

# Developing Supported Work Experience Opportunities - the Employer Perspective

## Education Business Futures



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### Summary

This case study reflects on an employer's experience of working with 4 learners with learning disabilities as they undertook supported work placements within the hotel. It highlights for educators, employers interests and how they might work collaboratively to the mutual benefit of learners and employers.

### Introduction

Q Hotels have 21 hotels across the UK including the Nottingham Belfry Hotel near Strelley on the outskirts of Nottingham City and close to Junction 26 of the M1. The staff at the Nottingham Belfry Hotel have supported employer engagement activities for school pupils for a number of years, offering work experience placements and taking part in a range of other activities.

Nottingham and Nottingham Futures is a not for profit Joint Venture company wholly owned by the City and County Councils. We hold the current National Careers Service Contract for the East Midlands, deliver Targeted Youth Support for both Councils and, amongst other things, also arrange safeguarded work experience placements for those schools contracted with us. Our employer engagement activities, although curtailed with the withdrawal of Government funding in 2011, are still utilised in other spheres and provide us with access to some 19,500 local businesses whose details we hold on our database.

When the Nottingham Belfry Hotel were initially approached by Education Business Futures regarding their involvement in this project the discussion was primarily around finding different ways to recruit to their 'hard-to-fill' vacancies and they were immediately interested in this concept as well as appreciating the Corporate Social Responsibility aspects of the project.

## Organisations involved

A group of providers in the Nottingham area worked together on this project and consisted of:

Skills for Employment - WBL

Vision West Notts - FE College

Bracken Hill Special School

Education Business Futures

Portland College - Specialist College

This project was also supported by Nottingham County Council and work was reported at a number of key strategic meetings including the Foundation Learning Education and Employment Strategy Group and Nottinghamshire Partnership Board.

## What we wanted to achieve

The primary aim of this project was to provide real work placements for learners with disabilities supported by a Job Coach who had been trained to use Systematic Instruction (TSI).

## Implementation

The project steering group determined the criteria for the placements required and the Education Business Futures division of the Futures Company searched for employers who had previously engaged with this client group or had expressed an interest in doing so. A number of businesses were contacted with some basic details and a request to register an interest if they wished to pursue the matter. Those that registered an interest were visited for exploratory discussions about their needs, the roles that they might be able to offer, their perceived risks and previous experience.

This information was taken back to the project steering group and informed the discussion about the most suitable placement and the characteristics of the learners most likely to succeed in the placement selected.

Meanwhile a Systematic Instruction training programme was arranged for key staff from each of the partners and an experienced Job Coach was made available by one partner for the duration of the placements.

Further meetings were arranged with the Nottingham Belfry to finalise arrangements and then learners were selected by the partners and put forward for introduction to the hotel.

Once commenced the learners were accompanied by a support worker from their own school / college / provider and the Job Coach was attendant at the hotel for the entire duration.

## Outcomes and impacts

### What we achieved

When we reviewed the project on completion they identified the following areas as outcomes from their perspective:

- Corporate Social Responsibility
- Staff Development and Morale
- Recruitment for hard-to-fill / poor retention job roles
- Reputation
- Useful experience

### Corporate Social Responsibility

Q Hotels have a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy and seek ways in which they can engage with their local communities, assist disadvantaged groups etc. This project fitted in with their CSR policy.

## **Staff Development and Morale**

There was a level of nervousness throughout the Nottingham Belfry staff about engaging with learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. However staff at all levels report that they enjoyed the experience and feel much more positive about the client group now – seeing and recognising ability rather than disability.

Having learners with a range of learning disabilities on-site has boosted morale across the staff team by introducing a new element into the daily routine and encouraging a fresh perspective on work and life.

Staff have reported that their attitudes and stereotyping have been challenged, that they enjoyed the challenge and feel that their attitudes have altered, positively, as a result of the experience.

## **Recruitment for hard-to-fill / poor retention job roles**

This was one of the primary motives for initial engagement with the project – The Nottingham Belfry has difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff in some ‘entry level’ roles within their staffing structure. The aim then was to explore whether with the support of a Job Coach and the use of systematic Instruction this would enable learners with disabilities to achieve employment standards within existing Job Descriptions.

## **Reputation**

Linked to the group CSR policy, there is a cultural awareness of the importance of reputation, locally in the community, amongst customers and potential customers and amongst other businesses both in the sector and in the supply chain. This project was seen as potentially reputation enhancing as it represents a serious commitment to a disadvantaged group.

## **Useful Experience**

The Nottingham Belfry management team recognised the desirability of gaining more experience of working with and recognising the abilities and support needs more representatives from this client group. This was driven by a desire to ensure that the best possible service is offered by the staff to customers and to potential employees applying for positions at the hotel. Although the prime motivation is to offer a good service, there is also an understanding of the Equality Act and a desire to avoid any complaints or claims under the terms of this act.

This project was seen as a low-risk opportunity of gaining valuable experience across the whole staff team. The positive feedback from the staff suggests that awareness was raised and attitudes altered positively.

## **What we learned**

The project has demonstrated that learners with disabilities can be supported to achieve employment standards within aspects of existing Job Descriptions but probably not to the whole Job as it is currently defined. This in turn has raised the question of being able to produce ‘individualised’ job descriptions whilst still conforming to the Human Resources practices of the group and ensuring that sufficient skill-sets are combined to meet the overall needs of the business. Significant challenges lie along this route but there is a genuine interest in further

exploration of how the skill sets that learners can acquire can be harnessed within an employed position.

## **What we are taking forward**

The Future

The Nottingham Belfry have expressed an interest in participating in a potential follow-up to this project that could involve between 3 and 5 learners on their site for an extended placement supported by Job Coach and using the Systematic Instruction approach, followed by fixed term employment with other partners.

## **What advice we would give to others**

It is important to have access to a number of businesses that have an interest in engaging with this client group. Discussions have to be held in language that business can understand and that caters for their needs and desired outcomes as well as those of the learners and the organisations providing education for them. Plans must ensure that the disruption to business is minimised and then identified accurately to the business. Effort and imagination should be applied to seeking some 'quick wins' for the business so that they get some insight of the potential advantages.

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**Provider name** The Nottingham Belfry Hotel, the Futures Company, Portland College, Vision West Nottinghamshire College, Skills for Employment, Bracken Hill Special School and Nottingham County Council.

**Sector coverage** FE colleges, Specialist College, Supported Work Organisations, Work based Learning Organisations, Special Schools

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