



Disability Discrimination Act Phase 2 Regional action research projects

Site final report

Project title: Raising awareness: working with partners including employers

Region: South West

Organisation: Strode College

Executive Coordinator: Ken Onions

Sites: Strode College, Kingston Maurward College, Bridgwater College, Wiltshire College

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Disability Discrimination Act: taking the work forward
Phase 2 Action Research Projects 2005/2006 Final Report

Project Raising awareness: working with partners including
employers

Final Report From: Mandie Holloway

Organisation: Strode College

Contributors: The Students: Digby Datnow; Ryan Chapman; Sian
Davies; Sherrina Longman; Claire Berrisford; Darren
Wilson
The College Staff: Janice Wilcox; Lyn Taylor; Natasha
Finn; Jan Snook
Sainsbury's Staff: David Bishop

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Section 1

Mandie Holloway

Strode College

Section 2 Major Focus

In 1997 the Further Education Development Agency published a report, 'A real job - with prospects: supported employment opportunities for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities', which looked at the circumstances and conditions that people with Learning difficulties and disabilities could enter in to employment which was meaningful, and which could be sustained. The premise that underpinned this research was that employment for this group of people was both 'legitimate with achievable aims'. This was a view held and shared by my team and myself. Since developing an Entry Level provision at Strode in 1996, we have been really clear that for all learners vocationally focused work experience is an essential core element of their learning programme.

Ten years later the climate has changed. Legal acts and educational policy has influenced the provision the learners now have. Entitlement and a more holistic approach to learners' education have helped broaden opportunity. However the research demonstrates that while opportunities may have increased through education via work experience, training has not advanced in a commercial situation, (Hughes and Kingsford 1997) A more current example of the situation is that only five per cent of Advanced Apprentices are disabled and the LSC has no targets to increase this, (Peter Little 2005). Pockets of limited opportunity exist in traditional vocational areas and progress appears to be limited to companies with either a social conscience, policy or financial backing.

This report looks at the development of a partnership between Strode College and Sainsbury's, a national chain of supermarkets, in the Street branch, Somerset. This was to provide opportunities for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities to train in a realistic work environment. It looks at the outcomes that enables the learners to acquire the skills they need, whilst developing the confidence to apply for jobs and eventually move into the retail sector, on a realistic salary, carrying out meaningful work, in safe surroundings. It looks at the support each learner needs to obtain and maintain employment. The

report then identifies the conditions under which the above has to happen. It is clear that job coaching is a fundamental corner stone for success, whilst commitment and understanding by the employer of their role, is crucial.

Section 3 - Progress so far

The focus of the research was not always on learner with learning difficulties and disabilities functioning at Entry Level. The project started by looking at learners with additional needs who worked in a very commercial sector, hairdressing,

My team support learners with learning difficulties and disabilities across the college. Many learners, who have additional needs within the hairdressing department, have needs centred on literacy, numeracy, and social issues. It is not until they come to college that many of these learners are diagnosed with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Some of these learners have had a chequered school career and often opt for a practical vocational area, which they perceive requires limited literacy skills in the first instance. Their practical and social skills often exceed their theoretical ones. The original focus of the project was to follow the hairdressing trainees with specific learning difficulties in the workplace, to see how they managed their barriers to literacy and how their placement providers supported them.

Unfortunately when funding allocations were made by the Learning Skills Councils last year, not enough money was allocated to work based learning and therefore the number of starts in this area, was reduced. This made the original aims of the project difficult to achieve. Learners who had originally applied to do work based learning in hairdressing and who had a poor school record or GCSE pass rate found it difficult to find work placements. Competition is high and there are a limited number of work placements. Trainees therefore were unable to take up work based learning places, which had been previously offered, as they had no work placement. Many of them these learners transferred to the full time programme hoping that in the following year they would be able to transfer back on to work based learning. These students therefore received the support they needed, through internal college services.

However we also set up a project with a local supermarket at the same time as the beginning of this LSDA project. As there was not enough

scope within the original idea, we decided to shift the focus completely on to the Entry Level learners following programmes that included work experience. The challenges facing these students would be more overt but nonetheless difficult to resolve. The project with its new focus would look at what support learners would need in a commercial context and what support an employer would need. It would also look at the role of the LSA or job coach.

Section 4 Successes and Challenges

Working within a large national organisation meant that the learners were able to experience for themselves, a professional working environment that demanded that they worked in a business like manner. This was one of the most important lessons, which had the most obvious impact. When the learners initially arrived at Sainsbury's they were given a full induction. This included how they should behave on the shop floor and interact with customers. More importantly the learners were taken through a full Health and Safety training package. This induction often involved other members of staff who were being inducted alongside. This small act by Sainsbury's allowed the students to realise in no uncertain terms, that their role was for real and certainly had to be taken seriously. The personal spin offs were clear to see. Confidence grew, as did their self worth and esteem. Professional relationships developed with other staff members. Uniforms were given to each of the learners, thus giving them status and value. It was their responsibility to look after them and prepare them for each week. None of the learners disliked wearing them or resented keeping them clean. They wore them proudly. This small act by Sainsbury's benefited them too. The customers took the learners seriously and believed them to be employees. They were confident that the learners would know answers to queries or would be able to find the answers to them. Sainsbury's also had six pairs of extra hands which helped in keeping the stock replenished as well as having a visual advertising to providing opportunity to all members of its local community. (Mendip has a high number and presence of disability groups and individuals).

The learners felt very strongly that they were members of staff on Thursdays. This in turn meant they did everything to the best of their ability. None of them slacked. The Learning Support Assistants supporting them were therefore encouraged to give full support and were moved by individual success. Clearly the sight of the learners' personal growth and determination to overcome barriers was marked.

