



Beyond mentoring: social support structures for young carpentry apprentices

Support document: case study reports

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Introduction

The limitations of the quantitative aspect of this project were not just technical issues of disappointing response rates. By definition, quantitative analysis is commonly preoccupied with associations – providing suggestive evidence about causation. The examination of statistical correlations and associations assumes the variables of interest are clearly defined and easily quantified. This is not the case concerning the subject matter of this study: i.e. the connections between mentoring and mental health amongst Australian adolescents and young adults. The shift from a quantitatively based research strategy allowed the research team to consider more basic questions like: what different forms does mentoring take? And more basic still: where do mentoring arrangements sit in the broader field of the social structures of support surrounding apprenticeships? Answers to these questions can only be generated by use of qualitative research techniques.

The following case study reports fall into two groups. The first four involved close examination of arrangements at large ‘best practice’ organisations. The second four explored the situation in smaller organisations. To ensure precision, only sites that engaged carpentry apprentices were examined.¹ The first part, involving larger sites and organisations, was conducted to answer the seemingly straightforward question: what forms do mentoring and structures of support take in ‘best of class’ settings? The second set of sites was studied to see just how different they are, if at all, in smaller organisations. The analysis revealed the answers were far from straightforward. Certainly amongst the ‘best practice’ sites an impressive array of mentoring and pastoral care arrangements were in place. But in many ways these were the least important aspects of social support provided to apprentices. Closer analysis of these experiences revealed it was the broader array of structures around the apprenticeship model of learning and work that delivered considerable substantive social support. And what was particularly revealing was that this was not confined to apprentices in the traditionally skilled trade of carpentry. Indeed, arrangements of very comprehensive and wide-ranging support were extended to occupational categories and groups of workers not traditionally associated with trades training – managerial employees and populations of workers at risk of social exclusion in general and labour market exclusion in particular.

This finding emerged from the field work and was not an ‘a priori’ hypothesis which the researchers sought to test. In conducting the field work prime attention was devoted to examining mentoring and pastoral care arrangements; that is, the core concern of this project. As the field work progressed, however, it became very clear that few apprentices interviewed regarded things like EAPs as being relevant for them. While nearly all noted the existence of these and like arrangements, nearly all the apprentices interviewed regarded them as being there for ‘other people’. What also became clear as the field work progressed was that all the sites studied operated as rich ecologies of support. An individual’s status as an apprentice gave them access to the support that came from what could be described as very rich and very live ‘cultures of craft’, or more accurately, *cultures of vocational development*. In the two large firms studied this operated for occupations (e.g. project manager) above trade-level worker. And in the large group training organisations (GTOs) studied this culture could extend to non-trade level workers, who while not officially part of a ‘culture of craft’ did embody a ‘culture of care’ but with a strong vocational element. As one interviewee at East Coast Apprenticeships put it: care took the form

¹ Full details of the research design and methodology are provided in section 3 of the main report.

of ‘offering [marginalised and disadvantaged individuals] the dignity of work’. And the notion of work was not that prevailing in modern social policy as practised in Australia, where any job at all is regarded as better than no job. Instead, it had to involve work that deepened an individual’s capacity to act autonomously – and a key part of that was that it had to pay a decent wage, at the very least the minimum defined by the relevant award.

In the case studies that follow attention is devoted to documenting the mentoring and formal pastoral care arrangements prevailing in the sites studied. In all cases, however, attention is also devoted to reporting on the structures of support provided in the day-to-day conduct of the apprenticeship itself. It is in these, the often informal arrangements, that deep structures of support work to help apprentices make the transition from youth to adulthood, as well as from the status of novice to fully qualified tradesperson.

Tables A and B provide information on the organisational context in which the mentoring arrangements operated and distil the key findings of fact obtained from the field work.

Table A Summary of key features of the large case study organisations

Key features	Large case study organisations			
	Hutchinson Builders	Fairbrother Pty Ltd	MGT ^a	East Coast Apprenticeships (Group Training)
Organisational context	<p>Founded: 1912 Employment: 1300 employees Apprentices: 80+ Regional presence: All states & NT Growth: turnover</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1960s crisis - 1992: \$20m - 2000: \$215m - 2012: \$1.15b 	<p>Founded: 1973 Employment: 500 employees Apprentices: 80+ Regional presence: All Tasmania*, rural Vic. Growth: (apprentice numbers)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - took 20 years to train first 100 - now graduates 15–20 annually 	<p>Founded: 1981 Staff: 15 Apprentices: 290 (two-thirds in construction) Field officers: 4 Hosts: 100+ active at any one time. 20 in construction: 5 or so largest account for large percentage</p>	<p>Founded: 1988 Staff: 51 Apprentices: 300 Hosts: around 485 active at any one time Regional presence: Brisbane (and nationally for mining) Growth: three stages, with latest extending services to adult apprentices and down the occupational hierarchy</p>
Nature of apprenticeship model of vocational development	<p>Full integrated system with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) two streams – trades & managerial/leadership (b) own RTO does off-job element (c) prevocational arrangement – ‘doorway to construction’. <p>All coordinated by a self-financed Workforce Development Unit</p>	<p>Highly developed system built into operations – not out of the HR function. Has two streams – trades & managerial/leadership</p>	<p>Group training operations + in past had Aust Apprentice Centre and contract to provide Apprenticeship Mentoring Services</p>	<p>GTO is flywheel for comprehensive VET & employment services. Apprenticeship model applied widely for second-chance learning – accelerated adult apprentices & for supporting ‘at risk’ social groups</p>
Formal support arrangements	<p>Director Workforce Dev’t Unit Apprentice Development Coordinator Site managers Site supervisors</p>	<p>Construction manager Site manager Designated supervising carpenter (OzHelp education & Employee Assistance Program)</p>	<p>Field officers for group apprentices Site visits every 8 weeks</p>	<p>Field officers ‘Manager once removed’ arrangement</p>
Informal/de facto support	<p>Firm’s own skilled workers on site Tradie subbies on site Other apprentices, especially in later years.</p>	<p>Firm’s own skilled workers on site Tradie subbies on site Other apprentices, especially in later years.</p>	<p>Site-based supervisors Tradie subbies on site Other apprentices, especially in later years TAFE teachers.</p>	<p>As for other organisations & extensive array of supported pathways for disadvantaged groups.</p>

Note: In the course of field work involving My Gateway Group training a very fruitful lead was provided that resulted in extensive field work being done with Barangaroo Skills Exchange (BSX). The experiences of the BSX and apprenticeship at Barangaroo are reported as part of the MGT case study. It important to note, however, that the BMX is an independent skills centre, organised by Lend Lease and West Sydney Institute of TAFE.

Table B Summary of key features of the small case study organisations

Key features	Small case study organisations			
	Small business 1 (NSW)	Small business 2 (WA)	Small GTO 1 (WA)	Small GTO 2 (Tas.)
Organisational context	<p>Business has employed apprentices for over 11 years</p> <p>Specialises in structural carpentry</p> <p>Owner is a licensed carpenter</p> <p>Employees: 2 licensed carpenters</p> <p>Apprentices: 2 (1st year and 4th year)</p> <p>Employee number varies, with previously as many as 10 employees (including 4 apprentices)</p> <p>Business sometimes subcontracts other carpenters for larger jobs</p>	<p>Owner is a licensed carpenter and his wife manages administration and recruitment</p> <p>Owner has been self-employed for 14 years and operating current business for over 10 years</p> <p>Specialises in fixing carpentry (e.g. hanging doors, fixing skirting)</p> <p>Employees: 1 licensed carpenter</p> <p>Apprentices: 2 in 1st year</p>	<p>GTO in operation for approx. 30 years</p> <p>Staff: CEO/operating manager, administrative/HR/recruitment officer, 1 client service manager (field officer) – usually has 2 client service managers</p> <p>Apprentices: Approx. 80 (10 carpenters and 30 cabinet makers)</p>	<p>GTO in operation for over 30 years</p> <p>Staff: CEO/operating manager, 4 field officers, a finance officer, administrative officer</p> <p>Apprentices: 120 (70% carpentry, mostly traditional)</p>
Nature of apprenticeship model of vocational development	<p>On-the-job learning and task allocations are customised to individuals' needs and abilities rather than the apprentices being required to undertake all tasks</p> <p>Apprentices are paid above award according to skill and performance</p>	<p>Training is on the job and customised to the needs and personality of the apprentice</p> <p>HR and recruitment is handled by the owner's wife</p> <p>Apprenticeships are advertised and candidates undertake a 1-week trial</p>	<p>Organisational philosophy is to build a personal relationship with the apprentice as a valued member of a team</p> <p>Apprenticeship applications are screened, with approx. 10% being selected; once accepted, apprentices are supported more broadly in their vocational development e.g. option to try out another trade or suspending their apprenticeship</p>	<p>Active role managing the fit between apprentice and host employer, including counselling the host on supporting apprentice and option to transfer the apprentice to another host</p> <p>Apprentices are allocated to work directly under a tradesperson or in a small workgroup of 3–5 under a senior tradesperson/leading hand</p>
Formal support arrangements	<p>Apprenticeship centre manages the administration ('paperwork') required for the apprenticeships plus contacts the apprentice and business twice in the first year</p> <p>No other formal mentoring support</p>	<p>Business engages an apprenticeship centre to sign up and register apprentices</p> <p>Previously arranged a counsellor through the apprenticeship centre and sought assistance from TAFE but does not generally engage formal mentors</p>	<p>Client service manager (field officer) required to check apprentices once every 6–8 weeks, more frequently if issues</p> <p>No engagement of external mentors</p> <p>Support given to apprentices to organise counselling or drug/alcohol rehabilitation</p>	<p>Field officers (generally with a trade background, but not exclusively) aim to check apprentices every 3–4 weeks, minimum of 8 times/year</p> <p>OzHelp Foundation Life skills training – 1 day mid 1st yr plus one day in 2nd yr</p> <p>No engagement of external mentors, but the host employer's worksite may have a formal mentor and HR support</p>
Informal/de facto support	<p>Owner and licensed carpenters</p> <p>Other apprentice</p> <p>Support embedded in everyday work practice and learning e.g. daily tool box talks outline goals and site risks</p> <p>Discussing personal issues and seeking advice was encouraged</p> <p>Community social networks.</p>	<p>Owner and qualified carpenter viewed as role models for both life and skills</p> <p>Often worksite will have other qualified tradespeople and other supervisors</p> <p>Peer support with apprentices helping each other.</p>	<p>Host employer owners/supervisors (quality varies)</p> <p>Other tradespeople on site</p> <p>Other apprentices</p> <p>A previous apprentice who is now a TAFE teacher provides informal mentoring</p> <p>GTO's administration officer is a point of contact for picking up and discussing issues.</p>	<p>Host employer's supervising tradesperson or group of 3–4 apprentices with a senior tradesperson/leading hand (quality varies)</p> <p>Other tradespeople on site</p> <p>Other apprentices.</p>

The case studies

A 1 Hutchinson Builders: social support as integral to a highly successful business model

Everybody is a mentor here ... even tradies like plumbers and sparkies ... no one ever brushes you off ... everybody always has time to help you. (Second year apprentice carpenter, Hutchinson Builders)

Introduction

Over the last half century Hutchinson Builders have grown from a medium-scale firm on the brink of closure to being one Australia's largest construction companies. It remains a family firm, albeit a privately listed company. Its apprenticeship arrangements are integral to its business model. These have evolved to produce more than a steady stream of skilled people needed on the scores of projects it runs at any one time. Just as, if not more, important has been the development of apprenticeships as central to its strategy of building future management and leadership capability for the firm. Mentoring is part of the Hutchinson's apprenticeships. In many ways, however, these are the least important form of social support provided to its young apprentices. More important is the extensive array of institutional arrangements making up the 'Hutchies' way of doing business. This refers to a distinctive set of internal practices and external relationships that embody the firm's strategy for commercial success. These arrangements provide a rich set of enduring, supportive relationships that underpin its extraordinarily successful business model. It is this model – of which mentoring arrangements are a part – that provides rich support for apprentices undertaking their trade, management and leadership training at Hutchinson Builders.

Organisational context and characteristics

The company was founded in Brisbane in 1912. Today it has a presence in all states (as well as activity in New Zealand, Canada and Japan), with over 1300 direct employees and over a 80 apprentices. The key features of the firm's evolution are summarised in able A1. History rarely evolves in a direct, linear fashion. The story of Hutchinson Builders is no exception. Since an existential crisis in the mid-1960s it is possible, however, to discern two distinct phases in the firm's growth over the subsequent half century. Since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) a third phase is evident.

