter Technology pathway).</i>

The Employer: Mercato, a software technology company, Birmingham 



Steve Bushell, Mercato Solutions

people. It has grown rapidly in the last 14 years through its ability to deliver innovative technology solutions to data management problems and to offer this data handling expertise to customers, including IBM, Capita, and the Welsh Government. From its offices in Birmingham, Mercato is helping to support a thriving sector of companies and organisations at the forefront of data engineering.

Alongside its success with developing innovative products, the company has an equally refreshing approach to recruiting and training staff. The company is continually exploring ways to find 'work-ready' employees and embarked on its first apprenticeship programme in summer 2013.

Mercato's Director of Marketing Steve Bushell says: *"Apprentices are the seeds of the future. As both a school governor and as a technology industry representative on the Birmingham Skills Board, it is absolutely clear that business and education have to work more closely together to overcome the clear gap in the supply of the work-ready people we need. I am in favour of a model where employers are involved in training their workforce through apprenticeships, not relying on colleges or universities to educate people in isolation."*

As the data handling technology sector has expanded, Mercato uncovered a shortage of the type of staff it needs. After discussions with BMET's Clive Davies, the College's Assistant Director of Technical Innovation and Development, Mercato made the decision to commit to a one year apprenticeship programme that upskilled

From its base in what was once the heartland of traditional industry in Birmingham, Mercato Solutions Ltd is now leading the way in a 21st century revolution, the handling of big data.

The company is one of three closely inter-linked SMEs, (Mercato Solutions Ltd, Probrand Ltd and Icomm Technologies Ltd), employing a total of 230+

people in 'data implementation', precisely the skills it needed for the growing big data industry. Mercato's radical technology, which has won the Queen's Award for Innovation, sits on software known as KnowledgeKube. This agile implementation platform is enabling the apprentices to become 'data implementers' who are developing and automating highly complex workflow and business process solutions, without having to write a single line of code.

Steve explains: *"We want qualifications and learning to be as meaningful and relevant as possible. When we heard that the apprentices would take OCR's Cambridge Technicals in IT course, with some additional new IBM 'Smarter Technology' units, we knew that this would be a great fit and too good an opportunity to miss."*

Mercato and BMET intentionally recruited people for the new apprenticeship programme that came from a variety of different backgrounds, that were 'blank canvases', with little experience in IT.

"Thanks to our close working relationship with BMET and OCR's flexibility in creating a bespoke curriculum," Steve continued, *"we've made sure that what the apprentices study is aligned to our needs. And we've found that we can mould the apprentices to be the 'data implementers' we need within a surprisingly short time."*

"Here at Mercato, we really see the value in apprenticeships. I do think that employers need to shed some of their misconceptions. We pay the people on the course above the minimum wage. We are realistic of course – not everyone will complete the apprenticeship programme as it is demanding. My rule of thumb is 80/20 to complete. But some exceed our expectations. Take Jonathan Burns (read overleaf) for example, he is already committed to joining us full time, as he has such an aptitude for the data handling work and is helping BMET to improve the course through his data management skills."

Steve also highlighted another positive aspect of his company's initiative. *"Having apprentices in the office has also been a stimulating challenge for our managers. They've been forced to think more about how people learn and have all enjoyed taking an open and more collaborative approach than they might with a normal 'new starter'. It's bought out a more advisory relationship, which is great news for CPD in the company."*

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The Apprentice: Jonathan Burns

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"My future is in IT" declares 28-year-old Jonathan Burns. From working in the security industry up to 18 months ago, Jonathan's career has changed dramatically since his innate talent for IT was discovered. After taking a short course in basic IT at BMET, his potential was spotted by BMET's Clive Davies who encouraged him to apply for the upcoming Mercato Apprenticeship course. Along with eight others, some of whom were straight from school and others from a variety of work backgrounds, including working in McDonalds. Jonathan started the apprenticeship in August 2013.

For the one year Diploma programme, the apprentices' week is split 50/50 between studying at the College for the first half of each week and working at Mercato's offices in the second half.

Jonathan comments; *"The balance is fantastic. Our college tutor Clive Davies is very enthusiastic and we are learning so much. We all work hard and we're totally committed, even if that means we have to be a bit more business-like and have a stronger work ethic than some other students at the college."* The parts of the Cambridge Technicals in IT Diploma course that Jonathan has enjoyed most have been the specialist IBM smarter technology units which complement the data engineering work he has been doing at Mercato. He's also really enjoyed the course units on business skills.

"I have been able to take what I learn in college straight into my work at Mercato. In fact, I am now based full time at Mercato as a data implementer and using the company's data management software, (called KnowledgeKube), to improve the apprenticeship course. That's the area of the business that I'm hoping to make my future at Mercato. The course has been great, it's really been about building and growing on the job."



Clive Davies, Birmingham Metropolitan College

The College:



Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMET) is one of the largest Colleges in the UK, with 14 campuses, providing further and higher education courses across the West Midlands. The College has strong links with employers and provides apprenticeships spanning a range of sectors including hairdressing, cookery and business administration.

Clive Davies, the Assistant Director of Technical Innovation and Development at BMET, admits his college took a brave step in creating the one year apprenticeship programme for Mercato. It involved working with a different exam board (OCR), teaching new qualifications, working with a new industry partner and condensing a two year course down to one year. He does not regret the decision however.

"I am proud that we could innovate and work in partnership to support a cutting edge company that is at the heart of the growing IT hub around Birmingham leading the way in data engineering. As part of the trailblazer initiative, I was asked by e-skills UK to be part of a national team looking at different roles in the digital industries, particularly that of the data engineer. An employer-led approach to apprenticeships is actually a great model, and one that operated successfully in this country for many decades."

The choice of qualifications for the apprenticeship programme at BMET was key. "OCR's Cambridge Technicals in IT course is a fresh and exciting one to inspire learners. I had worked closely with IBM before and I was really pleased that OCR was able to provide a specialist option on smarter ways of working with big data in the form of new IBM Smarter Planet Units which they added to the core Cambridge Technicals course. This makes the design of the apprenticeship very relevant to Mercato's needs.

"I like the innovation that OCR is demonstrating with the Cambridge Technicals course with these specialist pathways and they are right to emphasise the importance of work experience which some courses don't require."

"Our apprentices come to us for two and a half days a week and have got through six units before Easter. The apprentices have been a highly motivated bunch – they've had to be to cover the material required in the time. But they have all proved themselves up to the challenge and will be an asset to any company."

While this has been a pilot year for the Mercato Apprenticeship at BMET, and there are a few tweaks that Clive would make for the second year, he is convinced that the apprenticeship is on the right track.

"I believe we have now secured the right approach to preparing people for success in the workplace."