

Employers supporting the technician workforce and working with unions





“ Technicians get better access to continuous professional development (CPD) and the employer can be confident that their staff has been independently evaluated as competent. ”

Technicians do essential work in highly skilled practical roles (usually around Level 3 or 4). They often work as a part of a team in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). Technicians manage, teach, carry out research, solve problems, maintain machinery and develop processes and much more.

Technicians work in a whole variety of job roles where practical understanding of engineering and science is needed. These roles include:

Engineering	Science and research
Avionics engineer	Specialised clinical technologist
Marine engineer	Precision research engineer
BIM technician	Healthcare science practitioner
Operations manager	Anatomical pathology technologist
Building technician	Associate specialist, quality control
CAD designer	Research assistant
Pipe fitter	Analyst/instrument analyst
Civil engineering technician	Assistant scientist
Processing engineer	Warehouse operative
Control engineer	Microbiologist
Production engineer	Assistant diagnostician
Construction manager	Website technical manager
Electrician	Stores manager
Draughtsperson	Scientific glassblower

Sources: EngTech: **Recognising Your Engineering Talent – guidance for employers**
www.EngTechnow.com/Content/downloads/EngTech-employers-guide.pdf
 and the Science Council www.sciencecouncil.org

The union role

One way of building a better recognition of the importance of technicians in the workplace is to develop a learning agreement with the employer.

The benefits will be ultimately reaped by both the employers and the technicians themselves. Technicians get better access to continuous professional development (CPD) and the employer can be confident that their staff has been independently evaluated as competent, which helps the business in tendering for contracts, for instance.

The external and independent nature of assessing staff competence can also be useful tool for the union in areas such as case work and disciplinarys.

It is always worthwhile exploring the current situation first. If the employer already pays for other staff groups’ professional institution membership fees and registration, whether statutory or voluntary, supporting technicians would demonstrate that they too are a valued part of the workforce.

Registration is often part of employers’ Apprenticeship programmes. An inclusive employer who values their technical staff should ensure existing staff have the same opportunity for registered status.



“ An ideal way to introduce technician registration and CPD with employers is to add it to existing apprentice agreements. ”

What is a learning agreement for?

A learning agreement specifies how union(s) and employers work together. A learning agreement sits alongside other collective agreements and is not an alternative to existing structures. The basis for a learning agreement should be an understanding that there is a shared agenda of keeping people in jobs and developing their skills.

The content of a learning agreement always depends on the learning needs of a particular workplace. Like other agreements with employers, learning agreements are based on negotiating, and careful thinking needs to go into deciding what to include and where the bottom lines lie.

Learning agreements are living documents and should include an action plan which is reviewed regularly.

A learning agreement that covers technicians' registration and CPD is about tailoring learning and development support to this vital part of workforce.

Apprentice agreements

An ideal way to introduce technician registration and CPD with employers is to add it to existing apprentice agreements. Accreditation from a professional body for an apprentice programme provides credibility for it. For employers funding registration is a useful in helping to retain the apprentices as part of their business after they have achieved the qualification. A CPD addendum in apprentice agreements is a way of spelling out a commitment to providing good quality, appropriate CPD to all staff, newly qualified apprentices included.

Existing learning agreements

A number of workplaces already have a learning agreement. This is an opportunity to add an amendment or an annexe to address technician registration and how technical staff are supported.

Where there is a joint learning committee at the workplace it should include technicians' progress as a standing agenda item. Alternatively, it may be useful to set up a working party to look at how support for technician registration can be implemented. For instance, union learning reps (ULRs) and other

reps may need briefings to be able to support their colleagues effectively.

Working with professional institutions may present a good opportunity to re-engage ULRs and add to their skills, for example in looking into technician competencies.

New learning agreements

Where there is no existing learning agreement raising the technician agenda can be a useful way of starting a broader review with the employer. These would include baseline discussions such as numbers of ULRs, roles, facilities and learning committees.

