

Supporting Work Placements For Young People With Learning Disabilities Or Autism – A Case Study

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Summary

This paper:

- indicates what is meant by Corporate Social Responsibility
- outlines the benefits of Corporate Social Responsibility to an employer and to an individual
- summarises the benefits of employing people with learning disabilities
- outlines the experience of a work placement with someone who has learning disabilities
- explains Project Choice and its role in facilitating work experience placements.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

In recognition of their impact on local or global populations, large organisations often go above and beyond what is required of them by legislators or regulators by supporting schemes which aid social welfare. This is termed Corporate Social Responsibility (or Corporate Citizenship).

As a public organisation of over 6,000 employees and covering a large geographical area (over 2000m²), Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust (NTW) recognises its place in the local communities it serves and undertakes a number of schemes to engage with and support them.

As a mental health and disabilities Trust, NTW has more capacity, capability and responsibility than most to undertake

CSR that is aimed at individuals with some form of disability and whose opportunities elsewhere may be limited.

Offering a work placement

Offering a work placement is one of the most accessible ways to engage with the local community and demonstrate a positive attitude to CSR. Offering an opportunity to a young person is not simply an altruistic 'good thing to do'; they can bring a whole new dimension and dynamic to a workplace with their enthusiasm and different perspective.

In addition, there is an obvious wider social benefit; unemployment, particularly at an early age, not only affects future employment prospects but also results in other social problems such as poverty and ill-health. A work placement can provide a springboard for a young person to make the often difficult transition from school to employment in a measured, controlled and supported environment.

Benefits to the employer

- Risk free trial of a new member of staff.
- Little or no financial cost.
- Development opportunity for mentors.
- Development of supervisory and management skills of a number of staff members.
- Promotes diversity and understanding amongst the wider staff group.
- Enhanced public profile.

Benefits to the individual

- An understanding of the relevance of education in the workplace.
- Introduction to the workplace and opportunities available for career development.
- Developed employability skills.
- Increased self-esteem, confidence, independence and satisfaction.
- Introduction to an adult role model.

Work Placements for people with learning disabilities

Whilst a range of opportunities exist through government backed schemes, charities and advocacy organisations for training programmes for people with learning disabilities, employment opportunities are much harder to come by.

There are 1.5 million people with a learning disability in the UK. People with a learning disability are more excluded from the workplace than any other group of disabled people. Only 10% of people with a learning disability known to social services are currently in paid work,¹ and even then it is often for part-time hours and low pay.

The benefits of employing people with learning disabilities¹

- Some 77% of the public think more highly of organisations that make an extra effort to employ people with a disability. The organisation will be more representative of the community.



Large organisations may exhibit Corporate Social Responsibility/Corporate Citizenship.

- Staff will overcome any misconceptions about learning disabilities by getting to know a colleague with a learning disability.
- Staff are likely to respond well to a more diverse team, particularly if they are given the chance to 'buddy' or line manage the person.
- Many people with a learning disability have been excluded from the workplace for a long time and are very keen to work hard. Their enthusiasm can improve team dynamics and overall performance.
- Candidates with a learning disability can undertake, willingly and very well, jobs that are hard to recruit to or tasks that staff struggle to fit in to their workload.
- There is evidence to suggest that employees with a learning disability stay with one employer for a longer time than most other employees and take less time off work.
- By welcoming candidates with a learning disability, employers are

accessing a part of the workforce that they may not have reached before and are therefore more likely to recruit the right person to the right job.

The NTW experience

Project Choice (see below) contacted NTW Pharmacy in early 2012 to discuss the possibility of introducing some short-term, unpaid work placements. The Project had experienced success with placements at another pharmacy department in a local hospital (City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust) and had identified that pharmacy was an area that carried out a number of functions to which their students were well matched.

It was agreed that Project Choice would come to the department to present the work that they do to generate some publicity and discuss the sorts of roles the students undertake but also to identify any potential mentors. The resultant presentation was one of

the most memorable and uplifting events the department has had the benefit of hosting. As well as the project organisers, four of the students with a range of disabilities who had undertaken placements discussed the roles they had performed and how they had benefitted. All of the pharmacy staff who attended discussed afterwards how uplifting it was to see these incredibly able and confident young people standing up in a room full of people they did not know and discussing their personal experiences so eloquently and with such passion.

