

Episode 341 AW

[00:00:00] Hello, and welcome to today's episode of the Grow My Salon Business podcast. I'm your host Antony Whitaker, and as I always like to say, it's great to have you join us here today. Now, recently on one of my group coaching calls, a very good question came up from Heather. In fact, it really wasn't just one question, it was a series of questions, but it's a topic that is relevant no matter where you are in the world, because it is the real issues that salon owners everywhere grapple with.

[00:00:28] So I've decided to turn this series of questions into today's podcast episode. So Heather's first question was. Is it realistic to condense a traditional two plus year apprenticeship pathway without lowering standards? Now my answer is quite simply yes, but not only is it yes, that it's realistic, but it's also something that you have to do.

[00:00:53] In order to be financially viable. And I say that because the world is constantly changing. The economics of running a salon have changed, and whether we like it or not, the way we train people has to change with it. The second question really comes in two parts. The first part is how does the assistants contribution to revenue now and in the future compared to how it has been to date,

[00:01:21] Well, the first thing is that when someone says, compare to how it has been to date, what they really mean is compared to what I'm used to. Now I can say that with the benefit of over 40 years in the industry. And so you need to trust me when I say that the industry and all the moving parts within it have constantly evolved, and it will always continue to evolve and change.

[00:01:47] Change isn't a new thing that's just happening. But having said that, I'd also like to say that the answer to that question varies a lot, and it varies a lot from salon to salon, and it varies from apprentice to apprentice. But fundamentally, I'd say that I don't believe that the contribution to revenue from assistants is a lot different today to what it has been throughout my career.

[00:02:12] Now, I also think that the place to start with that question is actually to make a distinction between income producing staff and non-income producing staff, because there's this sort of messy area in the middle. So let me explain to you what I mean. There is a time at the very beginning of taking an apprentice or trainee on where their financial contribution is negative because they literally can't do anything.

[00:02:41] They actually slow you down, and so you quickly have to get them to be competent with setting up workspaces, communicating with clients, service standards, making refreshments, shampooing, et cetera. Now I just wanna reemphasize the point that I'm talking about an apprenticeship rather than someone who has gone through a hairdressing school, a private college or a government college where they've spent 12 months already learning the fundamentals.

[00:03:07] Okay? Whereas an apprentice has quite possibly comes straight from secondary school and knows nothing realistically about the way that salons run. So you need to set them up with those fundamental skills. But once they can do all that competently and with a degree of confidence, then something does start to shift because once you have got that happening the way that you want, then they can quickly be a very useful asset

[00:03:35] And although they're not directly producing money, and this is the important bit, because at that point, having them there as your assistant should enable you, the stylist to produce more money. So they're indirectly making a financial contribution, and you have to get to that point within a few weeks.

[00:03:56] Definitely not months or years. And if not, they are an unnecessary and unaffordable expense that you simply don't need, and that might sound brutal, but the cost of having them and all the employee benefits associated with it has meant that the profit margins in a salon are less than they have been throughout my long career.

[00:04:17] Whereas in the past you could carry them These days you simply can't afford to. They either make an indirect positive contribution to the salon sales or you don't have room for them. Now, the second half of Heather's question was, is there a shift required to make the employment of assistants viable?

[00:04:37] Yes, there is a shift required, and it comes down to two things. First, you, the salon owner have the responsibility of setting people up to succeed. Meaning that you need to have the onboarding and training systems in place to get them productive as quickly as possible. And here's the reality. Most salon owners don't have anything like that in place.

[00:04:59] And secondly, the individual needs to step up and prove that they're willing to learn and be able to make a valuable contribution because there's no room for stragglers. And let's face it, a lot of people aren't equipped already for that responsibility. As I said, salon owners need to develop the training program

that they need to get assistants productive instead of assuming that someone else will do it for them.

[00:05:27] And likewise, apprentices and trainees need to understand that the world doesn't owe you a living. Not everyone gets prize. You have to make a contribution and prove your value, or you quickly become that unnecessary expense.

[00:05:40] So let me just go back in time a little, and I promise you this isn't one of those when I was a boy stories. It's just to provide some context because as recently as the 1960s, certainly in the UK and I know in lots of other countries as well, apprentices. Had to pay to go to work. Yes. You just heard that, right?

[00:06:01] Okay. In other words, they, or more likely their parents paid the business owner a fee to teach them. Now, this wasn't just hairdressing, this was in many trades, and up until the sixties, that was really how it was done. But in the sixties and seventies, that was when the paid apprenticeship system started, and the apprenticeship was usually somewhere between three to five years to learn the craft, and it was very much on a minimal wage.

[00:06:29] Now, obviously times have constantly changed, expectations have changed. Employment laws have changed, and technology has changed as well. These days, there's laws around minimum wage and employee benefits, et cetera, and while they're undoubtedly good for the employee, they have definitely made it harder for the employer to take on new apprentices,

[00:06:53] Even in the 1980s in the UK to reduce unemployment, the government bought in a thing called the Youth Training Scheme or YTS, where the government paid the apprentices wages for the first two years. So effectively, you could have a salon full of apprentices who were free labour. I was a stylist at Sassoon in London at that time, and they would have intakes of 20 new apprentices into each salon at least twice a year.

