

Good Careers Guide Reviews

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Berthon Boats

Part One - Mini Review

Advanced Apprenticeship in Marine Engineering

Star quality

- ★ Apprentices get the chance to deliver boats to customers and take part in sea trials in the Solent - 'the worse the weather and the bigger the waves the better'
- ★ More than half of Berthon's project managers are former apprentices and others have gone on to become team leaders, department heads and managers
- ★ 'Aptitude, a methodical approach and technical understanding are key'

What apprentices do

Berthon services, repairs and refits private yachts – from fitting new decks, engines and electronics systems to spray painting and maintenance. The company also currently builds Shannon class lifeboats for the RNLI. Initially marine engineering apprentices shadow senior colleagues, performing simple tasks, then move on to more complex tasks such as servicing and refitting engines. Apprentices frequently need to use their own initiative.

Who they are looking for

'The apprentices meet the customers and must treat them in a courteous way.'
- **Berthon Boat Company**

Berthon wants young people who are hands-on, interested in maths and science, like getting stuck in and enjoy problem solving.

'The types who have an interest in boats, have fixed their own bikes or taken car engines apart in their spare time.'
- **Berthon Boat Company yard manager**

It is important to be personable, able to work as part of a team and have good communication skills.

It might suit you if you:

- ★ Have GCSEs and want a career that involves problem solving and hands-on experience
- ★ Like the idea of getting to grips with the technical aspects of boats, don't mind getting dirty and want to work by the sea
- ★ Want to work for a company where, if you're management potential, they'll encourage you

Training

The apprentices spend four days a week working at Berthon's headquarters in Lymington and attend Brockenhurst College once a week, studying for City & Guilds and NVQ qualifications levels 2 and 3.

Why an apprentice?

The company sees apprentices as 'vital to our plans for making sure we have the right skills in the right place at the right time.'

Applying

Previous work experience at Berthon or another manufacturing company is invaluable. Sailing experience isn't essential though.

'Loving the sea doesn't qualify you to be a marine engineer. You have to understand processes and principles.'
- Berthon Boat Company

Why not apply?

This apprenticeship is suited to young people with technical ability, initiative and drive who are happy working outside for some of the time and in all weathers.

'There's a lot of diesel,' we were told. 'You can get oily.'

Part Two - Full Review

Advanced Apprenticeship in Marine Engineering

Unique Touch

Six apprentices are currently taking part in the company's Grey Wolf project, helping to sail a 64ft motor yacht from New Zealand to Guernsey.

Introduction

For young people who want to leave school after GCSEs, enjoy problem solving, are interested in science and maths and like taking a hands-on approach, an advanced apprenticeship in marine engineering at Berthon Boat Company offers first-class training and experience.

Berthon currently employs 28 advanced apprentices, eight of them marine engineers, and sees them as the future of the marine industry.

'We have got a brilliantly successful apprenticeship programme. We offer high quality training, with enthusiastic apprentices and positive outcomes – good people you want to employ in the future.'
- Berthon Boat Company yard manager and former apprentice

Marine engineering advanced apprentices spend four days a week at Berthon's headquarters in Lymington, Hampshire and attend Brockenhurst College one day a week, studying for City & Guilds and NVQ qualifications. Berthon takes on most of its apprentices at the end of their four-year training, with many progressing to senior roles within the company.

The apprenticeship typically suits those who leave school with GCSEs or are slightly older and want a new career direction. The company looks for applicants who like problem solving, enjoy learning about the technical aspects of boats and don't mind getting their hands dirty. The company encourages those with ambition and management potential to progress up the career ladder once they've completed their apprenticeship.

Why do an apprenticeship at Berthon?

The apprentices we met at Berthon were adamant that they'd made the right decision. One said she'd found theory learning difficult at school but as soon as she had the chance to put what she'd learned into practice everything fell into place. Another apprentice told us that he was the first person in his family to learn a trade and that he had decided to train as a marine electrician because 'I like fault finding. If something doesn't work I want to find out why.' He added that a couple of his friends had gone to university but he was more interested in 'the bigger picture.'

'I will be coming out of my apprenticeship at 21 with a job and an expected salary of £26,000 while my friends will have four years of debt.'

- Berthon Boat Company apprentice

When we visited there was only one female apprentice but the management team are keen for more women to apply. 'There is a massive skills gap in engineering and we are concerned that we are not tapping into 50 per cent of the population,' they told us. 'Engineering is a fantastic career but students, teachers and parents are not informed enough about the possibilities out there. We have always been a manufacturing country; we need to get the kudos back for engineering.'

What exactly do they do?

'You gain confidence very quickly; it's great working at something you like.'

- Berthon Boat Company apprentice

After a two-week pre-apprenticeship course at nearby Brockenhurst College to help them become 'work ready,' the marine engineering apprentices begin by shadowing senior colleagues and performing simple tasks, such as cleaning components, getting trained in health and safety and learning to use equipment and machinery. As they progress, apprentices spend more time working on boats, taking engines out, servicing and refitting them. They frequently have to work on their own initiative. Each apprentice has a mentor but they are also encouraged to talk to college assessors and the company's yard manager (who is in charge of the apprenticeship programme) if they experience any problems.

'My door is always open. I don't suffer fools gladly but they know that if they do things right I will back them up 100 per cent.'

- Berthon Boat Company yard manager

'They really grow up while they are here,' said Berthon's marine skills assessor. 'The difference in maturity from when they start to when they finish is quite surprising. They have self discipline, they are far more self aware and they have specialised knowledge. The result is very gratifying.'

The apprentices' hours are from 8am to 4.30pm, Monday to Friday. They get half an hour for lunch, with most taking in their own sandwiches.

'My parents are really pleased that I am going out and doing a proper job.'

- Berthon Boat Company apprentice

Training

The apprentices work at Berthon four days a week and attend Brockenhurst College's marine technology site at Marchwood, next to Southampton Water, one day a week. There they study units like workshop practice and theory as well as functional skills English, maths and IT. Guided by college assessors, they work through their City & Guilds and NVQ portfolios. They gain level 2 qualifications (equivalent to GCSE) and level 3 (equivalent to A levels). A certain amount of written work is involved. They are assessed every six weeks and given regular appraisals. College is important. They have to pass the modules to progress as apprentices.

Life beyond the apprenticeship

More than 50 per cent of Berthon's project managers are former apprentices themselves (a number of them trained at Berthon). Other apprentices have gone on to become team leaders, department heads and managers, both at Berthon and other marine companies across the UK and beyond. All tend to stay in the marine industry so it's important to make sure that it really is where you want to be.

Who stays on at Berthon?

'We take on the bulk of our apprentices.'

- Berthon Boat Company

The company offers its apprenticeships on fixed-term contracts so there is no guarantee of a job at the end of the four-year training period. In reality though, most are offered jobs.

'Sometimes there might not be a place available but over the last couple of years we have taken on 95 per cent of those we have trained. Everything depends on the aptitude they have shown, their attitude, timekeeping, how diligent they have been and their qualifications.'

- Berthon Boat Company manager

Thanks to its rigorous assessment and high quality training Berthon apprentices are 'pretty sought after,' with some moving into the super yacht industry. 'It's the appeal of the travel,' we were told. Others are promoted at Berthon, working their way towards supervisory or managerial roles. Further study is encouraged. One former apprentice turned trainee manager is now studying for a foundation degree in marine engineering and others told us they'd like to follow suit.

Pay, perks and play

An apprentice recently got the chance to take part in the Dubai to Muscat sailing race while another is off to the Caribbean to crew for one of Berthon's customers.

First year apprentices earn £9,360 a year, rising to £16,640 during their final year, and get 29 days holiday. They don't have to pay college fees. Work gear – navy polo shirts, overalls, steel-capped boots and all PPE (personal protective equipment) – is supplied.

Six apprentices are currently taking part in the company's Grey Wolf project, helping to sail a 64ft motor yacht called Grey Wolf from New Zealand to Guernsey. The apprentices had to apply for the chance to sail one of the six legs – 'we chose the individuals it would make most difference to,' said the company. 'It's an amazing experience for them and they are writing blogs for the company website.' A 19-year-old who had only been with the company for seven months couldn't believe his luck at being chosen to join the Azores to Guernsey leg. 'I didn't expect to get a chance like this,' he told us.

The company also encourages apprentices to speak at schools' STEM events. A 21-year-old on the verge of completing his training had recently spoken about apprenticeships to the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights in London as part of its 'Ark Appeal' to fund more apprenticeships in the marine industry.

Remarks

Berthon understands, appreciates and values its apprentices and sees an apprenticeship as an ideal route to working in the marine industry. It also regards apprenticeships as a vital way to ensure that the company has the skills it needs for the future. The company's yard manager described the apprenticeship route as 'invaluable.' He once took on a graduate with an MSc in marine engineering but found that they had 'loads of theory, but no practical knowledge.' He added: 'I would have been better off taking on an additional apprentice.'

Part Three - Applying

Advanced Apprenticeship in Marine Engineering

Is a marine engineering advanced apprenticeship at Berthon for you?

If you are hands-on, like getting stuck in and enjoy problem solving then this apprenticeship could be for you. The apprentices we spoke to enthused about the best bits of the job, from getting the chance to deliver boats to customers to taking part in sea trials on the Solent – 'the worse the weather and the bigger the waves the better,' said one. The least appealing parts of the job are apparently bilge cleaning, tank removal and pressure testing. 'There's a lot of diesel,' we were told. 'You get very dirty.' Not that sailing or interest in sailing is a prerequisite for the job; indeed those who want a life on the ocean waves may find a Berthon apprenticeship doesn't quite fit the bill as apprentices mainly work onshore. The company's marine skills assessor told us that a love of the sea doesn't mean you're necessarily suited to a marine engineering career.

'You have to understand processes and principles. Aptitude, a methodical approach and technical understanding are key.'

- Marine skills assessor for Berthon Boat Company

Apprentices must be personable, able to work as part of a team and have good communication skills. When customers visit the company the apprentices often meet them and must be able to talk about their work informatively and courteously.

Most apprentices are from within 20 or 30 miles of Lymington though current apprentices include one who moved from Bolton to do his training and another from Pembrokeshire. It doesn't matter where you are currently living if you are prepared to relocate and can afford to do so. The company doesn't offer a relocation package or any additional financial help to its apprentices though the yard manager said: 'We make sure there is a support network before making any job offer.'