From that presentation, a significant number of pharmacy staff members expressed their interest in becoming mentors and the department began working with Project Choice to create suitable work placement opportunities. This involved identifying suitable tasks and roles that contributed to the functioning of the department. It was agreed that a post working into both the dispensary/stores and procurement team would be the most appropriate. There was also a careful selection process

undertaken by Project Choice to select a suitable student for the workplace, tasks and roles that were to be undertaken.

Jacques Reid (a 19 year old with autism) was selected and came to meet the department. Following lengthy consideration, two mentors were selected; a Pharmacy Dispensing Assistant and a Pharmacy Technician. These two individuals not only had the attributes, attitude and communication skills required, but were also working in the appropriate areas to be able to closely supervise Jacques. The placement was also overseen by the Specialist Pharmacy Technician – Training Manager and the Specialist Pharmacy Technician – Procurement and Informatics.

Jacques started working at NTW in September 2013, initially two days a week with a view to a three month placement. His initial duties were limited to tidying and facing up shelves in the dispensary, topping up bottle/carton stocks and other simple tasks. It quickly became apparent however that not only was he able and competent to complete more demanding tasks, he also benefitted from more varied work.

He progressed quickly on to processing medication returned from wards (assessing them for re-use, disposal, processing all necessary paper and computer work), transferring stocks from stores to dispensary shelves and adding standard warning labels to stock (e.g. 'date opened' stickers).

His introduction to the department was supported by all pharmacy staff, and he quickly became another valued member of the team.

His initial placement came to an end in December 2013, however by this time Jacques had made such impressive progress that both he and the department were keen to extend this. In addition, his career ambition was to pursue paid work in pharmacy (rather than a laboratory, which had always been his dream).

He returned to the department in

January 2014 and quickly increased to three working days. This then ran until the end of the academic term. His role further developed in line with his confidence and competence to progress to picking stock from stores and raising and issuing picking tickets from the pharmacy computer system. As his confidence grew he provided extremely useful support for both the storekeepers and dispensary staff.

In July 2014 Jacques' placement with Project Choice came to an end. It was clear, however, that he had more potential to fulfil and whilst the project may have given him employability skills and confidence, he still had untapped ability. Consequently, the Trust supported the department in creating a 12 month apprenticeship position for him. This position allowed him to continue his development in a paid position in an environment he knows and enjoys and with the support of his trusted colleagues. Towards the end of this apprenticeship Jacques was truly ready to enter the world of work and stand proudly on his own two feet. He has now been successful in securing a full-time, fixed-term post as a Pharmacy Assistant.

Not only has Jacques (rightly) taken a lot of pride in his new role, the fact that it is paid has emphasised (to him



and others) his growing independence and confidence. The department also has another competent member of staff to support its daily functions and staff have another valued colleague.

“When I first started I didn’t know how I would fit in. Everyone has been great at helping me though and I really enjoy working here. I am really pleased to have a paid apprenticeship because I love my job!” Jacques Reid – Project Choice student/Pharmacy Apprentice

Benefits to the mentors

Jacques’ mentors have rightly taken a phenomenal amount of pride and satisfaction from their work with him. Whilst there have been challenges (see below) it has been a richly rewarding experience and one that will stand them in good stead for supporting other placements and taking on other career challenges in the future.

“Mentoring Jacques has been a great experience. It has been a challenge at times and required patience to explain things in an appropriate manner, however it has allowed me to see my role from a new perspective. Watching Jacques develop from his first day to the way he is now has been so rewarding. He has really grown in confidence and ability. The department has also benefitted – there were a lot of tasks that previously we struggled to keep on top of, now Jacques keeps a close eye on things and he is very thorough and precise.” Pharmacy Dispensing Assistant/Mentor

“Project Choice has given me the opportunity to undertake a mentor role that I have thoroughly enjoyed. This has allowed me to develop and improve my communication skills in such a capacity. From a professional point of view, it has been a privilege to provide support to a new member of our team and to see them flourish and grown in confidence in their role.” Pharmacy Technician/Mentor

Challenges

Welcoming Jacques into the department has been a rewarding process, but it has been challenging at times as well. Whilst the department was keen to support Project Choice, there was some trepidation that the student we received may need more support than we could provide without impacting on operational effectiveness. Whilst there have been times Jacques has needed a significant time investment, notably when preparing to undertake new tasks, this has always been recouped once he is ‘up to speed’ and confident.

