

Introducing Bud Systems: The end-to-end EdTech solution that's set to maximise apprenticeship delivery

By Heather Frankham, Co-Founder of Bud Systems

It's fair to say that I've witnessed first-hand the growing pains that apprenticeship delivery has experienced over the past quarter century. From my beginnings as a teacher, I went on to build the UK's largest apprenticeship provider, Lifetime, starting from scratch in 1995 before selling the business in 2016.

I'm passionate about giving young people the best possible start, and wholeheartedly believe that apprenticeships are a force for good. However, it is an industry beset with issues.

There have been high profile cases where funding has been used inappropriately and the quality of training has been inconsistent in some organisations. The recent collapse of well-known providers like Learn Direct and 3aaa has shaken confidence in the apprenticeship sector and is leading the ESFA to call for tighter controls from end-to-end.

In setting up Bud Systems, a software solution for the management and successful delivery of apprenticeships, these are challenges I've decided to tackle head on.

How Bud Systems was born

When I was running Lifetime, a key to its success was that we employed people who, like me, were truly passionate about what they did – who wanted to help people and deliver high quality training. But with the amount of paperwork involved in apprenticeship delivery, I learned that just being passionate isn't enough. As a provider, there are holes you can easily fall into if you don't put robust systems in place.

My experience in the industry has given me a good understanding of those potential 'holes'. While technology was always at the core of Lifetime, this isn't the case everywhere else. In 2016, I sold Lifetime and took on a role as Chair at competitor Paragon Skills. My first goal was to put in place a system to give me visibility over the national performance of the organisation.

When I researched the tech solutions that were already out there, what became clear to me is that the systems were designed for 'expert users'. Very often, really good trainers aren't tech-savvy – their passion lies in teaching, not administration. No system existed that offered what I needed: a simple, effective system that supported trainers to deliver fantastic training consistently across the board. One that allowed managers to sleep at night knowing that learners were making the progress they should be, and that this was being evidenced at every stage.

So, alongside former Lifetime Training CEO David Foster, I decided to build it.

Why Bud Systems is different

Bud is based on the future of apprenticeships, rather than the way things used to be done. What makes Bud really unique is that it's been developed and tested in consultation with some of the best people in the industry. We've not only fed in our own experience, but that of some of the UK's largest training providers and most experienced assessors and auditors.

In developing Bud we've focused very closely on the user interface. The software has been designed to be intuitive and simple to use on a mobile or desktop platform, removing the need for cumbersome folders and worksheets.

The system is all about 'no surprises'. It's been designed to make the delivery process more visible for everyone involved - training providers, employers and learners. Goals and objectives are clearly set out from the start, and all reviews are based on this, providing clear progression and reporting which helps managers makes the right decisions.

For example, notifications prompt the learner to work on tasks little and often, helping to reduce last minute panics and intimidating chunks of work. For employers and providers, the system helps to ensure that the 20 per cent off-the-job learning is clearly planned and monitored so there are no surprises at audit or EPA gateway.

Ensuring that apprenticeship funding is being managed appropriately is a key feature of Bud. A good example of this is additional support funding. Many organisations have claimed this for learners but failed to provide evidence of that additional support being delivered when it came to audit stage. Bud will flag this situation in advance to the organisation and trainer, to allow them to take steps to rectify before it becomes a problem - that's one of the 'sleep at night' tests I wanted the technology to be able to answer!

Transforming apprenticeship management

Pulling together all our industry expertise and having many, many sets of eyes on our product during development has enabled us to design a system that won't let providers down. Our focus is always on the best user experience – and creating innovative ways for providers to be more cost effective and efficient.

The proof of this is that organisations using Bud get zero errors on audits. They get great Ofsted grades. Crucially, it enables organisations to have no surprises, greater certainty, better progress for their learners, and higher success rates.

But for me, Bud is really about putting the learner first. We have a duty to them. As an Ofsted inspector once put it to me – “We should be thinking about all learners as if they were your own son or daughter. What would you want for them?”

I'm excited to be at the helm of a project that will raise standards across the industry, ensuring that the quality of training is no longer left to the luck of the draw, supporting great providers to grow their provision without compromising the quality and compliance of their delivery.