

Changing lives in a Covid-19 world

National Grid established our ‘EmployAbility, Let’s Work Together’ programme of Supported Internships in 2013. Since then over 100 students have benefited from the programme within National Grid and, many more, with Companies that have followed our lead. For young people in Britain with learning disabilities, finding paid work is challenging. Nationally, less than 6% of people with learning disabilities are in paid employment. Yet, the results of our EmployAbility programme show that this can be raised to over tenfold.

But then Covid-19 arrived. It has had significant impacts on how Companies such as National Grid operate. Before Covid-19 thousands of employees were working together, in smaller teams, in our offices, with all the associated support roles such as reception, facilities, mailroom, staff restaurants, coffee shops.... Many of these areas provided excellent opportunities for supported internship placements. But nearly overnight they were scaled back. Working from home rapidly became the norm.

What were we to do? Stop the EmployAbility programme? No, no, no! These young people still have the same needs. We had to adapt to the ‘new world’ and find a new generation of placements. Our interns still come into our office and have a socially distanced ‘base room’ which they share with the Job Coaches. Our experience has taught us that supported internships are still viable and successful in a more ‘virtual world’. Take the examples below of placements that we have found, which are being done remotely from the team asking for the work to be done:

- For Asset protection (National Grid owns lots of assets – gas pipelines, electricity cables etc.) updating Grantor and Council databases, checking email addresses and phone numbers, ringing people if necessary, to check information.
- Inputting invoice data onto a spreadsheet
- Business Services - data cleansing- searching for IBAN, VAT, company registration and phone numbers, ahead of a large system implementation
- Data Science team - annotating images of National Grid’s assets ready for machine learning.
- Engineering and asset management - Assisting with pdf scrape - typing in handwritten data on to a spreadsheet.
- Capital delivery
- IT Commercial – scanning documents, saving and archiving.
- Creating safety check lists for equipment.
- NSEF - sourcing a map plugin then adding locations of supported internships data for their web page
- And there is more to come such as migrating Sharepoint sites to new sites and supporting training robots

Our interns have also learnt new skills which will help them in a 'virtual world'. The interns are more confident using video conferencing. They can maintain social distancing in an office environment. They can give presentations confidently to a remote audience. All these are good skills to have in our strange 'new world' and build their EmployAbility skills and readiness.



Photo: Supported interns in National Grid running a virtual quiz for colleagues using Microsoft Teams

So the message is: Don't give up. Adapt to the 'new normal'. Seek out the many remote opportunities for placements. Give the interns space to adjust. Enjoy the reward of changing lives for the better!

Notes: Our programme started back in 2013 as a partnership with Round Oak (now Evergreen) Special Educational Needs School in Warwick. In that first year, we offered internships to five students at our nearby offices. We saw an enormous transformation in each of the shy and nervous students that first arrived, as they grew in confidence and self-belief, often for the first time in their lives. Since then, we have reached our 100th intern which is a significant milestone. We've expanded across 5 of our offices (including 2 in Cadent) and are in partnership with 11 special schools and colleges.

The supported internship model is simple. National Grid identifies a range of roles that an intern can fill. These could be office-based, or in departments such as catering, reception or facilities. The intern then spends around three months in one of these roles, supported by a job coach. These coaches are provided by one of our partner schools and funded by a government funded Access to Work grant. They provide individually tailored support to each intern, breaking down the role into manageable parts, training the intern and helping them to settle in. While at National Grid, the intern normally completes two or three placements in different areas of the business over the course of an academic year, giving them a thorough introduction to the organisation and different workplace tasks.

As well as their placements, the interns also spend a few hours every morning, with their job coaches, studying for a BTEC in work and functional skills. The qualification covers topics such as writing CVs and preparing for interviews. Armed with these new skills and workplace experience, it helps to make sure that at the end of the year, the interns are employment ready.

Why not watch this brief video to learn more about the programme: <https://youtu.be/JKPedEGzDA>

We have also developed a toolkit to implement Supported Internships. It is available on our website, as well as on the Careers and Enterprise website:

[https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/sites/default/files/uploaded/national_grid_-_employer_engagement_toolkit.pdf]. The resources cover every stage of the process, from finding an education partner, to guides for job coaches and managers.