Table A1: Hutchinson Builders – key phases in its evolution

Period	Turnover	Central feature of market positioning	Internal restructuring	Development of key relationships	Observations on growth strategy
The early years 1912–1950s (Jack I and Jack II)	By 1930 largest privately own construction firm in Qld	Warehouses, offices, retail, private schools, churches, hospital buildings. Post war => industrial buildings	Traditional family firm, scaled up to 400 employees.	Traditional relations with suppliers	Business as usual
Stagnation, Drift + Crisis Mid-1950s–mid-1960s	Turnover reduced as a result of ill health of the father and son team	As above	As above	Steady loss of standing with architects and clients as performance fell.	Business as per model of the 1940s
Foundations for Growth 1966–1992 (Jack III – Carpentry and quantity surveyor quals)	1966: Crisis 1992: \$20m	Client, not size or sector focused. Re-positioned to undertake ‘specialised work’	Modernised production methods and organisation: New technology Programming Scheduling Quality control	Re-established credibility with: Suppliers Creditors Subbies Architects Clients	Gradually built capacity, especially in-house capacity, to take on bigger projects.
Rapid but stable expansion 1992–2000 (Jack IV – Civil engineering and MBA quals)	1992: \$20m 2001: \$215m	Pitching for large-scale developments in Queensland and beyond	Flatter management structures + organisational forms (e.g. regional, semi-autonomous team)	Extended networks, especially with new breed of younger developers	Continued to build large-scale standing productive capacity for quality control.
Diversification + increased geographic spread (Jack IV + Greg Quinn)	2001: \$215m 2012: \$1.15b	In addition to established core, expanded into supporting resources + education sectors.	Scaled up in-house management and trade capacity to control quality and costs. Created extensive in-house skills centre to better link on- and off-the-job training.	Extended networks into the resources sector and government.	Maintained a widespread property investment portfolio.

Source: Ian Ward and Suzy Richter, *The truth: Hutchies the super builder, Centenary Celebration Issue, 1912–2012*, Hutchinson Builders, Brisbane, 2012.

The foundations for current arrangements were laid following stagnation and accumulating debt in the first half of the 1960s. The firm had built a solid reputation in the first half of the twentieth century as a small-to-medium sized player in the southeast Queensland construction industry. Hutchinson's failed to embrace the new technologies and organisational arrangements that emerged following the second World War, which meant it missed the benefits of increased mechanisation in particular. It incurred a serious debt following an unsuccessful investment in one of Australia's first ventures involving strata title on a Gold Coast development in the early 1960s. While this form of tenure subsequently became popular, in the early years property buyers were reluctant to risk this form of ownership. This left Hutchinson's exposed with a large debt and an antiquated business model, limiting its capacity to discharge it. This was the setting into which the son of the owner – John Hutchinson (Jack III) intervened. As a third generation Hutchinson he knew the business well. He had completed his carpentry apprenticeship with the firm and gone on to obtain qualifications to become a quantity surveyor. He rounded out his skills in the industry working for the Queensland Department of Public Works. In 1966 he joined the family firm and set about restoring its fortunes. This involved a number of elements:

- restructuring management and staffing arrangement through selective 'promotions, demotions and sackings' (Ward & Richter 2012, p.26²)
- introducing modern technology as at that point 'major excavation was still being carried out with pick and shovel' (Ward & Richter 2012, p.26)
- modernising approaches to programming, scheduling and quality control (Ward & Richter 2012, p.27)
- restoring key relationships, especially with 'suppliers, creditors, sub-contractors, architects and clients' (Ward & Richter 2012, p.27)
- shifting the business from pitching for work based on 'size and type' to one driven by taking seriously 'client need' (Ward & Richter 2012, p.32). This resulted in the company specialising in work which 'other builders avoided ... it often sought out difficult jobs that required in-house building skills and expertise. As a result [it] became well known for complex refurbishments, where its own employees carried out the trades. This self reliance [was] based on a ready supply of in-house skills tradesmen ... This type of work served up healthy profit margins, even though it was usually much more difficult to carry out' (Ward & Richter 2012, p.31).

Slowly the firm recovered and from the early 1970s onwards embarked on a path of strong, if at times, volatile growth. By 1992 it had a turnover of \$20 million per annum.

Over the course of the 1990s and into the new century, the firm grew even more dramatically, reaching a turnover of \$215m by 2000 (Ward & Richter 2012, p.39). There were a number of elements underpinning this achievement. John Scott Hutchinson (Jack IV) became Managing Director in 1992. He had trained as both a civil engineer and obtained an MBA.³ Building on established relationships, he extended strategic connections to 'a new, young breed of property developers for whom Hutchies became the preferred builder'. (Ward & Richter 2012, p.39) He also refined internal organisational arrangements. From the mid 1990s a flatter management structure was established. This was based on:

2 | Ward & S Richter, *The truth: the Hutchies: the super builder*, Brisbane, 2012.

3 It is worth noting that his MBA thesis examined 'Training and development of foremen in the construction industry' (Ward & Richter 2012, p.33). This a matter for which the firm now has a highly respected reputation.

Autonomous teams operating out of 19 offices throughout Australia with each responsible for its own business development, designs, cost planning, construction, workplace health and safety and training.

This flat management structure places special obligation on team leaders to nurture clients, be non-adversarial, fair, honest and produce top quality product ... [clients] can nominate which team they want to work on their projects.

(Ward & Richter 2012, p.51)

The most recent phase of the firm's evolution dates from the early 2000. Since that time turnover has mushroomed to over \$1 billion per annum today. This has been achieved by building on the legacies of established since the 1960s. Importantly, its reputation for quality work achieved through integrating its large standing workforce with over 150 projects and strong networks with suppliers, developers and financiers meant it flourished, as opposed to faltered during GFC. Its financial strength and business model made it the preferred builder for many large projects commissioned at that time. It also diversified into the modular construction for the then booming resources sector (e.g. demountable homes for fly-in, fly-out workforces) and into government work, especially education as a result of the GFC counter-cyclical programs of the Rudd government. Growth in turnover was supported by growth in its direct workforce. As its centenary history noted:

Hutchies also increased its core of internal tradespeople ... The strategy was expanded to include internal linings, aluminium fabrication, pre-cast panels, pre-fabricated buildings, scaffolding and cranes.

Expansion of trades involved putting on as many apprentices as possible to be trained as future leaders.

A training operation was set up in 2007 to increase apprentice numbers from 40 to 350, with all training done in-house so apprentices would learn to do things the Hutchies way ... to get it right first time.

(Ward & Richter 2012, p.44–5)

Mentoring arrangements

Official structures

As Mournier has noted, there are three basic dimensions to skill: technical, cognitive and behavioural (Mournier 2001; Buchanan et al.2004). Hutchinson's apprentices are explicitly developed in all three dimensions. Apprentices are not just trained in the core technical elements of carpentry. In the latter two years, around half of the firms apprentices learn the management capabilities necessary to be effective site and project managers in the future. The firm has also devised high-level cognitive education in areas like materials science to ensure its apprentices have the deepest possible understanding of the matters shaping successful building. It is important to note the firm is also concerned with the wellbeing of your apprentices in the broadest sense. A key part of its training addresses what it calls 'life skills'. This covers matters such as healthy living, cooking, communications, punctuality, personal appearance and the importance of savings.

Responsibility for mentoring its apprentices is shared between leaders of the firm's Workforce Development Unit and middle management on worksites. The Director of this unit and his second in charge, the Apprentice Development Coordinator (ADC), play an active role in all apprentices' engagement with firm: from selection, through placements and ultimately signing off on their completion. The ADC in particular helps devise training plans and monitors achievement of particular

competencies achieved by scrutinising the apprentices' 'taskbooks'. Day-to-day responsibility for ensuring apprentices are well treated and receive the training required is the responsibility of a designated 'site supervisor'. This role is usually performed by either the Hutchinson's local site manager, a foreman or one of the company's trades people on site. The Apprentice Development Coordinator regularly visits all Hutchinson's sites to monitor the apprentices, checking progress in terms of skill development, but also ensuring progress of the life skills aspect of the training. During these visits they also made themselves available to apprentices in case there were any issues the apprentices need help with or advice on. The large number of sites at which the firm operates means the Director of training and Apprentice Development Coordinator were often out of the office and dealing their apprentices and their local supervisors at various sites around the country.

Apprentices' experiences

All apprentices interviewed reported very good treatment and development opportunities since starting with the firm. When asked who in the firm they could turn to for support – either educational or of a more general nature – all referred to the Workforce Development Director and Apprentice Development Coordinator. As one second year apprentice put it: 'Peter and Andrew are always there and always have the answers'. This same apprentice also noted that his first site level supervisor – a site manager – had identified that he, the apprentice, had an esteem problem and worked hard to build the apprentice's confidence from day one. 'I always felt welcome and never unwelcome ... As you grow you learn the skills in [making] conversation. And after a time you blend in and know who best to approach for advice'.

Apprentices interviewed differed quite significantly in their reports of formal support provided by the firm. One noted he had never had a designated mentor. On closer questioning, however, it became clear he had received considerable support from an array of people at the different sites at which he had worked. As one fourth year apprentice put it: the support you get 'varies job to job ... the person you get support from changes quite a bit'. At some sites it was from another Hutchinson employee on site, either a site manager, foreman or staff tradesperson. At others, subbies on the site played that role. And for a number apprentices interviewed, older apprentices often provided important advice and suggestions. While all apprentice interviewees knew that Peter and Andrew were there if needed, they reported that they rarely, if ever called on their time. Instead, they relied on these more local agents when assistance of any kind was required.

De facto arrangements of support

Formal apprenticeship arrangements

These latter observations highlight the bulk of the support provided to the apprentices came from the broader apprenticeship system operating at Hutchinson, rather than from the formal mentoring arrangements as such. Up until a decade ago Hutchinson's apprenticeships had been fairly ad hoc in nature. Recruitment had, in the words of one interviewee, been based on a contacts made through 'family and friends'. Apprenticeships are now far more systematically organised. The firm is a recognised registered training organisation (RTO) and delivers all the off-the-job training for its apprentices. The firm's Workforce Development Team of 15 is fully self-financing and all apprentices are paid for by the Hutchinson's 'Team' that engages them. At the time of the project fieldwork there were around 25 such teams running approximately 130 projects. Each 'Team' has a number of projects. Overall control of these is maintained by a Project Manager and Contract Manager (usually based at a Hutchinson's business

location). Actual delivery of the construction capability on site typically involves a site manager and foreman coordinating the efforts of a wide range of sub-contractors, and occasionally a small number of Hutchinson's own tradespeople. As a result, apprentices are based within sites where Hutchinson employees are usually a very small presence – sometimes as small as two.

Recruitment into an apprenticeship at Hutchinson is usually achieved by participation in some kind of prevocational training. This can involve, for example, successful involvement in a school-based apprenticeship. More common is participation in a three-month course based primarily on-the-job work placements called 'Doorway to Construction' or completion of a 12-month program called 'Ready for Construction'. Completion of this does not, however, guarantee a place at Hutchinson Builders. One of the apprentices interviewed reported that only four out of his intake of 16 were offered a place at the firm after completion. The company is primarily looking for future leaders – not just productive tradespeople. Selection to the firm requires successful completion of a selection interview, strong reports from work experience employers and satisfying a Team Leader that the apprentice will be productive member of his or her workforce. Training is task-based and synchronised with workflow. In quiet times, the off-the-job training is brought forward to ensure training does not compromise the ability to meet project deadlines when demand is strong.⁴ The Workforce Development Unit is primarily responsible for delivering 30 competencies associated with the Certificate III in Carpentry: 22 compulsory competencies and eight electives. As noted earlier, it also oversees study and career plans for all apprentices. It is now devising training for the next level – cadetships in higher-level project and site level management. It is also devising the more advanced education for future leaders in areas like materials science because the current training package is silent on this aspect of the building trades.

Apprentice experiences

The trajectory of particular apprentices through these formal arrangements varied dramatically. One apprentice reported that he had essentially stayed with same 'Team' for much of his apprenticeship. Another reported he had a long and continuous association with the same site supervisor. This supervisor had actively structured his work experiences so he could get a coherent, structured flow of learning sequences, given the projects he had had to manage. Others had had very different experiences. This group also reported it had received considerable support, especially for learning new skills and with advice on other aspects of life. One fourth year noted that he was attracted to mastering management skills and realised he had to carve out learning opportunities and find the support to get them. As he noted: 'I got a lot of information from subbies'. Another fourth year noted he had received good support from Peter and Andrew over the years, but at site level Hutchinson's staff had only been one source of development. According to him: 'I never had a mentor ... people find someone and stick with them. I've never worked with too many other apprentices ... you learn as you go along. You learn as you carry a load'.

