

## **Written evidence from Founders and Coders (SFF0019)**

I am the Executive Director of Founders and Coders, a Community Interest Company based in London, founded in 2015. We run Skills Bootcamps and Apprenticeships (increasingly combining them as a single accelerated apprenticeship) at Levels 4, 5 and 7: Software Developers, DevOps engineers, Data engineers and AI data specialists. We are a significant provider of ("accelerated") Level 4 Software Developer apprenticeships and of Level 7 AI apprenticeships. Unusually for an independent training provider, we are a non-profit. A large proportion of our employers are SMEs.

This is my evidence to the select committee.

### **Skills for the future**

It's impossible to know what skills are needed more than a few years out, but short term there are issues.

In our programmes, we see an ever-bigger gap in opportunities between those wanting to get into the industry (at Level 4) and those who already have experience and are looking to upgrade their skills (at Levels 5 and 7).

The competence required at entry level just keeps growing. A symptom of this: pre-pandemic, one programming language was enough. Now employers often expect candidates to be familiar with two.

Meanwhile, what counts as a "digital skill" is shifting. Once upon a time, it was Microsoft Office, then it was email and a web browser. Then, we needed to learn to navigate a variety of apps. And now, machine intelligence is upending workplace workflows in unpredictable ways.

As programmers, we see it all the time. What was once a junior task, can be outsourced to Chat GPT. I—no longer a full-time programmer—have co-written more code this year than I wrote alone in the previous three. Concentrating on doing one thing well used to be a good route into a first job, but now it feels like specialising is not a safe bet.

Instead, what's needed is a broad sensibility of how things fit together in a more general way—which takes years of experience to acquire. And now we need to develop the ability to direct an AI software companion to write code. Programming in written (or spoken) English is becoming a realistic option.

But if writing code's becoming easier, then comprehending it isn't. If code is easier to write, then understanding how and why it's gone wrong might get harder. It's not clear where the people capable of that understanding will

come from in future, if co-pilots are putting juniors out of a job.

The opportunities are there for those that know how to make best use of the tools, but it just widens the gap between those who adapt and those who do not. We are doing our best to help our learners be among those who know how, but it's not a general solution.

### **The roles of different actors**

Government seems to imagine that it is the role of employers to use apprenticeships to hire school leavers and job seekers, rather than train middle managers. I'm not sure that message has got across.

Employers, not unreasonably, expect apprentices to stick around long enough for the employer to recoup their investment in time and resources. That sometimes happens, but often either the job market's slack, and employers aren't hiring, or it's white hot, and apprentices walk as soon as they can. It's Catch 22. We have first-hand experience of this phenomenon.

Others think it's the job of employers to pay living wages while they patiently wait for the apprentice to get competent enough to leave. No wonder employers fight shy. I've seen employers taken down on social media for offering real opportunities to school leavers, but not at living wage. I don't imagine they'll be making the mistake of hiring school leavers again. It's apparently bad for PR.

### **How can government add value?**

Our experience of government is that 1) funding is sufficient, even generous; 2) apprenticeship standards are not prescriptive, which is a real strength; and 3) the Ofsted inspection framework makes a lot of sense (even if the inspections themselves make us all anxious).

However, what's lacking is a realistic understanding of the limitations of the private sector as a first employer, particularly in the digital sector. Without a more active role in securing initial employment opportunities, the good work being done by government is incomplete.

The digital sector has another problem that markets can't easily solve. Software is generally treated as a "capital good", an investment in the future. It is vulnerable to the business cycle. Smaller employers, in particular, are unable to plan more than a few months out. Expecting them to invest in an apprentice is particularly unrealistic.

Government can best provide more value by acting as an apprentice

employer of last resort. If somebody wants an apprenticeship in a shortage skill and can't find an employer, then the government should hire them. Or even better, subsidise the non-profit sector to do so.

We're going to try something similar on a very small scale. We're a non-profit and we don't have deep pockets, but we're willing to give it a go.

### **Policies, institutions, the levy, the role of business, and incentives**

Government policies are based on an assumption that is not borne out: that private sector employers are willing in sufficient numbers to hire inexperienced staff.

It's less about institutions than about aligning incentives. What an industry needs is not the same as a single employer.

Reforming the levy without providing more funding will just lead to more levy going un- (or mis-) spent. The issue is that, in many cases, funding the training alone is not enough to get employers on board.

The question of what the role of business "should be" makes no sense. Businesses need to focus on staying afloat, not on the needs of the economy as a whole. Some business owners may act with enlightened self-interest, but on the evidence before us, as a whole they fall short in this respect.

In a more mobile labour market, employers have almost no incentive to provide training to employees. And there's the nub. Training has clearly declined among employers, because that culture's been lost. that doesn't change overnight.

It will require pump priming by government, whether we like it or not. More of the same half-baked mix of policies (some even quite good) seems likely to fail, or at best succeed much less than it could.

Clearly employer incentives are needed, and on a much bigger scale. Government needs to provide it—who else?—or do the hiring itself.

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