

Graduate to Success: What Students Can Bring To Your Business

Many SMEs see the benefit of taking on a graduate or a student on work experience, but are unsure how to go about it, or indeed what their options are. Others assume that taking on a student or graduate is too time-consuming and of little benefit to the business. This Innovation Note shows how it can be a positive experience for both parties.

Recruiting students – either at undergraduate or postgraduate level - enables you to tap into a new pool of talent that can make a real impact on your business and can improve your bottom line performance. These young minds can:

- Bring new ideas and fresh enthusiasm.
- Give you an extra resource which can free you to run your business and plan for the future.
- Bring additional skills to tackle the projects that your business needs but that you never find time to progress.
- Provide access to university resources and knowledge often at the leading edge of technology.
- Be a flexible and cost-effective solution to your recruitment needs.

Today's students and graduates can focus on business issues and solutions, and resolve business problems effectively. They are skilled in IT, good team workers, and are able to think for themselves. In short, they just get on with it.

A work experience or placement student also offers you the opportunity to train a potential new recruit to your business with no commitment or risk. Working with a student over a number of weeks or months is the ideal way to test the water and potentially to recruit someone for the longer term. Other schemes aim to place new or recent graduates directly, helping them find their first full-time position.

Maximising the Value of the Experience

The key to getting best value from such an appointment, both for your

business and the student or graduate, is to ensure the experience is planned and managed properly.

As an employer you gain by helping the young person to understand and develop the skills they attain whilst working for you. Regular reviews of the employee's performance helps both parties focus on attaining the objectives. This in turn helps them reflect on their performance to improve their skills (such as handling equipment and carrying out processes) and personal attributes (such as time management and ability to work with others). As the student progresses in the job, business "nous", or awareness, will be acquired and this will further contribute to your business.

Before You Start

As with any other employee, some early planning will bring rewards. Things you need to think about are:

- Produce a written job specification. For a student placement this may be brief; for a graduate position a fuller spec will be needed. This will help you to recruit the right person and also ensure that they know what is expected of them from day one.
- Take selection seriously. You are more likely to get the right person with the right fit for the team if you put them through the same selection process as you would any other member of staff.
- As with any other recruit, put your offer in writing and make the contact clear. Telling them when and how they get paid and whether or not they get paid overtime or expenses can save a lot of problems later on.
- Try to be clear about the objectives of the job they are going to do, and set them down in writing. This will enable you to keep a check on the young employee's progress and reduce the amount of time in supervision.





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Administrative Points

Like any form of employment, taking on a student involves a certain amount of red tape. Aspects to consider are:

- **Payment:** Check with the host higher education institute (HEI) whether there is any financial support available to help you cover the direct costs of employing a student. If a student is doing a project related to their course, the work experience may be unpaid. Otherwise you will need to pay at least the minimum wage.
- **Tax and National Insurance:** Students are subject to the same tax and national insurance regulations as any other employee. Some summer schemes pay student bursaries which are subject to different regulations.
- **Health and Safety:** HEIs need to ensure that students' work environment will be safe and you may need to complete a Health and Safety questionnaire and produce other documentation to prove this.
- **Employer's Liability Insurance and Third Party/Public Liability Insurance:** You will need to have the relevant cover before you can take a student on placement or work experience.
- **Overseas Students and Work Permits:** Overseas students do not need a work permit to take part time and vacation work. However, a number of restrictions apply – the HEI's placement service will be able to explain these.

Induction

For many students this may be their first experience of the world of work. This makes it all the more important that they receive a full induction. This should be the same as for any other employee; it will help the student settle down and give their best as quickly as possible.

Introduce the student to the members of staff they will be working with and explain the aims and culture of the company. If possible, assign the student to a mentor. This role encompasses answering the employee's questions, being their first 'friend' within the company and generally making the transition to the world of work a little bit easier. The chosen mentor should be good with people and shouldn't be too senior in the business.

Other aspects to think about are:

- Give the employee a tour of the workplace as this will help them to understand the business and enable them to quickly apply this knowledge to their work.
- Tell the student/graduate what the normal office hours are and when they will be expected to work outside of those hours. They will also need to know about any general policies such as not smoking on the premises.
- Show the student/graduate how to use the photocopier, fax machine, telephone system and computer system and explain any security procedures. Remember that they may not have developed some skills which many employers take for granted e.g. professional telephone manner.
- Discuss the dress policy of the office and be explicit. They may not have encountered the terms 'business dress' or 'smart casual' previously.
- If the business requires the student/graduate to travel, they should know this at the recruitment stage. You should also explain your expenses policy.
- Explain company procedures for writing letters, faxes, and memos and the authorisation levels necessary for sending external correspondence and incurring expenses.

Useful Links

Red Hot Talent: A practical guide for SMEs on how to manage work experience students more effectively, Berni Dickinson, published by National Council for Work Experience, www.work-experience.org

Graduate Advantage is a graduate placements service run by careers services of West Midlands HEIs: www.graduateadvantage.co.uk

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) arranges industrial placements for skilled researchers: www.ktponline.org.uk

Knowledge, Innovation, Technology, Transfer Scheme (KITTS) is a West Midlands placement programme to match small and medium sized enterprises with graduates: www.kittsgraduate.co.uk

Shell STEP is a UK-wide programme offering undergraduates project-based work within small and medium sized enterprises: www.step.org.uk