Sainsbury's employees found that having the learners in once a week was difficult and challenging. Many were unsure how to interact with them; others fearful that their jobs would be taken and there would not be enough work to go round. Others found that the thought of working with learners with learning difficulties would impact negatively upon them and devalue their status and value. These prejudices and stereotyping by the staff were in the main overcome by as staff relaxed and began to understand the nature and needs of the students.

The chief barrier to the learners' progression was their lack of literacy skills. The learners were unable to recognise dates and product details. This meant that regular prompting by the LSAs was crucial if the job was to be done correctly. The learners were able to maintain routines and know exactly what had to be done, as long as no reading was involved. This meant that there was a heavy reliance on LSAs and Sainsbury's staff. Without this support the learners would make mistakes, which might have undermined the confidence that was being built up.

Section 5 Outcomes and Benefits

Following a review and evaluation meeting with Sainsbury's project team it was agreed that the experience had been beneficial for both the learners and staff. It enabled a positive image to be conveyed not only to the employees of Sainsbury's but additionally to the customers and the local community who frequented Sainsbury's Street. The second cohort will be joining Sainsbury's in September 2006.

By the end of the academic year learners had a clear idea of the expectations of working in such an environment but during the feedback and evaluation it was felt that they would have benefited from individual targets. This will be addressed as the new cohort is identified.

The whole experience enabled the college to forge links with the business community where a broader knowledge and understanding of the capabilities and needs of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities were being established. Initial barriers were soon dispelled as staff could see that the learners were going to be fully supported and integrated. Towards the end of the work experience period, Sainsbury's staff initiated a football match for sports relief against the learners, which was really successful.

The learners in this cohort did not feel sufficiently confident to apply for a job. However an indirect benefit will be that other learners with similar needs will be able to apply for positions at this branch of Sainsbury's at least, who will have an understanding of the contribution that these individuals can make to the running of the business.

Section 6 Emerging Themes

It is clear from our experience that any initiative such as this must be fully resourced with support personnel; this is not an option it is essential and fundamental to the success of the whole programme.

The learners need time to learn not only their job but also the idiosyncrasies of the organisation, the professional relationships that will change from person to person, how they need to behave, what they must and must not do. Once they have ordered these complex relationships and skills in their minds and practiced them, they will then have to master some of the most difficult skills, i.e. literacy, and develop sight word vocabulary and letter or word recognition. These skills need developing in a safe environment away from the work placement.

Should the learner need further support and development, time needs to be given to enable them to practice and develop these new skills so that they become habit. The work that has been started at college will need to be continued by other organisations such as Social Services training enterprise schemes, or organisations such as Remploy or Shaw Trust when the learner leaves college.

Once the above agencies have enrolled the learner, as part of that individual's progression, supported employment initiatives for Learners with disabilities and difficulties will need to look at their own training practices and length of this provision. At present supported employment initiatives have reduced their support periods to six weeks. This is not a realistic period of time. The government when forming policy will need to understand that in order for these learners to become autonomous economically, time and money will need to be invested to support them in developing their practical skills to achieve this aim. This may mean adjusting the benefit system to more favourable conditions to allow learners with learning difficulties and disabilities who are in training for employment environment to receive a different strand of benefit. This

will allow these individuals to progress from a life of dependency on benefits and poverty, to independent adults.

Section 7 Useful resources or sources of advice

- Training co-ordinators especially those with Information Advice and Guidance qualifications with some focus on learning difficulties
- The uniforms enabled the learners to feel part of the organisation and therefore they felt a sense of responsibility towards the host employer
- Regular meetings between the organisation and the college were essential. In addition weekly meetings between college academic staff and learning support were essential.
- Mendip Supported Employment forum.

Section 8 Key Messages

- Realistic individual targets should be established at the beginning of the project
- The learners need time to develop a sight vocabulary and basic literacy skills
- Learning Support workers or Job Coaches are essential and non negotiable
- Policy makers need to understand that progression will be made if appropriate resources such as time and monetary support are made available to develop marketable employability skills. These learners are unable to gain skills in optimum time scales and need reasonable adjustments. This has not been understood previously and only small pockets of success have been made. This success is usually due to a small group of committed individuals and companies who support these learners.
- Therapeutic earning levels have been reduced to a level that makes it impossible for learners to progress in to training situations to 'learn' a trade. Although the Peter Little report 'Through Inclusion to Excellence' 2006, highlights that these individuals will need access to independent economic well being, infrastructures are needed to support the process. These benefit adjustments forces employable people in to a dependency on government benefits and poverty. The poverty is not short-lived, it is life long. Therefore government policy discriminates against the very people it needs to help into the workforce and provide equality of opportunity.

Section 9 Finance

The funding from this project has helped to pay for:

- The author's time whilst on the project
- Learning Support Assistants to act as job coaches
- Petrol for travel to and from the Supermarket
- Resources such as photographic, and video
- Lecturing staff overseeing the project
- Work experience co-ordinators time
- Washing facilities to use uniforms for learners who were unable to do this.

Obviously the funding did not cover these costs but helped in a small way to ease the burden.

Section 10 Future Work

This work will continue, with Sainsbury's in much the same format.

However we are introducing the following changes:

- Introduction of Retail NVQ Level 1 for this cohort of students
- Maintenance of Work Experience Co-ordinator Role
- Introduction of administrative support for co-ordinator
- Forging links with the local catering industry
- Clearly defined targets by both college and the employer
- Expanding the work experience initiative to include different roles within the store

Bibliography

Maria Hughes and Margaret Kingsford (1997) *A real job - with prospects: supported employment opportunities for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities*. Further Education Development Agency (FEDA)

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