



Learning Key
TRAINING ACADEMY

For employers weighing up an apprentice, a team that needs certifying, an exam seat, or a second opinion before a migration goes ahead.

FOR EMPLOYERS · 2026/27

Tell us the gap. We'll tell you what fills it.

Apprenticeships, team certification, an accredited exam centre and IT consultancy. Based in Middlesbrough, delivered at your premises anywhere in the UK or live online – and sometimes the honest answer is that you should not spend money with us at all.

100%

training funded for apprentices aged 16–24 if your pay bill is under £3m

6

IT apprenticeship standards at Level 3 and Level 4

8+

vendor certification tracks your job adverts already ask for

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Build the skills your business is short of

Most enquiries start with a problem rather than a product: a contract that requires certified staff, a team that learned on-premise and now runs cloud, a role nobody can recruit for. These are the four things we can do about it.

PAGE 03

Hire an apprentice

Grow your own. We recruit, train and prepare for assessment; you provide the job, the wage and the released hours. Usually faster and cheaper than competing for people who already hold the certificate.

PAGE 08

Certify a team

When several people need the same skill at the same time, separate public courses are the slow, expensive route. We run the cohort together, on your schedule, in your classroom or ours.

PAGE 09

Book exam seats

You do not have to train with us to sit an exam with us. Self-study candidates, re-sits and whole teams certifying as a block — one invoice, one set of dates, results together.

PAGE 09

Buy consultancy

When you need the expertise occasionally rather than permanently. A second opinion on a design, a skills audit, help specifying a role before you advertise it.

And the fifth option, which costs nothing

Describe the problem rather than the solution you have in mind. Twenty minutes on the phone is usually enough for us to say whether it is an apprenticeship, a course, a consultancy piece, or something you should not spend money on at all.

Four questions worth asking any training provider

ASK

WHY IT MATTERS

Who assesses the learner?	A provider that marks its own work offers less. Ours are assessed independently.
Whose courseware is it?	Vendor-authored material tracks the exam. An interpretation of it does not.
What happens if somebody fails?	A score-report conversation and a changed plan, or another invoice.
What will you tell me not to buy?	A provider with no answer to this one is selling, not advising.

What you are actually taking on

An apprentice is an employee, not a student on placement. They are on your payroll doing real work from the first week. What makes it an apprenticeship is that a protected block of their contracted hours is reserved for training, and that at the end an independent assessor confirms they can do the job against a national standard.

That is the whole bargain: you provide the job and the time, we provide the training and the assessment, and the standard makes the result mean the same thing to every other employer in the country.

WE HANDLE

- Advertising the vacancy and screening applicants against the standard, not just against a CV.
- All off-the-job training — in our Middlesbrough centre, at your premises anywhere in the UK, or live online.
- Progress reviews, portfolio building and preparation for end-point assessment.
- The paperwork: the apprenticeship agreement, the commitment statement, and the funding claim.

YOU HANDLE

- The wage, and a real role with enough scope for the apprentice to meet the standard.
- The released hours for off-the-job training.
- A named person in the business who can answer questions and sign off progress reviews.

How long to get started

From first conversation to an apprentice starting is usually weeks rather than months, and most of that is recruitment. You can also put an **existing** member of staff onto a standard, which removes the recruitment step entirely — common where somebody has grown into an IT role without ever being formally trained for it.

What it costs you

For most employers the training itself is fully funded or close to it. Your real costs are the wage and the released hours. Pages 6 and 7 set out the current rules, and we confirm your exact position in writing before you commit to anything.

The case for growing your own

Competing for people who already hold the certificate means competing on salary with everyone else who needs them, for someone who still has to learn your systems. An apprentice learns your estate, your customers and your way of working from the inside, at the same time as learning the trade — and the retention that follows is the point, not a bonus.

The whole thing, in the order it happens

The mechanics put a lot of employers off, mostly because they are explained badly.

01 Choosing the standard

Every apprenticeship follows a national standard: a published description of what somebody in that role must know and be able to do. You are not designing a training programme — you are picking the standard that matches the job, and the rest follows from that.

02 Recruiting, or nominating

Hire someone new or put an existing employee onto a standard. Both are common. An existing employee has to be learning genuinely new skills for it to qualify, which rules out using it to certify what somebody already does.

03 Off-the-job training

A protected portion of contracted hours is spent learning rather than producing. It does not have to be one day a week: it can be delivered in blocks, on site or online, and time spent learning new skills while doing the job can count if it is planned and recorded.