Qualifications

Marine engineering apprentices need a minimum of five GCSES at grades A*-C, including Bs or above in English and maths, plus resistant materials or a relevant science. Similarly, those wanting to become marine electrician apprentices must have five GCSES at grades A*-C, including Bs or above in maths and English, plus a technology or science subject. The company says it has to be confident that applicants can cope with the college aspect of the apprenticeship as well as the job itself. 'Our baseline requirements are important,' said the yard manager. 'If you have an E for maths then you are not going to be an engineer or electrician.' Most applicants come straight from school or college at 16 or 17 but some are slightly older, either because they want a career change or have done a degree and realised they have gone down 'the wrong route.'

Essential qualities

Aptitude, a methodical approach and technical understanding are key and are tested as part of the selection process. Applicants are also expected to demonstrate a passion for the work, a strong aptitude for problem solving, attention to detail and good communication skills. Berthon is keen to recruit young people who show interest and enthusiasm for their chosen trade. You might have an interest in boats, fixed your bike, taken a car engine apart or be able to talk knowledgeably about an engineering project you've done at school, college, as part of a hobby or work experience. Previous work experience at Berthon or another manufacturing environment is invaluable. Sailing experience is not essential (keen sailors will mostly have to sail in their own free time).

The application process

Online application: Apply online via the Berthon website, Brockenhurst College or the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS). The company likes to see a good covering email too. They advise: 'Use a spell check, don't use text language or start with "hi mate."' Courtesy and manners are important from the outset. The company receives around 400 applications a year for the apprenticeships on offer so it's highly competitive.

Assessment, trade test and interview: Those with appropriate qualifications are invited to an assessment and trade test at Brockenhurst College, Berthon's training provider. The test is a 45-minute practical task where candidates are asked to rebuild a winch or similar. Applicants who show promise but aren't quite ready for an apprenticeship can (if they wish) take a year-long performing engineering operations (PEO) course at the college – though you won't get paid for doing it. About a fifth of Berthon's current apprentice cohort have completed this type of course. 'After doing the PEO they are better placed for work,' said the company's marine skills assessor.

Formal interview: Around four applicants per apprentice position are then invited to Berthon's Lymington headquarters for a formal interview. 'We ask what they know about the company, why they want to be an apprentice, why should we choose them?' said the yard manager, who is in charge of recruitment. 'I know that not everybody is confident so we try and guide them through the interview.' His advice is: Do your homework, find out about the job and the company, look presentable (no shorts for the interview) and ideally bring along an engineering project or at least be able to talk about one.

'We want the best candidates so you have to sell yourself.'
- Berthon Boat Company yard manager

About Berthon

Berthon Boat Company Ltd is a family business dating back to 1877. Based in Lymington, Hampshire, it services, repairs and refits private yachts – from fitting new decks and electronics systems to painting and maintenance – and currently builds highly sophisticated RNLI Shannon class lifeboats.

The company employs 150 staff and over the years has trained generations of skilled marine engineers and electricians, shipwrights, painters and riggers. They are determined to ensure that marine skills are maintained throughout the industry and so take on around eight advanced apprentices a year. Berthon's apprenticeship programme has been widely praised and the company has twice been named as the medium employer of the year at the National Apprenticeship Awards.

Berthon operates from a modern, state-of-the art factory in Lymington, complete with luxury yachts having their sterns revarnished, composite RNLI lifeboats and a traditional wooden sailing boat undergoing restoration that is used to train apprentice shipwrights in traditional skills.

The company has its own 280-berth marina next to the factory, filled with gleaming yachts and boats. There is also a yacht sales and brokerage division, with offices in Lymington, France and the US.

If you like the sound of working at Berthon but aren't sure about pursuing a career in marine engineering, the company offers other apprenticeships, including roles as marine electricians, shipwrights, painters/sprayers and marina operatives/boatmovers.

How do I find out more?

The company runs an open evening for prospective apprentices and their parents in February each year (details on the Berthon website). The Berthon team also gives regular presentations about its work at local schools and colleges and offers numerous work experience placements.

Capgemini

Part One - Mini Review

Higher Apprenticeship in Software

Star quality

- ★ 'In terms of technical ability qualified HAs are as good as graduates' - manager
- ★ Many software engineering higher apprentices (HAs) will be working on multi-million pound accounts within three months of joining the company
- ★ 'After five years we will be at such an advantage – five years' experience and a degree' - apprentice

What apprentices do

At Capgemini - 'Consulting, technology, outsourcing'

Capgemini software engineers work for project teams that design and develop solutions for IT based problems for companies such as Rolls-Royce or major fashion retailers.

Some HAs we met had been testing sections of code others were working on design documentation. Consulting on technology projects can mean living out of a suitcase and moving every few weeks, though HR director said: 'In the main HAs are on larger, longer term projects, where they can enrich their learning.'

Who it suits

'This route isn't for people who want a nine-to-five job.'
- Capgemini

Head of GAP (graduate, apprentice and placement) recruitment at Capgemini said she was keen on determined, articulate youngsters with 'a problem-solving, logical approach' – the type who have done D of E, sport or volunteering activities at school and can show commitment and the ability to multi-task.

Typically aged between 18 and 25, some HAs have worked elsewhere or tried university, others apply straight from school. The recruitment team and apprentices emphasise that the unique combination of work and study means apprenticeships aren't an easy option so perhaps it's not surprising that we were bowled over by the zest, character and resolve of those we met.

Training

A highlight is sharing in the 'fun budget', an assortment of rewards and treats for work well done including cinema tickets and pizza vouchers.

Higher apprentices spend the first 12 weeks at Capgemini working, training and getting project ready. They live in university halls with fellow HAs and spend their days in classes at Capgemini's Tel-ford base. Once initial training is complete HAs leave halls and are assigned to client sites with hotel living potentially becoming the norm.

Why an apprentice?

'We want our apprentices to succeed - it's a serious investment for us and a big commitment for them.'
- Capgemini

Increasingly Capgemini Project managers like having apprentices on their teams. They get a kick out of helping HAs learn and seeing them blossom. Equally, apprentices inspire colleagues with their enthusiasm, energy and fresh perspectives.

Applying

'If we get a CV that says "I spend most of my evenings coding," we think kerching.'
- **Capgemini**

'At Capgemini we look for outgoing people who have a little bit about them, are naturally inquisitive and want to understand how something works. They might have built a website, fixed computers for others or be the ones that friends turn to for help with apps.'
- **Capgemini**

Why not apply?

A Capgemini higher apprentice in Software Engineering is only really suited to those with a passion for IT who are unfazed by the prospect of living away from home, leaving friends and family behind and who don't mind changing their home base to suit company needs.

Part Two - Full Review

Higher Apprenticeship in Software

Unique Touch

- ★ Higher apprentices spend 12 weeks working at Capgemini while living in university halls sharing in the 'fun budget' and making friends with fellow colleagues fast.

Introduction

For the right person – smart, focused, hard-working budding professionals with a passion for IT – a Capgemini HA not only offers unique experiences of work but provides a pathway to a first-class professional career in a dynamic, fast-changing, nurturing company.

'We are looking to grow our own people and develop them.'
- **Capgemini**

HAs sign on for six years and there may be penalties for anyone who jumps ship early.

'We want our apprentices to succeed – it's a serious investment for us and a big commitment for them.'
- **Capgemini HR director**

Following successful completion of the higher apprenticeship element, they read for one of two degrees, either software engineering which develops students' technical abilities and understanding, or business information systems, which focuses on business information management. Good performers who make valued contributions to projects may find themselves on the promotion path well before training finishes.

HAs spend much of their life at the headquarters and offices of other companies and know they can not only work closely with colleagues but, if called for, live with them too.

Monday through Friday hotel living is a typical life-style... This requires a certain maturity, hard work and independence of mind and spirit and so is only really suited to those unfazed by the prospect of changing home base to suit company needs.

Anyone who is concerned about uprooting and leaving family and friends behind or has regular commitments to sports, music or social activities should think twice before applying.

Why an apprenticeship?

'After five years we will be at such an advantage – five years' experience and a degree.'
- **Capgemini apprentice**

The Capgemini apprentices we spoke to had all been attracted to apprenticeships by the notion of earning while they learned, not stacking up any debt and gaining invaluable experience by learning on the job. Not that life is hurdle free.

Some said they got fed up with their parents, schools and careers advisers constantly talking about 'university, university, university' and be-moaned the fact that many people wrongly assume that apprenticeships are confined to jobs such as hairdressing and car maintenance.

Many would like apprentices to be better under-stood and given the kudos they deserve.

What exactly do they do?

Train, work, learn, earn, consult.

After initial training Capgemini software engineering HAs work as consultants on projects for a variety of companies such as Unilever and HMRC in locations ranging from Cornwall to Glasgow via Cardiff and Kensington.

Software engineers design, develop and maintain companies' software architecture. Day to day, this can include coding, integrating, implementing, in-stalling or changing frameworks and technical and functional application management. Coding plays a significant part but as a tool. Key skills are an ability to problem solve, to work creatively and as part of a team.

Apprentices must be prepared to travel. 'After the first 12 weeks they could be sent anywhere and hotel living can become the norm,' said the company's head of talent. She wasn't joking. The apprentices we met had worked all over – from Knightsbridge to Skelmersdale. Projects can last for anything from a few weeks to a couple of years. 'In the main we prefer them to be on a large project, where they can enrich their learning,' said the apprenticeships HR director, adding that project managers like having apprentices on their teams. 'They get a kick out of helping them learn and seeing them blossom.' Even so, the novelty of living out of a suitcase, no matter how generous the expenses, quickly wears off. 'It's especially hard for anyone with family or personal commitments,' we were told.

'You can't even guarantee to be completely free at weekends.'
- **Capgemini**

Training

'We're learning the real world rather than the academic world'
- **Capgemini apprentice**

Training begins with an induction week, followed by three months learning technical software engineering skills in Telford. After that HAs join project teams and can expect to be sent anywhere in the UK.

The software engineering HAs start their careers at Capgemini's slick, modern Telford offices on a business park, ten minutes' walk from the station and town centre. Each of the three intakes, February, July and September, kick-start their careers with a 12-week accelerated learning environment (ALE) course. Affectionately known as 'boot camp,' the aim is to get the apprentices 'project ready' – crucial, considering many of them will be working on multi-million pound accounts within three months of joining the company.

'They have to realise that they have a responsibility to act as professionals.'

- Capgemini head of talent

'Our reputation is at stake. Every employee represents our brand. We can't afford to take a chance.'

- Capgemini

Travel and food expenses are covered during the first 12 weeks and apprentices stay in a hall of residence at the University of Wolverhampton's Telford campus (apart from those from Telford, who live at home). Bright, modern rooms with double bed, desk, wardrobe, TV and en-suite shower. Breakfast and supper provided – much better than typical student fare and eaten at tables laid with linen tablecloths, napkins and even fresh flowers. Telford, a modern town, won't win any glamour awards but it has cinemas, ten-pin bowling and a shopping centre.

