

“Up-front Productivity Training” for mature apprentices in the tiling trade.

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Abstract

This paper outlines the state of progress in the pilot “Up-front Productivity Training” scheme currently being implemented by the Australian Tile Council Inc. in partnership with the Department of Education, Science and Training through its National Skills Shortages Strategy.

The scheme is genuinely radical in that it has companies sponsoring apprentices by contributing to their wages in return for the business of the host tradesman. It is also radical from an educational aspect being the first Australian trade training to incorporate the educational principles of “Authentic Learning”. (Google this phrase for more info) This sees the apprentices undertake the whole task of the trade as their first major project, in this case they tile a bathroom. This will see them more productive, early on in their training.

The scheme is restricted to persons over 25 years because it is believed they will be better motivated and bring some maturity and experience to their rapid acquisition of skills.

The scheme is another entry path to trade training, and it is not designed to replace traditional apprenticeships. It is an opportunity for persons who wish to get a trade, to be paid higher wages while this occurs. To some extent, it addresses the problem of mature workers with financial commitments having to drop to apprentices wages if they wish to attain a trade.

The off the job training is provided at TAFE and the apprentices are indentured. Like all apprentices over 25, they will be eligible for AUSTUDY support if they meet the Centrelink requirements regarding assets and income. The training meets the requirements of the BCG03 training package and a shortened term of apprenticeship may result. DEST funding has in part allowed the development of this initiative which is set to go national next year. The scheme has the support of the key tile industry players as well as the CFMEU and TAFE.

As the pilot course for this training started at the same time as this paper had to be submitted, and the first 4 week segment will be almost complete by the time this paper is delivered, persons interested in the progress of the scheme should visit <http://upfrontproductivitytraining.blogspot.com> for an update.

Introduction

In getting the “Up-front Productivity Training” for mature apprentices in the tiling trade started I learnt a great deal about the weaknesses of current trade training for mature persons. I also learnt that this new approach to trade training was applicable to other trades and skill areas.

In particular I found that sponsorship of apprentices’ wages by manufacturers and suppliers is easily found, that apprentices over 25 years are eligible to apply for AUSTUDY and that attracting mature persons to trades is a valuable additional pathway to help relieve the shortage of skilled tradespersons.

Several truisms were accepted in planning this training scheme. Namely:

- That generally, traditional apprentices don’t make money for their employers, otherwise there would be no skills shortage as employers would eagerly have apprentices..
- That mature persons will generally learn a trade faster than their youthful counterparts.
- That because of their higher level of financial commitment, the low wages for mature apprentices often makes acquiring a trade unviable.

Any new scheme aimed at increasing the number of mature workers entering the trade, therefore has several hurdles to overcome before it would be broadly successful.

To attract mature workers to trade training the wages would have to be higher. But obviously, if the wages were higher the apprentices would be less attractive to employers. In real terms, this could only be counteracted by subsidising the wages, or increasing the productivity of the mature apprentice, or both. “Both” is the best option.

Increased productivity would come from the fact that these mature workers could use their accumulated skills, experience and, particularly, attitude to learn faster and produce

more. The increased wages could be subsidised by Government support and from direct sponsorship of apprentices by players in the industry that is suffering the skills shortage.

The increase in productivity would require a different approach to the acquisition of skills, and surprisingly, the wage sponsors were easily found and organised.

First, let's look at making mature apprentices more productive.

“Up-Front Productivity Training”

It is almost a universal tenet of education to break down complex tasks into simpler elements to facilitate teaching and learning. Traditional training sees students move from the simple to the complex so that eventually all the discrete skills can be combined to perform the complex task. “Up-Front Productivity Training” completely changes this approach. It is based on “authentic learning”, an approach expounded by Professor Fred M. Newmann¹.

By definition, the term "authentic learning" means learning that uses real-world problems and projects, and that allows students to explore and discuss these problems in ways that are relevant to them. Authentic learning can provide high up-front productivity which makes the learners much more attractive as employees.

In the case of tile fixer training, the first major task of this new program has participants tiling a whole bathroom, and discovering what is needed as the task progresses. The training is carefully structured to ensure success and promote a standard of finished work that is acceptable in the industry.

Mature workers are targeted because they are more likely to have a mature attitude, have a superior work ethic and greater accumulated skills and knowledge. They are likely to be more motivated to learn, and would be better able to make a considered decision about adopting tile fixing as a career. It is maintained that they will learn more quickly and be substantially more productive than a teenage apprentice is, particularly after they have acquired the basic fundamentals of tiling a simple bathroom.

The educational fundamental of Authentic Learning is for the students to produce authentic intellectual work, something which they understand deeply. This requires:

¹ Fred Newmann is Professor Emeritus of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin. USA. He has written extensively on curriculum design that improves learning.

- **Construction of knowledge;** they can't just recite what they memorise. They have to DO something with it; manipulate it, use it to produce something.
- **Disciplined enquiry;** involving a **knowledge base** and a **depth of understanding** that has to be **elaborated in communication**.
- The product or process being acquired has to have **significance** beyond the training situation.
- **Support for the learning;** this includes having high expectations of all students, respect and the inclusion of all students in the learning process.²

The principles of Authentic Learning have been adopted by the NSW Department of Education & Training in their Quality Teaching Framework, where, at www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au they espouse that the curriculum should be based on the elements of **intellectual quality**, a **quality learning environment** and **significance** of the learning to the students. Authentic Learning lends itself perfectly with tertiary training, and particularly with trade training.

The employers are advised to allow the mature apprentices to lay tiles and to limit the amount of “labouring” type work that they undertake. The focus will be on the trainees laying a sufficient number of square metres of tiles to more than cover their own wages and on-costs. Their employment conditions will be those of a trainee apprentice under the State legislation, with a set period of employment. (This may vary depending on the industrial legislation that applies in the various states) There may be the ability for bonus payments to be made that are linked to productivity, and the term of the apprenticeship is shortened by at least 6 months because the first year of training is compressed into one semester similar to earlier pre-apprenticeship schemes.

Of the 12 persons who started the pilot course of Up-front Productivity Training there are 2 Kooris, 1 female, 4 long term unemployed, 1 builder's labourer, 1 tile salesman, and 2 unregistered unemployed. The 12th, had 2 years experience as a trainee tiler and decided to proceed by the Recognition of Prior Learning pathway available at Randwick TAFE. All but two participants have employers, some have already been processed through New Apprenticeship Centres, it is expected that they will all be employed by the end of the initial 4 weeks training.

How “Sponsorship” works

² From a presentation by Fred Newmann at a University of Newcastle Pedagogy Conference. January 2004

The subsidisation of the mature apprentice's wages comes from three main sources. It can be said that their training at TAFE is sponsored by the relevant State Government, in that it provides the training facilities, teachers etc. for training in "designated trades" (including Wall and Floor Tiling).

The Federal Government is the major sponsor through its provision of AUSTUDY to trainee apprentices who are over the age of 25. If eligible, the recipients of AUSTUDY are also exempt from TAFE administration charge.

The third provider of sponsorship is a company that benefits directly from the sale of products to the employer of the mature apprentice. That is, one of the outlets where the tradesman purchases the products necessary to carry out his or her business. In the wall and floor tiling contracting business, this is usually one of the outlets where the tradesperson has an account and purchases tiles, adhesives, and ancillary items. While this sounds complicated to administer, it is not. The sponsoring company simply applies a discount to the tradespersons account at the end of the month that is equal to the amount of the subsidy. The discount is given for a period of 18 months after which it ceases. If the outlet where the tradesperson buys product does not wish to be a sponsor they can simply arrange for one of their product suppliers to be the sponsor. For example, in the wall and floor tiling industry there are about a dozen major tile adhesive and grout suppliers, a handful of tile manufacturers and several large wholesale and retail chains or franchises. Any one of these companies can become the sponsor by simply providing a discount off the monthly account to the retail outlet where the tradesperson buys their materials. It could even be possible for a mature apprentice to have more than one sponsorship, although care would need to be taken that there was not a conflict of sponsorship interest.

Memoranda of understanding have been signed with over a dozen major companies in the tile industry to be sponsors. In fact, every company approached has agreed to become a sponsor, some are sponsoring more than one apprentice. As the "Up-front productivity scheme" expands, it is likely that the major industry players will have numerous apprentices under sponsorship through numerous outlets.

A comparison of sponsored and un-sponsored wages is of some value and is set out in the tables below.