Most unions have their own model learning/ apprentice agreement templates. Those are a good starting point for internal union or branch discussions.

The template below has been specifically written with technicians in mind and can be used to drill down from the top level to the bottom line of what a union wants to agree with the employer.

What should be included in an agreement?

One of the big issues to discuss is the cost of registration and what the employer's other financial support covers. For instance, the Science Council says that the Science Technician (RSciTech) registration cost is £15 per year if the individual is a member of a professional body and £70 for membership and registration when a person joins an institution (always check the rates before entering the conversation with the employer). With some professional bodies in engineering the cost can rise to several hundred pounds.

One of the ways to approach this is to explore what employer's current contribution to staff training is and how registration can be a focused way of providing CPD for technicians.

It is also prudent to discuss the time needed to go through the application process. This includes filling in the registration application which includes demonstrating individuals' experience and competence. The staff may need ULRs' help and it is sensible to discuss whether ULRs themselves need to

be briefed on what registration is, how it works and how the professional institutions can help.

Also, a learning committee or a joint working group should examine benchmarking employer's learning and development provision against registration to

ensure that the technicians' CPD is geared up to keep them up-to-date in their profession. Registration and the competences that go with the standard can be a helpful starting point for appraisal discussions or personal development planning too.

A learning agreement template for technician workforce

This agreement is between [insert name of union/s] **and** [insert name of organisation].

-
- The employer and the union/s will work together to support technician staff members to apply for registration and demonstrate the competencies required.

 - The employer will conduct a staff audit to determine the technician roles eligible for registration.

 - The employer will cover the fees for professional institution membership and registration.

 - Both partners will make every effort to encourage under-represented groups (women, BME groups, etc.) to work on achieving the registered technician status.

 - The technicians will have access during working hours to union learning reps (ULRs) for information and advice on learning and training.

 - Technician registration will be a permanent discussion and review topic in the joint learning committee meetings.

 - The employer supports the process of applying for and maintaining registration by:
 - supporting technicians' portfolio building
 - benchmarking company training and learning offers against the registration standards to make sure the technicians have an opportunity to gain and keep on top of the standards
 - providing paid time off release for continued professional development activity
 - holding promotional events within the organisation together with union reps/ULRs.

 - Where an Apprenticeship programme is in place, the employer will arrange accreditation of the Apprenticeship programmes to help simplify the registration process and fund it for individuals.

Addendum template to an apprentice agreement

-
- Where an Apprenticeship programme is in place, the employer will arrange accreditation of the Apprenticeship programme to help simplify the registration process and fund it for individuals.

 - After finishing their Apprenticeship apprentices will have access to relevant, good quality continuous professional development (CPD) which complements the competencies and qualities described in registration standards for the profession.



Case studies

“ After working for over 25 years in the field of radiation protection, it is satisfying to finally gain recognition of the skills and experience that I have accumulated over that time. ”

The benefits of membership



“I was encouraged to take up membership by my manager during an annual appraisal process. The employer pays, although the fee is only £37 p.a. so it is likely I would have joined even if they didn’t.

There are lots of benefits of membership of PB and registration. Costs may be prohibitive but if you use the benefits to the maximum then the cost can be justified. If employer doesn’t pay, speak to the recognised union to try to get them to change. Speak to professional bodies to see what their ‘offer’ is. You may have a choice and it’s worth comparing.

Employers should at least contribute to fees and allow paid time to go through the process. They are gaining from your registration, at least in the short term. They should also look at the bigger picture. Even if you move on, you are benefiting UK plc.

After working for over 25 years in the field of radiation protection, it is satisfying to finally gain recognition of the skills and experience that I have accumulated over that time.”