A taxi ferries the apprentices from the campus to Capgemini every morning and they work from 9am till 4pm, with half an hour off for lunch (sandwiches, chocolate, fruit, juice and endless tea and coffee provided). More often than not, we were told, they spend the evenings in the communal kitchens on campus pouring over assignments on their laptops.

'We were all nervous at first but we hang out together and eat together and it's very easy to make friends.'

- Capgemini apprentice

'It's hard work – there's no getting round it. We get back in the evening and some evenings we have to do at least two hours of work.'

- Capgemini apprentice

Induction week includes a one and a half day team-building course and activities like skating and quiz nights.

'Bootcamp helps to break the ice and bring everyone closer together'

- Capgemini apprentice

'There is healthy competition in class but we all have a common goal.'

- Capgemini apprentice

As well as their IT training they learn 'soft skills,' such as how to write a business email, leave a voicemail and talk on the phone.

After 'Boot Camp' HAs join project teams and can expect to be sent anywhere in the UK. They do real work from day one while continuing to study. However there are plenty of people to help them learn on the job, support them and help sort out issues, regardless of how small, large or pressing.

'We're learning the real world rather than the academic world'
- Capgemini apprentice

While most of the apprentices were buzzing with enthusiasm they admitted that the programme isn't for the faint-hearted.

'The workload can be overwhelming at times – 'but we are all here because we want to achieve, we want to succeed and we want to strive.'
- Capgemini apprentice

After boot camp apprentices are assigned to projects across the country. They work in a variety of roles – from business analyst to software engineer – but also take a series of two-day training workshops and webinars spread across the next 15 months.

'They start working as junior software engineers and we find that they quickly become very productive members of the team, their enthusiasm, innovation and energy is infectious.'
- Capgemini operations director

After two years the higher apprenticeship is complete. They then progress to studying for a BSc in computing and IT. Capgemini originally offered the degree through the Open University but has now teamed up with Aston University. Aston is the first UK university to recognise a higher apprenticeship as the equivalent of a first year at university and adjust the degree structure accordingly.

Professor Dame Julia King, Aston University's vice chancellor, has described the degree as 'a major national initiative.'

It means that Capgemini undergraduates go straight into the second year of their degree. As they study by distance learning the degree takes three years to complete.

Life beyond the apprenticeship

Ninety per cent of HAs stay at the company after gaining their Higher Apprenticeship

The degree element while not compulsory is very strongly recommended and encouraged. A current HA told us that he was excited to think that in years to come he will probably be doing a job 'that hasn't even be invented yet.' This was echoed by an HA mentor who explained that the company's aim is that the HAs of today will be the leaders of the future. 'I'm not interested if they are going to be plodders,' he added. He also remarked that while some apprentices started their careers 'dazzled by the headlights,' by the end of their training they were confident, highly trained individuals who could work in a raft of different roles within the company.

We heard of one apprentice who'd been promoted two grades within 18 months, another who was mentoring two HAs and a third who was a software developer lead for apprentices.

Even the newest HAs we spoke to were up to speed on the progression route – from T1 (the level they're on when they join) to T9 (director level) – and pay grades. As their career progresses there are opportunities, but no compulsion, to work abroad. HAs don't tend to work on international projects during their first two years, though some are currently working in Saudi Arabia

Who signs on the dotted line and stays the course?

Retention rates – around 87 percent complete their HAs.

HAs we met were typically aged between 18 and 24. Some joined Capgemini straight out of school or college, others had worked for a while or gone to university and realised it wasn't for them (the company will consider university students up until the end of their second year). Approximately a quarter of Capgemini HAs are girls – the company admits it wants more girls to apply.

Around two-thirds of the first cohort made it through to the end and completed their HA programmes but this now stands at a commendable 87 percent. 'Our drop-out rates compare favourably with university and are declining as we better understand who to recruit and how to look after and manage those who join us,' says the company.

Capgemini believes in celebrating success and proud parents looked on as UK executive chairman Christine Hodgson presented the 22-strong group with their certificates at a ceremony in London. The handful who didn't make it through to the end left because they didn't understand what the job would be like, hadn't got their head around the 'mobile lifestyle' or because their parents had talked them into doing the apprenticeship in the first place. One left to do teacher training, another to become an actor.

Pay, perks and play

Those who do well can rapidly progress beyond basic pay rates.

Capgemini HAs start on £10,000, with initial accommodation and weekly food costs met by the company. Salaries rise to £16,000 once the initial three-month training is complete. A new apprentice said he'd taken a pay cut to join the programme but added: 'I know that one step backwards is definitely two steps forward.'

Perks include hotels and meals while they are working away, discounted gym membership and travel costs paid for three trips home a year.

Higher apprenticeship or graduate?

In software engineering, there's a 50:50 split between apprentices and graduates – 'but there's no level of hierarchy between them,' says the head of talent.

When we quizzed a group of graduates who joined Capgemini after university for their views they agreed there isn't much difference between graduates and HAs technically, but said the apprentices are sometimes quieter in meetings.

Around half the graduates said they would have considered doing the HA programme themselves if they'd known about it but others liked the university lifestyle, welcomed the extra time to decide about their careers and thought university had made them more adaptable. Asked the same question an apprentice admitted it had been hard 'watching all my mates go to university.' After a while, however, he decided that 'working in a job helps to prepare you better for a job in IT.' Others observed that the novelty of university soon faded and anyway, they had the money to go and visit university friends around the country. They felt they hadn't missed out at all.

'One of the major reasons for launching the higher apprenticeship was because we realised the graduate market couldn't achieve the volume of computer science graduates that we needed.'

- Capgemini

An HA mentor said the only difference between HAs and graduates was that the graduates have 'a bit more life experience.'

Apprenticeship insights

Many were attracted by the fact that while their peers at university are paying fees of £9,000 a year, they are earning a salary and aren't incurring any debt. An HA said he hoped to save enough money for a deposit on a flat by the time he'd finished his apprenticeship. The apprentices recognise they have to be exceptionally committed. 'After all, graduates have the luxury of freedom to learn, study and play without the added extra of a full-on day job,' said a member of the recruitment team.

A 21-year-old who had studied accounting at university said he learned more in four weeks at Capgemini than in two years at university.

We met a group of 13 apprentices aged 18 to 25 on week four of boot camp, all kitted out in business suits – boys in ties, the solitary girl in smart shirt and trousers (while girls are in the minority there's usually more than one). All were working on a QA trainer-led flow-chart session, whiteboard and marker pens to the fore.

You could be forgiven for thinking you'd dropped in on an A level lesson rather than a high-tech company.

Apprentices were engaged and quick to ask questions – some had clearly covered the work and much more before but when quizzed said that tended to happen during initial stages.

'It's good because we all have different areas of knowledge and strengths so we help each other out and learn from each other.'
- **Capgemini apprentice**

Several had previously tried university but decided it wasn't right for them, others had applied straight after A levels and a handful had worked (including a keen breakdancer who'd worked in retail and set up his own not-for-profit organisation). An 18-year-old who'd just booked himself a holiday in Mexico was struck by the fact that a friend who'd gone to university was so broke he couldn't afford to buy a loaf of bread.

The company has a culture of nurturing talent and project managers 'get a kick out of helping them to learn and seeing them blossom'

The apprentices all have a buddy, a mentor and project manager. There's also an employer assistance programme run by non Capgemini personnel, offering counselling for employees or anyone they live with who has financial or personal problems. They each have a personal development plan and progress is monitored on a weekly basis. It's drilled into them from the start that they need to become known for their work and grow their own networks.

Project managers often say the youngsters have a 'fresh way of looking at things' and request to have them back on projects. One boy, we were told, was already known as being 'a really safe pair of hands.'

What parents say

'From my point of view, all I ever wanted for my children was for them to be happy and not to be stuck in jobs they don't enjoy; my child made the right decision in choosing a higher apprenticeship – 100 per cent - he has loved what he is doing from the word go'.

'My child wanted to go into computing or software engineering and was very clear about that. This opportunity came at exactly the right time for him, everyone kept telling him that he needed a degree but instead of having years of debt he is earning and getting fabulous job experiences and a degree'.

'There's no doubt that it's hard work. They often don't finish work until 6.30pm and may then have online lectures or other study to do in the evening'.

'The one thing I find is that other parents don't understand. I will say that my child is a higher apprentice and I feel that there is a bit of a stigma but when I explain about the degree as well as working and earning, they are impressed'.

'I am so proud of him. He is getting a first rate experience'.

'A lot of friends went to university and they all go out a lot and had the university social life. Working away means they can't do that but they get to go out with friends at weekends and I don't think they feel they miss out'.

Remarks

'We recognise that the effort we put in equates to the end product we get out'
- Capgemini apprentice

Constantly re-evaluating, this award winning programme continues to shine. Newer initiatives like boot camp are the envy of both older apprentices and graduates. It's been a learning curve for all, but sharpening of pencil rather than complete re-edit.

Recruitment is more focused, the programme has evolved and project teams have a better understanding of the value HAs bring to their teams. While changes have been made, much of what was so great in the first place is still evident.

'Our higher apprenticeship programme has been a massive success.'
- Capgemini senior executive

There's no doubt that Capgemini trains its apprentices to an exacting standard, gives them the opportunity to work on major IT projects and supports them through their degrees. The HAs rise to the challenge magnificently.

The current and former HAs we met were highly skilled, ambitious, on top of their game and importantly, ably equipped to meet tomorrow's needs today.

Part Three - Applying Higher Apprenticeship in Software

Is a software engineering higher apprenticeship at Capgemini for you?

'I look for outgoing people who have a little bit about them, are naturally inquisitive and want to understand how something works.'
- **mentor**

If you're a motivated self-starter who likes applying your skills for real and is passionate about IT then this higher apprenticeship could be for you.

'We are keen on determined, articulate youngsters with a problem-solving, logical approach; those with a bit of get up and go – the types who have done D of E, sport or volunteering activities at school and can show commitment and the ability to multi-task.'
- **Capgemini head of GAP (graduate, apprentice and placement) recruitment**

Apprentices need to be prepared to put in the hours though – inside and outside office hours. Those we met were adamant that this route definitely isn't for people who want a nine-to-five job, a sentiment echoed by the recruitment team who reiterated that - with their unique combination of work and study apprenticeships aren't an easy option.

Other apprentices said that this route might not be suitable for 'people who are afraid to come out of their comfort zone' or 'people who don't like taking risks.' 'Mind you, it's a risk with a safety net.' said the Apprentice and Undergraduate Programme Manager.

From our perspective we doubt there are fewer more nurturing companies out there. According to the new recruits we met, Capgemini supports young people through training and work, builds their confidence and self esteem and sets great store by its seven shared values of trust, honesty, modesty, fun, boldness, team spirit and integrity.

