

Engaging with Employers

a short guide for local authorities and post-16 providers

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reforms aim to achieve better life outcomes including paid employment. For this to be achieved, staff who support children and young people must recognise the critical role that employers play in helping to realise improved employment rates for young people leaving education. This guide builds on guidance¹ issued by Preparing for Adulthood to support post-16 providers to engage with employers.

The National Occupational Standards for Supported Employment² recognise that employers are customers of our services with their own specific needs and requirements that must be met. **Education and supported employment providers can position themselves as business support services; suppliers of staff in a similar way to recruitment agencies.**

This can be a difficult conversation for post-16 education providers who are already stretched by the need to implement reforms. Some staff may have concerns and fears about contacting employers. They can tend to avoid it and opt for alternative opportunities for skills development such as internal placements. However, young people need the exposure that a mainstream, working environment can offer. It gives them a better opportunity to understand the requirements and responsibilities of working for an employer and gives the provider an opportunity to gain valuable feedback about individual capability and learning needs.

This short guide aims to provide an understanding of what works when approaching employers. If a product or service makes sense to employers and clearly meets their needs then it will be much easier to convince them of the value of engaging with education and training providers.

Understanding labour market information

Staff working within the education and employment sectors are often experts about disability and its impact on individuals. However, to secure employment for young people with SEND they need to develop their knowledge of the local labour market and the various opportunities that it can provide. Most areas have relatively few large employers; often the NHS Trust and local authority are by far the largest employers.

Most people work within small and medium size enterprises who employ between 50 and 250 staff. These are the companies that tend to recruit people with disabilities.

Since most of the large supermarket chains have signed agreements with national providers, it can be difficult for local organisations to negotiate job opportunities with these companies directly though work experience placements may be possible. Each locality will have a different makeup of employers and sectors. Local labour market information will be available through the local authority and Local Enterprise Partnership. This can give an idea of the sectors that are growing and those that are declining, as well as indicating the skills that employers are seeking in their staff.

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Clarify and define your offer

Before approaching employers, it is vital to be clear on a few things:

What are you offering employers?

How do employers benefit from being involved?

What differentiates your offer to that of others?

You are offering employers a free selection and recruitment service. This can help them to save on recruitment costs, especially if they inform you of job vacancies prior to advertising them. The cost of recruiting to a post can easily reach £5000 when taking into account adverts, time to shortlist and interview, reduced productivity when replacing staff etc.

Providers and local authorities should be aiming to develop longterm relationships with companies so that the company approaches them for staff prior to going to advert. This will maximise the company's savings.

Your offer:

A free recruitment service

Free selection by matching potential employees to particular vacancies

Advice, information and guidance about disability and adjustments

On-going support to train and retain staff

A credible and professional local service

Strong customer service with rapid response

A focus on problem-solving

Preparing for employer engagement

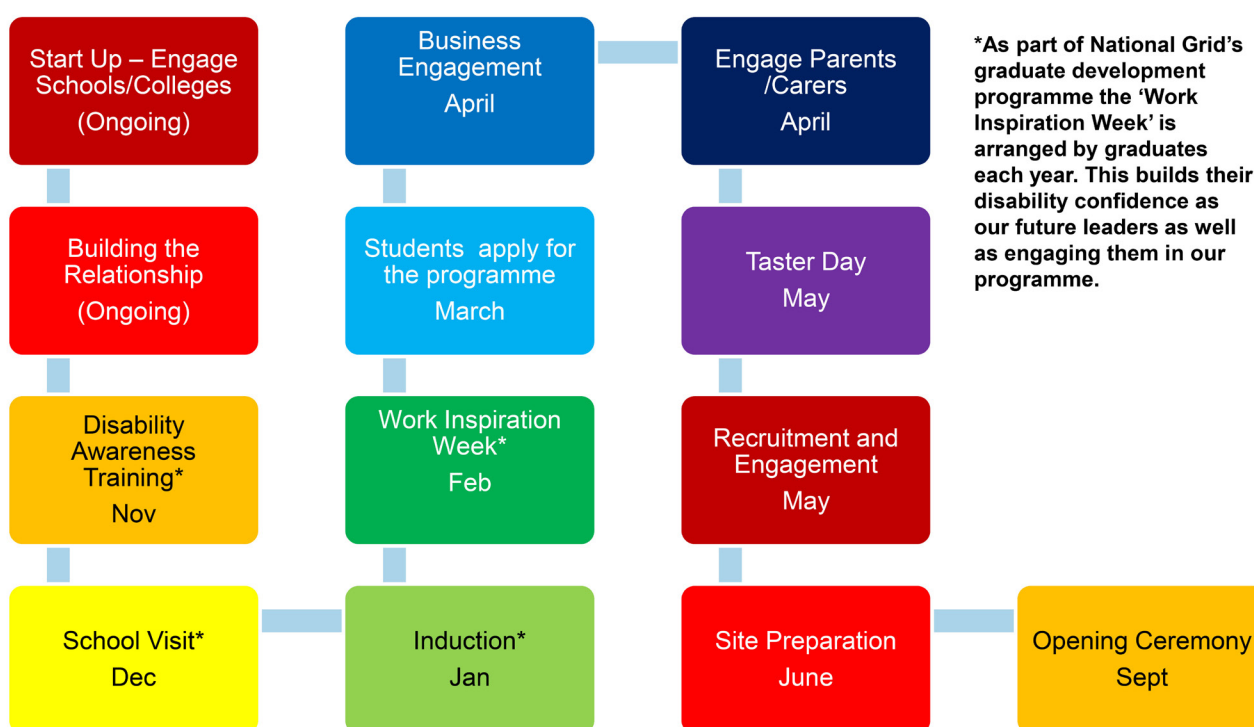
It takes time to identify and engage with employers so that you reach a point where a partnership is formed. Supported internships can take up to a year to put in place.

