

# SME APPRENTICESHIP ESSENTIALS.

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## AWD Programme Apprenticeship Essentials SME Pilot

### Supporting Apprentice Development in a Sales Role at [ESSLAB](#): a Case Study

#### Overview

For many SMEs, business growth is often limited not by ambition but by the time and capacity available to develop new talent. ESSLAB's experience demonstrates how apprenticeships can help SMEs build capability while supporting early-career employees to develop confidence and professional skills in the workplace.

[ESSLAB](#), an Essex-based SME supplying Certified Reference Materials, laboratory instruments and consumables to laboratories worldwide, has integrated apprenticeships into its workforce development strategy. By providing structured support and clear development pathways, the company has created an environment where apprentices can grow professionally while contributing to business priorities.

This case study highlights how ESSLAB supports a second-year apprentice on the **B2B Sales Professional apprenticeship**, delivered by [Consalia](#) (an Ofsted outstanding and unique sales business school) in partnership with [Middlesex University](#), both UVAC members. It illustrates practical approaches that SME line managers can use to help apprentices succeed while balancing the demands of work and learning.

Examining the career progression of Billy, he joined ESSLAB as a [Level 6 B2B Sales Professional degree](#) apprentice and describes the programme as a valuable early career route that provides both practical experience and structured learning. Key to his development has been the consistent support from his line manager, opportunities to apply learning in real situations, and regular conversations linking programme learning to workplace activities.

This case study reflects well on the themes and importance of the Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) programme's recently developed practical, flexible eLearning (highlighted in bold) designed to help SMEs support apprentices with confidence. These [SME Apprenticeship Essentials](#) eLearning courses are fully funded by DfE and have been created especially for those working with apprentices in small to medium-sized enterprises with the explicit purpose of ensuring good retention and achievement in apprenticeships at all levels and for all ages of apprentices. These modules are designed and delivered by the Education Training Foundation (ETF) in partnership with the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), the Strategic Development Network (SDN) MESMA Group, and the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC).

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## Starting strong: setting apprentices up for success

At ESSLAB, supporting apprentices begins before the apprentice's first day. Recruitment focuses not only on current skills but also on motivation, curiosity, and willingness to learn.

Billy explains that joining the business was his first full-time role and his first experience working in sales. The early weeks involved a steep learning curve, particularly around new terminology and industry concepts. However, this transition was made easier through practical support from his line manager Chris and colleagues across the organisation.

Early activities included:

- Shadowing different roles across the team
- Networking with colleagues across departments
- Learning about organisational goals and priorities

These early experiences helped Billy understand how the business operates and where his role fits within it. Creating a supportive environment where questions are encouraged helped him build confidence quickly.

For SMEs, this highlights the value of **structured introductions and open communication during the early stages of an apprenticeship.**

## Day-to-day support: keeping the apprenticeship on track

ESSLAB's approach to managing apprentices is structured but manageable for an SME environment. Billy's line manager created a **three-year development plan**, broken into quarterly goals. This provides a clear pathway for skill development while linking internal expectations with the requirements of the apprenticeship programme.

Regular communication plays a key role. During the first year, Billy and his line manager held **bi-weekly catch-ups** to review:

- Progress in the job role
- Apprenticeship learning and assignments
- Any challenges or support needed

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These short conversations help keep learning connected to real work. Billy notes that learning becomes more meaningful when it relates directly to what he is doing day-to-day.

For SMEs considering apprenticeships, this demonstrates that **a consistent rhythm of brief check-ins can provide effective support without adding significant administrative burden.**

## Coaching, communication and learning through real work

A key principle of ESSLAB's approach is learning through meaningful workplace responsibility.

As Billy's confidence developed, his role gradually expanded. He became more involved in account management and now manages his own territory. This progression allowed him to apply knowledge from the apprenticeship directly in real customer interactions.

His line manager describes the process as one where increased responsibility follows demonstrated capability. As the apprentice develops, the business can confidently invest further in their growth. Billy also highlights the value of reflective learning within the apprenticeship programme. Assignments encourage apprentices to analyse their experiences, identify lessons from challenges, and apply improvements in their work.

In a small team environment, these reflections can benefit others too. Sharing learning and insights helps create a **wider culture of continuous improvement across the organisation.**

## Progression and retention

One concern sometimes raised by SMEs is whether apprentices will remain with the organisation after gaining new skills. At ESSLAB, apprenticeships are seen as a long-term investment. The business provides structured development opportunities and clear progression pathways, while apprentices are encouraged to demonstrate readiness for increased responsibility.

Entering his second year, Billy reports greater confidence in both customer interactions and internal communication. This growing capability allows him to contribute more fully to the sales function and take ownership of additional responsibilities.

For ESSLAB, this approach **strengthens both employee development and long-term workforce capability.**

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## SME practices that support successful apprenticeships

ESSLAB's experience highlights several practical approaches that SMEs can adopt:

- **Connect learning to real work**  
Link apprenticeship learning to everyday tasks and responsibilities wherever possible.
- **Provide a clear development pathway**  
Use a simple development plan that aligns job responsibilities with apprenticeship Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours (KSBs).
- **Use coursework to improve practice**  
Assignments can become opportunities to explore real business challenges and strengthen capability and provide a great opportunity to properly integrate on-and-off-the-job learning.
- **Encourage reflection and discussion**  
Reflective learning helps apprentices build confidence and allows insights to be shared within the team.

## Why this matters for SMEs

ESSLAB's experience shows how apprenticeships can support both business growth and employee development within an SME environment.

With consistent line management, clear communication and opportunities to apply learning in real situations, apprentices can quickly develop confidence and contribute meaningful value to the business.

As apprentices progress, they can take on greater responsibility, helping SMEs build internal capability and create sustainable talent pipelines.

As ESSLAB's Managing Director Richard Day explains:

*“Degree apprenticeships are a key part of how we invest in people, build capability and support long-term business growth. By combining academic study with hands-on experience, our apprenticeships help us develop highly skilled professionals who can make a real impact.”*