There is a real family feel and community spirit, teamwork and team spirit are very much to the fore – apprentices talk of helping and supporting each other and feel supported by their superiors too.

What Capgemini looks for - qualifications and qualities

Qualifications – Capgemini HAs need seven GCSEs (or equivalent) at grade C or above, including maths and English, as well as 240 UCAS points (equivalent to CCC or above at A level, with IT, maths or science as one of their subjects). Alternatively, candidates should have the BTEC national diploma (with at least one distinction) or have completed a full IT-related advanced apprenticeship with work experience. The recruitment team admitted that Capgemini 'sets a high bar in terms of the academic side,' although one boy we spoke to had got a C in his GCSE maths and said he was coping fine.

Passion for IT - First and foremost Capgemini look for a passion, enthusiasm and capability in software development and IT creativity. 'If we get a CV that says "I spend most of my evenings coding" we think "kerching,"' the company's head of talent told us. 'Many applicants have a knowledge of PowerPoint and Word but they don't necessarily know about coding or Java. We look for underlying aptitude and a desire to learn. They might have built a website, fixed computers for others or be the ones that friends turn to for help with apps.'

Other essential qualities - High analytical capability, good oral and written communication, interpersonal skills, self-motivation and the ability to work as part of a team. Try to demonstrate that you have these qualities by giving examples rather than just listing them.

The application process

Online application - Applicants for the Capgemini HA programme must first complete an online application form. Says the HR team, 'They can upload their CV too if they wish – the application form is a must, the CV optional.'

Telephone interview - Of those who apply, around 50 per cent make it through to a 20-minute telephone interview, facing questions about why they have chosen the apprenticeship route and why they want to work at Capgemini.

Assessment day - Just under half of those who have a telephone interview are invited to an assessment centre for a half-day session, which includes an interview, group exercise and aptitude tests. Everyone is given feedback, even those who aren't successful:

'We want to make sure that even if they don't get through they get something out of the experience.'

- Capgemini

Capgemini - what you should know

Capgemini operates in 44 countries and has more than 130,000 employees.

Capgemini is a global provider of consulting, technology and outsourcing services, helping companies and public sector organisations to improve their businesses through 'smart, appropriate use of technology systems.'

The company works with everyone from HMRC to Unilever. Its headquarters are in Paris and it has offices across the UK, including London, Woking, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Swansea.

Capgemini launched its five-year higher apprenticeship (HA) programme in 2011, with a view to tackling the IT skills shortage in the UK and enabling young people to gain a level 4 apprenticeship, role-specific training and a sponsored degree.

The company offers apprenticeships in .NET software engineering, Java software engineering and data and business IT. It hires more than 100 HAs a year (25 times as many apply) and gives them the skills they need to succeed in technical roles and add value to client projects from an early stage in their careers.

Capgemini's apprenticeship programme has won a host of awards. The company was highly commended at the 2013 National Apprenticeship Awards, has been named as one of the City & Guilds top 100 apprenticeship employers and is part of the government's Trailblazer campaign to design and implement new industry-backed apprenticeship standards.

How to find out more

Capgemini runs a variety of Insight evenings, work Inspiration events, school events and open days.

Current apprentices found out about the programme in a host of ways – including via teachers, googling IT jobs and the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) website. They recommend looking at the Capgemini website as it has a lot of information about the company and what they do. Coincidentally one apprentice who applied through the NAS's vacancy matching service, which is supported by Capgemini, ended up working on that website.

Other early career opportunities at Capgemini

In addition to graduate entry, advanced apprentice routes and additional higher apprenticeship programmes Capgemini is now in the early stages of developing a cyber security HA.

CGI

Part One - Mini Review

Degree apprenticeship / sponsored degree in Business Management for Information Technology or Information Systems Management

Star quality

- ★ Triple triumph - in just three years degree apprentices earn a degree, a higher apprenticeship qualification and have three years paid, professional work experience
- ★ Pay is performance and experience related, so by the time DAs graduate most are paid more than their peers who start on CGI's graduate programme
- ★ Work is cutting edge; CGI defend clients from circa 43 million cyber attacks daily, their software supports more than 200 satellite missions and they designed, built and operate the Police National Database, which searches across two billion records

What they do

CGI degree apprentices work in a variety of diverse projects, from sending satellites to Mars and bid management to providing cloud computing, data business intelligence, cyber security or mobility solutions (aka all things needed to operate in the mobile environment) for a diverse range of clients, including household names in the energy, utilities, automotive and banking sectors'. Apprentices may get the chance to work for CGI in the US, Canada or Europe.

Who it suits

'Our client base is massively diverse so we need people from different backgrounds with a new take on things; it makes for a more creative and dynamic workforce.'

- CGI recruitment team

Busy, practical, outgoing learners who like applying what they learn to their work.

GCG reviewers were impressed with the focus, maturity and ambition of the DAs. Many had held jobs while at school, showing they can manage work alongside study.

Training

A hefty workload means focus and time management skills are key.

DAs spend four days a week working at CGI's Reading or Leatherhead offices, plus a day a week studying for a degree at the University of Winchester, with independent study on top.

Why an apprenticeship at CGI?

'Lots of us are very money driven and don't want debt.'

- CGI apprentice

CGI is a top-ranking company with an excellent reputation. DAs will have a qualification and a broad experience coveted by other companies, they receive a starting salary of £13,000 and their tuition fees and course resources are paid for. DAs are used on projects from day one and develop a strong sense of loyalty. They are well supported - each has a mentor, a designated people manager and buddy (a current apprentice).

Applying

Looking for the keen and capable (minimum 300 UCAS points or equivalent). 'Enthusiasm is more important than knowing the particular role or direction you want. We encourage DAs to investigate and develop their own career paths, though for the tech stream we need to see evidence of computing interest, enthusiasm and aptitude.'

Why not apply?

'If you want to party every night, forget it.'

- CGI

Advice from current apprentices includes: Don't apply if you aren't motivated by challenge and hard work. Meeting deadlines for work and university is tough and, at times you have to be prepared to sacrifice your personal life. Progress within CGI depends on developing a reputation and network among CGI's senior management— so probably not the best place for the shy or insecure.

Part Two - Full Review

Degree apprenticeship / sponsored degree in Business Management for Information Technology or Information Systems Management

Unique Touch

- ★ This innovative company is not only on message but was the very first company to send a text message.

Introduction

'When I put on a suit I feel good; I sense I will do something exciting and beneficial with my day.'

- CGI apprentice

For those with great people skills, who are motivated by tech-buzz (though not necessarily technical), this innovative CGI degree apprenticeship (DA) programme is a must-investigate. DAs are simultaneously student and employee and combine the academic rigour of studying for an honours degree at university with permanent full-time employment – DAs still get the degree but more besides. Despite the demands of the workplace they complete their degree in three years, the same time as full-time students. They benefit from working on live projects from day one, so put the theory they study at university into practice in the workplace and understand their studies better because they have seen the theory put into practice. With a constant stream of experts on tap, both in the workplace and at university, it's little wonder they develop their knowledge, skills and understanding fast.

CGI is one of the leading independent information technology and business process services providers in the world, providing end-to-end IT for major companies across the Americas, Europe and Asia Pacific. An extremely diverse client base means there's a real need to attract people from different backgrounds and degree apprentices are part of the response to that need. CGI believes that recruiting individuals from a variety of educational, social and geographical backgrounds makes for a more creative, dynamic and ultimately competitive workforce, which equals business sense.

The overarching programme is the same for all DAs but individually they work on different projects and in different roles within CGI – so experiences and final skill sets may vary.

Once they have been with CGI for a year or so, apprentices are able to influence the choice of projects they work on and the roles they take on – learning to be an advocate for yourself is an important part of succeeding as an apprentice. Much of CGI's expertise is embedded in its older workers; learning from them is a fundamental part of the apprenticeship.

The highly professional, friendly CGI recruitment team takes a keen personal interest in the well-being and progress of each apprentice and genuinely cares about their welfare and progress, going to great lengths to encourage achievement and excellence. In turn the articulate, engaged, enthusiastic apprentices develop into highly effective, valued employees.

Why an apprenticeship?

'We want top management people from the DA/sponsored degree programme.'

- CGI executive sponsor

The CGI DAs we spoke to were keen to sprint up the career ladder and see the DA/degree route as potentially placing them ahead of those following the conventional first degree then job route.

'The applied nature of the apprenticeship allows almost instant contribution to the bottom line. Our new joiners are making an impact on the business from their first week and feedback from senior management is excellent. We want apprenticeships to be viewed as a prestigious option for school leavers.'

- CGI recruitment manager

Apprenticeships help deliver the skills that companies need to compete successfully in today's global race. We want apprenticeships to be viewed as a prestigious option for school leavers.

The company freely admits that market forces are at play too. In 2001, 32 per cent of employees in the sector were under 30 but by 2011 this had shrunk to 19 per cent.

'For ten years the under 30s were neglected and insufficient young talent was developed. If the recruitment pool is dry then we must look to train our way out of the problem.'

- CGI

For their part, DAs say they enjoy working as part of a team, getting on with the job and being supported by their project managers. 'When you do a good job you usually get a thank you,' says one DA. 'Everyone enjoys positive feedback.' As well as a line manager, each apprentice also gets an army of support, including a 'buddy', a fellow apprentice from the year above, a work-based study mentor, plus the guidance of HR and university staff. An HR team member meets the six apprentice representatives bi-weekly to get feedback on progress and achievements as well as to discuss any concerns or issues. Each apprentice has a people manager who, where possible, stays with them throughout their career, and a project manager who deals with them on current assignments.

What exactly do they do?

- ★ Keep secrets, programme, project manage, graduate.

From day one DAs can find themselves involved in a wide range of business processes, from project management to marketing, or managing and mapping business models. They work in project teams for a wide variety of companies such as Airbus, Rolls-Royce, SAFRAN, Dassault Aviation, Volvo Aero Corporation and BAE Systems. Some projects are for companies that operate in secure or highly confidential or restricted business arenas so discretion, integrity and discernment are key. It's even possible that signing the official secrets act may be an initial task. Not all projects are straight out of a Bond movie. Many are non 'life-threatening' large scale business applications but that doesn't mean they're any less exciting. DAs work on enterprise and data architecture. In other words: designing, planning and analysing how data is collected, stored, arranged, integrated and put to use or managing and mapping business models and information assets. This is big stuff – they might even be 'paying

your wages' and helping you spend what you earn as CGI annually process £28 billion UK payslips for more than 1.5 million employees and serve a million card customers via bank, loyalty, fuel and international Visa/Mastercard transactions.

