



## HM Revenue & Customs

### Changing job prospects with supported internships at HMRC

**Tracy Etherson** leads the supported internship programme at HMRC, the first government department to partner with the charity DFN Project SEARCH\* to support students with special educational needs or autism (SEND) into work. She says watching the individuals grow and develop has been amazing and she wants to see this approach rolled out across government and the private sector.

Alongside Tracy, we spoke with **HMRC intern Harry** who was supported by his **job coach Abbigail Wade from HfT**, a charity on a mission to change the lives of learning disabled people for the better. HfT is a partner on the programme with DFN Project SEARCH, Liverpool City Council and The City of Liverpool College. We discussed the innovation and enthusiasm the interns bring to their roles as well as the life-changing impact the programme is having on their ambitions and experiences of the workplace.

\***DFN Project SEARCH** provides real work experience, combined with training in employability and independent living skills, to young people with a learning disability or autism spectrum conditions, or both. Delivered in a business setting, the supported internship programme is a partnership between a host business, education provider, and supported employment provider. It aims to provide interns with full-time paid work, helping young people make successful transitions to adult life.



## Can you tell us a bit about the programme and how it came about?

**Tracy:** HMRC were invited along to an event and heard a presentation from DFN Project SEARCH on supported internships and it was something that really hit home with HMRC, we really bought into it. We heard about young adults coming out of education who were struggling to get employment and at the same time, we struggle to recruit for some of our entry-level roles.

Getting to work with these young adults and see their life change over the course of the last nine months has been an immense experience. For this pilot year we have five interns. We give them a range of work at our entry-level grade, which is simple admin. Then, as they progress, each task gets a little bit harder. We have multiple business areas, so every 12 weeks they'll go somewhere else within the business so that they're trying new work, learning new skills and making new friends along the way as well.

## So Harry, can you tell us how you came to be on the programme?

**Harry:** I found out about the recruitment day quite late but decided to go with my Dad. We didn't know what it was going to be like. I understood HMRC was about taxes, but for that reason I never gave it much thought. It was just a big scary government building. Then we met Tracy and the rest of the volunteers and they made us a cup of tea and talked to us for a bit. They gave me a few tasks that clued me in about what I could expect to be doing. Tasks like answering the phone and going through email inboxes. At the end of it, I thought, you know what, I might give it a shot.

## Can you tell us what it's like at HMRC and the skills you're getting?

**Harry:** My first rotation was relatively simple on the large business team. I had to use an inbox and amend records and I was drip-fed these tasks so once I'd got the hang of one another was added onto it and then I was just keeping myself busy throughout the placement. It was a very nice jumping off point really. It helped me get settled in without being overwhelmed.

If I wasn't doing this now, I would still be in college and then I'd probably have gone on to uni just to put off getting into a job because I was very nervous, I had no idea what it was going to be like. But now I do want a fixed term contract, but whether or not it will be with HMRC, I don't know. The good thing is I have the confidence now and the support to go for it. I'm not worried because I know that DFN Project SEARCH can help me find placements somewhere else.

Either way it's a win-win. Just the skills I'm going to have by the end of it, hopefully they outweigh the need for more qualifications.



**Tracy:** The beauty of this programme is, although the supported interns are getting work experience, what we also offer them throughout the internship is how to write a CV, how to apply for a job, how to go for an interview. So that if we are not able to offer something at the end, they have those skills where they will be able to apply either internally, externally or across government.

We do base the rotations on the candidates so we offer administrative skills and practical skills that are less IT based, for example in catering. But also we are saying we are a digital organisation so we are offering those skills as well because in most places you work in now you will need these skills. So they're learning new tools that they'll be able to apply throughout their careers.

