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The Power of Apprenticeships

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If we are to grow and prosper as a country - we must invest in our youth. With university graduates racking up an average of more than £30,000 worth of debt, apprenticeships provide a great alternative of structured and hands on learning, not to mention that the financial incentive that students can earn whilst they learn. By equipping young people with skills, but without debt, they undoubtedly provide an extremely attractive proposition for both employers and young people. On average, apprentices earn £100,000 more over their career than less qualified workers, yet in today's university driven society there often remains a sense of stigma about not attending university. Interestingly week Nick Clegg spoke out against apprentice snobbery, which he described as "holding back" the UK.

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As the general elections loom, it's great to see that subject of apprenticeships is once again coming to the fore of public debate. Just last month Prime Minister David Cameron announced that a future Conservative government would use £1 billion in spending cuts to fund three million new apprenticeships. While at the Labour party conference in Manchester, Ed Miliband announced that getting equal numbers of young people to enrol on apprenticeships as entering University was one of his party top priorities. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats are pushing for a pay rise for current apprentices, all positive news for tomorrow's workforce.

On the flip side the promotion of apprenticeships is equally beneficial for businesses. A recent report from the Association of Accountant Technicians revealed that apprentices delivered an average of £2,000 worth of benefits to a business' bottom line. According to Skills Training Research, 80% of companies who invest in apprentices have reported a significant increase in employee retention, while 59% report that training apprentices is more cost-effective than hiring skilled staff.

So what does the rail industry think about apprenticeships? As a fast paced, dynamic industry we are the backbone of the transport industry and need a breadth of skills. Network Rail currently enrolls around 200 talented young people on its three year apprenticeship scheme each year. Since the scheme began in 2005 Network Rail has recruited more than 2,000 apprentices, the vast majority of whom go on to gain rewarding careers within the industry. For example, some of Network Rail's former apprentices have become Maintenance Engineers, Project Managers, Designers, Testers, and one is even a National Aerial Survey Specialist in the Network Rail helicopter!

Unfortunately we are not seeing the uptake we'd like from young women, but we are working hard to rectify this at the moment. Currently, just 5% of National Rail's apprentices are female, but we aim to increase this to at least 12% by rolling out numerous positive incentives. I work with some exceptionally talented women and together we have implemented industry wide mentoring schemes which we hope will help more women rise to senior roles within the industry. In turn, we hope this will have a halo effect, with such talented women enlightening the next generation about the opportunities the rail industry could offer them.

It is therefore imperative that we all work together to fight any prejudices that vocational training is perceived to have. Yes, there are many excellent courses for young people at university, but higher education isn't for everyone. For many apprenticeship schemes you don't need A-levels, just a can do attitude and a willingness to learn. For example for the National Rail apprenticeships you need 4 A*-C GCSE's to learn valuable skills which set you up for a profitable career, and similarly, there are numerous equal opportunities in almost every sector. We shouldn't just leave the issue of apprenticeships to politicians, but as a society, with the above in mind, it's clear we need to speak more frequently about the opportunities such schemes present, which in turn would banish such snobbery. This is essential to engage, enlighten and empower the next generation to fulfil their full potential - something which is surely in all of our interests!

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