Hutchinson Builders is, in terms of directly employed staff, one of the biggest construction firms in the country. At the core of its business is a nucleus of skilled staff – both technical trades people but equally, if not more important, a host of high-skilled project, contract and site managers and foremen. Formally, a very well-designed and highly embedded apprenticeship model of learning pervades the

⁴ It was noted by two interviewees it was the inability of any TAFE or private RTO to provide this kind of training that prompted the development of this internal training capacity in 2006–07. The reported immediate cause was that a Hutchinson's employee had broken an arm but could still do desk-based educational work. It was felt important to use this time to accelerate the off-the-job training component during this otherwise 'idle time'. This seemingly small-scale problem triggered a complete rethink and large-scale upgrade of the firms training capability.

organisation. This is centred around an innovative and resourceful Workforce Development Unit, which works actively with line personnel in 27 teams to provide a work flow sensitive approach to on- and off-the job training. What is clear from the accounts of apprentices is that the formal mentoring arrangements are of variable standing. For some they were recognised and appreciated – both those of the central unit and at site level. But what was even more significant was that even where formal mentoring arrangement were perceived to be basic, apprentices still found considerable sources of support – usually from subbies or older apprentices. The legacy of Hutchinson’s extensive restructuring with its roots going back to the re-positionings of the mid-1960s, mid-1990s and mid-2000s has been the creation of a very distinctive ‘ecology’ of support. This ecology simultaneously develops quality skills and support structures for the apprentices involved and good business outcomes for the firm.

A 2 Fairbrother: enterprise-based industry leadership in social support

Fairbrother has moved from being a company that simply builds large buildings, to one that makes people's lives better.⁵

Fairbrother is the largest construction employer in Tasmania and one of the largest in Australia. It commenced operations in 1973 and has grown, through hard times as well as good, with advances as well as setbacks along the way. It expanded into the Sydney market for several years, but has subsequently consolidated operations in Tasmania and southwestern Victoria. Since 1986 it has produced six apprentices of the year. Its founder and current Board Chair, Royce Fairbrother, and his wife (and lifelong business partner) Thea Fairbrother, have played leading roles in developing community-based mental health support services for Tasmania at large, and not just for the construction industry. The experiences of this firm highlight just how expansive a firm can be in providing support to young people at workplace, industry and community levels. But unlike most other firms where community-mindedness involves 'corporate social responsibility', which is essentially an aspect of its marketing operations, at Fairbrother the commitment to mental health support (at work and beyond) builds on profoundly deep values and structures of social support that pervade every aspect of the firm's business operations.

Organisational context and characteristics

Fairbrother commenced operations in 1973 in Devonport, northwest Tasmania. Over the last four decades it has mushroomed from a husband and wife partnership to a proprietary limited company with over 500 direct employees in their group. It took twenty five years to recruit its first 100 apprentices. Today it has around 80 apprentices in training, graduating, on average between 15 and 25 per year. The firm and its senior managers have also been leaders in taking up concerns with health and wellbeing of the company's employees and their communities. This initially involved support for local sporting clubs and things like the Devonport fun run. Talented athletes within its workforce are supported with accommodating work schedules and all staff and their families are invited to participate in the firm's fun runs and wellbeing programs. Over the last decade, however, the engagement with community mental health initiatives has been of a kind rare amongst businesses. The firm's founder has played a key, supportive role in bringing Ozhelp – a suicide support and prevention program for young workers in construction – to Tasmania. His wife – and initial firm business manager – has been active in the establishing innovative community housing and allied support services (Common Ground Tasmania) for the homeless, mentally ill and low paid. This is a business and community initiative, an example of how the firm's personnel have played a leadership role well beyond running Tasmania's largest building company. A comprehensive account of the firm's history has just been released.⁶ The key elements of its evolution relevant to this study are summarised in table A2.

⁵ Kellie O'Brien, *Shaking the foundations: the Fairbrother story*, Tero Sade,[Hobart], 2015, p.154.

⁶ O'Brien (2015).

Table A2: Fairbrother – key phases in its evolution

Period	Critical events		Guiding ethos	Core activities			Community activities
	Family	Business		Geographic reach	Building related	Business organisation	
1972–1978 Formation	Marriage of Royce and Thea		Building a family firm through ethical business and quality trades work	Devonport and Ulverston area, and hinterland	Odd jobs evolve into cottage construction. Joinery shop established.	Husband and wife partnership	Apprenticeship for quality trades work
1978–1992 Initial rapid growth	Engagement with Little athletics alerts Royce to 'health-productivity' nexus			Gradual spread through NW Tasmania Initial spread into Hobart fails	Shift focus to commercial + industrial construction.	Collateral from extended family (e.g. family farms as bank security)	Health initiatives start 1985 Firm organises the first Devonport Triathlon
1992–2003 Transition	Latent schizophrenia manifests as acute disability in son over 3-year period in early 1990s	Diversification into Sydney is significant but impossible to sustain after 10 years. Abuse of high trust business practices by Melbourne property developer results in '\$1m lesson'	Releasing family control and preparation for handing the organisation over to others.	All Tasmania + forays into Sydney and Melbourne Pull out of Sydney after 10 years Rethink inter-state inter-State Developer projects after Salamanca Silos project in late 1990s/early 2000s	Scale of jobs gets bigger. Manage risks openly + learn from mistakes => respect from suppliers deepens.	Values statement Management consultant facilitates company-wide rethink. QA and greater formalisation of procedures	Advanced approaches to leadership development start Late 1990s health assessments of the workforce commence Play leading role in bringing Ozhelp to Tasmania
2003 Current trajectory: measured, diversified and community minded growth	Royce's cancer experience cements changed role of 'strategic' as opposed to 'hands on' leader.		Giving back and growing people and community as well as the firm => commercially successful, community-minded firm built around the apprenticeship model of learning.	All Tasmania + southwest Victoria as trial for spread into other parts of regional Victoria.	Large firm with: : building - commercial work - industrial work - pub sector work : joinery : property development : Facilities management : Mechanical services + refrigeration	Royce and Thea hand company to the Board. Partnership with John Holland provides good joint venture model for the future.	Apprenticeships extended to leadership/management as well as quality trades training. Thea and Royce plays active role in supporting 'Common Ground Tasmania', independent living for disadvantaged.

Source: O'Brien (2015).

As the table shows it is possible to divide the firm's history into three distinct phases: formation, initial expansion and transformation. The transformation was triggered by multiple challenges, bordering on personal and commercial crises, in the late 1990s (and early 2000s). Prime among these were creative and thoughtful responses to two setbacks in particular. The first involved the deep challenge of grappling with the reality of a child who developed a particularly acute form of Schizophrenia as he matured during his late teens and early 20s. The second involved two serious financial setbacks. These arose from engagements with developers in the Sydney and Melbourne property markets. Losses arising from a three-year foray as a sub-contractor in Sydney in the later 1990s ended up costing the company in excess of \$3 million. Abuse of Fairbrother's high-trust approach to building arrangements in work done on the Salamanca Silos redevelopment by a Melbourne-based property developer cost the company just over \$1 million.

These experiences have profoundly shaped the firm's business model. The firm has never lost a deep commitment to producing quality work based on technical excellence in production, centrally based on trade skills. This has, however, co-existed with a deep sense of humanity – i.e. valuing integrity in all relationships and decent treatment for clients, employees, sub-contractors and the community at large. The crises of two decades ago triggered organisational innovation. This can be characterised as shifting from being a family firm based on quality trades work to building a community-minded firm, underpinned by deep commercial competence and organised around the apprenticeship model of learning. The firm has always valued the ethos of 'get the job built, you just can't just meet budgets' (to use the words of one manager interviewed). This now occurs in the context of very rigorous risk assessments and risk management processes. While it has a very large standing workforce, currently over 500 employees in its group of companies, on any one site there can be as few as three Fairbrother employees and rarely does its workforce constitute more than 10% of a project's labour input. This blend of a large number of direct employees working with a large network of sub-contractors allows it to manage significant training overheads for its labour force – but not so big that it compromises its commercial viability. In addition, its systematic approach to training is not simply a community service producing a public good. Expenditure on skill development is seen as an investment and not a cost: as one site manager observed, 'better initial training for new recruits delivers much higher apprentice productivity in later years'.

As is clear from this formulation apprenticeships have been integral to, as well as been shaped by, the evolution of the firm's business model. The firm has always valued providing exceptional service, and quality trades training has been central to achieving this for clients. With the increasing scale of operations and the more systematic approach to business planning and operations, the firm now uses the apprenticeship model of learning for developing future leaders – both for itself and the wider industry.

Mentoring arrangements

Apprenticeship arrangements at social support for young workers

Mentoring and support are inscribed at all levels and in all aspect of the firm's operations. The everyday structures for organising work provide the settings for discussing sensitive issues. One managerial interview put it this way: the company 'earned respect amongst apprentices' by their comprehensive approach to skills development. This provided the context for apprentices 'feeling safe' to discuss personal problems.

This is an ethos expounded by the firm's founder and current Chairman of the Board: Royce Fairbrother. He is as concerned about apprentices' development as adults as he is about their development as future tradespeople and construction managers.

They [young apprentices] turn the television on and they're told you can have this wonderful plasma TV – it's 48 months and there's no interest. They get a car. It's on hire purchase. They get a girlfriend. They have absolutely no idea how to budget. The girlfriend's great but then it falls apart. Then they get really down. They get in a hole. They can't go and talk to Mum and Dad about it.

...

One thing we have learned from our mentoring program is that when the kid's a bit disillusioned and the wheels fall off, their productivity drops – they lose their interest. The general response from employers is to go and kick them in the rear and say, 'Look, lift your game or you're out of here'. They end up getting the sack or walking away, and all they achieve by doing this is to dig a deeper hole. The apprentice becomes defiant. Our approach is to say, 'Look, I can see you're struggling. Can we help?' Totally different outcome. (O'Brien 2015, pp.144, 146)

The sources of support are not solely, or even primarily, the company's formal 'mentoring' or 'wellbeing' programs. Rather, it is a function of the highly developed and comprehensive approach to developing apprentices. The key elements of this are described below.

Custodians of the firm's apprenticeship arrangements

The firm does not have an 'apprenticeship master' housed in HR or corporate services. Instead, in the words of the firm's founder Royce Fairbrother,

the firm has Apprentice Mentors in each of their regions tasked with overseeing the Apprentice's growth and development. These people are especially chosen for their keen interest in training and developing young people and their 'Father Figure' traits. The Mentors basic objective is to provide coaching and mentoring to each apprentice and to ensure they acquire the skills, knowledge and experience necessary to become a fully qualified trades person. Additional to this is the key responsibility to provide personal and confidential support and ensure each apprentice receives appropriate 'Life Skills' training and role models values that are in line with the company's culture.

During the field work the Apprentice Mentor in Southern section was interviewed and observed in action. The current occupant was well known, liked and respected amongst all interviewees. He regularly visits all company sites in Tasmania, providing advice and support to site managers and supervisors as well as directly to the apprentices currently in employed by the firm in that region.

Recruitment and career paths

Competition for apprenticeships at Fairbrother is high. Traditionally it has taken on 16-year-olds who have completed Year 10. Nearly all have completed at least some work experience in construction before starting at the company, with many having obtained a Certificate II in Construction. The company takes great pride in offering a quality alternative to university as a career choice for young people. In making selections it recruits on applicant quality and their potential to contribute to one of two streams in the firm: one that will be site-based, the other in the office. The aim is to give future leaders and managers a sense of production and commercial reality before taking on management roles. Leadership roles that are office-based involve, initially, that of 'estimator'. These people progress to project management positions. The career structure for site-based work is more refined, with six distinct roles: apprentice, carpenter, leading hand, sub-foreman, foreman and finally construction manager. Nearly all

managers in the firm have come through the apprenticeship system – few if any have been recruited from university. The firm, however, encourages and supports higher tertiary level qualifications – after people have completed their apprenticeships.

On-the-job training: induction and supervision

Fairbrother provides a very comprehensive and highly structured learning process. Initial induction takes three days. In addition to dealing with the essentials of safety and the basic features of the industry, considerable attention is devoted to ‘life skills’ issues. This concerns such matters as managing finances and drug and alcohol awareness. In both first and second year, apprentices undertake a one-day session provided by Ozhelp. These concern matters of sound mental health practices and suicide prevention. The company takes special care to ensure the quality of on-the-job training. Only certain experienced carpenters are designated as suitable to have apprentices. As one apprentice put it ‘the company recognises not all leading hands are good teachers ... a few are recognised as being very good’. And as another observed: ‘they only ever put us with good training carpenters ... some of the others are only interested in doing a good job’. All apprentices interviewed reported that they had been allocated a particularly good ‘training carpenter’ for their first six months. This continuity of association was valued by all as a great way of settling into construction working life. The length of association with training carpenters varied dramatically amongst those interviewed. All noted, however, that generally the training experiences were very good – and if problems arose, they were rapidly redeployed to work settings where learning opportunities or quality of association were better.

