

Preparing for Adulthood: Engaging employers to find work experience for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities: a guide for post-16 providers



Introduction

Good work experience can often be the key to the door of a good job after leaving education: the more contact a young person has with the workplace, the more likely they are to find employment¹. This is especially true for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD). The experience that young people gain from workplace training can make them more attractive to employers. Employment rates for disabled people are considerably lower than for non-disabled people (46% and 76%)², and only 7% of people with a moderate to severe learning disabilities are known to adult social care, are in work.³ As a post-16 learning provider you have a vital role to play in establishing strong relationships with employers, which can result in high quality contacts within the workplace for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Personalised work experience should form part of every study programme.

This guide has been developed to provide a helpful introduction to effective employer engagement for post-16 learning providers. This includes:

- Further education colleges;
- Sixth form colleges;
- Sixth forms in academies, free schools and maintained schools, including special schools;
- Independent specialist providers; and
- Any other providers of study programmes.

1 Beyer S and Robinson C (2009) 'A Review of the Research Literature on Supported Employment: A Report for the cross Government learning disability employment strategy team'. London: Department of Health.

2 Labour Force Survey 2012 Q2

3 NHS Social Care and Mental Health Indicators from the National Indicator Set: 2010-11 provisional release at www.data.gov.uk

It has been divided into 11 sections, providing information on the steps you need to take to establish sustainable partnerships with employers which are mutually beneficial:

- The benefits for young people with LDD of having a range of high quality contacts with employers, including in the workplace;
- The benefits for employers of employing a diverse workforce;
- Understanding how employers can get involved;
- Developing the business case to engage with employers;
- Defining your offer to employers;
- Identifying which employers you want to approach;
- Coordinating an approach across the education provider with a single point of contact;
- Initially engaging with employers;
- Moving from initial engagement to a strong, long term relationship;
- Maintaining relationships; and
- Further resources.

The benefits for young people with LDD having a range of high quality contacts with employers, including in the workplace

Disabled young people typically start out with the same hopes as everyone else: the levels of aspiration among disabled 16-year-olds are similar to those of their non-disabled peers and they expect the same level of earnings from a full-time job. A number of factors are crucial to helping young people with LDD create a successful and fulfilling career, and one of these enablers is accessible work experience. This will provide them with a proven track record which helps to dispel any negative attitudes of employers. This experience can also show employers and post-16 learning providers what a young person can achieve, and help families to understand what is possible.⁴

The benefits for employers employing a diverse workplace

Healthy, competitive businesses can flourish where the needs of people, communities and businesses are interrelated. To remain competitive, organisations need everyone who works for them to make their best contribution. Increasingly, employers are recognising the importance of diversity in recruiting and retaining the skills and talent they need to be successful. By getting involved in a range of provision with post-16 learning providers, employers can be supported to create open and inclusive workplace cultures in which everyone feels valued and respected. The case study on *EmployAbility – Let's work together* provides a good example.⁵

Competence and flexibility are vital skills that employers seek. Today more than ever, businesses need people with the ability to adapt to different situations and circumstances. Perhaps more than any group, people with disabilities can possess precisely these attributes. On a daily basis, people with disabilities must think creatively about how to solve problems and accomplish tasks. In the workplace, this translates into innovative thinking, fresh ideas and varied approaches to confronting challenges and achieving success.

Further information on the benefits of employing a diverse workforce are set out in a useful factsheet called *Diversity in the workplace: an overview*.

Understand how employers can get involved

Employers can get involved in various ways to support the employment pathways of young people with LDD. Dependent upon their business needs and level of disability confidence, employers could get involved with:

- Working with you in community volunteering and team building events, supporting young people with LDD;
- Mentoring support to young people with LDD and contributing to careers advice and guidance;
- Presentations to young people about their business and potential opportunities;
- Providing mock interviews;
- Offering work tasters and work experience;

4 Department for Work and Pensions (2013), *The disability and health employment strategy: the discussion so far*

5 <http://www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk/resources/pfa-resources/employability-lets-work-together>

- Attending networking events and job fairs;
- Offering supported internships; and
- Offering traineeships and Apprenticeships.

Develop the business case to engage with employers

By becoming involved in provision for young people with LDD, employers can expand their pool of talent, skills and creative business solutions. It is important that you develop your business case to present to employers to ensure they understand all the benefits of getting involved. You will also need to consider how this fits with other messages to employers as part of a local area's strategic approach to employer engagement.

Some of the key benefits to employers could include:

- Improved image and external reputation with a workforce that reflects the diversity of local communities;
- Team building and internal reputation with improved staff morale;
- Personal development opportunities for staff;
- Diversity-improved services and products to attract the "purple pound" - the spending power of disabled people estimated to be £80 billion in the UK;
- Improved understanding of the needs of customers with disabilities;
- Ability to recruit from a wider availability of labour to ensure they employ the best people for their job vacancies;
- Early identification of talent, and development of a local workforce that comes with values that fit their business needs;
- Reduced recruitment costs with a supported selection process;
- Improved staff retention;
- Corporate social responsibility and being seen as an "employer of choice"; and
- Positive change to workplace culture and practice.

Define your offer to employers

In return for employers offering a range of opportunities for young people with LDD, be clear about how this relationship can benefit the employer as well as the young person. The offer could include:

- Free training for their staff in disability awareness and mentoring;
- Job coach support (at no cost to the employer) for work tasters, work experience, supported internships, traineeships and Apprenticeships;
- Business support with tailor-made solutions which includes staff retention and job carving;
- Free job-matching service to their vacancies;
- Advice on reasonable adjustments;
- Advice on financial support and incentives; and
- Free publicity for the business.