[00:07:21] We had so many apprentices that they had to take two hour shifts on door duty, meaning that they stood at the front door opening and closing the door for clients. Now, obviously that no longer exists anymore, and today's employers have the responsibility to recruit, train, and pay apprentices. Now that can be a win for the employee because they get training and pay and benefits.

[00:07:47] But fast forward to 2026 and no matter where you are in the Western world, the cost of having non-income producing people on the payroll has now

become so high that many salons no longer take on apprentices because they simply can't afford to.

[00:08:05] However, there are different models in different countries. For example, in the United States, they do have apprenticeships in some states, but primarily the model is it to learn a trade. In this case, hairdressing, you pay to go to a beauty school and after a certain amount of hours at school, you are effectively a licensed hairdresser.

[00:08:26] In many countries, there's now a mix of apprenticeships or private schools as well as government-run schools. And that mix is constantly evolving and the standards vary dramatically no matter where you are.

[00:08:39] But regardless of the model, the challenge is essentially the same. How do you create productive and profitable team members in a sustainable way? The third question Heather asked me is, are you seeing strong employment based salons restructure the assistant pathway? And if so, how? Well, the first thing to acknowledge

[00:09:01] is that employment based salons are in decline, and there are many reasons for that, but one of those reasons is that employing people in the hairdressing industry has become harder than ever because of increased legislation, increased minimum wages, and increased employee benefits.

[00:09:18] And while none of those things are fundamentally bad. What hasn't increased in proportion anyway is the level of financial productivity from the stylist behind the chair, which has meant that the margins for profit are squeezed tighter and tighter and tighter, which is making salon ownership less attractive for many.

[00:09:38] But some of that is also self-inflicted in that the majority of salons do not have a structured written training program for any of their team. They have no written syllabus, no timeline, and no training notes, recording progress for individuals on their team.

[00:09:54] They offer very little regular in-house training and assessments for their team. They do not have a stylist or colourist with the teaching skills dedicated to being an in-house educator, and they wrongly assume that the educational institutes, whether that's the private providers or government schools, will train apprentices or assistants to the standard that is needed for their salon.

[00:10:19] The majority of salon owners do not recognize that with technology today, whether it's the internet, YouTube, smartphone, social media, et cetera, that you can learn anytime, anywhere, and it's often free or at very low cost. Unfortunately, though, the standard of education varies dramatically. Sometimes it's terrible, and other times it's brilliant.

[00:10:40] And at the same time, we have to recognize that the next generation coming into the industry have different values and they will not work the way that perhaps worked, whether that was 10 or 20, or 30, or even 40 years ago. They live in a different world, and the world that they live in is changing faster than ever.

[00:10:59] And as salon owners, we need to find a way to make that work for us. And equally they need to find a way to make it work for them. And whether you like that or not really doesn't matter. That's just the reality of the world we now live in. Today, the good employment based salons, and there are many of them everywhere, recognise this, and they definitely have restructured the assistant pathway to get them productive quickly.

[00:11:27] They take full responsibility for training. They have systems and timelines and accountability in place. They invest in educators within their team, and they're constantly evolving, constantly improving, constantly asking How do we make this better? and yes, some.

[00:11:45] Are deciding that apprenticeships don't stack up any longer financially, but many are making it work. And that's important because despite everything, despite ai, despite how fast the world is changing, hairdressing is still a people business. It's still a craft. And there will always be people who want to learn the hairdressing craft.

[00:12:08] And that should give you some reassurance. So where does that leave you? It's easy to listen to all of this and think, oh my God, this is just getting too hard. But the reality is, is that there is a huge opportunity here because the salons that will win going forward are the ones that take ownership, ownership of training, ownership of systems, ownership of building productive professional teams.

[00:12:33] So if I was to leave you with a few simple takeaways, it would be this. Number one is it's your responsibility. To take ownership of your training. And that doesn't mean that you can't outsource it and bring in other people, because of course you can, but ultimately it is your responsibility to manage that.

[00:12:53] Number two is build a structured pathway. Meaning have a timeline that an apprentice can see, where they will be in six months, 12 months, a year, 18 months, two years, and set clear expectations and standards along that journey. Number three is you really do need to get assistance or apprentices contributing quickly.

[00:13:16] Even if it's indirect contribution, it definitely matters. Number four is invest in someone in your team to become a trainer or an educator. And number five, accept that the industry has changed. It always has and it always will. So learn to adapt to it rather than resist it.

[00:13:40] And if you are listening to this and you're thinking to yourself, look, I know this is really what I need, but I just don't know how to put a training program together to fast track assistants, well then maybe this is where you need a bit of help regardless of where you get it, whether it's through me or through someone else, whether it's through me through.

[00:13:59] Online courses or working with me one-to-one in a coaching capacity. The reality is, is that sometimes having someone to guide you through the process can save you years of trial and error. So look, with that said, we'll wrap up this week's episode, but for more information, you can visit [grow my salon business.com](http://growmysalonbusiness.com), where you'll find our free resources, our books, our online courses, and our coaching programs.

[00:14:25] So in the meantime, have a great week and don't forget to join me next Tuesday for another episode of the Grow My Salon Business podcast. So bye for now.