When first outlined, the whole process – induction, starting at uni and going straight on to projects – can seem daunting to newbies, but they are helped and supported.

'I was quite nervous about working with the client for the first time but I'm more relaxed now.'

- CGI DA

'I've built up a relationship with clients - I understand what they need and what I need to do for them.'

- CGI DA

It's possible to be working on more than one project at a time. 'At present I have four clients; I present the documents I have written and they give constructive feedback,' said another DA.

Once they have gained enough experience DAs have a voice in deciding the sort of project they should work on next. Those doing the BSc option will study programming and spend much of their time 'developing and testing' on projects but their business training comes in useful and opens the way for career development.

Training

'At university you can't usually trial things from the real world but on this programme we constantly work on real problems.'

- GCI apprentice

Week one is induction week, a chance to cover off important issues such as security and health and safety. DAs spend the week learning about the company, including expected behaviours, and bonding with fellow apprentices. For the next three years DAs split their time between work and study; four days a week on the job at either Reading or Leatherhead and one day a week at the University of Winchester's leafy campus working towards either a BA or BSc (Hons). DAs may be studying part-time but they have a full-time plus attitude.

'They're only here at university one day a week but not only do they keep up with the work but typically they have a greater appreciation of deadlines, better personal time management and are about ten percentage points above our other students. Interaction and healthy competition drives them.'

- University course leader

More than 80 per cent achieve a 2:1 or better; around 60 per cent of CGI DAs graduate with first class honours degrees. All receive their awards, alongside others, at the University's graduation ceremony held in the splendour of Winchester Cathedral.

The combined apprenticeship/degree programme was launched in 2013, building on the sponsored degree programme founded in 2007. All modules on the university course have a vocational flavour, with input from CGI staff. The university says it is very committed to CGI and finds them a supportive and enlightened organisation, though as with any 'learning curve' there were a few bumps along the way but both seem proud of the end result.

The university say: 'It is an example of what can be achieved when universities are responsive to the needs of business and when business recognises the resources and assistance that universities can give them in helping their development.' - Other universities take note.

The University of Winchester hope to extend the model to other companies and, for their part, CGI see value in training locally, not least because it fosters retention - so much so that in the future they hope to run schemes in Scotland and in Wales.

The great thing about a built in degree course is that students get a university experience and have some lectures and seminars with other Winchester students. CGI apprentices report they are broadly happy with the degree course though, as with students and degree courses nationwide and beyond, there are odd grumbles about some modules and the odd dull lecture. It's clear the degree component is extremely attractive to the apprentices and, while the consensus is they feel they learn more at work than at uni and they perceive a gap between academic work and the real job, we suspect they will appreciate the true value of the degree as they move across projects and progress through their careers.

Most of CGI's degree apprentices join straight from school at the age of 18, or after trying uni or working elsewhere, but a few join the scheme having completed an advanced IT apprenticeship scheme (for those who leave school at 16). CGI is part of the Business Disability Forum, and recent successful graduates from the sponsored degree programme include a dyslexia champion.

Many of the staff at the University of Winchester are from the business world and so appreciate CGI's needs. Some lecturers are CGI employees. Apprentices are encouraged to approach senior managers to ask them to support their university project research. This not only helps their project but potentially offers the chance to explore new areas of the company, talk to different people and develop networking skills, 'It gives them a higher profile and aids career development.'

'I have actively stopped someone doing a dissertation on the next London Airport and encouraged them to work on projects relevant to what they do at CGI.'
- Tutor

One DA said: 'My CGI Manager didn't know about the apprenticeships and so did not understand what I needed to do and why.' CGI admits that with circa 5,000 employees in the UK, educating all of them about DAs isn't easy, nor is it yet perfect, but they say it is getting better and add: 'The best thing is when a manager has one apprentice one year and the next year asks for two.'

Until recently DAs studied for a degree in Business Management or Business Management with IT. This was replaced by a new but not dissimilar degree: Business Management for Information Technology - the main change a greater focus on IT. However, as part of an attempt to address the skills gap in IT a second degree, BSc Information Systems with an even greater IT emphasis, has been introduced by CGI. CGI say the degrees will focus on themes that are current and will become more prevalent for them and their clients over the next five years and beyond. Not only did the University of Winchester approve these two new degrees but they bestowed four Commendations upon CGI for: the quality and rigour of their recruitment, selection and widening of participation; the programmes' industry relevance (the professional assessor described the degrees as 'astonishing programmes' meeting the needs of industry); the degree's work-based learning and teaching strategy, and the extent to which they included student feedback from previous programmes, into the design.

Life beyond the apprenticeship

In an average year around 20 percent of sponsored degree students are promoted before graduating.

Former sponsored degree students have gone on to a huge variety of roles,' with many already carving out very successful careers and winning promotions.

'We can offer an international career and in many different parts of the company. That's the advantage of a bigger firm. Current DAs are working on an impressively wide range of projects in key growth areas. Many are excited by business intelligence and see a dynamic future in as yet, unmapped areas.'

- CGI executive sponsor

Once qualified, former DAs/grads compete for places on project teams with other similarly qualified staff members. You will continue to learn new skills and to develop your talent. This may involve further professional training if you are good, promotion prospects are good, and not only will your skills be in demand from within the company but from CGI's competitors too.

Who signs on the dotted line and stays the course?

Two-fifths are female and a third of all females at CGI take the technical BSc Information Systems Management.

'We're not making it harder to get in but the quality of candidates is improving,' says a recruitment manager. 'People are actively seeking out degree apprenticeship opportunities. They are more proactive about their choices, more driven to follow through, and we benefit.' The DAs we met were aged between 18 and 24. Some came directly from school or college, others had had jobs elsewhere. 'For two years I worked in Sainsbury's chopping up meat and fish then saw an article about degree apprenticeship in the local paper and found CGI as a result,' said one. A fair number had tried a year at university but found it didn't suit, citing reasons such as 'we had only four hours' lectures a week' and 'I am a practical learner. I need to see if something works.'

Though relatively few move away from home, some of those who do find being uprooted from friends and family difficult, with long commutes and constant study after work and at weekends the norm.

'Re-locating can be difficult. Some apprentices get really homesick. We had a girl who was not really that driven and subsequently left.'

- CGI

One DA moved 400 miles from home and told us: 'It is challenging. It affects friendships and your relationship with your family.' Another added: 'It is a sudden change. Fortunately my boyfriend is also very career minded and he supported me. We have evolved as a couple.' Some DAs commented that parents can be quite protective at 18 and while CGI staff are supportive they're not going to hold your hand. 'You have to learn resilience, learn how to say no and to cope under pressure,' said one DA.

'I ask myself "am I growing up too fast?" But I know I will have three years of work experience when I finish and that's a huge plus.'

- CGI DA

Despite the graft, retention sits at a commendable 90 per cent, broadly in line with university retention rates. Most DAs stay at CGI once their degree is complete. Those who don't may find themselves financially penalised as their contract includes a clause that expects them to stay put for six years. Buy-out costs vary but the company is upfront about these. All are transparently calculated and sympathetic to genuine need to leave.

Pay, perks and play

'Apprentices not only graduate without debt but one shrewd apprentice managed to save £25k by the end of the course and subsequently used it as a deposit on a flat.'
- CGI

You are a fully entitled employee from day one and get a permanent contract, a guaranteed (that is, if all works out well) future career, first-class training and development opportunities and a starting salary of £13,000. Add to that fully paid tuition fees, course resources and accommodation, plus a range of excellent benefits such as a laptop and company phone, 25 days' annual leave, pension contributions, profit participation plan, share purchase plan, season ticket loan, health and life benefits, member voluntary discounts and a range of other flexible benefits.

DAs are spread out across the company's business and geography so the CGI team makes an effort to organise social events – cinema trips, clubbing, barbecues, whatever appeals. 'Socialising is bigger and better,' say DAs. 'We have less time but more money than university students so we play hard when not working.' For just £5 a month, employees receive discounts on theatre tickets and activities like rock climbing, the Reading Festival, paint balling and Royal Ascot. Other perks include relocation expenses, accommodation expenses and membership of the CGI Sport and Social Club. The CGI football tournament is played out in different countries each year. One of the biggest adventures is the UK Challenge. 'It's a corporate event that takes place over several days: running, cycling, canoeing, orienteering type things. We take a team and they're pushed to limits. It's physical and mental, with puzzles to solve and team members to look after.' Those who've taken part say it is an incredible bonding experience, and talk of 'buddy-ropes' and 'motivational speeches.' If that doesn't grab you maybe activities such as the Million Makers challenge will, think Dragon's Den – pitching a money making idea then, if successful, winning investment to grow the idea for charity.

Degree apprentice or graduate?

'If people are keen and capable they'll fit in. We encourage them to investigate and develop their own career paths.'
- CGI

CGI recruitment remains skewed towards graduates. 'We'll always require graduates as we can't predict need all the time. It's a continuing balance,' says a senior manager. CGI are currently recruiting graduates into specific business areas, all with technical backgrounds. The majority will have a Computer Science or IT degree with specialist skills in java, C++, C#, open source, security or forensics.

Some DAs from the first cohort (2007) commented: 'When the programme first began there was a grads vs undergrads culture but that's gone now.'

CGI is well aware that former apprentices develop a stronger sense of loyalty and, with a sustained track record of delivering quality work, apprentices represent good value. 'We still have to train them but they work four days a week, so it's not long before they pay their way,' said a CGI manager.

Apprenticeship insights

'The apprenticeship is ideal for those who want to work in business as you get to try different roles.'
- CGI

Most DAs said their schools focused on university and presented it as the only post-18 option. 'Schools want to boast about the number of students who go to university,' was a sentiment echoed by many.

It seems that there's hope on the parent front though as one apprentice told us: 'My mum was pleased I swapped uni for an apprenticeship.'

Remarks

This degree apprenticeship / sponsored degree programme turns out loyal, graduate employees with a thoroughly professional outlook.

No wonder apprentices are an increasingly important part of the CGI landscape and this scheme attracts ever more erudite youngsters. They are mature beyond their years, but take that as a positive.

Most, even on bad days, are excited by the prospect of flexing their work muscles, making a difference and delivering for the company and its clients.

Part Three - Applying

Degree apprenticeship / sponsored degree in Business Management for Information Technology or Information Systems Management

Is this path for you?

'I liked data modelling at school but didn't know I could do that for a living.'
- CGI apprentice

Want to work in business but not quite sure what will best suit you? This degree apprenticeship / sponsored degree programme offers an opportunity to sample different roles on a variety of projects, work out what is right for you and earn a degree at the same time.

According to current DAs if you are self motivated, keen, independent, adaptable, willing to learn, hard-working, ambitious and hungry for a career, this is a great opportunity.