04 On-programme assessment

Progress reviews throughout, involving the apprentice, us and you. Short, and designed to catch problems early while there is still time to do something about them.

05 End-point assessment

An independent assessor — not us, and not you — confirms the apprentice meets the standard. That independence is what makes the qualification worth something to the next employer, and it is why we cannot simply pass our own learners.

Off-the-job hours: what changed

You will still see “20% of contracted hours” quoted. Since 1 August 2025 the requirement is a **published minimum number of hours for each standard** rather than a flat percentage. Our programmes plan around an average of six hours a week for a full-time apprentice. Ask us for the published figure for the standard you are considering — it is the number to build the rota around.

What usually goes wrong

Two things derail apprenticeships, in our experience: **a role too narrow to cover the standard, and the released hours quietly disappearing when the business gets busy.**

Both are avoidable, and both are far easier to fix in the first month than in the tenth. We raise them at the review rather than at the end.

What the employer has to provide

- A contract of employment for the duration, at or above the legal minimum wage for apprentices.
- A role with enough breadth for the apprentice to meet every part of the standard.
- The released hours, and a named person who supports them.
- A signed apprenticeship agreement and commitment statement — both of which we prepare.

Six IT standards, at Level 3 and Level 4

Each runs twelve to fifteen months and is awarded by City & Guilds, with over 450 hours of real-life application evidenced along the way. If you are not sure which fits the role you have in mind, describe the job and we will tell you which standard matches it – or tell you that none of them do.

STANDARD	THE ROLE IT BUILDS	LEVEL
IT Systems Support Technician	Keeps systems and users running: hardware, software, networking and troubleshooting; DNS and DHCP faults; application-level repair. Leads to systems administration and cyber security associate roles.	3
Digital Applications Technician	Makes the tools you already pay for actually work: Microsoft 365 and Power Automate, Google Workspace, Copilot and Gemini, AI agents and automated workflows – and trains colleagues to adopt them.	3
Artificial Intelligence	Applied AI inside a business: machine learning and language models, the regulations around using them lawfully, and building agents and AI-enabled workflows on real processes.	3
Data Analysis & Statistics	Turns what you collect into something somebody acts on: ETL, visualisation, Excel, Power BI, Tableau, SQL, Python and R, and the communication to make it land.	3
Network Engineering	Designs, builds and maintains the network: LAN, WAN, WLAN and VLAN, device configuration and CLI, software-defined networking across sites.	4
Software Development	Designs, codes, tests and ships: Python, Java, C# and JavaScript, web technologies, SQL, PHP and APIs, with source control and AI-assisted delivery throughout.	4

Level 3 or Level 4?

Level 3 is broadly A-level standard and is where most new entrants start. Level 4 sits closer to the first year of a degree and generally suits someone with relevant experience or a Level 3 behind them.

Who is eligible

Aged 16 or over, living in England with the right to work in the UK, not in full-time education, and employed on a contract that allows for training. Set nationally, not by us.

Apprenticeships and certifications are not either/or

A common pattern: the apprentice takes the standard, and one or two experienced people take a vendor certification at the same time so there is somebody in-house who can supervise properly. Tell us the shape of the team and we will suggest the combination rather than quoting for one thing at a time.

Most employers pay far less than they expect

A good number pay nothing for the training at all. These are the published national rules; we confirm your exact position in writing before you commit.

PAY BILL OVER £3 MILLION

You pay the levy

0.5% of your total pay bill, collected monthly through PAYE. The funds sit in an apprenticeship service account and can only be spent on apprenticeship training and assessment.

If you are paying it, the money is already gone. The only question is whether you use it.

From 1 August 2026 the 10% government top-up is no longer added to new funds entering levy accounts.

PAY BILL UNDER £3 MILLION

You do not pay the levy

And for most apprentices you do not pay for the training either.

- **Apprentices aged 16–24:** government funds 100% of training and assessment costs, up to the funding band maximum.
- **Apprentices aged 25 and over:** you co-invest 5%; government funds the other 95%.

If you pay the levy but your funds run out

- **Apprentices aged 16–24:** government funds 100% of training and assessment costs.
- **Apprentices aged 25 and over:** you co-invest 25%; government funds the other 75%.

Additional payments

You receive **£1,000** for taking on an apprentice aged 16 to 18, or one aged 19 to 24 who has an education, health and care plan or has been in care. There is separate funding for English and maths where the apprentice needs it, and for learning support.

