



Helping young people into the driver's seat

Rail union ASLEF has partnered with Virgin Trains to create the very first Apprenticeship programme for train drivers that sets a new benchmark for the rest of the industry.

◆ Martin Moriarty

Three young people in the North West have become the very first apprentice train drivers at Virgin Trains, after the company, drivers' union ASLEF and training provider TQ Training launched a brand new, high-quality programme earlier this year.

Simon Tyrer, Sam Jones and Joe Wilson started their 52-week programme in February. They undertake their on-the-job training from the different Virgin Trains depots where they are based (Preston, Manchester and Liverpool, respectively) and come together in Crewe once a week to work on the NVQ component of the programme.

Sam Jones, who is 23 years old, was already working as an onboard caterer for Virgin Trains when she applied for the programme. "Everyone – the drivers I've been working with, the driver management team at the Talent Academy, TQ Training, ASLEF – have all been really supportive," she says. "If I've got any questions there will always be people willing to help me – it's been really good."

Simon, the oldest of the three at 29, had been managing a branch of the Carphone Warehouse before applying for the Apprenticeship. "I knew I had quite a gap to bridge from phone shop

manager to train driver so this Apprenticeship has been an absolute godsend: it's allowed me to get from where I was to where I want to be," he says.

Joe may be the youngest of the three at 18, but this is already his second Apprenticeship – he had already completed two years on an automotive technician programme at Peugeot Citroen before deciding to make the move to the railway. "I knew from my previous experience how good Apprenticeships were for young people but I'm enjoying this one more because of the challenge – it's a big learning curve," he says.

All three are currently shadowing mentor drivers in their depots, accompanying them to see how they all tackle the different daily challenges of safely transporting thousands of passengers on their routes. Sam recently took the chance of travelling down to London with Lee Stevenson, who is the ASLEF rep on the drivers' company council from Manchester, where she is based.

"Sam came out with me and we went down to London together: she's got plenty of enthusiasm, as have the other two," Lee says. "I think the Apprenticeship is a great way of

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introducing young people into the rail industry: if we can get some more into the driving grade – especially with the enthusiasm these three have – that would be fantastic."

At the end of their Apprenticeships, Sam, Simon and Joe are guaranteed entry to the driver training programme. And while they are earning £15,000 this year, their salary will more than double when they start driver training, which will take between two-and-a-half and three years.

The pioneering programme was put together by a small working group last autumn, under the joint leadership of representatives from Virgin Trains' operations team and ASLEF's lifelong learning department.

"We weren't doing it because Apprenticeships are the hot topic of the week: we've been trying for a long time to get an employer in the sector to buy into our vision," says ASLEF's Union Learning Fund (ULF) Project Coordinator Shirley Handsley.

"But all the people around the table wholeheartedly believed in this programme and could see the benefit of it: right from the early negotiations, everybody involved has believed this is the right thing to do."

Virgin's Operations Project & Competence Manager Sam Edwards agrees. "There was a lot to do in a very short space of time but everybody involved had a real passion to get this up and running – and if we'd had any longer, I still think we would have got the same results," he says.

Shirley started talking to the Virgin Trains' learning and development team about a possible new driver Apprenticeship programme back in May 2016, after the concept was negotiated by ASLEF Industrial Officer Kevin Lindsay. But it was only once Sam became involved from the operations side four months later that everything really began to pick up speed.

"Once the operations side became involved, the process moved from conversations into a real programme, which demonstrates the importance of operations leading on a programme like this," says Shirley.

With a short timeframe to design the programme, Sam and Shirley set up a small working group in September 2016 that comprised the two of them and a couple of people from provider TQ Training, with occasional input from Virgin Trains' learning and development team. They met once a fortnight to exchange ideas and in between times they talked to the key people in the operations side of the business and the industrial arm of the union to ensure everyone was happy with all the key components they were planning to include.



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When he started working with Shirley last year, Sam himself had only recently completed a Degree Apprenticeship in Business Management at Manchester Metropolitan University, through the Virgin Trains Red Track Programme.

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That experience has helped him work on the Driver Apprenticeship programme, he says. "Red Track is a new scheme, just like the one I'm running now, so I could use that experience to throw into this programme," he says.

While the programme is in its early stages, both sides are very happy with how it is shaping up so far. "Virgin Trains has set the benchmark with this programme and I hope that others within the industry follow," Shirley says.

Sam believes his effective working partnership with Shirley has paid dividends for the Driver Apprenticeship programme and beyond. "Shirley has been accommodating to me, I've been accommodating to her and, to be honest, it's strengthened the relationship not just between us as individuals but also between the company and the trade union," he says.

Shirley is equally proud of what they have achieved. "We've both learned from each other: it's been an absolute pleasure to work together. This shows that together we can do something that's really worthwhile: from an employer and a trade union point of view, it shows that partnerships can actually make good things happen," she says. **LR**