Managers say that business, people and proven analytical skills are also key and we'd add exceptional maturity, confidence and an outgoing personality to the list. Even if you have these qualities, think twice about applying if you find change challenging, think 12-hour days plus travel are beyond the pale or you need to stay close to home.

What CGI looks for

The company says it is looking for busy people.

It isn't all about the grades, though applicants must meet the entry threshold. Most have an extensive extracurricular CV, including work experience, sports, charity work or volunteering and CGI looks for 'ambition, enthusiasm and motivation for self-development.' For those applying to the technical degree or BSc the company looks for an interest in, or passion for, technology. 'Perhaps they have built their own website, or already code.'

Qualifications:

- ★ You need 300 UCAS points from three subjects – i.e. equivalent to three Bs at A level (and no lower than a C grade in any one subject) or an Advanced IT Apprenticeship or equivalent
- ★ A minimum of 5 A*-C grades at GCSE, including English & maths or equivalent
- ★ Passion for IT: (for the business with IT option), plus a desire to work in business

- ★ Essential qualities – good oral and written communication skills, self-motivation.

The application process

It's competitive – of around 300 applicants, a third make it to the assessment centre stage and a tenth are subsequently offered a place on the degree apprenticeship programme.

You are applying for a job, a degree and a career so it's worth heeding the advice of current DAs, who recommend that you prepare well for each stage of the process. 'Do your research, find out about the company and the job and make sure it really is what you want to do.'

Online application: All applicants for the CGI degree apprenticeship must complete an online application form. The usual tips apply – take care to complete all sections or explain gaps, answer questions fully and check for spelling and grammatical errors.

Telephone interview: Each application form is screened manually by a CGI recruitment adviser. If any questions arise from your application form that need to be answered before being considered for assessment day you will be asked to complete a brief, 20-minute telephone interview. Expect to be asked questions about your application form, so have a copy on hand. Also think about your motivations for applying to the degree IT apprenticeship, such as 'why the apprenticeship route?' and 'why do you want to work for CGI?'

Assessment day: Those who perform well in the initial screen are invited to an assessment day. Staff from both the university and CGI are involved in the selection process. Expect to do an online psychometric (aptitude) test, a written case study exercise, group exercise and presentation and also complete a one to one interview with a CGI manager. The interview will be competency based, which means you'll be giving examples of when you have been involved with teamwork, faced challenges or been particularly creative in solving a problem. You will also be asked about your motivations for applying to the degree apprenticeship and also what you know about CGI, so ensure you have done your research! You will also have a chance to speak to current and past apprentices and other CGI employees during the day.

Whether successful or not, feedback is given. 'Sometimes we advise them to reapply next year or point to other opportunities elsewhere.'

CGI – what you should know

CGI works with more than 80 per cent of the world's top banks, securely manages the health records of millions of Europeans, prevents more than \$1billion of fraudulent transactions annually and handles over 70 million cyber security events daily.

CGI's 68,000 employees provide IT and business process services that facilitate clients' businesses. Working in 40 countries across the Americas, Europe and Asia Pacific, offerings include application management, business consulting, business processing services, IT outsourcing, infrastructure, business intelligence services and systems integration. An exhaustive list of clients includes those in the communications, financial services, government, health, manufacturing, oil and gas, post and logistics, retail and consumer services, transportation and utility sectors.

CGI recently added a higher IT apprenticeship qualification to both of its two sponsored degrees, BA Business Management for Information Technology and BSc Information Systems Management. Entry is increasingly competitive; most recently, 270 applied for 30 places - that's nine applicants per place and rising year on year. The company constantly refines the training and is striving to narrow the gap between academic theory and the reality of the job. CGI shows real commitment to its degree

apprentices, supporting them at every turn. Standards are high, the quality and commitment of apprentices excellent.

How do I find out more?

The CGI recruitment team visits schools, runs workshops and attends some career fairs. Vacancies are advertised on external sites such as Not Going To Uni and CGI's own website:

<http://www.cgi-group.co.uk/careers>

Laing O'Rourke

Part One – Mini Review

Laing O'Rourke offers Apprenticeships and places on their School and College Leaver programme to those who are leaving school after GCSEs, 'A' Levels, or equivalent qualifications, and are interested in a career in the world of construction. The successful candidates are enthusiastic, hardworking, practical and good team players, who want to get out into the world of work and earn a salary while gaining qualifications.

'There's huge job satisfaction in building things that affect people's lives, whether it's the Northern Line extension or a hospital that treats people with cancer' – Apprentice

As well as getting hands-on experience and a degree or NVQ, working at Laing O'Rourke will mean building something tangible, that can be pointed to for years to come.

'Being interested in the built environment is often cited, but also very important is an interest in design and how things work' – Civil Engineer

'You never have a dull day, that's for sure' – Apprentice

Laing O'Rourke's supportive training and development programmes are led by people whose job it is to bring out the best in their trainees. They can be out in the workplace from day one, earning, while learning practical, hands-on skills from experienced tradespeople, construction professionals and engineers.

'My son's programme manager is very supportive. Plus he has a mentor who can help him and who also shows how far up the company he could go' – parent of a School and College Leaver

'The results of what you worked on are there for everyone to see' - School and College Leaver

Part Two – Full Review

What Laing O'Rourke does

Engineering. Construction. Manufacturing. Creating buildings and infrastructure for clients across the globe – in the UK, Middle East, Canada, Southeast Asia and Australia. Their HQ is in Dartford, Kent with project sites throughout the UK.

'We build with technical excellence from the foundations to the glazing' – Senior Manager

Many people will have seen, visited, or used, a building or piece of infrastructure engineered and built by Laing O'Rourke. They create the buildings that shape our lives: the hospitals we're born or treated in, the stations we use to get to the buildings we live and work in; the schools we are educated in; the malls we shop in; the sports stadia we cheer in...

Whether it's the:

- London 2012 Olympic Park
- Bond Street tube station
- Francis Crick Institute
- Heathrow Terminal 5
- Manchester Town Hall
- Atlantis Hotel in Dubai
- Kwinana Power Station in Australia
-

... this is just a fraction of Laing O'Rourke's work.

The innovative new cancer treatment building for Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospital in London is being engineered and constructed by Laing O'Rourke. From the window of the busy project office, Apprentices, School and College Leavers and managers alike point with pride at the Leadenhall ('Cheesegrater') building - another of their projects.

Who they are

Laing O'Rourke employs more than 10,000 people in Europe and around 15,000 across the world. Their roles vary widely, including engineers, electricians, quantity surveyors, plumbers and project managers – even abseilers.

'What sums us up?' said one senior manager. 'Excellence in what we build and the people we employ. Responsibility – as a company and as individuals. Enjoyment – it's a hard job; you work long hours but you're part of a motivated team.'

What makes them different?

Laing O'Rourke has a supportive culture. Employees are encouraged to aim high - and be adventurous. So they don't necessarily have to stay with the trade they trained in; if they want to, they can often move into other trades or sectors within the company or grow into a more senior role.

As well as its core construction and infrastructure businesses, Laing O'Rourke owns a range of specialist companies right across the supply chain, such as Expanded, Select, Crown House Technologies and Explore Manufacturing. This means that Laing O'Rourke has the capabilities to deliver a project from start to finish – from demolition and groundworks, to complex mechanical and electrical installations,

to operation and maintenance. They employ many of their own engineers and tradesmen, rather than subcontracting out to other companies (unless it's for a specialist skill, such as lead-lining a radiotherapy treatment room in a hospital, for example), so there's a huge variety of roles available across the company.

Career Development

Laing O'Rourke says it prioritises being a great place to work – providing both current and prospective employees with an equal opportunity to grow and develop. As one manager put it :

“As a company that recognises the value of great people, Laing O'Rourke believes that a diverse workforce is a successful workforce”.

It's worth noting that 40% of Laing O'Rourke's current management did not join the company as graduates, but initially started in a trade, such as plumbing or heating engineering.

Construction has traditionally been regarded as a male-dominated sector, a perception supported by statistics: in the UK construction industry as a whole, the percentage of female engineers and on-site workers is in single figures. Laing O'Rourke is determined to change that and works with local schools, colleges, universities and communities to demonstrate the variety of roles available and attract people who may not have otherwise considered a career in the industry.

What's on Offer?

Apprenticeships

Those leaving school after GCSEs can work, study and earn as a Laing O'Rourke **Apprentice**. Whether aspiring to be an electrician or a building controls engineer, a plumber or a heating and ventilation engineer – to name but a few of the roles available – Apprentices work towards a Level 3 NVQ in their chosen trade.

The theory learnt at college one day per week is put straight into practice by working on site the rest of the week, supported by experienced tradespeople and construction professionals.

‘I went off maths at school because it was all theory – I couldn't see why we were bothering to learn it. Now I see why’ – Apprentice

By the end of their four-year training, Apprentices will have gained a professional accreditation with skills that can be used in a variety of roles and have a guaranteed job to kick-start their career, whether that is to continue working in a trade or to move up the career ladder into a more supervisory role.

School and College Leavers

For those doing 'A' levels, NVQ or an equivalent qualification, becoming a **School and College Leaver** at Laing O'Rourke means they can be sponsored to do a range of relevant degrees, such as civil engineering, quantity surveying, construction management or IT, while gaining invaluable on-site experience. Whether aiming to be a quantity surveyor or an engineer, being a School and College Leaver entails studying at university one day a week and working on site for the rest of the week.

‘You get the degree, you get the experience, you get a wage and the benefits that come with it and you get respect for doing what you've done’ – School and College Leaver

A few years down the line, just as those school leavers who went to university are wondering how to translate their Old Norse degree into getting a job so they can pay off their student loans, the Laing

O'Rourke School and College Leavers have been earning while studying for their degree and have a guaranteed job in their chosen profession.

'You aren't treated as a trainee, making teas or whatever; you're given quite significant responsibilities, you're helped to reach your goals and targets' – School and College Leaver

Pay and Benefits

Both Apprentices and School and College Leavers receive generous pay and benefits packages. The exact package does vary, depending on their particular trade or specialisation, but Apprentices are paid a competitive hourly rate of pay while School and College Leavers receive a full-time salary and a benefits package, plus 100% of their university fees are paid for by Laing O'Rourke.

'There's a future for the youngsters: the starting salary is £15,000 pa and at age 23 my son will have a degree and five years' work experience in the adult world' – parent of a School and College Leaver

'His expenses are paid for, he has a pension scheme and private health insurance. He's bought a car, so at weekends he drives off to hang out with some of his old mates at uni' – parent of a School and College Leaver

What Laing O'Rourke is looking for

As one manager put it: *'No-one builds a building by themselves.'* Having good negotiating skills and working well with others is a must. That isn't just with direct colleagues; the team includes architects, clients and local residents.

