

How to Guide for Observation



What is it?

An Observation involves an Independent End-Point Assessor (IEPA) observing an apprentice undertaking a task or series of tasks in the workplace, as part of their normal activities; these are 'on-the-job' and naturally occurring duties, and will be linked directly to the appropriate standard and criteria. The Observation will normally be complemented by questioning from the IEPA, during and/or after the Observation.

This assessment method is suitable for assessing knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) holistically, and specifically assessing practical skills. However, some workplaces may not be suitable for observation to be undertaken in or may require additional controls to be put in place; for example, relating to safety, security, confidentiality or restricted access to the site or observation area.

For end-point assessment (EPA), the Observation is a **summative** assessment method, taking place at the end of the apprenticeship to demonstrate the KSBs gained whilst on-programme.

It should be very clear **what** is being observed, i.e. the specific KSBs from the apprenticeship standard. The apprentice and IEPA should be very clear about what the purpose of the Observation is and know exactly which competencies are being shown/expected and assessed during the Observation.

How to Prepare for an Observation?

Being observed can be daunting, and although this method of assessing competencies is widely used, the most experienced professionals can still become nervous and stressed about the prospect of being 'watched'. This must be taken into consideration when preparing for an Observation, and apprentices at all levels should be supported, to help them to feel prepared and ready for the assessment activity.

To help them to prepare, apprentices should **practise** being observed, both formally and informally, throughout their work and programme of learning. This type of activity is known as **formative** assessment and allows the apprentice to receive ongoing feedback on their KSB development, in relation to the end-point assessment activity they are preparing for. Observations can be carried out by the apprentice's manager, off-the-job trainer or their more experienced colleagues; a range of people and situations will help develop the confidence and readiness of the apprentice. This should help them to:

- practise showing and demonstrating their KSBs
- build their confidence in being 'watched' and observed carrying out their normal activities
- become *reflective* professionals and carry out self-assessments of their progress
- be more aware of their development areas and priorities for improvement.

Other Factors to Consider

The experience, knowledge, qualifications and occupational competence of the observer must be taken into consideration, to ensure that the findings from 'practice' observations are valid and the results are reliable. An observer must be realistic and honest when observing apprentices and providing feedback to them, and any practice observations should focus on highlighting areas of good practice whilst being constructive about any areas for further improvement.

It might also be useful to reflect on what progress has been made since any previous observations; to treat observations as a tool to record **progress over time**. Try not to treat each observation in isolation – the observer might not have completed prior observations, but the findings and feedback from them should be used to review how well the apprentice is developing and improving their KSBs. Asking apprentices to reflect on previous assessment and observation activities will help to involve them to be more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and will also make the apprentice more responsible for their performance. It would also be beneficial to structure any development priorities in an informed way; for example, by linking them to the EPA criteria, allowing the apprentice to 'tick off' their competencies and develop their self-confidence.

For the purposes of EPA, Observations **should not** have any elements of simulation. If there are any KSBs which don't naturally occur in the observation, the IEPA will revisit them afterwards or at another time; this is why the Observation is often followed up by a question and answer or discussion activity. The IEPA will explore the apprentice's KSBs and fill in any 'gaps' by asking specific criteria-related questions after the Observation.

Observation Conditions

As this is a formal EPA method, and although it will probably take place in a real working environment, the apprentice and observer should remember the formality of the activity at all times. Other people may enter and leave the observation area as a matter of course, but they should try to limit any interruptions and should not offer any advice and/or guidance to the apprentice during the Observation. Although the apprentice needs to demonstrate the KSBs, they should always, where appropriate, seek support and guidance from colleagues. This is a natural and good practice part of work, and apprentices should also review where this would be considered good practice, such as when seeking a second opinion.

Observation Feedback

After practice observations, apprentices should receive clear and constructive feedback on their performance and progress. The way in which feedback is delivered is also important, especially if the intention is for the activity to be supportive and developmental. Everyone is different, and each individual apprentice will have their own personal preferences in relation to how they prefer to receive their feedback. Feedback meetings, their content and style in particular, should be structured in a way that suits the individual receiving the feedback.

For EPA, an Observation Record will be completed at the time the Observation is taking place. The IEPA will mark the Observation against the standards and identify which areas have been achieved.

How to Provide Constructive and Useful Feedback?

There are many ways in which feedback can be structured, delivered and presented. It is important to adapt feedback methods to meet the needs of the apprentice – and to make it a two-way rather than one-way process. Apprentices need to 'own' their own progress and development priorities, and if they are only 'told' what they are doing well and what they need to improve, then their 'buy in' may not be assured. We should therefore always consider how observers could use a **coaching** approach to engage apprentices in reviewing competencies (see Appendix I).

Appendix I identifies some feedback models which could be used and adapted to meet the needs of the apprentice and situation, but there is no right or wrong way to structure this, it should be dictated by the context and preferences of the people involved.

General Points

Remember that the most effective feedback **is not one-way**. If someone is to learn and develop, they should be **actively involved** in the process of identifying their own competencies and priorities for improvement/further development.

Becoming **reflective** is important for any professional to improve and develop. For ongoing observations, structure the feedback to promote self-reflection and help the apprentice to learn and make their own decisions about what they do well and what they need to progress and advance their KSBs.

Guidance for the Professionals Involved in the Observation Process

The apprentice should:	
try to...	try not to...
fully prepare for the Observation – try to anticipate what might go wrong and identify strategies to overcome them.	panic! Observation of people at work is a normal thing – and it's likely that your observer will know what you're thinking as they've been there themselves.
practise what you're going to be doing in the Observation before it takes place.	be over-confident. Even the most experienced professionals don't get everything right all the time, so be aware that you'll have some development points, wherever you 'are' in your career.
carry out peer observations – this other perspective will help you to see what the observer sees and be more aware of your own KSBs and plan.	be observed before you're ready, but remember to take the advice of the more experienced people you work with. If they think you're ready, you probably are.

The employer should:	
try to...	try not to...
plan opportunities for the apprentice to practise being observed and receive feedback – the EPA activity shouldn't be the first time they are assessed in this way.	tell the apprentice exactly what they are 'doing wrong' and how to put it right! If people are told what to do, they don't always learn it.
encourage the apprentice to take responsibility for identifying what they need to improve and how they will improve.	be too hard or soft; remember to stay objective and use the appropriate standard to make observation judgements.
apply a coaching approach – apprentices will be more empowered and motivated if they identify what they need to do, in order to develop their knowledge, skills and behaviours and improve.	overload the apprentice with feedback – too many points for improvement can be overwhelming and confusing, so prioritise the most important factors for improvement, rather than having too many.
stay as objective as possible, and avoid making any "if it was me, I would do it like this..." statements.	compare staff members; use examples of good practice to help make suggestions but remain objective and don't compare the apprentice to their colleagues.

The observer should:	
try to...	try not to...
be very specific and use examples from the Observation to explain important points.	be vague, use examples, talk 'abstractly' or make comparisons to other Observations/members of staff.
keep the feedback short and focussed, but not too rushed.	take too long in providing the feedback – the longer after the event, the less useful it is for the receiver.
have a balance of negative and positive feedback – if there are a large number of development points, prioritise the most important ones.	do all the talking – make the feedback a two-way conversation rather than the observer simply 'telling' the apprentice how they did.
make sure you're fully prepared to provide the feedback – the observer should take notes during the observation which should be used to inform the feedback.	focus too much on negative or development points – too many areas for improvement can demoralise and demotivate the person receiving them.