

Creating new pathways into self-employment through apprenticeships

Wickes is a UK home improvement retailer offering products and installation services, including kitchens and bathrooms, through a nationwide network. Its installation business relies on skilled, self-employed tradespeople working in customers' homes.



The challenge

Like much of the construction and home improvement sector, demand for kitchen and bathroom installations continues to grow, while the pipeline of new tradespeople is limited and the existing pipeline is ageing.

Apprenticeships offer part of the solution - yet traditional models often focus on employment within a single organisation. For Wickes, whose installation model relies on self-employed tradespeople, this created a challenge: **how do you grow talent for roles that don't follow a conventional employed pathway?**

Wickes' solution

In 2019, Wickes launched a first-of-its-kind installation apprenticeship, becoming the first UK retailer to create an apprenticeship programme that **directly prepares people to become self-employed** installers.

The 18-month programme combines:

- Hands-on, on-site learning in customers' homes alongside experienced installers
- Formal technical training delivered by a specialist provider



- A nationally recognised Level 2 qualification in fitted interiors
- Structured support to set up and run a business

Crucially, apprentices don't just complete training – they leave with the skills, confidence and support to run their own installation business and often become Wickes Approved Installers.

Connie Collett, Senior Operations Manager, Wickes Installation Apprenticeship Programme:

“Our overall objective is for apprentices to complete the programme while setting themselves up as sole traders - so when they finish, they own their own business and can go on to install in our customers' homes.”

Designing a different kind of apprenticeship

Wickes has built a model that mirrors real working conditions and long-term career outcomes:



1. Inclusive recruitment that removes barriers

The programme is open to people from all backgrounds, including those without prior qualifications or experience.

Rather than focusing on academic attainment, Wickes uses **assessment centres to identify potential** - encouraging candidates to be themselves and demonstrate their strengths. The team actively works to **break down perceptions that apprenticeships are only for certain people.**

Make it an Apprenticeship

“We want them to come along to the assessment centres as them... and **if we have to tailor our programme to suit their needs, then that’s what we will do.**”

This approach has driven strong demand, with hundreds of applications for each cohort.

Wickes also invests time in candidates who aren’t successful:

- All assessment centre participants receive **detailed feedback**
- Feedback is delivered personally, helping individuals understand strengths and areas to develop
- Some candidates successfully reapply after acting on feedback.

“How do people grow if they don’t get feedback? ...**We’ve had individuals come back, work on their development areas, and then succeed.**”



2. Tailored learning for every apprentice

Wickes has moved away from a one-size-fits-all model. Apprentices receive tailored support based on their needs, pace and learning style.

Dedicated team leaders provide **one-to-one support**, helping apprentices progress and build confidence throughout the programme.

3. Learning by doing from day one

From the outset, apprentices work in customers' homes alongside experienced installers. This builds technical expertise alongside essential employability skills such as communication, professionalism and customer service.

4. A fully integrated training partnership

Wickes works with a single national training provider (WEBS Training) to ensure consistency, quality and alignment with its approach.

This partnership is highly collaborative:

- Values and expectations are aligned from day one
- Teams collaborate throughout delivery
- The programme is continuously refined



This ensures apprentices experience training and work as one joined-up journey.

5. Going beyond the apprenticeship standard

Wickes complements the formal apprenticeship with additional in-house training, including:

- Customer service workshops
- Business start-up support (including sessions with accountants)
- Product and supplier training
- Surveying and technical assessments

This broader skills focus prepares apprentices not just for a job - but for running a successful business.

6. Long-term support into self-employment

Support continues well beyond completion. Installation managers - many of whom have decades of trade experience or have run their own businesses – continue to provide:

- Site visits and technical guidance
- Business coaching and wellbeing support
- Ongoing development opportunities

Graduates also support new apprentices, strengthening the model over time.

Impact

The programme is delivering benefits for individuals, businesses and the wider sector:

For individuals

- A clear route into a skilled trade
- A nationally recognised qualification



- The opportunity to become self-employed and run a business
- Long-term career prospects and earning potential

Graduates have already gone on to launch their own installation businesses, with continued backing from Wickes.



For Wickes

- A sustainable pipeline of high-quality installers
- Greater consistency in standards and customer experience
- Stronger relationships with a network of skilled tradespeople

For the sector

- A scalable model for tackling the construction skills shortage
- Increased diversity by widening access to trade careers
- A new way of thinking about apprenticeships beyond traditional employment

Why it works

Wickes identifies several success factors:

- Designing for the real end goal (self-employment, not just completion)
- Personalising the learner experience
- Strong, values-led partnerships with training providers

- Embedding employer-led training alongside formal learning
- Providing long-term support beyond the apprenticeship

The programme also demonstrates the value of trust—both in apprentices' potential and in their long-term commitment.

“People underestimate the **commitment** apprentices give when you invest in them.”

Call to action: Make more opportunities

Wickes' model shows that apprenticeships can go beyond traditional employment pathways. By aligning programmes with real business needs and future workforce models, employers can:

- Create new entry points into sectors facing skills shortages
- Open up careers to more people
- Support individuals into sustainable, long-term livelihoods

Apprenticeships don't have to follow a standard model. With the right design, they can unlock entirely new opportunities - or businesses, individuals and industries alike.