The same rules as a table

YOUR SITUATION	APPRENTICE 16–24	APPRENTICE 25+
Pay bill under £3m	100% funded	You co-invest 5%
Levy payer, funds available	From your levy account	From your levy account
Levy payer, funds exhausted	100% funded	You co-invest 25%

Up to the funding band maximum. Wages and released hours sit outside all of this.

The parts nobody mentions until later

Transferring levy funds

Levy-paying employers can transfer up to **50%** of their annual funds to other employers.

If you are a large employer with unspent funds, this is a practical way to support apprenticeships in your supply chain. If you are a small employer, it is worth asking your larger customers whether they transfer – many have funds they will otherwise lose.

“Treat this as an orientation rather than a quotation.”

Funding rules change, sometimes at short notice. We confirm the current position for your business, in writing, before anything is signed.

What you always pay

Whatever the training costs, you pay the apprentice's wage and you give up the released hours. Those are the real costs of an apprenticeship and no funding covers them.

We say so plainly because employers who are surprised by it later tend to be the ones whose apprentices do not finish.

Where these figures come from

The rates on these two pages are taken from the **Department for Education apprenticeship funding rules 2026 to 2027**, which applies from 1 August 2026. Checked 14 August 2026.

Where a government department's guidance and the funding rules disagree – it happens – we follow the funding rules and tell you the discrepancy exists, so you are not caught out when somebody quotes the other number at you.

A three-line version for your finance team

Under £3m pay bill, apprentice aged 16–24: training is fully funded. Over £3m: it comes out of a levy account you are already paying into. In both cases the wage and the released hours are yours.

Four things employers get wrong about the money

- **“We are too small.”** Small employers are the ones the 100% rate is aimed at.
- **“The levy is a tax we cannot recover.”** It is a pot you can only spend one way – and it expires.
- **“Funding covers the wage.”** It does not, and never has.
- **“We will sort the released hours later.”** This is the single most common reason an apprenticeship fails.

When a team needs the same skill at the same time

Sending people on separate public courses is the slow, expensive way to do it. We deliver the whole cohort together, on your schedule.

GROUP SIZE

From a handful of people upwards

DELIVERY

Evenings, weekends or block release

WHERE

Middlesbrough, your premises, or live online

The certifications employers ask for

We are an accredited partner for the vendors whose names appear on job adverts — AWS, Cisco, CompTIA, Microsoft, EC-Council, ISC2, PMI and VMware among them. That matters twice over: your team sits the real exam and gets the real credential, and the courseware is the vendor's own rather than somebody's interpretation of it.

Tailoring, honestly described

Vendor certification courses have a fixed syllabus, because the exam does. What we change is the pace, the order, the examples and the lab scenarios — running exercises against the kind of estate you actually run makes a large difference to how much sticks. Where a team needs something the certification does not cover, we will say so and scope it separately rather than pretending the course does it.

Typical reasons teams come to us

- A contract or framework requires certified staff by a certain date.
- The business has moved to cloud and the team learned on-premise.
- Security has become somebody's job and they need the grounding to do it.
- A tool has been bought and nobody has been trained on it.

Group sizes and dates

We cap cohorts so everyone gets time on the equipment. Dates are arranged around the team rather than published in advance — tell us roughly when suits and how many people, and we come back with options and a written quote.

Before you book a cohort, decide what “done” means

Certified by a date, because a contract says so, is a different plan from generally more capable. The first wants exam seats booked before the course starts; the second wants more lab time and less exam drill. Tell us which one you are buying and the cohort is built accordingly.

You do not have to train with us to sit an exam with us

Self-study is a legitimate route, and plenty of experienced engineers only need the certificate rather than the course. Book a seat, turn up, sit the exam under proper conditions. We will tell you honestly if we think somebody is not ready – the decision stays yours.

Sitting as a group. Where a team certifies together, booking the sittings as a block is easier to administer: one invoice, one set of dates, and results that arrive together so you can see where the team stands.

If somebody does not pass. Re-sits are booked the same way. If they trained with us we go through the score report first and are specific about what to work on – sitting the same exam again without changing anything rarely produces a different result.

What candidates bring

- Photographic identification. Exam boards are strict and we cannot waive it.
- Vendor account details, where the certification requires them.
- Nothing else – everything needed is provided and personal items are stored outside the exam room.

Rather than list every exam code, tell us the specific exam: we confirm whether we can seat it, when, and what it costs. If we cannot, we point you at somewhere that can.