### **Why is it important for HMRC, hiring young people and employees from a diverse range of backgrounds?**

**Tracy:** Well, in the Civil Service we can be quite robotic with some of the functions that we do. We get a process and we follow it. We brought in Harry and he looked at a process that we've been doing since time began and he just said, 'why are you doing it like this?' And he suggested a simple alphabetical change to a list that's actually sliced 10 minutes off the daily workload of every member of staff working in that team. He's actually come in with fresh eyes, fresh talent, fresh ideas and he's made an efficiency for HMRC right there. Why would we not want to bring in young people that have different perspectives who can make our all of our working lives better?

The other thing is they help give us pride in our own work. I've heard many people complain, 'ohh, I've got to go to work'. When the interns say, 'I work for HMRC' they say it with such passion and it rubs off. I work for HMRC too. And I'm so proud, so proud of all of them and so proud of the opportunity that was given to me to be able to do this for the last nine months, the best working year of my life to date. And long may it continue.

**Harry:** Well a lot of people who are neurodivergent have hyper-fixations and a lot of them can develop very specific skill sets. I think what HMRC gets by reaching out to people who might not be socially able or are not confident is that they get access to an untapped talent pool. And better yet, they get to train up that pool to fill their vacancies.

### **What did you need to do to get the business ready to be part of the programme?**

**Tracy:** We prepared for a good 12 months before we brought in our first intern. We had to get teams on board, get line managers on board, train them, get them to understand what the asks were and then we got them to put together a 12-week plan for each of the three rotations that will take the supported interns through to summer graduation.

**(cont.)** The idea is that the interns are getting a range of experience so that at the end of the programme they are employable. They can either choose a career in the Civil Service or they'll have the benefit of being able to put their internship at HMRC on their CV, which, as a first stab at work, is an excellent opportunity.

### Can you tell us about any challenges you've faced getting the programme in place?

**Tracy:** The biggest challenge absolutely for me was the recruitment. It was difficult because it was new and people thought it was too good to be true. We also started our recruitment at the end of term, which meant most interns for this year had already decided what they were going to be doing for the next year.

The difference now is we've had positive media coverage and we've got parents with children who have been struggling for years to find something for their career path and they're actually asking to come to recruitment days instead of us going out and trying to advertise it.

Another challenge we faced was that a lot of these young adults don't have the formal identification it takes to get them through basic pre-employment checks. It's been a real learning experience because some of them just do not have photographic ID, they're not on utility bills or anything like that. I now know there's another route because there's a CitizenCard and funding available to help these young adults get that.

### What do you think has been the success factor?

**Tracy:** I absolutely know the success factor has been the partnership with HfT. They've provided an in-house job coach in Abbie who is the absolute glue to this project. She comes in, she spends all day, every day with the interns and learns the job with them. So all the heavy lifting in terms of supporting the interns is done by the job coach.

Of course, we still offer support. We offer a line manager, we offer a buddy system. We treat these young adults like we would any other civil service employee. But the difference with this is, because we've got that in-house support that's qualified and experienced in working with young adults with special educational needs and autism, our managers have that advice on hand too.





Find out more about  
DFN Project SEARCH's  
Supported Internships  
on their website

[www.dfnprojectsearch.org](http://www.dfnprojectsearch.org)

**Harry:** Abbie being my job coach - she's my lifeline. She will learn a task alongside me, so she picks up on what I miss out because my concentration can be a bit up and down, especially when I'm sitting there for a long period of time. Having something explained to me by my co-workers as well, in both teams in both placements, has been wonderful. They've really sat with me and helped me understand it. And the end result is that I haven't seen Abbie, except for at lunch times, for ages. I'm at a point where I can just get on with it.

### So what would you say to other employers considering this?

**Tracy:** It's easy. It's such a success story that it won't just be HMRC that's offering this type of programme. There are no negatives to it. We're getting a resource at an entry-level grade where our interns can build their confidence and grow their skillset. And, following on from the supported internship, there may be an opportunity to have a fixed term contract, which would mean our interns stay for 24 months.

We've started this off, HMRC is the first government department to do this and for the last nine months I've been on calls across government and let's just say everyone is watching what's happening here at HMRC. I'm sure this is going to not just go nationwide for us, but it's going to go across government as well.

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