'Teamwork, innovation and delivery' – Senior Manager

'We want to see drive, enthusiasm, flexibility, work ethic, eagerness to learn' – Manager

Even principally office-based roles, such as Quantity Surveyors, Procurement, Estimators and Digital Engineers have an on-site component, with everything that goes with working on a project site.

'You have to have a voice when you're on site' – School and College Leaver

Project sites are small worlds of their own; for the sake of the project and everyone's safety, it's vital to speak up and have input, as well as knowing when to listen and learn from the experience of others in the team.

'We're looking for attitude and aptitude' – Manager

Resilience is important as problems can and do crop up. It's how they're dealt with that counts, so tenacity and lateral thinking are pluses. Problems can range from materials being delivered late to something more unusual, such as a significant archaeological find. At Laing O'Rourke's Guy's and St. Thomas's site, archaeologists discovered the remains of a Roman ship that could not be moved and lay deep in the mud precisely where the foundations of the new building needed to be.

All the Apprentices and School and College Leavers we spoke to commented on the responsibility they were given from the start.

'My son has matured very quickly because of who he's spending his day with' – parent of School and College Leaver

Other good traits are calmness, spatial awareness and alertness, which are essential on a busy site with heavy machinery, bulk materials and large components, such as pre-cast concrete cladding panels.

Those interested in going into engineering will need to have top grades in maths. In some other sectors, being numerate and applying common sense is more important than in-depth knowledge of quadratic equations.

'We want our early talent to be motivated, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed' – Engineering Leader

Training and Development

Laing O'Rourke has made a big commitment to developing their talent, spending £18 million on the training, education and development of its employees in 2014/15.

'This is a really development-focused organisation. Wherever you are in the company, you never finish learning' - Senior Engineer

Whether an Apprentice or a School and College Leaver, trainees are supported throughout by their programme manager and are allocated a mentor to bounce ideas or concerns off.

'I know I've got support if I struggle' – School and College Leaver

Once with the company, there is some flexibility; an Apprentice might be training as an electrician only to realise they are more interested in plumbing. Or perhaps having gained their NVQ in a trade as an Apprentice, they want to progress up the career ladder into management by taking a sponsored degree while continuing to work. As long as they have got the talent and determination, they will be rewarded with plenty of opportunities to progress.

Who doesn't it suit?

This industry is not for those only want to work in a controlled, unvarying environment, where the temperature is set at 22° and the pot plants are dusted on Tuesdays. Project sites can be exciting, productive places but they can also be challenging, fast-paced and exposed to the weather. Similarly, circumstances can change on a project – be it delivery times or the discovery of Roman remains – requiring a flexible response from the team.

The hours can be long on site and all trainees need to find ways to fit their coursework into a busy working week.

'Sometimes I have to cancel seeing my mates at the weekends because I know I have to catch up on my coursework' - School and College Leaver

It's good to be assertive but not to shout others down. Every project entails working with teams of people with varied skills and from different backgrounds.

The great majority of trainees, supported by the programme managers, finish their Apprenticeships or School and College Leaver successfully, but a few don't make the grade. The company's investment in

their trainees is considerable and if they're not up to it and aren't prepared to put in the hours or commitment, they won't remain on the course.

Finding out more

Many of the Laing O'Rourke Apprentices and School and College Leavers we spoke to said they decided to apply after talking to one of the team at a careers fair, a recruitment event or at one of the company's open evenings, where potential applicants can meet current Apprentices, School and College Leavers and Graduates to find out what their working life is really like.

'My son wanted to watch the West Ham match rather than go to Laing O'Rourke's open evening. I dragged him along; but it was brilliant and he wouldn't shut up about it after going' – parent of a School and College Leaver.

Laing O'Rourke Website: <http://careers.laingorourke.com/>



Part One - Mini Review

PwC Higher Apprenticeships in Professional Services

Star quality

- ★ The sky's the limit – a career at PwC can take you to the top.
- ★ Higher Apprentices are given real responsibility for high profile clients and internal projects from the outset and are encouraged to represent PwC at external events when they arise. This has recently included visits to Buckingham Palace and No.10.
- ★ 'The way PwC treats Higher Apprentices is fantastic. My daughter has learned so much and feels like an integral part of the team. I wish my first job had been like that.' (Parent of a PwC Higher Apprentice)

What apprentices do

'It's not just about accountancy. There's something for everyone. We offer so many diverse careers.'

- PwC Manager

PwC offers programmes for school and college leavers in four of their seven business areas – Assurance, Consulting, Deals and Tax. Assurance teams help organisations by providing an independent audit of their performance. Consulting teams help clients understand how they can grow and do things more efficiently, often helping them to think through and implement change projects. Those working in Deals guide public and private sector clients through major deals, organisational changes and strategic decisions. Corporate and Indirect Tax helps companies – from family businesses through to giant multi-nationals – understand and manage their tax obligations.

Day-to-day work across all of these areas includes using systems, doing research, drafting correspondence, attending meetings, establishing relationships with clients and getting to grips with their organisations. As well as learning through coaching on-the-job, Higher Apprentices attend training courses, and are given time away from their job roles to study independently.

Who it suits

'Even if university was free, I'd have chosen this route. I'm gaining a professional qualification at a top organisation, alongside career defining experience.'

- PwC Tax apprentice

A great alternative to university, this demanding programme suits bright, hard working, ambitious students who enjoy learning by doing and through coaching. One apprentice said: 'I had no idea what I wanted to do when I left school but I knew I liked variety and doing lots of different things at once. I applied to join Consulting and have never looked back.'

The programme is ideal for those who can think independently, readily deal with ambiguity and change, have excellent listening, team working and communication skills and can confidently share their point of view.

Training

'We're always on the lookout for talented people, irrespective of background or the career path they choose.'

- Gaenor Bagley, Head of People at PwC

The two-year school and college leaver programme is a mix of real work, formal training and studying for qualifications. It doesn't matter what subjects you've studied at A level and no prior business experience is needed. Induction and training cover all technical skills you need to get started and will provide a solid grounding in your specialism.

About PwC

PwC is one of the world's leading professional services organisations, advising its clients – from entrepreneurs to charities, governments to private businesses – around the globe. Apprentices bring diversity, energy, enthusiasm and a fresh pair of eyes to the teams they work with.

Applying

This Higher Apprenticeship is aimed at motivated school and college leavers. Applicants need 240 UCAS points (equivalent to CCC at A level) for Tax and 280 points (BCC) for other areas. PwC is genuinely welcoming of all applicants, regardless of background. It doesn't matter what you've studied or where – PwC values the fresh perspectives new joiners bring. About a fifth of applicants are aged over 21, choosing the programme as a way to change career or pathway.

Those who successfully complete the online application form, plus numerical and verbal reasoning tests, are invited to an assessment centre for group and individual exercises. Following this, they have an interview with a senior member of staff.

Interested? Make sure you read the full review and do check out the wealth of material on PwC's own site www.pwc.com/uk/careers/schools

Part Two - Full Review

PwC Higher Apprenticeships in Professional Services

I wasn't expecting that

Beyond work a myriad of opportunities awaits – you may even get to be a star of the West End and tour the UK, courtesy of PwC's annual charity panto, which sees employees acting, singing, dancing, directing...

Introduction

The key driver from a business perspective is diversity. Bringing in people from different backgrounds – not just graduates with a 2.1 from top universities.

Launched in 2012, the Professional Services Higher Apprenticeship (studied through the PwC school and college leaver programme) aims to recruit and develop the bright and ambitious who are keen to launch their careers early rather than go to university. Successful applicants develop their business skills while completing formal training and studying for qualifications in one of four areas – Assurance, Consulting, Deals and Tax.

The school and college leaver route isn't easy. As well as great on-the-job performance, professional exams must be passed. This takes hard work and commitment. For those who make the grade, a world of opportunity awaits. There's plenty of variety and serious responsibility in the mix from the off and the programme offers a real chance to build a dazzling portfolio of achievements.

'Our Higher Apprentices get to meet senior figures and work with clients. Some of the current cohort have met David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Vince Cable. One of them has even taken part in a national TV and media campaign,' said a Manager. 'We're proud of them and encourage them to share their experiences.'

'My child has matured a lot – having to dress appropriately and going to clients' offices gives a new perspective. Higher Apprentices have to work with some very senior people and gain so much experience by working with them.'

- Parent of a PwC Higher Apprentice

The role

As well as learning on-the-job, and developing the specialist skills that PwC's clients expect and that you will need to do the job, Higher Apprentices simultaneously study for a professional qualification.

Working as part of a team, those joining PwC's Corporate and Indirect Tax practice work on a range of projects, from preparing annual accounts to restructuring multi-million pound property portfolios, from buying a business to advising celebrities on the tax implications of their worldwide tours. A PwC Manager said: 'If you want to be part of a business that's committed to proactively engaging with the tax policy debate and focused on leading views or working with organisations to help them make the most of their biggest asset – their people – then our Tax practice is the place to be.' Day-to-day work includes technical research, attending meetings with senior staff, establishing relationships with organisations like the Inland Revenue, drafting client correspondence and general office duties.

'It's a big commitment. It's not just a job – you are building a career. Whichever area you work in, people need to be agile and ready to build strong relationships, networks and leadership skills.'

- PwC Manager

Those working in Management Consulting help organisations to grow faster and work smarter. The Management Consulting practice works in areas ranging from helping clients to define their strategy to ensuring their business functions are effective to helping clients improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their workforce. Business consultants deliver practical, insightful advice that gets straight to the heart of the big business issues, to make a real impact on the bottom line (profitability of the business).

'Whatever issues you tackle you'll work with inspiring leaders to deliver measurable results and a standard of client service that's truly second to none.'

- PwC Consulting Manager

Assurance is PwC's department for audit – helping clients to accurately express the financial and non-financial position of their businesses. Higher Apprentices develop the business skills, knowledge and relationships for a career that's about so much more than numbers. They're part of the team that gets to grips with every aspect of clients' activities – developing real insights into their client's markets, technology, people and management as well as their finances.

'Assurance is critical work that enhances corporate governance (balancing the interests of, for example, shareholders, customers, suppliers). It plays an important role in ensuring the reliability and relevance of business information.'

- PwC Assurance Manager

Those working in Deals advise clients throughout the cycle of Mergers & Acquisitions (M&A), from planning beforehand to providing support after the deal has gone through. Teams advise on some of the largest and most complex cross-border deals. Financial due diligence helps buyers understand what will make a transaction successful. This may include thoroughly assessing a target company's finances, considering the opportunities and risks and identifying potential deal issues. They also work for vendors (those selling a business) by independently assessing that business so potential buyers can make informed decisions. They can help with buying a business, selling all or part of a business, refinancing or listing on stock exchanges through Initial Public Offerings (IPOs).

