SEARCHing for solutions

Everyone deserves the right to aspire to the very best future.....

....yet nationally only 5.1% of people with a learning disability and/or autism spectrum condition known to local authorities in England transition from education into secure paid employment, compared to 80% of their peers.

That is a resounding gap. Given the proven impact that secure employment has on physical and mental wellbeing, it means these young adults are more likely to be socially isolated, live in poverty and poor housing, and have a shorter life expectancy.

There is also a negative economic impact on society and business. With around 1 million people with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) out of work, many of whom are keen, ambitious, young adults with an array of talent to offer employers, UK businesses are missing a huge pipeline of talent simply due to societal stigma and prejudice.

One organisation looking to reverse this trend is national charity DFN Project SEARCH, who coordinate a one-year transition to work programme for young adults with learning disabilities or autism spectrum conditions, or both. The charity works in partnership with Local Authorities, education providers, families and host employers ranging from NHS Trusts to some of the UK's biggest businesses such as DPD, GSK and Marriott Hotels. They provide real work experience combined with training in employability and independent living skills delivered in a business setting to help young people make successful transitions to productive adult life.

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Claire Cookson, CEO of DFN Project SEARCH

Claire Cookson, CEO of DFN Project SEARCH said: "As a society we are too low aiming for people with a learning disability because there is a fear factor among employers of getting it wrong in hiring young adults with SEND. We need to change that. There is a huge untapped talent pool of brilliant young neurodiverse people who will make some of the best employees, but just need the opportunity. Our experience shows that businesses will really benefit from their skills and talent as well as the huge positive social impact they will generate at a societal level.

"Our unique programmes around the UK have been established with various prestigious employers including several private sector businesses. At the end of the programme, on average 70% of DFN Project SEARCH graduates gain jobs and 60% of DFN Project SEARCH gradates move into full-time permanent roles and in total – a 55% improvement on the national average," said Cookson.

Earlier this year, DFN Project SEARCH was awarded a government contract from the Department for Education, as part of a consortium working in partnership with the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) and British Association of Supported Employment (BASE), to double the number of supported internships to 4,500 per year by March 2025. We see this as a testament to our collaborative, results-driven work.

Their role within this partnership, called **Internships Work**, is to lead on employment engagement, providing support and training to Local Authorities and creating over 800 Employer Champions within the timeframe. Their ambition is to eradicate the postcode lottery so that everyone with an Education Health and Care Plan can access high-quality transition-to-work support and training in their local area.

There are several benefits of hiring from a diverse talent pool with significant positive social and economic implications. Studies show that people with a learning disability stay in their jobs 3.5 times longer than their non-disabled co-workers. A high proportion of employees with a disability have their job performance rated as average or above and have been rated higher than those without a disability in terms of attendance and being on time. And they are great culture carriers for an organisation - productivity goes through the roof in most roles occupied by their graduates as they are absolutely determined to succeed and bring real energy and commitment to their work.

DFN Project SEARCH graduate **Emre** is a good example of this. Like his peers he tried various roles on the programme after his studies. Emre successfully applied for a position at Blackpool Council, his hometown. He proved himself to be quick to learn and a great support for the small team running Carleton Crematorium. **Emre says:** "DFN Project SEARCH helped me with my communication skills and help build my confidence". He adds: "Doing different placements helped my employment skills, especially when I was able to apply for a post with the Council." He continues to be a valued member of the team at Carleton Crematorium and he has since developed his skills into the wider variety of the role that he chose for his career.

DFN Project SEARCH driven by a desire to reach a point where employment young people with a learning disability or autism spectrum condition becomes normalised and mainstream. To help spread this message, DFN Project SEARCH has created a campaign where they are calling on UK businesses to join their #InclusionRevolution and recognise the social and economic value of employing young adults with SEND. The campaign aims to support 10,000 young adults with a learning disability or autism spectrum condition into full time paid employment by 2030.

Another recent programme graduate, **Charlie Forbes Nixon,** said: "DFN Project SEARCH has a family atmosphere and sense of belonging. It has changed my life. I have done things I didn't think were possible and it has improved my confidence. You'd be surprised how capable you are regarding what job you find yourself in."

"I encourage organisations to consider how their recruitment processes could become more inclusive to people with learning disabilities and autism", said **Claire Cookson**. "Not only is it morally the right thing to do, but it's also good for business and society."

For more information visit
DFN Project SEARCH