

How Apprenticeships Are Bridging the Skills Gap in Industry

Background

The benefits of apprenticeships are something Combilift is very passionate about. Apprenticeships have significant value in the upskilling of our workforce, while providing local employment and training opportunities to our employees who choose to work and live locally.

The OEM (original equipment manufacturing) Engineering Apprenticeship is currently in its fifth year and is going from strength to strength. Its concept was formed when industries in the manufacturing sectors in Ireland came together to address the skills shortages in the OEM niche.

Companies such as Combilift, Dennison Trailers and Dairymaster formed a consortium and, in collaboration with Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB), devised the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship, which commenced in Monaghan Institute in 2019.

The apprenticeship was initially devised based on the skills needed in the manufacturing industry; however, as the apprenticeship evolved, there was an appetite across other sectors, such as after-sales, service, and maintenance. Companies including Jungheinrich, Johnson & Johnson, and Irish Rail came on board.

Because of its success and the evident demand across Ireland, the apprenticeship was also rolled out in Limerick and Clare ETB, whose first cohort of OEM apprentices graduated in November 2023. It has become an apprenticeship of choice among school leavers and the workforce in the manufacturing, service, and installation industries, with more than 40 companies registered to employ OEM engineering apprentices.



Martin McVicar

Managing Director, Combilift

The OEM (original equipment manufacturing) Engineering Apprenticeship is currently in its fifth year and is going from strength to strength. This article describes its origins and development to date, and outlines its key attractions for school leavers, industry workers, and employers.



Christopher Gibson, OEM apprentice

Meeting industry needs

Mentors have an integral role in ensuring the apprentices succeed, supporting them with coursework and on-the-job training which complements the classroom-based element of the apprenticeship.

For Combilift, the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship has enabled our employees to progress and achieve a QQI level 6 qualification in an industry-led curriculum with up-to-date modules, reflecting current industry needs such as industrial robotics and PLCs, electrical and electronic technology, mechatronics, engineering drawing, and a capstone project. We are delighted that 100% of OEM engineering apprentices in Combilift remained in full-time employment after graduating.

Combilift has had nine OEM engineering apprentices graduate over the last two years. We have had one female graduate, Alana Kernan, who was nominated as Apprentice of the Year in the Generation Apprenticeship awards 2023 and is a valued member of our team. Mentors have an integral role in ensuring the apprentices succeed, supporting them with coursework and on-the-job training which complements the classroom-based element of the apprenticeship.

Our team value the importance of apprenticeships, and this year three Combilift employees were nominated as Generation Apprenticeship Workplace Champions. Minister Simon Harris announced Combilift as winner in the Large Company category in the 2020 Generation Apprenticeship Employer of the Year, a testament to the support of our entire team.

Appeal of the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship

If you are a parent, guidance counsellor, or current student pondering if apprenticeship is the right career path, I can say that the new-generation apprenticeships have opened up doors to many students who don't wish to or are unable to move away from home to go to college or university.

The ideal candidate to join the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship programme would be someone who enjoys problem-solving, practical hands-on work, troubleshooting, and working in multifaceted teams. With the apprenticeship being only three years rather than four, it means we can produce highly skilled technicians in a shorter timeframe, who can then join our existing team in the Design, Manufacturing, and Engineering departments, helping deliver successful, customised products to our customers worldwide.

Apprentices are rotated across the various departments to gain exposure to all elements of the business. This ensures that each apprentice is given the best opportunities to become well-rounded, experienced, and valuable employees.

The OEM Engineering Apprenticeship, managed nationally by CMETB, is a three-year QQI level 6 programme consisting of both on-the-job and off-the-job blocks. It is suitable for those currently employed in OEM companies, school leavers, career switchers, and mature applicants wishing to pursue a career as a qualified OEM engineering technician. On-the-job learning takes place in the company, and off-the-job education and training take place on an annual 16-week block release basis at either the Monaghan Institute campus or Raheen Training Centre in Limerick.

On completion of the programme, learners receive a QQI level 6 Advanced Certificate in OEM Engineering and are qualified as OEM engineering technicians, with a widely sought-after skill set in the manufacturing, installation, servicing, and commissioning sectors, both nationally and globally.

Looking ahead

The OEM Engineering Apprenticeship, developed by industry to address the current requirements and dynamic nature of the sector, is constantly reviewed by the programme steering committee to keep it relevant and up to date with

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emerging trends and technologies. Combilift values the contribution that OEM engineering apprentices make to the company and considers them a key asset to its future success and expansion.

Findings from the 2023 national survey of apprenticeship employers, released by the National Apprenticeship Office, show this career path to be hugely popular, with almost 27,000 apprentices currently in training. Graduates are job-ready in a diverse range of engineering skills.

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