



Steve Straw from Linney Group spoke to I CAN about the established partnership the local Nottinghamshire business have with I CAN's Dawn House School.

“W&J Linney is based less than one mile from Dawn House School. We were approached a number of years back by the school to provide work experience for their pupils.

Working with Dawn House School has definitely changed our approach to working with young people and differently-abled young people, like those at Dawn House School. It has laid the foundation for how we work now - it has given us an opportunity to see what worked well with our partnership with Dawn House, and to identify what we can improve. This is a family business operating since 1851 and we employ over 700 people. Contributing to the local community is part of our Company values. Much of my role here is around recruitment and training so I had awareness that some young people struggled with communication but no experience of supporting them.

We took small steps and started by liaising with Dawn House staff. We arranged an informal visit for the young people to visit our factory as we were advised it would help them to establish their routines. We didn't want to have prolonged support from the school, we wanted the young people to feel this was a real work situation. It worked really well as we knew the school were there if we needed them but we could also have time to engage directly with the young people.

For two [particular]young people who came from Dawn House, the experience was really positive. Aside from wanting to equip them with skills for the outside world, they lacked confidence. To see their communication skills develop and their confidence grow was fantastic. By the end of their placements with us, you would have been unaware that they had any difficulties with communication - they were so confident and had learnt really useful life skills.

From the wider group of young people we have worked with [from a range of education settings], one young man in particular had his whole life change for the better. He'd had a part time job before but they had messed him around, and he really wanted to work. He'd had a challenging home life and his family didn't work. He started on our scheme and built up his confidence, his independence, as well as the technical skills we taught him. In July 2014 we offered him a full time job and since then he has been able to move out and rent a property with his girlfriend as well as taking and passing his motorbike test. His life is completely different to before he worked here.

Our relationship has worked well because both we and the school wanted to build a partnership. In the case of working with Dawn House, Philip Chandler (Dawn House School Family Liaison) was interested in knowing our business as a local employer and he wanted to know how we could help his business, the school and young people. We developed a real 'handshake' partnership with a mutual understanding that we were working together. We've learnt a great deal about the education system as we work with a number of schools,

colleges and educational organisations and it has just shown us that in general, the education system and the world of work don't always hook up.

[For other employers, I would say that] we aren't a charity; we wanted the work experience we offered the young people to be as close to real work as possible. [Our work experience] has helped internally with our employee engagement as everyone wanted to know what we were doing and to get involved - colleagues are now asking me when we are going to have more young people with us again. It triggered schools and educational bodies coming to me and wanting to link up with us. I am also involved with a steering group in Nottinghamshire with the local authority, schools and other businesses to share knowledge about the way we work with schools and get other schemes set up.

In my experience, we have seen real extremes of ability with our new recruits. Schools focus so much on academic ability but don't develop enough life skills - communication skills, confidence, and the ability to work with other people. If young people's confidence gets knocked or if these skills aren't nurtured then young people will struggle through life. When you develop these life skills in young people they just fly.

Teachers can be disconnected from the world of work. We have also been educating school staff through our work experience programme - we invite school staff and heads in for the day where our group Chairman holds a 'Core Values' day and shows them our business and how it works. They understand more about the work we do, what we look for in our employees and how we work with the community to develop these relationships. It doesn't have to be a lot of hard work and jumping through hoops to get it right between schools, employers and young people."