Case Study:

National Grid started their EmployAbility – Let's Work Together³ programme with Round Oak School⁴ in Warwick and is now hosting four internship programmes around the country. The company has scheduled a programme of engagement with education providers and potential interns, both before and after the start of internships. This is graphically shown below as work experience and bespoke programmes. The aim of the network is to make it simpler for schools and employers to work together.



Standard Operating Model - Pre Go-live processes



Post-16 providers that are seeking to arrange a work experience placement should bear in mind that the employer may have processes that have to be undertaken before a placement can start. These may include health checks or Disclosure and Barring Service⁵ (DBS) checks for young people over 16 years of age or a member of staff in contact with a child. It is advisable to discuss the process well in advance with the employer.

You will want to ensure that any placement is in a safe workplace and this will require a health and safety appraisal and the completion of any necessary risk assessments. The job coach will be an important point of contact for the employer, the young person and the education provider and can advise on any reasonable adjustments that are needed. All work placements are covered by the employer's liability insurance⁶.

1. http://www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk/media/387941/guide_to_employer_engagement.pdf

2. <http://base-uk.org/knowledge/national-occupational-standards>

3. <http://employabilityletsworktogether.com>

4. <http://roundoakschool.org.uk/index.php/Internships>

5. <https://www.ucheck.co.uk/a-dbs-check-for-work-experience-do-you-need-one/>

6. <https://www.abi.org.uk/Insurance-and-savings/Products/Business-insurance/Liability-insurance/Employers-liability-insurance/Work-experience-students>

The Business Case

The argument for schools, colleges and training providers improving their engagement with employers can be worked up into a business case, which can be used to request additional resources to develop a sophisticated and coordinated approach to employer engagement.

This case should cover:

- Improved range and quality of employment destinations for learners on apprenticeships, traineeships and supported internships
- Improved reputation with local employers
- Enhanced local reputation with young people and families
- Improved Ofsted rating⁷
- Increased numbers of young people with special educational needs and disabilities on the roll

The alternative approach is to work closely with a supported employment agency to ensure that respective roles are agreed. Whatever is decided, it will be important to coordinate employer engagement with them to ensure that employers are not bombarded with different requests.

Equally, for employers, there is a clear business case for employing disabled workers. Not every company will feel that it benefits in the same way and it will be important to identify the drivers for each company.

Customer-facing business such as retail may focus on attracting the spending of disabled people and their families by having a workforce that reflects local communities. Other companies may be attracted by reduced staff turnover or developing team morale. Many organisations have realised the potential for becoming an “employer of choice” by developing a strong reputation for how they support and retain staff.

Approaching employers

You need to be clear about your offer and the benefits to employers of employing staff who have a disability. Research the company so that you have an understanding of what they do. Be clear about any previous contact from your organisation. Employers will prefer a single point of contact with your organisation or partnership. This helps to establish a consistent approach and ensures accountability. This will help to ensure a coordinated approach from your school or college. Be aware of any sector-based initiatives that are encouraging the recruitment of people who have a disability. For example, the NHS launched an initiative to recruit people with a learning disability in 2015⁸.

Employers face a large number of approaches from a great variety of organisations. Be clear about what differentiates your service from that of others. Collaborate with other organisations to approach local Chambers of Commerce and networks such as the Federation for Small Business and the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD). It may be possible to arrange a presentation at their network meetings and follow up with an article in their newsletter. It is vital to approach the right person within the company that you’re approaching. They should have some authority around recruitment. When contacting an employer the aim should be to gain a face-to-face meeting to discuss how you can support them. Never try to “sell” over the phone.