Customisation and personal attention

Career development is not left to chance or for people to work out by themselves. One interviewee who had recently completed his apprenticeship, now on the project management track, noted that he had devised a five-year training plan, which mapped both the qualifications and work experience required for further advancement. All apprentices also have a clear understanding of what they will be learning over the coming 12 months. This is not an annual ritual devoid of substance. Each month the apprentice has what was referred to as a performance review, where both the supervisor and the apprentice noted what had been learnt since the previous month and what would be dealt with in the coming month. Every three months the Construction Manager with the official role of apprentice mentor met with the apprentice. These meetings do not just deal with the formal aspects of the training, but also provide opportunities for apprentices to share any concerns. They also provided the mentor with the opportunity to identify any problems early. Overall the apprentices interviewed reported that these arrangements worked well. One first year noted ‘it gives you a chance to report on what you’ve done ... and the leading hand reports on your achievements: high or low’. Another noted ‘it gives you a chance to ask for more variety in your work if the work is repetitive’. One later year apprentice did note, however, there could be problems with the transparency of the system. If you write something down in your performance appraisal ‘it goes to too many people ... this creates problems if you don’t like your job ... you don’t want to be seen criticising your immediate supervisor’. Concerns of this nature were, however, rare amongst the apprentices interviewed.

Group training a safety net

For the last three or so years all Fairbrother apprentices have been employees of BGAS – a group training company. This arrangement helped with reducing overheads, especially the discount on payroll tax and workers compensation provided by the State government to group training apprentices. It also meant that the group training field officer was in regular contact – between three and 10 times annually

– with apprentices. Most reported, in the words of one fourth year, ‘they were always there if you needed them ... but you rarely need them’. Not all were happy, with one second year noting ‘you see them three times a year ... and sometimes only hear from them if you’ve done something wrong’. Again, negative sentiments like this were rare.

Fairbrother as resource for community support

It is important to remember that Fairbrother is not just concerned about its own apprentices and commercial success. Since its earliest days it has supported – financially and through donations of staff time – community sporting events like triathlons in the regions where it operates.⁷ It has released its ‘apprentices of the year’ to perform the role of ‘apprentice ambassador’, who regularly address large gatherings of young people interested in options for their future careers. And as noted above, it has been particularly active in the provision of community-based mental health support services. For the industry, it actively supported (and continues to support) the introduction of Ozhelp in Tasmania. Since its arrival the number of suicides amongst young people in the state’s construction industry has steadily fallen from 10 per annum in 2008 to just one in 2014.⁸ Engagement with the Common Ground Tasmania community housing initiative has involved drawing other businesses into actively supporting – financially as well as organisationally – the provision of new forms of accommodation and allied services for people with, amongst other things, severe mental illness. Just recently the firm has established the Fairbrother Foundation to help with the education expenses of eligible children of its employees. For this firm, social support beyond the enterprise is as integral to its business model as social support for its own employees.

De facto support arrangements and the reality of formal structures at work

As highly developed as the firm’s formal structures of support were, it was the informal arrangements associated with their operations that were just as impressive. As one second year apprentice put it:

Fairbrothers is much like a big family ... the apprentices talk to each other a lot ... tell each other mistakes to avoid ... the company teaches you to look out for others.

Another put it simply as: ‘the company regularly advises you to help others, especially the new ones’. This helping ethos is linked to a deep respect for quality trade skills. As a third year noted: ‘The company has lots of local experts ... it is very open to sharing and learning new skills ... people take the time to teach you’.

Most important in this regard is the support the apprentices provide to each other. Many later year apprentices noted they had been taught a lot by senior apprentices early in their careers and now they were doing the same. A final year apprentice spoke for many when he noted:

... at the end of my first year I worked under some third year apprentices ... they taught me well as they knew where I was at as they had only recently been there themselves ... I’ve done the same. I’m now helping the younger apprentices too.

7 For example, the company played a leading role in organising the first triathlon conducted in Devonport in 1985.

8 <<http://www.ozhelptasmania.org.au/resources/OzHelp%20Tasmania%202007%20-%20V2014-12-12.pdf>> viewed 2 May 2015.

Conclusion

Fairbrother provides a powerful example of the support that really counts – that is the underlying support that is built into workflows and the development of human capability in its totality. Fairbrother is not just concerned with having technical competencies imparted to ‘get the job done’, it is concerned with developing highly productive and autonomous individuals capable of adapting to a wide array of circumstances at work and beyond. The key social structures of support it provides are not primarily its mentoring and workplace wellbeing programs – it is the firm’s high-quality, well-resourced apprenticeship model of learning and its practical commitment to craft quality and the community that is key. And underpinning it all is a socially concerned but highly disciplined commercially successful business model.

The ethos that has held it altogether is defined by a commitment to and pride in work and community. The firm’s commitment to the trades – especially carpentry – was a source of great pride, identity and care. Giving people a quality transferable skill was the unifying ingredient to the business and its skill regime. This gave coherence to pride in work and community. Integral to this was respect for skill different from – but regarded as equally valuable as – the academic/university notion of skill. And pervading it all was a commitment to treating all decently – at work and beyond.

A 3 MGT Group Training and Barangaroo Skills Exchange: Partners and paradoxes in social support⁹

I came from Coffs Harbour originally ... I dropped out of school there in year 10 and became a mischievous street kid ... I moved to Sydney to work in a labouring job my uncle found for me – but it fell through ... I'd just turned 18 and wanted to party with my mates. Sydney has so many openings with clubs, the Cross ... too many distractions. ... without them, I'd have been lost.¹⁰

(Experienced carpenter, now supervisor with Lend Lease at Barangaroo)

The experiences of this now seasoned and highly respected site supervisor capture neatly the importance and nature of structures of support provided by MGT. What is most significant about this experience is that it was not just the group training company that provided the support – but a network of loosely connected parties of which it was a part: family, TAFE and a large host employer. While MGT was originally selected as a case study to explore what the best of group training had to offer in terms of mentoring and support, as the field work unfolded it became clear its success could not be solely attributed to its staff and operations. Moreover, this group training organisation has won contracts to provide government-funded mentoring services – in addition to its standard group training role. As such it provides powerful insights into the many dimensions of 'support'. Surprisingly, this highlights the limitations – or at least the complications – of field officer-provided pastoral care and the potential virtues of separately funded 'mentoring' services.

Organisational context and characteristics

Macarthur Group Training was one of the first group apprenticeships schemes formed, and has operated continuously since 1981. Initially based in the Sydney's southwest, it now covers all parts of the city, the Illawarra and the south coast of NSW. Six years ago it changed its name to My Gateway. It currently has just on 15 staff. In addition to group training, it also provides apprenticeship mentoring services. At the time of the field work MGT had 290 apprentices and trainees, of which two-thirds were in the traditional trades – and the majority of these were in the construction trades, primarily carpentry. Its four group training field officers were supported by one full-time apprentice recruiter and one administrative staff member. At any one time it has approximately 100–110 active host employers, twenty of whom are in construction. Between 13–14 small businesses in residential construction customarily only have one or two apprentices at a time. The six to seven large host employers in commercial construction typically have multiple apprentices.

The nature of MGT's relationship with its host varied along a number of dimensions. The first concerned the type of skilled training it assists with. Smaller employers are often highly specialised, for example, working only on a particular type of form work. Ensuring apprentices get a well-rounded grounding in the

⁹ The chapter combines reports on two distinct organisations: My Gateway Group Training (or MGT) and the Barangaroo Skills Exchange (BSX). The latter is a partnership owned by Lend Lease and Western Sydney Institute of TAFE and part funded initially by the former Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council and the National Workforce Development Fund of the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency. The experiences are covered in this chapter as a key interviewee was on secondment from MGT to the BSX. MGT has nearly two decades of association with Lend Lease. One of the key insights provided in this chapter came from the comparison of support provided as part of traditional GTO operations and those provided by a new, dedicated 'mentoring' support officer funded federally. It is for this reason reports of experiences of both organisations are contained in this chapter.

¹⁰ 'them' = his uncle + an eight week TAFE 'Job Ready' (ie pre-employment) course + MGT apprenticeship (with field officer actively keeping him 'on the rails' every time he fell off(+ placement with Lend Lease + TAFE training.

trade can be difficult and, where possible, rotations between employers are arranged to diversify their skill base. Amongst the larger construction firms employers are often keen to prepare graduates for a career in construction management. For them exposing apprentices to a wide range of construction activities is important to ensure their competence as foremen, supervisors and site managers of the future. Such rotations often occur within the sites at which these firms operate. The second dimension of difference concerns the level of engagement – or what was referred to as ‘depth of partnership’ – between MGT and the host employer. As one MGT manager noted:

the challenge is to establish a partnership. Some just want the apprentice as cheap labour. Their lack of engagement with us is indicative of how they treat apprentices ... The employer who is engaged with the apprentice is also engaged with us ... If there is not a good partnership with the host ... this speaks to a lower level of concern with quality of the placement for the apprentice.

MGT has been a long-term partner with Lend Lease. Currently Lend Lease’s largest construction site in Sydney is at Barangaroo. This is one of Sydney’s largest ever construction projects. It will run for around 10 years. Integral to Lend Lease’s successful bid for this project was its commitment to leaving a legacy of a much more highly skilled construction workforce once the project had been completed. This is being organised through an onsite skills centre known as the Barangaroo Skills Exchange – more commonly referred to as the BSX. At the time of the project field work MGT’s connection with the BSX was limited. One of its senior field officers was on secondment as part of BSX. In much of the analysis that follows, site level experiences referred concern the situation at Barangaroo. It is included in this case study chapter because we were put in touch with the MGT secondee and conducted most of the field work with his active support as field work coordinator. It is important to remember that the experiences at Barangaroo are primarily a result of BSX activity and not that of MGT.

BSX is a joint venture run by Lend Lease and the Western Sydney Institute of TAFE. It has a staff of 30 funded from a variety of sources including the Commonwealth Government, the Construction and Property Industry Skills Council, the NSW Government’s Barangaroo Delivery/development authority – as well as Lend Lease and the Western Sydney TAFE. Over 3000 workers attend the Barangaroo site each day. BSX defines itself as ‘solutions’ – not simply training – provider. For example, it is responsible for inducting the 50 or so new staff who enter the site each day. It also runs a Certificate IV in Safety and Supervision. This is not being delivered as a standalone course, but rather as the backbone for developing a middle management network across the site, known as the Barangaroo Leaders Safety Program. And in addition to organising the off-the-job training for the 300 or so apprentices on site it runs education programs in language, literacy and numeracy for workers needing to improve these foundational capabilities. In short, BSX is the nucleus that ensures the site operates as ‘learning organisation’ and helps individuals (and the industry) genuinely live the reality of ‘lifelong learning’.

Formal mentoring arrangements

The MGT staff member seconded to BSX had been with the GTO for about a decade. He could speak with authority about the structures of support relied upon by their apprentices. What was particularly valuable were his observations about the nature of support provided by both group training field officers and how this compared with that provided by dedicated mentoring staff.

MGT is respected by its hosts, especially those with whom it enjoys a strong workforce development partnership, for a limited but important number of services. Prime among these are:

- recruitment: assistance with sourcing quality labour quickly

- training: assistance with devising customised training plans for each apprentice relevant to the immediate employer. They also helped undertake ‘gap analysis’, which helped firms identify quickly where TAFE training needed to be supplemented with in-house training, given rapidly changing work methods, which off-site providers could not be expected to know about
- redeployment: the flexibility to move apprentices on quickly if the demand for labour was not there – but secure in the knowledge the apprentice would find employment elsewhere
- monitoring: many firms appreciated the fact MGT checked with apprentices at least eight times a year. This provided a safety net for the firms who, given other demands, could overlook apprentices’ work and learning requirements. Field officers could also work as a resource for identifying early problems in performance and/or assistance in managing problems of this nature.

All apprentices interviewed noted that their MGT field officer had indeed been in regular contact with them. MGT managers also reported that host employers had called field officers where they suspected potential problems with suicidal tendencies. In one case, the field officer was the agent responsible for taking the apprentice concerned to emergency care and getting them hospitalised. There was also a report of an apprentice walking into a field officers’ office and ‘off loading’ years of emotional anguish associated with a dysfunctional and troubling family life. The field officer concerned, as well as the apprentice, both received follow-up care in light of the incident.

MGT’s formal pastoral care was easily as good as any of the other firms’ arrangements concerning this matter included in this study. The MGT secondee on the Barangaroo site now performs the role of delivering ‘mentoring’ services. This has meant it has resources and the accountability to do more in this domain for apprentices at this site. At the core of activities under this program is a three stage engagement process with the following elements.

- The first interaction with an apprentice is primarily concerned with introductions, getting the apprentice acquainted with the site and outlining what they are entitled to in terms of mentoring services.
- The second occurs soon after this and involves the apprentices completing questionnaires. These gather general information about their practical and material situation in life – not just their working life. For example, data is gathered to ascertain if they are eligible for a trade support loan, a travel concession card or a car registration rebate.
- The third occurs a month later. In this session apprentices complete a detailed survey that helps ascertain details like their living arrangements and whether they have had any trouble with the law.

This process results in mentors having a ‘profile of information’ by which they can identify apprentices who are likely to need greater support. This can then be offered. There is no need to wait for the apprentices to request them to be involved or have an incident that triggers their intervention.

In terms of the quality of support provided for the purposes of mental health, the MGT secondee felt dedicated mentors were able to provide better levels of social support than field officers, for a variety of reasons. The most important reason was because field officers are often involved in disciplinary matters. The monitoring function is not necessarily positive for the apprentice – at least in the short run. If the apprentice has been found to be slacking off, it is often the field officer who is called in to solve the problem. Field officers are also often called on to solve administrative problems such as payroll anomalies and the like. Given these activities, many apprentices can be reluctant to share sensitive personal information. The scenario is easy to imagine, as one manager put it:

Last week you were asking me about sloppy work and turning up late. Then next month or a year later, after seeing some warning signs, you enquire are ‘there any problems? Can I help?’ Why would the apprentice open up given that experience?

Some field officers do have the ability to play both roles – disciplinarian and carer – but staff with such skills are hard to find. Separating the roles of field officer and mentor appears to have helped improve the level of support apprentices receive. People designated with purely a mentor role can consider the apprentice’s welfare as their sole aim – free of the burden of having to appease the employer. Mentors associated with BSX reported apprentices are generally more forthcoming and more willing to talk about financial issues and family matters. And while the ratio of mentors and field staff to apprentices is roughly the same (at about 1:70), because there isn’t much administrative work or having to deal with the employer, the effective ratio is lower. Interviewees noted that, while these differences were real, they should not be overstated. Mentors still had to take employer views into account in situation of conflict. But as a matter of emphasis, designation as a mentor appears to give such personnel a greater capacity to grapple with the complex personal issues than was the case for standard GTO field officers. As one seasoned ex-field officer, now mentor put it: ‘mentors are concerned with the personal dimension of the person not the operational matters of the apprenticeship’. And as another with similar background noted: ‘apprentices have been more forthcoming [since the dedicated mentoring arrangements have been in place]’.

De facto arrangements of support

As with the other cases the day-to-day support provided by peers, co-workers (especially subbies) and supervisors operated in conjunction with the formal arrangements noted above. One mentor noted that ‘third and fourth years often help out teaching on the job. But we need to pay great attention to what they are teaching. Most have not been trained in this role’. One fourth year apprentice reported how a supervisor from his first year actively worked to provide continuous work for him over the life of his apprenticeship even though the rest of the team changed. He really valued the continuity of association and hoped one day soon he would be able to provide such support to young workers coming through. One supervisor interviewed reported that he regarded informal mentoring as integral to his role. He often provided unofficial updates to the apprentice coordinator, noting in particular where he thought there might be emerging risks. He defined mentoring as ‘having someone to look up to ... have a laugh, have a joke but at the same time explain things and get their confidence up’. He reported that he sees many apprentices who are very reserved and who will not seek help even if they do not understand something or need help. He reportedly saw his role as getting their confidence up so they ask and answer all sorts of questions about the work they do. As he noted: ‘apprentices shouldn’t be feeling embarrassed about asking questions’. He also noted it was easier to get apprentices to open up about their personal issues if they have a professional relationship and have talked about work and skills matters before. He also noted he had had no formal mentor training and feels like is still learning today. It is also important that not all apprentices reported unambiguously good experiences. While none noted any fundamental flaws, some noted there could be placements where the learning and support experiences were limited. As one second year painter and decorator noted: sometimes the training you get is patchy. Some employers just use you as cheap labour. ‘If you want to learn ... you push and then you learn’. Clearly confidence is a big part of the equation.

MGT and BSX have amongst the most formally developed support systems, and especially mentoring arrangements, of any of the cases studied. The insights about the potential benefits of role clarity – as between an agent like a field officer and a dedicated mentor – are worth reflecting on, even if the evidence of the respective benefits of one agent compared with another is not conclusive. What is also striking about the experiences of these organisations – especially the situation involving Lend Lease and its partners at the Barangaroo skill exchange – is that MGT has not been operating in isolation. On the contrary it appears to have been part of broader culture of support. And that support goes to both nurturing skills development relevant to people as economically productive beings, but also to personal development to individuals as people often in need of care more broadly and intimately defined. This culture was embraced by supervisors as well as agents officially designated part of the support and mentoring system. It was this culture that appears to be the strongest element of the support provided to apprentices not just of MGT – but to many if not most apprentices engaged at the Barangaroo site.

A 4 East Coast Apprenticeships – social support as the defining feature of an organisation

You can't just 'contract in' pastoral care ... you need to have it embedded in an employment relationship. This means you have a better connection with the apprentice. (Programs Manager, ECA)

The last large 'best practice' case study is that of East Coast Apprenticeships (ECA). This is an example of a group training company in its purest form. It is also a case which highlights the difficulty of separating out 'mentoring' or 'pastoral care' as distinct features of an organisation. These are not so much identifiable or integral features of the organisation; rather they are a defining feature of it and all its operations. While the following account follows the same format as the previous three cases – organisational characteristics, forms of mentoring and de facto support arrangements – it is important to recognise this characteristic of ECA. In some instances the account may appear repetitious, but this is unavoidable given the all pervasive nature of pastoral care within this organisation.

Organisational characteristics

ECA operates in the northeastern part of Brisbane. At the time of the fieldwork it had just under 400 apprentices and about a dozen trainees. Half of these were in the construction trades, with most of these being apprentice carpenters. After the local council, this group training company was the largest employer in the district. It worked with a network of approximately 6000 employers, of whom, at any one time, about 300 were actively hosting apprentices and/or trainees. The organisation employed just on 30 staff, 8 whom were field officers.

The organisation began in 1988. Since that time it has moved through three distinct periods of operation. These are summarised in table A3.

Table A3 East Coast Apprenticeships: its evolution

Period	Group Training Activities		Community construction	Employment support programs
	Apprentice and trainee #	Significant GT development		
<p>1988–1998 Foundations + Initial Activities</p> <p>Management style – elementary 'Not for profit'</p>	From 12 to 87	Major growth in traineeships	<p>Obtained licence to be a regional building company. Speciality: construction + renovation work for homes for the disabled.</p>	<p>1997–99: Obtained and then lost contract for Jobs Network services in the district</p>
<p>1999–2008 Rationalisation + Growth</p> <p>Management style – highly competent 'for purpose' (ie helping others)</p>	From 180 to 700	<p>Shift to trade training as 'core business' focus</p> <p>2006: devise distinct adult group apprentice model with Theiss</p>	<p>\$4 million worth of work for Qld Dept of Housing</p> <p>Constructed purpose-built house of paralysed Qld police women from public subscriptions</p>	<p>Conducted 40 'Break the cycle' programs — a Qld government funded initiative for disadvantaged unemployed people.</p> <p>2000: Training program in aged care (discontinued) 2001: STAR – work experience program for severely disable young people</p>
<p>2009–15 Consolidation + Extension of apprenticeship model to adults + disadvantaged groups</p> <p>Management style – as for previous period + honouring employment security commitments in tough post GFC world</p>	From 600 — 399	<p>2010 — 2014: National Apprenticeship Program (NAP). Leading role in large scale pilot of 'gap training' for adult apprentices in resources sector. Over 200+ gain trade status after completing 18 months quality 'gap training' on + off job. Extensive funding + other support from Fed Govt + several large resource companies.</p> <p>2015: extend this model to long term unemployed refugees. This pilot financed solely by ECA</p>	<p>Post GFC funding for this kind of work scarce</p>	<p>2009: Trade Opportunity Program (TOP) – 1 wk TAFE+ 5 wks with employer (pre-employment) 2013: Group Training Dyslexic Support Program 2014: Vocational Training + Employment Centre (with Mission Aust.) – support for Indigenous apprenticeships : Females in the Trades Program 2015: Refugee VET Program – small pilot modelled on NAP : developing Opportunity Knocks (OK) as feeder to TOP as bridge from for the long term unemployed</p>
<p>Summary of evolution</p>		<p>Focus on classical apprenticeships + extension of the model for efficiency reasons to near skilled adults. Can now produce fully qualified trades people in less than 15–18 months.</p>	<p>Capacity to undertake such work dependent on government + community support for social housing.</p>	<p>Extension of the apprenticeship model of learning + work to disadvantaged groups for jobs below trades level. Also operate as feeder programs into apprenticeships.</p>

The first period, 1988 to 1998, were the foundation years. After starting as a group apprentice scheme supported by three councils, it embarked on a wide range of activities, including taking on traineeships, undertaking community construction projects and, for a short while, delivering employment services as part of the Howard government's initial round of 'Jobs Network' contracts. A new management and leadership team took over in 1999. This marked the second period of operations. This team put the organisation on a more professional footing. ECA shifted attention to focusing on supporting apprenticeships in the traditional trades, especially construction. The focus on group apprenticeship became (and remains) 'core business'. Other activities such as limited construction of community housing, especially for those with disabilities continued. The organisation also delivered a suite of activities directed at helping unemployed youth into the labour market as part of the Queensland Government's 'Breaking the cycle' program. But the prime achievement during the second decade of operations was increasing apprentice numbers from under well under 100 in 1998 to just on 700 on the eve of the Global Financial Crisis. The most recent phase of operation has been defined by a creative response to the challenge of the post-GFC world. While no staff were sacked, apprenticeship intakes fell dramatically. As a result the number of apprentices in training fell to levels approaching half those that prevailed in 2008. ECA has not simply shrunk to accommodate more volatile and often weak demand in the construction sector. Since the GFC it has taken the apprenticeship model into a new domain of 'second chance' learning for work. For older workers it has hosted the development of National Apprenticeship Program (NAP). This was an initiative directed at taking experienced workers and 'topping up' of their training through adult apprenticeships in the resources sector. This has worked to boost levels of boilermakers and electricians in mining in particular. For a host of disadvantaged and marginalised groups it has delivered – and in some cases pioneered – programs that blend on- and off-job learning to help hard-to-place individuals into jobs, often by means of supported entry into apprenticeships.

Pervading the organisation is a very distinct and coherent ethos. This is informed by two fundamental assumptions: people should be as self-reliant as possible; and they need support to attain and maintain this status. Outwardly, the most commonly espoused value is that of care. Instead of defining itself as a 'not-for-profit', it prefers to see itself as a 'for purpose' organisation – and the purpose is 'helping others'.¹¹ Equally, however, the deep commitment to quality service and professionalism pervades the organisation. The brief account of the organisation's history shows that it has been both entrepreneurial and adaptable. As the CEO has noted: 'We seek to offer quality service with integrity'.¹² It is not, however, only an organisation for society's winners. Quality is maintained by giving people from all parts of the labour market a place. If someone is not good enough to meet the quality standards for an apprenticeship in the traditional trades, options are available in a wide variety of pre-employment and prevocational programs provided by ECA. What is most distinctive about this organisation is that work is taken as the reference point for care – a regime of care that could be characterised as involving a commitment to *inclusive vocational development*. Support is not so much 'case management' with a 'mentor' or someone designated responsible for 'pastoral care'. Rather support for this organisation involves providing: a diverse range of potential pathways; and the means to progress along them. The coherence of the pathway is defined by a notion of vocational development – tacitly informed by the apprenticeship model of learning and work. As such mentoring and support for psychological development is not a separate service: it is integral to the activities provided by a wide array of

11 ECA, Annual report, 2013–14, pp.20–1.

12 *ibid.*, p.21.

partners. This ensures there are a wide array of potential sources of support, with trainees and apprentices able to draw on support that is appropriate for them. They do not have to rely on some 'standardised' form of support. Support, in other words, pervades an ecology of vocational development nurtured by ECA.

Formal mentoring and pastoral care arrangements

All ECA apprentices interviewed reported positively on their experiences at work, at TAFE and with the ECA. As one first year apprentice put it: 'I'm finding this apprenticeship pretty cruisey and I don't need much help'. A third year spoke for many when he observed the system worked well, but you 'should not be scared to ask questions'. He thought things might not be so effective where apprentices were shy by nature. Several reported that they had a helpful induction, which included being given basic education on mental health and young people. Only one apprentice interviewed, however, reported reading this material, which he reported was 'very interesting'. By and large apprentices reported they would turn to family or friends for support if major problems affected their lives, things like problems with parents, boy/girlfriends, friends and debt. On matters of skill they reported they would turn to either their work mates, supervisors or TAFE teachers. All recognised they could turn to their ECA field officer if they had a serious problem and felt they had nowhere else to turn. But as one first year apprentice carpenter interviewed put it: 'I'm not the sort of guy to ask to help'.

The observations of the apprenticeship need to be placed in context. Interviews with ECA management, field officers and specialised support staff identified that a well-designed system of support surrounded these apprentices. In a sense, their limited awareness of, and even more limited use of, these arrangements was indicative of their success. These arrangements operated more as a system that prevents problems emerging as opposed to one of 'crisis management'. All senior ECA personnel mentioned they had only one or two serious episodes requiring intensive support for their apprentices each year. For example, one who had moved to quit smoking had a severe allergic reaction to one of the medications repressing his desire to smoke. This triggered an incident that required him being taken to hospital for intensive care. The apprentice called his field officer in the moment of crisis and the field officer arranged for the ambulance. There were reports, however, of less life-threatening incidents. For example, one apprentice had had a severe panic attack at work and was been supported through it by his host supervisor and field officer. Another reported that a field officer anticipated that an apprentice under his charge was about to be evicted. The field officer warned the apprentice – and in so doing took the intensity out of the ensuing disruption.

At the core of the mentoring arrangements is the field officer. There is usually one field officer for every 50 apprentices. They play the role of managing the relationship between the apprentice and host employer. In many cases they are as much a mentor for the employer as for the apprentice. The key activities they perform include:

- organising inductions: both into apprenticeship as large and with particular hosts
- mentoring: providing advice and support as needed such as being able to text them at any time
- mediating conflict: this is not common, but does happen. solutions can involve facilitating the working through of differences, as well as arranging for the redeployment of the apprentice to another host if necessary
- referrals: where a serious problem emerges the field officer may not be able to provide the solution but can offer informed advice on who is best to address the issue.

- practical administrative and organisational support: such as helping young people with paperwork associated with finances, housing and transport rebates, all the helpful work that is not normally covered by the traditional conception of mentoring/pastoral care.

Through the course of the interviews with ECA personnel it became clear that considerable thought has gone into understanding what pastoral care means. The organisation has an official two-page policy statement on it. A particularly thoughtful former field officer articulated the qualities ECA valued and endeavoured to nurture in this strata of its workforce.

It is not just a matter of being available or making contact with apprentices ... you need to be able to get people to speak.

You have to have your ears open all the time.

A good field officer knows how to probe – not all can do this ... As ex-tradespeople they are trouble-shooters by nature. They have an investigators mind ... you need to control the flow of information ... you need to be able to put issues in context ... not all field officer can do this ... you have to want to develop and value these skills.

While there has been some turnover amongst field officers it has been limited. The stability of staff has meant the organisation has acquired over time a team with the skills noted above.

Supporting the field officers is a range of other agents.

- ECA Consultants: these people are responsible for recruiting apprentices. This is a large and complex job. It frees the field officers up from the detailed work of having to ‘source’ labour for hosts and thereby enables them to focus on support for both apprentices and their hosts.
- Contact officers within ECA: the group training company encourages apprentices to contact staff other than their field officer if they think they need support independent of the field officer. This is a kind of ‘manager once removed’ arrangement. Every year a number of apprentices use this facility, contacting people like the Operations Manager and Programs Manager directly.
- TAFE and trade training teachers: sometimes teachers identify problems or changes in performance amongst apprentices. They can act as an early warning source for potentially emerging problems with apprentices and alert field officers to issues that may not have come to their attention.

De facto arrangements of social support

In many ways the formal mentoring and pastoral care arrangements at ECA were the least significant part of the organisation’s structures of social support. Three other aspects of its operations were also at work.

The extended network of support associated with the apprenticeship model of learning

Like the other case studies, there was extensive evidence from the apprentices themselves of the wide range of individuals and authorities they could turn to for advice and support about a host of matters – work and personal in nature. Prime among these were peers. Clearly older apprentices regularly help younger apprentices. Equally, experienced tradespeople – not just the immediate supervisor – provide a reservoir of support of apprentices. One noted, while the older hands sometimes get frustrated, it is usually with the situation, not the apprentice. And another noted ‘most experienced tradies are happy to take time out to teach you because you eventually you help make their life easier on the job’. One

apprentice went as far as to observe that ‘we are all like a family on site – we all look out for each other and help each other out’. Another noted: ‘the host employer will always have my back’. Evidence of a supportive culture of craft was extensive amongst the apprentices interviewed.

An array of vocational pathways

It is important to remember that while ECA’s ‘core business’ is defined at group training arrangements for apprentices, it is not solely a ‘group apprenticeship’ organisation. In recent years it has built up the capacity to offer a suite of programs relevant to a wide range of potential labour market participants who would not normally be involved with the traditional trades. Indeed, it has gone to considerable lengths to offer a pathways for people who would normally have no hope of entering the trades – but devising programs based on the apprenticeship model of learning. These programs can be briefly summarised as follows:

Pre-employment programs

- STAR program: this is a work experience scheme for profoundly disabled young people. It provides them with the opportunity to work for two hours a week over a four-week period with staff in the ECA office.
- OK (Opportunity Knocks) Program: this is currently being developed. It will be a week-long program for the unemployed, designed to ease their potential entry into a pre-employment program – TOP – that is it is a systematic induction to the construction industry.
- TOP (Trade Outcomes Program): this is conducted over five weeks and involves one week initial off-the-job training, followed by four weeks on the job (with every Friday back at the training provider – usually TAFE). It is designed to help marginal individuals find potential interest and motivation – and a potential employer to take them on as an apprentice.

Trade support programs

- Vocational Training and Employment Centre: this is run in conjunction with Mission Australia. It offers ‘support to businesses that might employ Indigenous job seekers at no cost to the employer’ (VTEC leaflet). ECA works with Mission staff to then find appropriate apprenticeship host employers. ECA and Mission field officers then support both the apprentice and host employers to ensure the placement succeeds.
- Females in the Trades (FIT): this is a specialised support service established to try to boost the level of females in the carpentry trade to initially seven and ultimately 12%. Currently in ECA less than 4% of its apprentices in the traditional male trades are women.
- Dyslexia Support Program (DSP): many talented people are excluded from work in higher-level occupations because of dyslexia. ECA uses language-free assessment tools to identify a candidate’s capacity for completing a traineeship or apprenticeship. Having identified talented individuals ECA then works with a range of partners to identify tailor-made pathways to apprenticeship completion.

Adult apprenticeship programs

- National Apprenticeships Program: in 2006 ECA provided support to Theiss Contractors to take on a range of people with part of the skills necessary to be a tradesperson, and then provided ‘top up training’ to make them fully competent. From 2010 to 2014 this idea was piloted nationally, with ECA coordinating the recognition of prior learning and coordinating the top-up training – both on- and

off-site – with a number of large resource companies and institutes of TAFE. The pilots ended up training well over 200 participants. They came from one of five streams of labour:

- apprentices who had not completed their trade training
- ex-defence diesel mechanics and electricians
- trades-people seeking dual trade status
- Australian residents with overseas qualifications
- trades assistants from the engineering and construction sectors.

All participants needed to have at least 40% of the competencies required for full trades status and the capacity to master the rest in fewer than 18 months. The pilot was successful and resulted in the production of over 200 qualified tradespeople. The recent shake-out in the resources sector has, unfortunately, reduced the demand for adult apprenticeships of this type in the short term.

- Refugee VET Program (RVETP): building on the lessons learnt from the NAP, ECA is now piloting a similar arrangement for the refugee community. Because no governments have funding available for such a pilot, the group training company is financing an initial pilot of 14 refugees itself.

A web of tacit, but highly developed, partnerships

The support apprentices and participants in the above programs receive in making the complex transitions into paid work is only possible because ECA mobilises active support from a wide range of long-term partners. The key partners involved include:

- host employers
- training providers, especially in the TAFE sector, such as Skills Tech Australia
- fellow group training organisations, especially Migas, Golden West and Smart Employment. Ideas, learnings, procedures and benchmarks are actively shared with these sister organisations
- technical experts, for example, psychologists such as custodians of Q Test, the instrument used in the Dyslexia Support Program
- state and federal parliamentary representatives
- local councils (the original sponsors of the group training company)
- board members with expertise in business and other intelligence relevant to the organisation's functioning
- federal government funding for more ambitious program, for example, the National Apprenticeship Program for the resources sector.

Pastoral care is not a part of ECA: it is the defining feature of all aspects of the organisation's operation. The arrangements work to prevent, as much as possible, problems emerging. Over the last 15 years approximately 10 apprentices have died, nearly all from motor accidents. None have suicided. The arrangements are based around highly skilled field officers. This is, however, merely the most visible part of support system. Just as, if not more important, are the structured pathways provided for those seeking access to apprenticeships, either from non-traditional feeder group or as adults. The entire regime of care, however, only flourishes because of the wide range of partners mobilised to contribute to the operation.

Table A4: Summary of key findings from the large/best practice case studies

Key dimension of the case study	Extent to which the apprenticeship model of learning is used as a platform for providing social support beyond that required for technical training and degree of reach across the labour market beyond traditional jobs + feeder groups			
	Directly employed apprentices <i>Hutchinson</i>	Blend of direct and group training arrangements <i>Fairbrother</i>	<i>MGT + Barangaroo</i>	Pure group training <i>East Coast Apprenticeships</i>
Organisational, worksite + occupational characteristics of the case studies — including extent of occupational coverage in terms of training provided above and below the traditional trades	<p>Large company</p> <p>Company apprentices often limited presence on any particular site</p> <p>Apprenticeship covers both preparation for project management/leadership as well as skills trades</p>	<p>Large company</p> <p>Company apprentices often limited presence on any particular site</p> <p>Apprenticeship covers both preparation for project management/leadership as well as skills trades</p> <p>Strong commitment to drawing in non-traditional feeder group (e.g. women)</p>	<p>Moderate-sized GTO, largest host in Australia</p> <p>Company apprentices in very large cohort of apprentices</p> <p>Focus mainly on the technical trades.</p> <p>Very active in drawing in non-traditional feeder groups (e.g. indigenous)</p>	<p>Large GTO mainly hiring out to smaller hosts</p> <p>Apprentices often limited presence on site, often with very small employers.</p> <p>Focus almost exclusively on technical skills — not managerial</p> <p>Comprehensive engagement with non-tradition feeder groups. Wide array of pre-apps + pre-employment support</p>
Formal mentoring and pastoral care arrangements	Apprenticeship master Induction	Extensive arrangements — especially concerned with mental health	Standard + mates on construction training + support	Standard
De facto arrangements of social support embedded in the apprenticeship ecosystem of workforce development	Very strong culture of the trade – with strong emphasis on management and leadership development.	Very strong culture of the trade – with many dimensions of support. Strong emphasis on management and leadership development.	Very, very extensive training regime with on-site skills centre + host of trades based support structures	Very distinct pathways to vocational development broadly defined – all based on apprenticeship model of learning. Engage with many forms of second chance learning.

Contrasting cases of support in small organisations

A 5 Small Business 1 (NSW)

I invest in my employees because I'd rather a team of people who know what they are doing rather than people waiting for instructions from me so it's in my interest to give 20 minutes, no even 10 minutes a day is all they need, one-on-one to explain to them why we are doing what we are doing. That makes them a better carpenter. I never ever had that when I was an apprentice. I was just a sheep and I was made to follow orders and if I wanted the information beyond my role, I was told maybe a bit later but it never came to me. (Small business owner and licensed carpenter)

Organisational context and characteristics

The small business is a Sydney-based carpentry company that works within the inner metropolitan areas. The business specialises in structural carpentry such as walls, floors and roof frames: 'the skeleton of the house', rather than internal fit-outs like doors and architraves. They mainly do residential houses.

The business has been engaging apprentices for over 11 years. It currently employs two apprentice carpenters, one in his first year (17-year-old male) and one finishing his fourth year (24-year-old male), along with two licensed carpenters, in addition to the owner, who is also a licensed carpenter. The number of employees varies from year to year. In previous years, the business has had as many as 10 people on the books, including up to four directly employed apprentices. The business also sub-contracts other carpenters from time to time to undertake larger contracts.

Formal mentoring and pastoral care arrangements

There is very little formal mentoring and pastoral care organised through the business. The owner engaged his first apprentice through a group training organisation, however, he frequently has apprentices referred to him through his social networks ('I don't advertise') so now he just directly hires apprentices with the help of an apprenticeship centre.

The apprenticeship centre handles much of the paperwork required to create and manage the apprenticeships, as well as helping the business and apprentices to access incentives from the government. The help provided is largely limited to administrative help; however, the apprentice and business is contacted twice in the first year: 'it's generally about every six months in the first year, then after that they disappear. I don't see anybody after that'. Beyond this, the business has never engaged a formal mentor for any apprentice.

De facto arrangements of social support

While there was little in the way of formal mentoring, considerable informal social support is provided over the course of the apprenticeship. The business owner voiced a strong commitment to the pastoral care and support of young apprentices, which he explained as being informed by a sense of moral duty and his own experience of negative treatment as an apprentice.

Got it tough when I was young, it was a different world in the late nineties when I was an apprentice and I worked with people who didn't even want to know your surname and if they had a task to be done, it didn't matter how you do it. So with me, it's more personal and I find the team gels better ... I learnt what not to do, that's how I was taught. I've seen what my bosses did and I knew that I don't want to be like this guy I don't want to run a business like this person. I didn't have a good mentor, I knew what not to do. These guys are learning from me what to do. There's a different way of teaching and learning here.

Recruitment and engagement

The process for engagement in an apprenticeship begins with the candidate being referred to the owner through the owner's social network or the apprenticeship centre and resumes will also be sent directly to him. At the first contact with the candidate, the owner will ask three basic questions: Do you drive? Where do you live? What year of an apprenticeship are you in? A preference is given for those who drive and live nearby but the business owner reports not considering other factors like where the apprentice was schooled ('I don't discriminate between anything like that. It's how you perform on site').

The owner will arrange a two-week trial with the candidate, paid at the award rate. The owner states that the trial is as much for the candidate 'to find out whether our company and our line of work and the people that we work with are suitable to them' as it is for the business to assess the candidate. 'If they're not comfortable and they're just motivated by the pay, they won't last that long'.

During the trial, the owner will assess the candidate's capability and if the candidate is accepted, the pay will be increased to be above-award requirements. 'And I'll put their pay above award. We're only talking about \$30 more than the award wage but that \$30 is enough for them to travel a week and whatever else. It's a lot at their age.' He will also consider adjusting the pay to better reflect the apprentice's skill and performance level.

Support embedded in everyday work practice

The support is embedded as part of the practice of everyday work and the social life of the worksite. Every day begins a toolbox talk where the team meets up on site and lists their goals for the day, outlines site dangers and other possible risks (including who else is working on the site) and anything else that might affect the team's work. Outlining the goals in this way lets the team know when the targets have been met for the day and creates clear expectations for the apprentices' workloads that allow room for social interactions.

When you're spending 8 hours a day with somebody, you get to know them on a personal level of course and we try to make the workplace an enjoyable environment. So we have fun because the goals are outlined for the day – we must reach our goal and also have fun along the way.

On-the-job learning is felt to work best when the apprentice gets a chance to see the task being demonstrated first for them before attempting it, rather than only being told instructions. There is explicit recognition of the individuality of each apprentice: 'everyone has different needs and different abilities – and that's the main thing'. This awareness leads to on-the-job learning support and task allocations being customised to individuals rather than the apprentice being required to undertake all tasks: 'So we give them tasks suitable to their abilities and this is all stuff that I have to think about as a business owner the night before and make sure I don't put any kid in a position that could jeopardise their health or even scare them off from the industry, especially when they're fresh'.

There is also the recognition that apprentices will often have to deal with a range of issues that could affect their wellbeing, such as relationship and family troubles, and how the work environment has the opportunity to provide support:

That's why we try to make an environment so when these things do happen, they're happy to still come to work. It's an escape for them. It's a good place it's a positive place for them to be so when these problems do arise, they know they have – you know it would be harder for them to rock up to a workplace that is a tough environment when you have personal problems so we're already starting off on the right foot.

Talking about personal issues and seeking advice was encouraged, especially during lunchtime chats, where there was a lot of team discussion. The business owner's approach to providing advice was not to tell the apprentices directly what to do but to give examples of similar situations and how he handled them instead.

The business owner reported that he felt that he had a moral obligation towards caring for his apprentices that he didn't think was standard practice in the trade:

I don't know if you're going to get the time from other people or you're going to get another person like me because I really take on these apprentices and really try to nurture them not only to be a good carpenter and a good person but and be a business owner.

Community safety net

The business owner acknowledged that he has sometimes had to 'let go' of apprentices, most recently this happened when one apprentice was felt to be a negative influence on the another apprentice's learning and work performance. However, the business owner took on the responsibility to find replacement apprenticeship for the dismissed apprentice via his community networks, reporting that the apprentice is still in that job and doing well.

TAFE was noted both by the business owner and one apprentice as an important source of support for both learning and pastoral care.

Apprentices' experiences

The apprentices reported having a good relationship with their boss, repeatedly referring to him as 'nice man' and a friend who cares about them and being happy with their working conditions. They reported viewing their employer as a role model in their lives, both professionally and personally. They view both the owner and the qualified carpenters as mentors for them because they help them learn. One apprentice who had worked for other employers previously in his apprenticeship noted how much better his current employer was by comparison; particularly valued was the quality of the learning received, the high standard of the work performed by the business, and that he was being given his full employment benefits such as superannuation and his tool allowance. The apprentice reported that other employers had taken advantage of him, not paid him his employment benefits and had work environments where being shouted at and sworn at was common.

A 6 Small Business 2 (WA)

It was a bit tricky to begin with because I didn't do any woodwork at school so I sort of jumped straight in to the whole carpentry side of things so that was a bit of a task but being with a good boss and all that, actually a good group of people as well for the first week, the first couple of weeks was hard but got around pretty well after the first couple of weeks. (First year apprentice, 17 years old)

Organisational context and characteristics

The small business operates and is based in the suburbs of Perth and specialises in fixing carpentry such as hanging doors and fixing skirting, shelving, eaves and decking. The owner is a qualified carpenter who has been self-employed for the past 14 years and has operated his current business for over ten years. He spent the first few years by himself before going on to engage 10 apprentices. He currently employs two 17-year-old first year apprentices and another qualified carpenter. His wife, who has a background in human resources, handles the administration of the business and the apprenticeships, as well advertising for and recruiting apprentices.

Formal mentoring and pastoral care arrangements

The business has never engaged formal mentors, nor considered doing so. Help with signing up and registering apprentices to an apprenticeship is provided through an Apprenticeship Centre, which also operates as a group training organisation, though the group training services are not used by the business. The owner prefers to directly hire apprentices: 'you pay a lot more to go to one of those organisations but it's hassle free but I'm willing to do a bit of paperwork'.

The business used to employ a talented apprentice who developed significant problems with drug use in connection with family issues. They were able to organise a counsellor through the Apprenticeship Centre and had some assistance from TAFE; however, that did not solve the problem and the apprentice was let go.

De facto arrangements of social support

Recruitment and engagement

The business owner's wife will usually put out advertisement when they are recruiting for a new apprentice and receive 15–20 calls as a result. The business owner then speaks to them on the phone and says that he can usually tell if they will clash or not. He will then have a meeting where they can chat face to face. If that goes well, a one-week trial is organised. The business owner notes that he will know four hours into the trial whether the candidate will work out or not. In particular, the owner looks to see if the candidate has motivation for the work and whether they are physically able to deal with it.

Support getting into work

When the apprentices start working they receive an induction at the current worksite. This induction reinforces the protocols to work safely, including personal protective equipment, safe practice, what tools to use and how to operate them safely. There will often be other tradespeople at the worksite who the apprentices will talk to. For example, at the current worksite, there are about 40 other tradespeople and the apprentices will often talk to the cabinet-maker and other supervisors at the site. The worksite

can sometimes be hard ('it's a blokey industry') and 'verbal dressing-downs' do occur, though there is recognition that each young person is different (some are 'harder', some are 'softer') and that the delivery of criticism needs to be tailored accordingly.

The apprentices were friends prior to starting, with one apprentice being recruited through being encouraged by the other apprentice to apply for a job opening. The apprentice who started first already had experience in woodwork at school and had worked for a week with another carpenter, so found getting into the work easier. '[The first week] was GOOD. It was different. It was good going from not doing anything.' He received help from the business owner and the qualified carpenter, as well as having other supervisors at the worksite checking on how he was going.

The other apprentice had started two months later and had not had any experience working with timber so found it more difficult, especially the first couple of weeks. Getting on with his boss and other people at the worksite helped him get into the work, despite having a lot of struggles. He was also aided by his friend and fellow apprentice. He reported going over to his friend's house on the weekend and they would discuss work to get ahead.

Mentoring and role models

Mentoring was generally viewed by the apprentices as being similar to teaching but more practically based. It was being shown how to do the task and supported in being able to learn how to do it yourself.

[Mentoring is] like teaching ... but more of a hand's on sort of way. Like instead of just getting told something over the phone and learning it for yourself... it's them showing you sort of everything like so if you stuff up you know they're there.

The apprentices reported that there was a strong social learning support on the worksite, with the boss, the qualified carpenter and other supervisors on site helping them to learn how to do carpentry and how to do things safely. The quality of the work delivered by the business is felt to be high and this is valued by the apprentices.

The boss and the qualified carpenter were viewed by the apprentice as role models whom he could talk to and get advice from. 'I look up to my boss ... he's a great guy. I want to be sort of like how my boss is right now because he's in a really good spot with his life.'

While mostly this advice centres around work, this has also included help with personal matters. One apprentice reported these conversations with his boss and the other qualified carpenter as being particularly valuable in helping him get through a difficult period in his personal life.

I'm always with them [my boss, the qualified carpenter and other apprentice] except for a couple of my mates. The people I work with ... they are honestly like family. I enjoy getting up to go to work at early hours of the morning so that I can see them. It's great, good people and all that. They are there to help a lot, not just work issues.

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It was good knowing that if I didn't like it I could speak to [field officer]. I had a secure job so no matter what happened, I would always get placed somewhere to finish my apprenticeship. It's more I liked having that security so that I wasn't just employed by that one company. I could be moved around... I think I just knew that if I didn't like it, I could move somewhere until I did like it I reckon. It made it a lot easier. Knowing that they [group training organisation] were there, they said just stick at it. They said everyone starts off there. I didn't really know what I was getting myself into fully. They basically said that's how everyone starts and I trusted them. Got better so [they were right].
(Fourth year apprentice who has just completed, 22 years old)

Organisational context and characteristics

The group training organisation was established 30 years ago to supply the furnishing industry. They previously were also registered as an RTO; however, they discontinued with that line two years ago due to the cost and lack of viability. At their height, they had 150 apprentices on their books. They now have approximately 80 apprentices in furniture and building, with around 10 carpenters and 30 cabinet makers.

They have very few staff. There is the CEO who is also the operating manager, an administrative officer who looks after recruitment and HR. They would normally have two client service managers (field officers); however, at the time of the case study, only one client service manager who had recently been hired a few months ago, and were in the process of hiring a second client service manager and the CEO was stepping into fill that role partly.

Formal mentoring and pastoral care arrangements

The main role that is charged with mentoring and monitoring apprentices for issues is the client service manager role, which is the equivalent of a field officer. The client service manager is responsible for checking on both apprentices and host employers to manage any issues, as well as recruiting new host employers. At the time of the case study, due to the temporary shortage of staff, the client service manager was looking after over 70 apprentices. While she had worked in a previous group training organisation where she had to look after 70 apprentices, she felt that was too much and the ideal number was more around 50. The CEO has been filling in as a field officer and going to meet with apprentices directly.

The client service manager is required to check on apprentices at least once every six to eight weeks if there are no major issues and the apprentice is settling in well. However, if an apprentice is having issues then they will check in much more frequently, for example, three times a month.

The organisation has not engaged external mentors to directly support their apprentices. This is largely because they feel that such an approach could potentially interfere with the relationship between the organisation and the apprentice that they are carefully nurturing:

If you build that relationship properly and you treat the kids properly, you can hopefully get to the point where the kid will understand that he is part of a team here and if he does the wrong thing, he's letting down the host, he's letting us down, and he's letting himself down. That's the relationship that we try to build. It doesn't always work. We want them to feel valued and we want to help them, but that's largely through getting to know them and them getting to know us.

The organisation does not provide specific mental health training; however, it has supported apprentices through seeking counselling and other forms of help such as rehabilitation for drugs and alcohol. The organisation reported being open to engaging external mentors, who were specifically trained to deal with youth mental health issues.

Recruitment and induction

The organisation undertakes a variety of recruitment activities including presentations to schools, connections with public and private training organisations, through recommendations from TAFE lecturers and involvement in careers expos. However, the most number of applications come through advertising on online job boards.

Once they have contacted the organisation, they are asked to provide more details about themselves and the sort of apprenticeship they are seeking, as well as a resume. These applications will be filtered, for example, to remove people who appear to not have any real interest in being an apprentice or who live too far their target location. Only about 10% of the applications make it through the selection process. One host employer who was interviewed noted that he had recently changed group training organisations and had found that this organisation did more screening of their apprentices than the other and that it resulted in apprentices with 'better attitudes'. If selected, they would interview the apprentice and create an info sheet about the apprentice (for example, if the apprentice has a vehicle or has done a pre-apprenticeship), which can be provided to a potential host employer seeking an apprentice.

There is an induction at the group training organisation premises and an induction on the worksite. This will only occur once the apprentice has been found a suitable host employer. If a host employer already exists then it can be a matter of only two days from selection to being inducted into work. However, if there is not already a host employer allocated, then it could be any time from one to four weeks. During the wait to be allocated, the procedure is to keep in touch with the apprentice at least once a week. If the apprentice is under 18 then the parents are usually involved and if they are over 18, then less so.

The induction at the group training organisation will usually occur on a Friday and will involve going over what their responsibility is and what their host employer's responsibility is, providing them with a book on workplace safety, giving them work clothes, protective equipment and sunscreen. They are also required to watch videos on workplace health and safety and complete a test on whether they understood the content.

When they are placed with a host employer, there is another induction with the host on that site. The purpose of the induction is to check whether the site is a safe work environment and that the apprentice is clear about the way in which the site is organised, such as starting and finishing times and other workplace practices.

Supporting the apprentice commit to a trade

The organisation prefers to recruit apprentices who have had some exposure to the trade, such as having done a pre-apprenticeship, work experience or having a family member who has worked in the trade. 'Generally those who have some knowledge or experience in the trade will do better than those who just decide to do it for some reason or another.' Despite this, sometimes apprentices will discover that they are not suited to a trade but have interest in another trade, and support will be provided to help them change trades.

Where apprentices wish to leave altogether, they will have a conversation with them and their host employer to see if there are other underlying issues. 'Usually, it's an environmental thing – didn't realise it was going to be so dusty or dirty. We do try to filter these things out.' There is also the option for the apprentice to try out another trade for a week to see if it suits. Where apprentices are undecided about whether to stay or what they want to do, they can put their apprenticeship on suspension for up to six months to consider whether they really would like to do the trade. After six months, if they decide not to continue, the apprenticeship is cancelled but they can reinstate it at a later date if they change their mind.

Disciplinary process

The client service manager role will also be involved in managing the disciplinary process. This will often be raised by absenteeism from TAFE and work. The process includes putting together a list of incidences of absenteeism to see if there is a pattern, meeting with them to see understand what might be the underlying issues, and written warning letters.

De facto arrangements of social support

'Some of them [host employers] are very committed to training ... some are more tolerant than others ... some of them are very good [mentors], some of them are not so good.'

The experience of the group training organisation has been that the quality of the support embedded in workplaces and their practices differs from host to host. This was felt to be largely due to the guiding motivation for the individual host employer for taking an apprentice on. Most would take on apprentice as they felt there was a need to train future tradespeople for their industry and fewer, but still quite a lot, were committed to training our youth.

And then there's a level at which some of them would say, it's ... cheaper [labour], the kid will learn something and ... I'll get him to do some things and it will reduce my costs. That would be the least in my experience. The majority of them are in the other two categories.

These different attitudes are reflected in the willingness of the employer to work through issues that may arise in relation to the apprentice. Some host employers are more likely to appreciate the commitment of the group training organisation to the care and wellbeing of the apprentice and will work with them to support the apprentice and resolve issues. Those host employers can make very good mentors. On the other hand, there are host employers who don't want to deal with any issues and ask for the apprentice to be replaced.

A previous apprentice and TAFE teacher who provides informal mentoring to some of the organisation's apprentices at TAFE noted that in her experience, apprentices who are engaged with a group training organisation can be let go more easily by their host employer in comparison to direct employers. However, the existence of the support network and having back-up has meant that she has found issues more likely to be picked up and dealt with. As a consequence behaviours were felt to more likely change for the better when apprentices are engaged with a group training organisation. Another observation has been that she has found it easier to follow up absenteeism at TAFE as she can easily notify someone at the group training organisation, while it can be more difficult and take longer to get in contact with a direct employer.

Supporting host employers

One employer reported valuing the high level of support provided by the group training organisation when one of his apprentices developed a drug addiction issue and started not turning up to work. He consulted with the group training organisation to work out a solution and the young apprentice was put on leave for three months and his participation in a drug rehabilitation program was organised. The apprentice was able to deal with his issues and is now back at work again.

Multiple sources of support

Apprentices are situated in a network of support, which included the group training organisation, the supervisors at the host employer and also the lecturers at TAFE, are in regular contact with the administrative and recruitment officer. The administrative/recruitment officer is a constant point of contact and interaction for apprentices from the moment of recruitment. While she looks after administrative, financial and training matters, they will frequently let her know if they are having issues or she will talk to them about problems they might be having about which they might not feel comfortable talking with others.

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It's not one size fits all, that's the thing you have to remember. That's what worries me sometimes with the training systems ... is that they structure them so that the apprentices all have to fit in with the system. You're dealing with individuals who have different levels of capacity and understanding and levels of interests. Whatever we do has to be customised for the individual.

(Field Officer, Group Training Organisation)

Organisational context and characteristics

The group training organisation has been in operation for over 30 years. It specialises in the construction industry with approximately 70% of its 120 apprentices on its books being engaged in carpentry, mostly traditional carpentry. In the past it has engaged 150 apprentices at the height of the Rudd government's building stimulus, and 110 at its lowest. The organisation's host employers are mostly sole traders. The organisation also engages a smaller number of apprentices to large construction firms. The focus of this case study is on the smaller sites.

There are 7.5 full-time equivalent staff employed: the operating manager, four field officers, a finance officer and an administrative officer. The field officers cover the whole of the state, so are generally based in offices in their homes, although they are usually out on the road. Whole-of-organisation meetings are usually held every three months, but the staff will talk to each other frequently during this time. The organisation reports that the current economic climate is putting strain on the construction industry. Compounding this, external funding for supporting services is being cut or looks likely to be cut.

Formal mentoring and pastoral care arrangements

Formal mentoring and pastoral care are delivered through the group training organisation's field officers. The organisation does not engage external mentors as this is viewed as the organisation's role. Each field officer looks after between 30-40 apprentices, with 50 apprentices felt to be too many for the provision of adequate support. The organisation generally recruits field officers with a trade background, though not exclusively (for example, a previously employed field officer was not from a trade background but instead community services trained and was felt to have been excellent). A benefit of having been a tradesperson is that experience can be used to relate to the apprentice.

You actually have real experiences. That in itself for me seems to break down a lot of barriers. As soon as they realise that you were a tradie yourself, that seems to make a lot of people more responsive ... When they talk about a particular issue, I remember some cases having been through it myself.

Field officers generally aim to check on apprentices to see that everything is going okay every three to four weeks, with the requirement being at least eight times a year. They also aim to meet with the host employer every three to four months. The responsibility to look after the apprentices is paramount. One field officer noted that he tells the apprentices who he looks after that they can call any time of the day or night if they have any issues. However, the aim is to develop self-reliance on the part of the apprentice through supporting them to work out the problems for themselves.

Listening was felt to be a key skill in mentoring, as is being respectful and trying to understand the apprentice:

Telling people what to do and how to do it, especially when you've got the generational difference, nah that just doesn't work. To me, listening, having a conversation and being strong in putting in your point's okay but not dictating terms. That's the one thing that I reckon turns people off really quickly.

(Field officer)

Recruitment and induction

The organisation mainly recruits through their connections with the VET in Schools program. They also conduct advertising drives and are contacted directly due to their reputation as construction specialists. The advantage of going through the VET in Schools program is that the candidates have had some exposure to the trade to see it is something they like and are suited to. They also have a chance through presentations to participants to advise on important selection criteria, such as having a driver's licence, so they can start preparing themselves. Once applications are received, they are sorted and selections for follow up are made. The candidates are interviewed and undertake a written test that includes testing for literacy and numeracy.

It was reported that an ideal candidate for employers used to be a young person who was in Year 11 with a driver's licence and a certificate II. However, due to the downturn in the economy, more employers are preferring to take on younger candidates, in Year 10, to reduce their costs, but having the same expectations as they might with a more qualified candidate. Older youth with a certificate II are being squeezed out and finding themselves too expensive to hire.

The first part of the induction is a half-day session at the organisation's premises, where they will be given workplace safety training and testing to prepare them for what they can expect on the job. Due to the way they recruit, most apprentices have already had experience on a worksite through school. The second part of the induction occurs when the apprentice starts at the host employer, where they will be introduced to the worksite and to those with whom they'll be working, a process which will take place over the first few days. The organisation will also sit down with apprentice, TAFE and the host employer and develop a training plan for the apprentice and help the apprentice to select core units.

Life skills training

A not-for-profit organisation (OzHelp Foundation) is engaged to deliver a short course on life skills and youth suicide prevention. This course used to be four days, a number of years ago; however, the difficulty of getting apprentices off the job has reduced the delivery time to two days. One day is delivered about mid-way through an apprentice's first year and then the remaining day delivered in the second year. It is generally scheduled in the winter months when it is easier for the apprentices to have time out from work. The course includes awareness and skills training on topics such as drugs and alcohol, mental health, grief management, self-harm, money and seeking assistance. The course was felt to be valuable by both staff and apprentices. One 22-year-old apprentice who had completed the course noted that, while he hasn't yet had to deal with those issues, 'it should be a requirement of any apprenticeship ... I think it should be a part of doing an apprenticeship that you get that support, especially some guys that need it', and that the biggest takeaway was knowing 'if you have any issues, talk to someone'. The organisation also uses this organisation to provide counselling services to apprentices. An example was given of an apprentice who had attempted self-harm and was persuaded after initial reluctance to get counselling assistance, after which he returned to his apprenticeship and successfully completed it.

De facto arrangements of social support

The organisation advertises a little in industry journals read by their target market for host employers. The recruitment of host employers is mostly organised through the field officers through their going to talk directly with businesses face to face. Interested employers will be vetted via a selection process, which includes providing a profile of their company and workplace to make sure they have suitable workplace practices and procedures. Host employers are required to be financially viable, reputable and responsible, with sufficient qualified tradespeople to nurture apprentices.

Support getting into work

As part of the induction, apprentices in housing will be allocated to and work directly under a tradesperson, while apprentices in general construction will be placed in a small workgroup of three to five under a senior tradesperson or leading hand.

The organisation has found that, while larger companies can provide a lot of organisational support such as having a nominated apprentice mentor and dedicated staff for safety and HR issues, there's usually far more personal relationship between the apprentice and the employer in smaller businesses. Both situations can result in positive or negative outcomes; it was reported to really depend on the individual and the business involved. There are times when a tradesperson 'who are genuinely interested in the welfare of the young person and makes sure they do the job properly and learn the skills'. These tradespeople will make sure to keep an eye out for the apprentice while they are working. On the other hand, there are workplaces where the apprentice is quickly handed off onto menial tasks with barely any supervision or guidance.

If I've got a one-man house builder who is very good with working with young people, that apprentice is going to get the best training, the best mentoring they could ever hope for. Likewise, if they're going to a major construction site where there is [a very good apprentice mentor], he'll spot an issue with an apprentice and he'll do whatever he can to fix it. You've also got other sites (big and small) where the apprentice feels isolated on site ... If you've got a one-man show ... doing all the work, the apprentice is just standing there and is told to find something to do because he's too busy to think about it. Small or large, there are good and bad stories. But I'd say there are more good stories. My experience is that most of our host employers are genuinely and actively involved in mentoring.

Customising the fit

The group training company doesn't just provide mentoring support to the apprentice but they also play an active role in managing the fit between the apprentice and the host employer. This can mean counselling the host employer on how to better treat the apprentice. If the issues cannot be resolved then the apprentice will be transferred to another more suitable host employer. A recent example is when the field officer was visiting an apprentice only to overhear the apprentice being sworn at and abused by a supervisor. The supervisor was counselled but the behaviour continued so the apprentice was removed from the site and they are in the process of finding him a new host.

When the relationship between apprentice and host employer is a good match, the mentoring relationships through the workplace can be deeply nurturing. One apprentice engaged with a small business talked about viewing his boss as one of his best mentors, with his boss even helping him and his partner build their house outside work time. When the match is good, there can be less need for support from the field officer. However, the field officer was viewed as being the key person to speak to if there were 'issues working with particular people, if the dynamic wasn't quite there'.

The organisation also has a mechanism by which, if an apprentice has issues with a field officer or they are not compatible for some reason, the apprentice can be transferred to be under the care of another field officer.

Professional development and communities of practice

There is a strong culture of supporting mental health in the group training organisation. In addition to the training and support that the apprentices receive, the organisation's staff also go through mental health first-aid training, with all but one field officer having completed this training. The one field officer who has yet to receive this training was new and the intention was for him to receive this training shortly.

The field officers take part in a broader community of practice around vocational education. This community is facilitated by a regular email list managed by a member of state government. This list will be posted a few times a week with notices of networking meetings and training being organised by various groups. It is through this list that the field officers often find out about professional development courses that are available. One example of a course discovered through this list was the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST).

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