Training

PwC's programme has three parts: the day-to-day job, the professional qualification and the on-the-job training. Everyone receives key business skills training, covering things such as understanding finance, communicating in a business environment and using technology effectively. They learn to problem-solve, work effectively in teams and develop their core literacy, numeracy and IT skills. Additionally, all are trained in their specialism – Assurance, Consulting, Deals or Tax.

As well as being coached on the job, Higher Apprentices study at college, do independent learning (a first year said he did 'a little bit' of studying every night to stay on track) and attend internal training events. There's help and support along the way and the company pays for the first attempt at professional qualifications, but not re-sits. Anyone failing a professional exam re-sit may have to leave the programme – individual circumstances are taken into account – and students are encouraged to consider re-applying to PwC upon completion of their qualification independently.

Apprentices start their PwC careers with a two-day residential course covering topics such as IT training, team-building, working in a professional environment, email and office etiquette, first impressions and the importance of their personal brand and being professional. There's also a workshop to develop business skills. 'I was using complicated words unnecessarily,' said one Higher Apprentice. 'We were taught to keep it simple, straightforward and to the point.' Wise advice.

This is followed by a more tailored induction at their own offices (locations include Reading, Gatwick, St Albans, Cambridge, Southampton, Uxbridge, Central London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Hull, Sheffield, Newcastle and Belfast). Once they start work the job is combined with training (a mix of on-the-job, face-to-face and online sessions) from a training provider and experienced professionals in their teams and studying for professional qualifications. They get time out of the office for formal training, revision, exams and meetings with their assessors. Some enterprising Higher Apprentices have set up study groups, meeting after work and studying together. Even so, you still need to be pretty self-reliant and determined as there's a lot of independent, remote study (delivered via webinars). There is plenty of opportunity to apply learning in the workplace but the technical content of exams can be demanding. One parent told us: 'The challenge my child finds is that sometimes they are expected to cover something from an exam point of view that they haven't yet done at work.'

Everyone we met emphasised the hard work, grit and determination required, as well as potentially long hours of work and study during peak times – which intensifies during exam periods. A Higher Apprentice working in Consulting told us: 'We work pretty hard but if you are driven and motivated

it's a great opportunity.' The rewards are there for the taking. There's every opportunity to perform like a graduate and to reach the very top.

The Higher Apprenticeship training doesn't just expand knowledge of the job and role. It develops skills in many areas. One apprentice said his job had enabled him to learn the importance of time management while another told us she'd gained confidence in public speaking, 'Public speaking was something I never liked but now it's second nature to me,' she said. 'I recently went into a school and had to explain what mergers and acquisitions were to a group of year 7 children. I compared it to a game of Monopoly, which worked really well.

Support

PwC has an excellent support structure. All PwC employees (even the UK Chairman) have a dedicated people manager – a career coach who supports them with everything from working out their strengths and weaknesses to representing them during the performance management cycle. Higher Apprentices meet with their people managers (all volunteers and generally working in the same area of the business as their coachees) at least once a month. In addition, everyone has a buddy (someone who is a year ahead of them) who makes contact before they join, answers questions and queries and supports them through their programme.

Apprentices also have training assessors who keep them on track and ensure they are up to date with their study modules. Assessors (most are external, from training provider Kaplan, but a few are internal) speak to them at least once a month and organise quarterly face-to-face meetings.

A parent described the programme as 'inspiring', saying: 'The way PwC treats its Higher Apprentices is fantastic. They're very good at supporting and motivating them. My child was nominated by a colleague for a Higher Apprenticeship award. On winning they had coffee and cake in the office and my child got a £100 voucher.'

PwC's school and college leaver programme – who it suits

PwC's opportunities are aimed at school and college leavers. However, they will consider career changers too. Approximately half of recruits are direct school and college leavers and around a quarter have done something else prior to joining – some started university and realised it wasn't for them, while some are career changers. Diversity matters, so it's perhaps not surprising that there's no upper age limit – the oldest apprentices to date are in their thirties. Managers say that within five years it's impossible to distinguish between those who join straight from school and those who join after university. Though there are identical progression opportunities, it's down to the individual to realise their potential through proactivity and application to the job.

The high-calibre Higher Apprentices we met had no regrets about taking the apprenticeship route rather than heading to university. Some had turned down offers from prestigious universities such as Durham and Edinburgh. A Manager said: 'A university education is highly valued by PwC but our school and college leaver programme suits those who enjoy learning in a hands-on environment and being coached by experienced professionals'. One of PwC's external assessors added: 'University isn't the right route for everyone.' A parent of a second year Higher Apprentice agreed, saying: 'I didn't feel university was right for my daughter. She wanted to have a career in accountancy and working for PwC means she has been able to live at home while she gets her foot on the career ladder.' Some roles are mainly office-based but others are not. Many include travel to and from client offices so you'll need to be prepared to be flexible and respond well to change and being outside your comfort zone.

Retention is good – 87 per cent of the first cohort stayed the course. The programme provides a great career foundation and an internal careers service helps apprentices plan their next steps. Of those who leave, some fail professional exams (apprentices are generally given two attempts), some travel

abroad, some take up employment elsewhere within PwC (mobility is encouraged) or at another company – possibly in a brand new career. PwC works hard to accommodate the needs of Higher Apprentices where possible, for example by providing discretionary career breaks and allowing those who leave having failed exams to re-apply to PwC once they're fully qualified.

The company

PwC is one of the world's leading professional services organisations.

With offices in 157 countries, PwC advises high profile multinationals, private businesses, entrepreneurs and charities around the globe. PwC help client plan ahead for risks, make sure they're sustainable and profitable, plus everything to do with measuring, protecting and enhancing what matters most to those clients.

PwC launched their Higher Apprenticeship in Professional Services in 2012 – the first firm to do so. The company was named a Top 100 Apprenticeship Employer by the National Apprenticeship Service and City & Guilds in 2013, going on to win the Rolls-Royce award for Large Apprenticeship Employer Newcomer of the Year at the 2014 National Apprenticeship Awards.

Pay, perks and play

'I was given feedback about the importance of having a work-life balance.'
- PwC Higher Apprentice

Higher Apprentices earn around £20,000 (inclusive of London weighting), with annual increases, performance related bonuses and 25 days' holiday a year on offer. Study materials, courses and first attempt exams are all paid for. Perks include discounted gym membership, discounts on services and products and season ticket travel loans.

Many of the Higher Apprentices we met still live at home (some have long commutes) while others share houses and flats (PwC doesn't pay for accommodation). Every new joiner is assigned a buddy a couple of years ahead of them to support them in settling in.

Once the working day ends PwC employees can take part in a wealth of activities. Most PwC offices field sports teams (football, netball etc), plus teams for one-off charity events such as the JP Morgan run and the Teach First 10k. If your idea of pleasure is closer to work then PwC Acorns provides an opportunity to be involved in a business development activity and to learn how PwC identifies potential clients and builds their networks. If you're keen on drama there's an annual PwC pantomime for charity (Cinderella in 2014 and Dick Whittington in 2015), with some 200 employees and alumni performing on stage or working behind the scenes. Each production runs in London's West End and tours UK cities, with thousands of tickets distributed free-of-charge to disadvantaged children.

Community is important to PwC and employees are encouraged to give back via anything from mentoring and sustainability to helping to paint a school or volunteering for ChildLine. There's an opportunity to be part of in-house groups too. These include: PwC Parents, PwC Women, GLEE (Gay, Lesbian and Everyone Else), PwC Christians and other religious networks as well as networks for work related interests.

Prospects – life beyond the apprenticeship

'Nothing is guaranteed. You have to make it happen.'
- PwC Manager

PwC has a long history of recruiting school and college leavers, having recognised the value they bring to the business for the past decade. The current programme, incorporating a Higher Apprenticeship, has been running since 2012, so it's too early to predict how fast the Higher Apprentices will progress up the career ladder but some past joiners from similar programmes are now in senior management roles. Indeed, during a Q&A session on the first day of his induction a single-minded young man asked how he could become a partner. Prospects are excellent – joining straight from school or college gives exactly the same chances of longer term progression as a degree. Indeed PwC expects virtually everyone who completes their Higher Apprenticeship to transfer onto a pathway equivalent to graduate joiners – but with recognition of their two years of PwC experience.

'We hope they'll stay with us and see us as an organisation that has invested in them. There's opportunity for everyone to progress. We appreciate that some will want different career paths and we would never put pressure on an individual to stay. There's an internal careers service and all employees are actively encouraged to use it to plan their longer-term pathway. PwC offers great opportunities for progression and mobility but at the end of the day it's up to them.'

- PwC Manager

Part Three - Applying

PwC Higher Apprenticeships in Professional Services

The application process

'Be well prepared for your interview and think about what you might be asked.'

- PwC employee

PwC recruits over 100 apprentices each year. Applicants need 240 UCAS points (CCC at A level or equivalent) for Tax and 280 points (BBC) for other areas. You can only count three subjects – DDDD at A level (240 points) won't do and general studies is not included either. Entry is competitive, with up to 25 applicants per place, but PwC is committed to helping students develop their employability skills, providing preparation calls, insight events and free e-learning tools on psychometric testing and interview skills.

'We expect them to be professional from the very first day. Nothing is guaranteed. You have to make it happen.'

- PwC Manager

Applicants must complete an application form and take online numerical and verbal reasoning tests. Successful applicants are invited to an assessment centre, where they do group and individual exercises, an in-tray test and a written test – tasks that involve prioritising, time management and staying calm under pressure. The final stage is a 45-minute one-to-one interview with a senior member of staff. This is a competency-based interview and might include questions like 'tell me about a time when you managed a project or set yourself a target.' Interviewers don't expect applicants to have business experience – examples can relate to school, family life or sport. One teenager said he had taught a friend how to do a slam dunk in basketball and related it to the world of work.

The apprentices we met highlighted the importance of doing your research, being clear about why you want to take this route and preparing for the sort of questions you might be asked.

'Those who are successful are clear about what the firm does and what they are going into.'

- PwC Manager

Post interview, a follow-up phone call reveals whether candidates have been successful or not. Everyone gets feedback on how they have done and those who don't get through can reapply three months later. In the months before they join, a 'Pre-joiners Committee' made up entirely of current students who've been in their shoes, works with those who are successful to help them prepare and feel confident before starting work. New joiners receive newsletters and a photo-book, information about their professional qualification, induction and job role as well as an invitation to a preview day.

How do I find out more?

To find out more about the programme, see case studies from current students and take advantage of PwC's free employability e-learning tools, visit www.pwc.com/uk/careers/schools