

Apprentice Recruitment during lockdown

When we heard that Katy started her apprenticeship with employer, FreshStance IT, in the first couple of weeks of lockdown, we were keen to ask small business owner Steve Fox a few questions...



We are hearing that many employers are delaying their planned apprenticeship recruitment due to C-19. How come you are able to progress with getting new apprentices appointed and working?

“We had Katy start as our first digital marketing apprentice just after the start of the lockdown, embracing remote working has enabled her to start and help us a huge amount. We also have apprentices who only started recently, again all have been able to work remotely and continue their apprenticeships. This includes training from apprentice training providers, internal training, day-to-day working and additional training from 3rd parties. Besides, we need the staff so not starting our apprentices would harm our business and prevent us providing the level of service we promise.”

How did you manage Katy’s onboarding and induction?

“The process for her onboarding and induction was the same as it would have been anyway, the only difference was using remote working tools. It took a few days to realise that she hadn’t seeing the inside of the office until I thought to send her a picture!”

So how have your apprentices been able to work remotely?

“FreshStance has always been setup to allow remote working. Wherever we are physically, several of us can work on documents at the same time, can let someone else see our screen or control our PC’s.

Voice or video calls and conferences are easy and available to everyone. All employees can take and make calls from their PC’s and mobile phones exactly as when in the office, with all the normal hunt groups (groups set up to take incoming calls), call routing and transfers. We can see each other’s status and chat by voice or text. Video calls are normal.

The core for our way of working is Microsoft 365 and then Smartsheet and Trello help with project management and other day-to-day management and communication.”

“Be prepared, apprentices are almost always super enthusiastic and hardworking, be ready to handle the extra output from them”

This sounds second nature for you...

“We’re an IT support and professional services company so I look at a lot of companies that say they absolutely can’t work with the current restrictions and can see exactly how they can. I think it’s more of a mindset than any real limitations in the vast majority of cases. The current situation should be part of disaster recovery plans already.”

“From a human side, I’ve worked entirely remotely in some previous roles, managed remote workers and had partners whose jobs are based mostly or entirely from home. It’s increasingly becoming a common or even normal way to work. C-19 is accelerating the change. Use the technology that enables work to support human interaction.”

How have your apprenticeship training providers responded?

Whereas some training used to be classroom based this is now 100% online, the training providers we work with switched seamlessly to online delivery. The only issue we had was an invite going to a disused mailbox for one candidate causing his course to be rescheduled. I think most apprentices actually prefer it to be entirely honest.

I work on the basis that there’s always a solution. Rather than seeing a problem, hoping things go back to how they were and thinking we could pause things, we look at what’s happening at the moment, accept things have changed, and find alternative ways to do what we need to.

We’re a few weeks in now, so is there anything that you’ve learnt or improved by starting Katy on her apprenticeship during lockdown?

“One thing which has come out of Katy joining the team and was highlighted in her interview and early days was the importance of the social side of work and how remote working can make you feel isolated. As a result, we now have weekly calls where the only agenda is a quick update on what you’re working on and doing aside from work, then allowing a freer flowing chat.

This has helped break the ice for Katy and reduce that feeling of being isolated. In the same position again, I’d make sure we did it sooner and part of the initial induction process.

Oh, and I did send Katy that picture of the office since she’s never set foot in it! At least she knows what her desk looks like, and apparently her new little desk home ‘looks cosy’.”



Finally, do have any tips or advice for other employers considering starting an apprentice right now?

“One huge tip is to ensure contact isn’t all about work. Allow time at the start or end of meetings for people to be social, create social meetings without a work agenda. Regularly check in on the new apprentice (and staff in general) and give them a chance to ask questions. It’s easy to ask the

person next to you something, but over email, chat or a call people are worried about asking silly questions or asking something they think they should know. It's easy to let the amount of contact you have with people slip, you may want to increase the frequency that you get in touch and just check that everything is ok. Provide updates to everyone, working remotely it's easy to lose the insight that working in a shared space and the associated gossip provides."

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What a great note to end on. Just left for me to say, thank you, Steve for your time, insights and tips - *interviewed by Karen Kelly, co-ordinator of the East of England Ambassador Network*



Steve Fox is the business owner of FreshStance and an East of England Apprentice Ambassador.

<https://freshstance.co.uk>

The Apprenticeship Ambassador Network is the movement championing apprenticeships to raise awareness and increase engagement to meet the needs of employers, communities, and individuals across the country

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