

Go-Ahead hires 650 bus and rail apprentices during COVID-19 pandemic

December 16, 2020



The Go-Ahead Group has recruited more than 50 apprentices a month during 2020 despite the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whilst focusing on keeping services going and ensuring customers and colleagues are safe, Go-Ahead has continued to take on apprentice drivers, engineers and customer service workers. In 2020 it has recruited 650 apprentices as part of its commitment to invest in its workforce for the long term.

Applications for roles at Southeastern, Govia Thameslink Railway and Go-Ahead London have surged to record levels. The number of people seeking rail jobs has doubled, while enquiries about roles driving and maintaining London buses are up by a third.

In addition to young people applying straight out of education, many applicants are job switchers who have been prompted by the pandemic to seek new careers. New recruits include an airline pilot, a former prison van driver, a guitar instructor, a teaching assistant and a veteran of the French foreign legion.

Southeastern has hired almost 230 apprentices in engineering, customer service and train driving this

year. It was recently named one of the Top 100 Apprentice Employers in the UK – the only train operating company to make the Government’s shortlist. Govia Thameslink Railway has recruited 188 apprentices, of whom 28 per cent are female.

Go-Ahead London has hired more than 300 apprentice bus drivers, of whom 17 per cent are female – significantly above the 12 per cent national average of female bus drivers.

Apprenticeship programmes have been hit hard across numerous sectors due to COVID-19. According to the Department for Education, apprentice starts have decreased by nearly 50 per cent in 2020[1].

In spite of the challenging environment, Go-Ahead has pushed ahead with its scheme, demonstrating the company’s commitment to training and push for championing diversity.

Go-Ahead’s apprenticeship programmes have adapted to ensure colleagues’ safety during the pandemic, including social distancing and implementing new distance-learning educational tools.

Go-Ahead’s Group People Director Scott Maynard said: “The pandemic has prompted many people to change careers – either through choice or because their previous jobs have become untenable. A lot of people who wouldn’t have previously considered working in bus and rail are looking at opportunities in the industry in a new light.

“Public transport is critical for our future and is essential in the fight against poor air quality and climate change. We will always need great people to help us drive our buses, maintain our trains and help passengers on their journeys. Apprenticeships are just one of the ways we are investing in our future.”

Among those to join as an apprentice train driver at Southeastern is former airline pilot Lee Portelli, who joined in November 2020. A father of two daughters, Lee had a 14-year career flying commercial aircraft before switching to the railways as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. He worked for Astraeus, Monarch and, most recently, British Airways, where he flew short-haul routes out of Gatwick.

He said: “I was looking for something that would use the skills I’d developed during my time flying – I wanted to do something that involved transporting passengers, and working in a safety critical role. When the opportunity came up at Southeastern, I was immediately interested.”

[1] Department for Education report 2020

Photo credit: Go-Ahead

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