

What do the Houses of Parliament, Sainsbury's, Southbank University, The Unicorn Theatre and the Old Post Office Bakery have in common?

People who attended an Employers' Breakfast hosted recently by Toucan Employment will know the answer, as all five organisations spoke positively about their experiences of employing people with learning difficulties.

Since 1989 Toucan Employment has been working with people with learning difficulties in Southwark. More than 300 people have been supported into a wide variety of jobs, with employers as diverse as the Ministry of Defence, The Royal Festival Hall and Urban Outfitters.

Toucan supports around 70 people a year in supported employment. Targets are very important to the organisation as the Managing Director, Ray Whittaker, explains: "working for an Employment project, it is vital that we can show that we get results." Toucan has many service users who have been in jobs for many years but the project also focuses on numerous potential jobseekers who have little or no experience of work.

There seem to be more and more projects focusing on Employment training etc - some of them have been in existence for years and never seem to achieve anything other than voluntary work. What makes Toucan different is its track record and success in finding people paid employment.

It can be really inspiring to see how much having a job means to a person. Sangeeta, one of Toucan's senior Employment workers said "you feel really good when you see someone in work and know that the job you do literally has the power to change somebody's life. The job can be quite difficult at first; you have to get used to employers who don't want to employ our service users, but when you make a positive contact and see somebody in a job they love it makes it all worthwhile". Sangeeta currently co-ordinates a highly successful project working with young people. Employers such as London Transport, The YMCA, Kings College and ASDA have all employed young people from the project.

Pippa, another senior worker, has managed to secure many jobs for people over the years including four within the Houses of Parliament. "It's good that we have an employer like the House of Commons that has shown such a positive attitude. It means a lot to those four people but also helps us to show other employers that it is not only a good thing to do but can work very successfully even in the most surprising places," says Pippa.

Toucan has always supported people in a wide variety of jobs. People are not just pushed into any job that is available but are

individually job-matched. This means that people have had the opportunity to work as Grooms for the Household Cavalry or in The Hayward Gallery as well as Supermarkets, Cleaning and Gardening work.

The Project focuses on the ability and interests of people. It's very much a 'can-do' philosophy. As Ray, the manager, says, "it is important that people are given the opportunity to succeed in employment. It doesn't always work out as well as possible, but it's important that people are given opportunities."

One successful project run by Toucan is the Van Gogh Café - a popular Café on the North end of the Brixton Road. The Café is very different from many other projects run by services for people with learning disabilities. From the outset the goal was to be as commercially successful as possible. It was always intended to be a very visible project, "we wanted the Café to provide real jobs and help to make social inclusion a reality".

Having a job means so much to people with learning disabilities. Just about every survey ever taken of peoples' wishes shows that employment is something that most people want. Despite that, funding for organisations such as Toucan makes up only a tiny percentage of spend on social services.

Employment is an immensely positive issue for people with learning disabilities. It is the best way of fostering social inclusion and involvement of people within their communities. When you consider how much is spent on social care services, one could question how little is spent to support people with learning disabilities to achieve employment.

"Services should not just provide care but also opportunities to Earn and Learn," as Ray makes clear. "It is imperative that issues of user involvement and consultation include people with learning disabilities in a meaningful way, and that has to include their role as paid employees".

One of Toucan's users works for Advocacy Partners. It is good to see people in full time jobs with Advocacy projects. More forward-looking organisations appear to be recognising the ability of people to influence their own services.

That people with learning disabilities want the chance to contribute to society should go without saying, but still far too few are in paid work. In Southwark, Toucan has a proud record of helping people find and retain work. The support people get can be quite intensive and is individualised not only for the needs of the employee but also for the employer. Toucan has

been fortunate that its Local Authority has, for some time, recognised the value of its work and has been able to build on this and enlist the support of other funders.

Funding Employment projects is extremely important, as is the need for these projects to have real targets for the numbers of people placed in work. Paid employment changes peoples lives, it gives them increased independence and confidence. People should have the right not just to receive care and support when they need it, but also the chance and support to contribute.

Service users' views are a really positive way of looking at the success of Toucan. People spoke passionately at the Employers' breakfast about their jobs in the Houses of Parliament, at the Van Gogh Café and the Unicorn Theatre. One young man had just secured employment as a play worker and made clear how pleased and proud he was.

Jeanette who works at the Café told everyone just how much having a job meant to her. "I love this job. When I'm at home I'm looking at walls 24/7. People should do more to give people with disabilities jobs."

Other service users such as Bill, who works in a Doctors' surgery three days a week, are equally enthusiastic about Toucan. He had been attending a day centre four days a week for years but now has a very different life. One service user, Anthony, was supported into a job at Sainsbury's and ended up getting his dad a job in the same store!

Toucan also recognises that often people want to move on from work. Brian moved on from his job as a hospital porter at St Thomas's to work as a road-sweeper for Southwark council. Nanette previously worked at Gap but the prospect of working at the House of Commons was too good to turn down and she moved into her new Job in 2004! Kenny was supported to get a new job with leisure services when the Velodrome he worked at shut down.

Sainsburys has provided a good source of jobs for Toucan's clients. Michelle the Personnel Officer at Sainsburys' New Cross store explained, "Toucan provided excellent support to

both us and Hassan who was on work experience, we were really happy with him and he is now doing really well as a paid employee". Matt from the House of Commons said "At first we were unsure of how things would work with Toucan, but it went really well with Brendan (the first person). We now employ 4 people through Toucan and will hopefully be able to employ more people, its been really positive for all of us and its important that more people support the work of an organisation like Toucan".

Ray believes that Toucan's success is based on:

- Toucan's committed and enthusiastic staff team
- Building strong relationship with users and employers
- Job Matching: drawing on peoples' interests and abilities
- Individualised Job Support: helping people to maximise their independence at a pace they can cope with.
- Ongoing support for employee and employer as necessary

Toucan adapts well to change, but one of the biggest obstacles it faces is that other organisations don't refer as many people to Toucan as it could support. This may be, in part, due to a lack of services' understanding of the successes of paid employment, but also Toucan needs to learn to celebrate its' success and find a way of raising its profile.

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