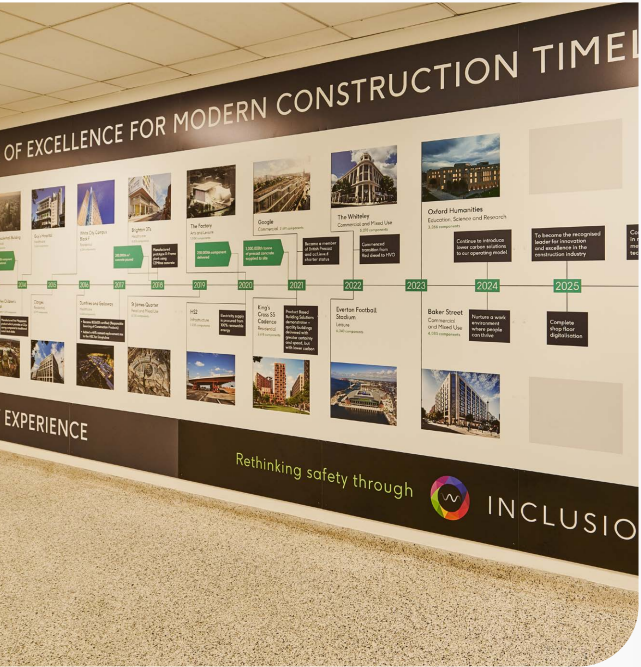




Case study

Embracing neurodiversity through supported internships



At the end of 2022, our UK business was immensely proud to be the first tier one contractor to achieve Level 3: Disability Confident Leader status. Part of maintaining that status is to challenge ourselves to identify ways to make our workplace more inclusive, to take steps to better understand our blind spots and to share our learning with other companies.

Portland is a specialist college, residential care provider and Centre of Excellence for Autism located in Nottinghamshire, close to our Explore Manufacturing facility.

James Langley, General Manager at Explore Manufacturing, explains:

“We had been in touch with Portland College for some time, discussing the possibility of supported internships, and it was really important to us that we went about it in the right way. Rather than rush to put a generic programme together, we’ve worked very closely with the college to develop internships that are suitable for their students, rather than the other way around. A lot of care and consideration has gone into bringing the internships to life, ensuring we provide the right kind of support and an environment where our interns can thrive.”

In addition to the overall training programme, numerous other factors were considered, including the selection process, the most suitable positions, how the programme would be introduced to existing employees, participant safety, and the concerns of the parents of the Portland College candidates. **We worked with students to develop skills in CV writing and interview preparation,** and in January 2024 we were delighted to welcome two new colleagues to the business, in the shape of David and Alex.

The **internships themselves have been tailored to the skills of the interns.** David was invited to join the facilities team, to assist with tasks such as booking and setting up meeting rooms and arranging tours. Alex joined the stores team, which involves ordering goods, re-stocking shelves, delivering products around the plant, and computer-related tasks.

Building the foundations for success

The **learning has been reciprocal.** While our team was active within the college during the internship design and recruitment process, in turn, Portland College spent time with our internal teams, **helping them to better understand autism and ADHD** in order that David and Alex came into an understanding environment.

Claire Dyson, Office and Facilities Manager at Explore Manufacturing, explains:

“We established quiet areas in case the work environment became overwhelming. This is the first interaction that our interns have had with an office and factory, and they were meeting a lot of new people all in one go. We also decided to go for a phased start, so Alex and David started on shorter, fewer days in January and have been gradually building up over time, as their confidence and skills grow. They are now working four days a week and are travelling to and from the workplace independently.

The up front work with the college, students and parents has been invaluable. It has enabled Alex and David to join our business and feel comfortable from the beginning. They are thriving in their roles and are a credit to our business.”

Parents have been important stakeholders in getting the internships right, and we continue to talk with them to make sure we know of any impacts – both positive and negative - that may not present themselves at work.

Image: Inside our Centre of Excellence for Modern Manufacturing, UK

Case study continued



“I was a bit concerned at first, about whether he would be able to cope, and whether the workplace would be able to cope with David” explains David’s mum, “but I think it’s really positive.”

Alex’s mum adds:

“I would like to say a big thank you for accepting him into your company... It’s been a learning curve, for yourselves and for Alex and between you I think you’ve done rather well! You’ve kept him safe, you’ve kept him interested and you’ve given him a purpose. Don’t stop giving people the chance – keep going, because it’s companies like yours that make the difference. He’s proud to be going to Laing O’Rourke. The company has been willing to try new things – thank you.”

From first steps to thriving

Laing O’Rourke’s purpose is: Pushing the boundaries of what’s possible, in service of humanity. The sense of pride and achievement is felt not only by Alex and David, but throughout the company. “It’s been quite humbling, quite eye-opening, to see the progression since we first met Alex and David at Portland College,” explains Steve Evans, Procurement Manager at Explore Manufacturing, and Alex’s line manager.

For Angela Newton-Soanes, Deputy Principal, Quality and Further Education at Portland College, the success is a catalyst for change throughout industry: “It is imperative that employers start from a place of learners’ ability, rather than disability. What we at Portland College and Laing O’Rourke are doing is exactly that. **We are learning from each other. If we get the structure right, we can repeat that structure.** We are identifying positive adjustments that mean the way our supported interns work and operate result in a win-win for learner and employer; they can and are doing amazing things. This is testament to the integrity, transparency and respect that all parties bought in to, which enabled a truly positive working partnership.”

Deana Langton, Work Experience Coordinator at Portland, added:

“Supported Internships/work experience is one of the most valuable and important activities that our learners undertake. It helps to grow confidence, builds transferable skills and provides a valuable insight into the real world of work. We really appreciate Laing O’Rourke’s contribution, which has allowed us to offer a range of work experiences to learners. All of the people involved have been so welcoming and supportive, so thank you.”