NSW Award rates for Indentured and Trainee apprentices in the Wall and Floor Tiling trade

Apprentices less than 21 years.	Base rate per week \$	Industry allowance per week \$	Special allowance per week \$	Gross total per week \$
Indentured 1 st year	192.20	21.70	17.10	231.00
Indentured 2 nd year	280.70	21.70	25.30	327.70
Indentured 3 rd year	371.90	21.70	32.50	426.10
Indentured 4 th year	435.70	21.70	38.70	496.10

Apprentices 21 years and over				
Trainee 1 st year	318.60	21.70	18.40	358.70
Trainee 2 nd year	321.30	21.70	27.80	370.80
Trainee 3 rd year	413.20	21.70	35.30	470.20
Trainee 4 th year	461.90	21.70	41.10	523.70

Sponsored apprentice	Gross award Per week	Sponsorship Per week	Likely AUSTUDY	Gross total per week \$
First 6 months	358.70	14.00	55.00 week**	427.70*
Second year	370.80	14.00	48.00 week**	432.80*
Third year	470.20	0	0	470.20
Fourth year	523.70	0	0	523.70

* Approximate only, AUSTUDY allowance depends on individual circumstances. AUSTUDY reduces to \$0 when income reaches \$431 per week for partnered person with children.

** Based on partnered person with children [Figures not verified by Centrelink. Calculated from www.centrelink.gov.au]

The total commitment per industry sponsor is \$1170 over 78 weeks (18 months). The benefits to sponsors are clear and measurable. The person being provided with a discount is a regular customer and the amount being spent with the sponsor's company each month can be verified.

The sponsoring company can apply some conditions on sponsorship such as having access to photographs and written material about the progress of the sponsored apprentice, having the sponsored apprentice wear promotional material supplied by the sponsor (within certain limits). An employer and apprentice's commitment to purchase sponsor's products and direct clients to sponsor's outlets is expected.

Other intangibles that come from sponsorship include:

- ✦ It generates employer and apprentice loyalty to a store and a range of products
- ✦ It provides a direct link to the tile fixer for the sponsor
- ✦ It allows some input on customer relations and quality control
- ✦ It shows the sponsor as a good corporate citizen
- ✦ It is helping ease the skills shortage

As can be appreciated, this model for sponsorship by suppliers to tradespersons is applicable to many other industries.

Why the need for an Up-front productivity apprenticeship scheme?

In the last 10 years the sale of ceramic tiles in Australia has gone from just under 20 million square metres to just over 30 million square metres per annum. The output from Tile-layer training at Australia's TAFE Colleges has remained basically steady and has even fallen slightly in the last couple of years. This has seen a lot of "under-skilled" operators move in to install this increasing number of tiles. Builders are experiencing delays in getting tiles installed and the quality of work has anecdotally declined.

Tile manufacturers and importers realise that to the end consumers, the installation of the tile is an integral part of the purchase. A tile in a box is of little value until it has been applied to the desired situation in a competent manner. If the installation is too slow, too expensive or poorly executed leading to poor aesthetics or performance, alternatives to tiles will be sought. It is clear that the tile manufacturers and the makers of fixing materials have a vested interest in ensuring there are sufficient tilers to competently install their products.

The peak body in Australia representing the Tile Industry is the Australian Tile Council Inc. It submitted a funding proposal under the Australian Government's National Skills Shortage Strategy which was successful. The essence of that proposal was to find another entry path to the trade of wall and floor tiling which could supply a substantial number of new, qualified tile fixers. A cohort of mature apprentices was selected as the most suitable format at the time. I was made the coordinator of the project and have just started the first group of 12 mature age apprentices in the program at Sydney Institute of TAFE, Randwick campus.

The 21 week nominal TAFE training provided for a certificate III in the trade, and the related competencies are all still achieved. However, the training begins with 4 weeks in the college, this is followed a couple of months later with a further 3 week block. The apprentices then plug into traditional stage 2 apprentice classes and continue as normal to the end of their TAFE training.

Tiling, and other trades where contracting is unit based, for example paid per square metre, pre brick, per item etc. are particularly well suited to allowing the productivity of employees to be measured. In tiling, for example, the new apprentice will have to lay approximately three and a half square metres of tiles a day to cover his or her wages and all on-costs. This allows the employer to assess the productivity of the apprentice, though due allowance must be made for time spent assisting in other processes that are not directly related to personal metres laid. If this calculation allows the employer to discover that the apprentice is making more than they cost, there is a high likelihood that another mature age Up-front productivity trained apprentice will be sought when the current one nears completion of their trade training.

This, plus widespread awareness of the alternative entry path to the trade that Up-front Productivity Training offers, is the key to the continued expansion of the scheme.

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