It is important that the offer to employers is realistic so that you can offer a reliable and responsive service that is readily accessible to employers.

Identify which employers you want to approach

Local knowledge about the employment market is essential, and you should seek out and understand the labour market information produced by local authorities. This will ensure that you understand where the jobs will be in the future, and can also be built into any careers information, advice and guidance you provide.

Target employers in sectors with projected growth, stressing the contribution a young person with LDD can make. This will ensure that young people with LDD have opportunities in the sectors where there will be jobs, which will improve their prospects of gaining paid employment upon leaving education.

Co-ordinate an approach across the learning provider with a single point of contact

Employers regularly report that they are frustrated by a multitude of approaches from a variety of organisations. It is important that they are not bombarded by numerous requests from different staff. This will ensure that employers don't become disillusioned by poor communication, and they have a professional and credible impression of what you can offer. Have a single point of contact for each employer, as employer's value consistency.

Set up and maintain a spreadsheet or database of employers that you have contacted, and the outcome of any approaches to them. This will need to be available to all those involved in employer engagement, and regularly up-dated to avoid any duplication.

Initial engagement with employers

Avoid the use of acronyms and jargon when talking to employers. Most employers are not driven by the agenda to improve outcomes for young people with LDD. They will be more interested in improving business efficiency, meeting resource shortages, enhancing customer services and increasing profit margins.

Before approaching an employer, identify who can make decisions to enter into a relationship. The aim is to enter into a mutually beneficial partnership with employers, to gain their support in developing sustainable employment pathways for young people with LDD.

In initial discussions with an employer, they may not understand how what you offer can meet their business needs. Therefore, you will need to gain an understanding of their needs from using open and probing questions. This can be done through a conversation with an employer getting them to talk about their business. This will allow for opportunities to start to ask more direct questions to understand how your offer could provide effective business solutions for them. By doing this, you will be able to match your offer against an employer's needs.

Employers may have concerns and it will be important to prepare your responses to any objections that they may have, and deal with these effectively. Some of their concerns could include:

- Will the young people with LDD have the right attitude and be willing and able to learn?
- Are they reliable?
- Will they fit in with my team or cause any trouble?
- What is the risk?
- Will my customer credibility be affected?
- How will my business benefit from this?
- What staff time will be taken up with training and supporting the young people?
- What will this cost me?

Moving from initial engagement to a sustainable mutually beneficial partnership

It will be important to work at the pace of the employer to ensure they develop their disability confidence and fully appreciate the clear business benefits of getting involved. Getting them on board in the first place is the key, and this might need to start with building the relationship by asking employers to come and meet young people with LDD so that they understand the range of abilities they have. If you work at the pace of the employer, this will ensure that they give the chances to young people with LDD to be productive members of their workforces.

Most employers have a starting point of low expectations of the contribution that young people with LDD can make to their businesses. Ensure that you are confident that those put forward initially for any type of work placements can fulfil their job roles. This will help to ensure that over time as employers develop their disability confidence, it will allow you to ask the employer to help you out testing the abilities of those with higher levels of need.

Where possible, use the knowledge and experience of a supported employment provider or trained job coach who will be able to conduct departmental and job analyses for any work placements. This can help to identify potential for placement or areas of unmet need with a business which could be fulfilled through a customised job role. Information on supported employment and training for job coaches is available through the British Association for Supported Employment (BASE).

Maintaining relationships

Once engaged in a relationship with an employer, it is important to keep in touch and remember to thank them at appropriate times. When the relationship has developed and they have provided various opportunities, they can be asked to take the time to speak to other employers they work with about the benefits of engaging with post-16 providers. Employers regularly network and there are opportunities for them to put you in touch with other likeminded businesses. It is also good to develop case studies with employers and use them in any information materials you produce as the business will benefit from this free publicity.

As employer engagement strategies are developed, create a branded information pack for employers. It is important that information offered is jargon-free, in plain language and communicates the benefits to employers of getting involved in offering opportunities to young people with LDD. It needs to be clear that the needs and expectations of employers are understood.

It is important to try and maintain both a high and positive profile with employers. Use of social media and websites to share information and link with employers is recommended. Employers should be encouraged to join any steering groups which would be relevant to them, inviting key people from those employers who are effectively engaged. Employers should also be invited to attend any events such as end-of-year celebrations, network events and coffee mornings. Also ask them to be guest speakers where this is appropriate, sharing good practice and further building the relationship.

Effective employer engagement cannot happen overnight. Continued dialogue with employers and getting regular and timely feedback will help you to refine your approach and strategy. This will ensure you arrive at a clear understanding of how to work in partnership with employers to develop vocationally-focused study programmes which meet the needs of young people with SEN, and also ensure real paid work opportunities are available which meet the business needs of employers.

Useful resources

Business Disability Forum - <http://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/>

CIPD - <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/factsheets/diversity-workplace-overview.aspx>

Disability Confidence Campaign - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employing-disabled-people-and-people-with-health-conditions/employing-disabled-people-and-people-with-health-conditions> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-disability-confident-campaign>

BASE - <http://base-uk.org/>

Inclusive films - <http://inclusivefilms.org/our-films/disability-and-employment-the-business-case/>

Evenbreak - <http://www.evenbreak.co.uk/>

Employer hub for supported internships - <http://www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk/what-we-do/supported-internships/dfe-information-for-employers>

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