When supervising or training any person with learning disabilities, it is vital that their condition is considered since this affects how they are managed. On occasions, Jacques was quick to become frustrated if a solution or course of action was not immediately apparent or if a change of plan was required. It was through the patience and communication skills of his mentors and colleagues that he came to understand how to react to this frustration in a manner which is appropriate for the workplace; this will be one of the key skills he will take away from his time with us.

Project Choice

Project Choice is a scheme established by City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust to provide work based placements for young people (aged 16-24) with learning difficulties or autism.² The scheme is divided into three parts:

1) Work experience

Half a day a week for a six week period (one school term). The students work one-to-one with a mentor to help develop an understanding of work expectations and behaviours. This stage offers young people a variety of personal skills.

2) Internship

The internship programme lasts one academic year and is unpaid. Interns have a named mentor (any member

of staff can be a mentor; no qualifications are needed) but aim ultimately to work independently offering a positive supportive introduction to working life. Interns spend 4 days a week in work placement and one day in college undertaking an Edexcel work skills qualification. Interns may undertake up to three placements in the year.

3) Exit strategy

Potential to progress into an apprenticeship, job or further learning supported by existing systems/agencies. The placements are tailored to meet individual needs and supported by Project choice staff.

The project is designed to:

- provide a pathway to work that is safe, appropriate and allows young people to demonstrate their skills sets outside the academic environment
- provide a learning environment in the workplace that allows development and appropriate target-setting for the young person
- ensure each young person can achieve their full potential
- provide an opportunity to increase wellbeing
- support young people with learning difficulties and disabilities or autism to become positive role models, actively contributing to society.

Project Choice is delivered in partnership with Gateshead College, City Hospitals Sunderland Foundation Trust, The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Newcastle City Council and Sunderland City Council.

How to support a work placement for an individual with learning disabilities¹

- Although a person with a learning disability may learn more slowly than some people, they will often learn more carefully and may perform tasks

better than others over time.

- People with a learning disability often need support to learn new tasks or to understand new situations. It may be possible for a team member to provide this support, taking on a 'buddy' role until the person has settled in.
- The vast majority of people with a learning disability have little or no experience of paid work and so may lack confidence and need a little extra attention at the start. It is wise to let the team know that a person with a learning disability is joining and make sure that everyone is positive and welcoming.
- People with a learning disability are all individuals with different skills so they will be able to do many different kinds of jobs. However, Mencap offers some general guidelines about the sort of jobs that could most easily be made accessible to people with a learning disability. These include jobs that:
 - require practical skills that can be learned through practice and repetition
 - do not require high-level qualifications
 - do not require a driving licence
 - have fixed elements and only require a little multi-tasking
 - are within teams where tasks can be shared and support can be offered.
- 'Job carving' often proves helpful in employing people with a learning disability. This comprises identifying different tasks that a person with a learning disability can do, and 'carving' out a job from these different tasks. For example, freeing up the receptionist from doing the mail distribution or freeing up the office manager from 'stuffing' envelopes and data entry. All of the tasks should be genuine business needs for the employer.
- Once people with a learning disability are confident performing one task, they can go on to learn the next. Once the individual has developed their skills in a number of particular areas, they

can then be supported to gain promotion and extend those skills.

Conclusion

Offering a work based placement is a rewarding and efficient way of enhancing the makeup and capabilities of the workforce, whilst also providing a valuable opportunity for a young person to demonstrate and develop their skills, confidence and self-esteem. In particular, placements for people with learning disabilities support the people who struggle most to achieve paid employment. This brings benefits not only to the individual involved but also the staff members around them, the employer and the local community and society as a whole.

There are a number of organisations that can offer support to employers wishing to offer work based placements. Details of some of these are listed below:

- BASE are a UK network of supported employment agencies. You can find details of all the member organisations on the BASE website. Website: www.base-uk.org.
- Mencap offers a range of education and employment services for people with a learning disability through all stages of training and development. There are a number of different services, including Mencap's supported employment service – Mencap Pathway. This provides employers with potential candidates matched to job requirements, and ongoing support from a job coach. Website: www.mencap.org.uk. Telephone: 01709 830 956.
- Remploy can refer disabled candidates to employers. Website: www.remploy.co.uk. Telephone: 0845 900 0031.
- Shaw Trust provide a supported employment service. Website: www.shaw-trust.org.uk. Telephone: 01225 716 300.
- United Response provide a supported

employment service.

Website: www.unitedresponse.org.uk

Telephone: 020 8246 5200.

Declaration of interests

- None.

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