Sometimes the answer is not a course

Training is the right call when a skill will be used continuously by people you already employ. It is the wrong call when the need is one-off, urgent, or so specialised that the person you train will have forgotten it before they use it again. We would rather tell you that than sell you a course.

The people who deliver our courses have done the work in industry, which is why the consultancy exists at all. An engagement often ends with a clear-eyed view of which parts of the team need developing – including the parts you could handle internally without buying anything further from us.

What we are typically asked for

- A second opinion on a design or migration before it is committed to.
- A skills audit: what the team can actually do, against what the business now needs.
- Help specifying a role before recruiting, so the advert asks for the right things.
- Short pieces of hands-on work where the in-house team is at capacity.

How to start

Describe the problem rather than the solution you have in mind. Twenty minutes on the phone is usually enough for us to say whether this is consultancy, training, an apprenticeship, or something you should not spend money on at all.

The teaching and the judgement are in different hands

A training provider that also marks its own work is not offering you very much. Here we prepare the learner, an independent body assesses them, and a third set of organisations inspects how the centre is run.

Awarding organisations

They set the assessment and issue the certificate, independently of us.

City & Guilds — an awarding body for 150 years.

NCFE — recognised by Ofqual, established 1981.

BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT — established 1957.

Pearson VUE — 21 million exams a year, 5,500 centres.

Certiport · CIMA

Technology partners

Their curriculum, their labs, their exam objectives; we are held to their standards to keep the authorisation.

Amazon Web Services · Cisco Networking Academy

Microsoft Learn Academy · TP-Link Learn & Training Centre

Accreditors and quality bodies

Organisations that assess us rather than our learners.

The CPD Certification Service — established 1996.

The Digital College — accredited online vocational training.

NC Group — Ofsted “Outstanding” apprenticeship delivery partner.

Pitman Training — established 1837.

Clinical and public sector

Not IT, and worth saying plainly: relationships with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine and the NHS sit behind the clinical and public-sector training the academy also delivers.

What that separation buys you

A credential your next hiring manager recognises without having to take our word for anything, and an early warning system: if the awarding body or an accreditor is unhappy with how we run, you find out. That is the whole point of the arrangement.

About the academy's own figures

2,500 certified graduates, 200 apprentices graduated and a 95% satisfaction rate are our own published figures rather than an inspector's. We would rather label them than let them be mistaken for something they are not.

Founding dates, member counts and country counts are as published by each organisation. Partner and vendor names and logos are the trademarks of their respective owners.

Twenty minutes, free, and no obligation attached

01 Tell us the gap

A contract requirement, a skill the team is missing, a role you cannot recruit for, or a decision you want a second opinion on.

02 We map the route

Twenty minutes with an advisor: apprenticeship, certification, exam seats, consultancy – or a straight answer that none of them is what you need.

03 You get it in writing

Options, dates and a written quote, with your funding position confirmed before anything is signed.

Book a conversation

Online learningkey.co.uk/for-employers

Phone 01642 800 881

Email hello@learningkey.co.uk

In person 69 Newport Road,
Middlesbrough TS1 1LA

Questions employers actually ask

Can we put an existing employee on an apprenticeship?

Yes, and it is common. They must be learning genuinely new skills – it cannot be used to certify what somebody already does.

Do the released hours have to be one day a week?

No. Blocks, on site, online, or learning new skills while doing the job – provided it is planned and recorded.

How quickly can somebody start?

Weeks rather than months, and most of that is recruitment. Nominating an existing employee removes that step.

Do you deliver outside Teesside?

Yes – at your premises anywhere in the UK, or live online with the same trainer and materials.

What will it cost?

For apprenticeships, often nothing for the training itself – see pages 6 and 7. For team training and exam seats, a written quote against your actual numbers rather than a list price that would not apply to you.



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Tell us the gap.

Twenty minutes, free, no pressure — and a straight answer, including when the answer is that you should not spend money with us. learningkey.co.uk/for-employers or 01642 800 881.

01

Apprentices

Six standards at Level 3 and 4. Often fully funded. Pages 3–7.

02

Team training

Whole cohorts, your schedule, vendor courseware. Page 8.

03

Exams & advice

Accredited exam seats and consultancy. Page 9.

VISIT

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TALK TO US

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Funding rates are from the Department for Education apprenticeship funding rules 2026 to 2027, applying from 1 August 2026, checked 14 August 2026. Funding rules change, sometimes at short notice — we confirm your position in writing before anything is signed. Service descriptions correct as published at learningkey.co.uk in August 2026.