The Business Case For Employers

- Savings on recruitment costs
- Sustainability as individuals are carefully matched to vacancies
- Reduced staff turnover, increased team morale, reduced staff absence
- A wider pool of labour that reflects local communities
- Improved reputation and image – internally and externally
- Diversity-improved products and services
- Meets corporate social responsibility objectives
- Attracts the £212bn purple pound (spending power of disabled people and their families)

7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015>

8. <http://www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/plan/building-a-diverse-workforce/need-to-know/creating-a-diverse-workforce-learning-disability>

Identifying and meeting employer needs

Get the employer to talk about their business. This should be a structured conversation with you asking broad questions and then narrowing in to focus on placement and job opportunities. Start by asking how they currently recruit staff and how they find the process. What sort of qualities are they looking for? You could ask about their experience of employing people with a disability.

This will start to give you ideas about identifying the employer's needs and past experiences. Issues of productivity and quality of work will be paramount as these are often causes of people not sustaining their employment. Research evidence also suggests that other reasons for losing jobs is a lack of social skills⁹ within the workplace or not having the right support from an experienced job coach.

Identify opportunities for workplace buddies and in-house training support. Check that the culture of the workplace is suitable for the young person. Some young people thrive in loud and busy environments. Others may find it a bit overwhelming. This can be avoided by doing an in-depth vocational profile to ensure a good job match.

The aim of the meeting is to show how the features of your service can meet employer needs and deliver the sorts of benefits contained in the business case.

Follow up quickly after the meeting so that you keep up the momentum.

The employer may well have worries and concerns. **Welcome these as they indicate that the employer is starting to think about the consequences of employing someone with a disability.**

Often, employers have had little exposure to people with a disability so they may well have misconceptions or be swayed by myths.

Address their concerns and check that you have dealt with them satisfactorily.

The importance of good customer service

Like any other customer, employers will demand a responsive and professional service from their suppliers.

Customer service is key to this. You need to:

- Respond quickly to requests for information and support
- Be friendly, approachable and available. Avoid the use of jargon
- Be honest at all times - employers will not tolerate any withholding of information
- Signpost to alternative support if you are unable to respond to a query
- Be very clear on any expectations and requirements of the employer
- Minimise the people who will contact the employer and consider the use of account management techniques
- Maintain a record of employer contacts and any outcomes using a database or spreadsheet, so that your staff have access to details of any previous engagement.

Ultimately, an employer is looking for good quality staff and you should ensure a strong job match between the skills of the jobseeker and the requirements of the job. This is achieved by compiling a comprehensive vocational profile and matching it to a job analysis conducted on the placement opportunity.

A bad match is demoralising for all concerned.

Maintaining links

You should be aiming to build a long-term relationship with employer organisations. Maintaining a personal touch is vital and this can be achieved through telephone calls and visits. Your organisation could consider maintaining employer interest through the use of newsletters and social media.

Consider establishing an employer forum where employers can meet and network together. Regular breakfast meetings offer an opportunity for employers to get together and support each other. Explore whether there are any existing forums that you can utilise. You could invite employers to meet up with those young people that they are supporting. Employers can talk about their business and what skills they value, offer mock interviews and may even volunteer to mentor individuals.

Some employers will be keen to champion your work amongst other employers. Make sure you take advantage of these opportunities as employers are swayed by the opinions of their peers. It can be very powerful when an employer tells others of their experience.

Remember to acknowledge the good work of employers. You could present framed certificates to recognise their commitment and arrange for this to feature in local media.

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Further Resources

[Business Disability Forum](#)

[CIPD](#)

[Disability Confidence Campaign](#)

[BASE website for information for employers](#)

[Inclusive films where employers talk about the benefits of employing disabled people](#)

[Employer hub for supported internships](#)

[Preparing for Adulthood guidance on employer engagement](#)

Top Tips

- Create a brand and develop an employer engagement strategy.
- Build a positive relationship with the right person in the business; a person who can influence or lead change. Find out the employer's needs first.
- Regular contact and support is key. Keep employers up to date with what you are doing, even if you aren't actively using them at the time.
- Give positive feedback to businesses and employees within the company – everyone likes a pat on the back for a job well done.
- Say thank you and recognise the employer's support. Encourage the employer in their process of change and development.
- Do what you say you are going to do! Stick to whatever you have agreed to do with or for the employer.

This guide has been produced as part of the Employment is Everyone's Business project in partnership with:

