

# Sodexo helps people with disabilities onto the career ladder

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Leading services company, Sodexo, has stepped up efforts to help young adults with learning difficulties into work. Through its healthcare division, the company partners with local colleges to offer work placements for people with varying disabilities.

Since 2002, Sodexo Healthcare has provided training to 121 interns in roles such as hospital portering, catering and administration. The aim is to increase employability, while building self confidence and encouraging independence. Forty-one of these trainees have gone on to gain permanent employment with the company.

Sodexo increased its intake three years ago when it launched its [public service pledge](#). It includes a commitment to provide programmes for people with disabilities across its entire business by 2025.

This comes at a time when figures show that only 49.2% of adults with a disability are employed, compared to 80.6% of those without a disability (source: Disability Employment and Pay Gaps, TUC, 2018). Last year, the Government set a target to get more than one million more disabled people into work by 2027.

Sodexo Healthcare provides supported placements at several contracts in its portfolio. They include Nuffield Health, Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury, Queen's Hospital in Romford, Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust and Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust.

## Interns working for Sodexo



Saabir Aydarus (20) from Stonebridge in London, has been on placement for three months as a Catering Assistant at Charing Cross Hospital (part of Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust). Saabir, who has a learning disability, was referred to Sodexo through the DFN Project Search programme. "I work in the canteen at the hospital where I help cook the breakfast, bring out the lunch, and serve people," says Saabir. "I used to be quite shy and I'd get very nervous around people. I would struggle to make eye contact. But now, I enjoy serving people the most.

"I've also learned about food hygiene, cleaning and customer service. The job has given me so much more confidence and I get lots of support from the rest of the team. They all tell me that I'm doing a good job," adds Saabir.

Madeline Crosskey (22), from Farnham, has autism and ADHD. She'd been working on placement at the Nuffield Health Guildford Hospital before being offered a permanent job with Sodexo. "I started out serving staff in the restaurant but now I go on the wards and serve patients, which is a step up for me," says Madeline. "I feel comfortable working with my supervisor because she understands me. I'd worked in retail somewhere else before, but I didn't like it. The staff were asking me to do things I didn't understand and I would get upset. I was so happy to be offered a proper job here – and the extra money I'm earning is a bonus too!"



## Bespoke programme at Queen's Hospital

Most of the programmes at Sodexo Healthcare are driven by colleges and local employability initiatives like Project Search. But at Queen's Hospital in Romford, where a 600-strong Sodexo team provides all the non-clinical services, a placement scheme was created in-house.

John McMullan, Sodexo's Site Director at the hospital, explains: "I knew about the supported work placements at other Sodexo sites, but there were no local schemes like that in Romford. So I decided that we should set something up ourselves.

"After several months working with Havering College, we launched a number of initiatives, including a 39-week internship programme and a six-week work experience scheme for students at the college. We match people to placements based on their abilities and interests. And they get support from a job coach at the college as well as a Sodexo job buddy."

Thirty people aged between 18 and 30 have been through the programme in the last three years.

"At Sodexo, we feel strongly that a diverse workplace is a better workplace. And that's been demonstrated here at the Queen's," says John. "The impact it's had on the individuals who've worked for us has been quite astonishing. But what I didn't expect was the effect it would have on the rest of the team. Watching the interns develop, learn new skills and become more confident has boosted team morale and created a whole new workplace dynamic. In fact, we've seen a drop in team turnover and sick leave since the programme began."

Each year the college celebrates the success of the interns at a special event where Sodexo presents awards. "At the end of the first year of working with Havering College, the students presented me with a plate they'd made which features the names of all the interns, job coaches and buddies who've been through the programme. It was a touching moment, and the plate has pride of place on display in my office," adds John.

Sodexo was recently accredited by the Government's Disability Confident Scheme as a [disability confident leader](#). The company has also signed up to the Global Business and Disability Network, part of the International Labour Organisation.

To find out more about supported work placements, please contact [Jennifer Cleary](#) L&D Manager, Healthcare.