Lloyd Collier

TechSRP Society of Radiological Protection, technician grade membership Senior Health Physics Technician, Diamond Light Source

Valuing technical roles



“I am Unite Branch Secretary, Member of Education Regional and National Industrial Sector Committees (RISC and NISC) and Executive Council member for the education sector. I have also been equalities rep and on the Women’s Committee for a number of years.

I am applying for reinstatement of membership of IST which I entered following encouragement by my technical line manager. I took up registration to develop my career and skills and network with other technical staff.

For anyone considering membership I would say take up the opportunity. The employer could support registration by paying registration fees, recognising the professional status of technicians and including it in the role ‘package’ when recruiting. It would help if registration became a requirement in essentials for a post when advertised to avoid the previous practice of employing recent graduates who have not had a chance to develop technical skills. It would also help if time and a budget for staff development were built into roles rather than being an afterthought, as it tends not to happen otherwise.

I have a degree in chemistry but a degree by itself is only really a start in a technical career. It would help if in higher education institutions’ technical roles were valued as much as academic ones.”

Paula Burr

Senior Technician, Department of Education, University of Sussex



“ Technicians are skilled workers playing a vital role in keeping the machinery going in the automated sorting process. ”

The union commitment



“TSSA General Secretary Manuel Cortes was delighted to show the union’s commitment to

technician initiative by signing us up as a Champion Trade Union with the EngTechNow campaign. He reiterated our view that ‘In line with our strategic vision around better skills for all, it opens up training and development opportunities to staff who’ve not had them before. It creates opportunities to progress professionally, potentially all the way to Chartered Engineer, without the need to pay thousands of pounds in university fees and associated costs, which many of our members simply cannot afford.’

TSSA is negotiating with Network Rail over the EngTech. We want them to support all their staff in the Technical Officer, Senior Technical Officer and Principal Technical Officer grades to gain registered status. Technical Officers are highly skilled engineering staff but have been overlooked for training and development for too long.

TSSA believes that it is essential the employer pays the fees: both for the registration and for membership to the professional institution. Employers get so much out of it: continuous professional development, mentoring and networking for their staff from the professional institution, an increased culture of professionalism amongst technical staff and better motivation and loyalty from their workforce. It’s only right that they should put something into it.”

Liz Warren-Corney

TSSA Learning Organiser, Scotland

Building a learning agenda



“The Communication Workers Union has recognised the technician registration as a positive

way to improve access to CPD for the engineers in Royal Mail. The employer is aware of the benefits of registration and is funding the technicians to take this step. EngTech registration is also a part of Apprenticeships in Royal Mail.

Technicians are skilled workers playing a vital role in keeping the machinery going in the automated sorting process. Reaching the EngTech status acts as a benchmark for skills acquired over their working life.

From the union point of view the technician registration is a way of supporting members to stay skilled and improve their standing in the job-market.

The issue for the union is that the engineers are widely dispersed around the country, which stretches the ULRs’ ability to give hands-on advice.

It may be easier for apprentices to see the benefits of registration while more established engineers may not be looking for pastures new, work-wise. However, there are times when it can be useful to measure the competences against standards set externally.

Promoting recognition of people’s skills is an important ingredient in the union’s general learning agenda. Since technician registration is part of management strategy in Royal Mail and taking advantage of this can be a route to informal learning. It also builds access to CPD and pathways to progression both personally and professionally.”

Ray Ellis

CWU Technical and Central Services Secretary

For more information about unionlearn’s Technician Pathways project and orders for the **Technician Registration Toolkit** contact Kirsi Kekki, Policy Officer (e: kkekki@tuc.org.uk or t: 020 7079 6953).

Other resources

EngTech: recognising your engineering talent. Guidance for employers <http://www.engtechnow.com/employers>

Science Council www.professionalregisters.org/

Engineering Council information for employers www.engc.org.uk/informationfor/employers/



Published by unionlearn
Congress House, London WC1B 3LS
Tel 020 7079 6920 Fax 020 7079 6921
www.unionlearn.org.uk
June 2015. Design by Rumba