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## **YOUTHFUL EXPERIENCE**

**Authorities adopt new ways of recruiting**

**Engineer a new revolution: Cycling specialist wanted by Shropshire Council - see page 33**

# Work experience is a qualified success

Mike King

If councils are to 'bridge the gap' and fill vacancies, then a change of thinking could be the key.

**Adrian Tatum** meets a man with a plan – that works.



A few years ago, local authority transport consultant, John David, had a plan. Concerned and frustrated by the onset of a severe skills shortage in the industry, one that he thought would ultimately affect all levels of departments, he came up with a solution.

His idea was ambitious, and many said it would never work but, just recently, these doubt-

ers have been made to eat their words – because it does.

David's plan was to set up a scheme where he could get unemployed people into local government highway, transport and environment departments to do unpaid work experience, with a view to them becoming salaried members of staff, if they proved their worth.

These people could be from any background, of any age, and

might have any qualifications. However, what they would all have would be a demonstrable desire to learn and a 'can do' attitude. The most important thing for David was that these people be given a chance to work towards a fresh career, one that could fill some of the many critical gaps in local government departments.

'I knew we couldn't create an engineer overnight, but that would certainly be my ultimate

goal,' David says. 'One day it could happen, because this is all about putting these people in a local government department for them to experience what being an engineer is like, how we operate and function as departments, and if they then see it as a potential career – then everyone benefits' he adds.

Although the idea was laudable, it was a big risk for any local authority to take. Nevertheless,



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**Sahil:** Gained average results at GCSE, then completely lost direction, moved in with the 'wrong crowd', and experienced the sort of streetlife that is influenced by peer pressure.

Aware he was going nowhere, he approached David via his website and convinced him to offer him a shot at 'redemption'. Sahil took an unpaid work placement, and made a big impression.

Within weeks, he changed his dress and dropped his gang-affiliated earrings, opting for suits with shirt and tie. He pleased managers sufficiently to be offered paid work, with comments on his attitude ranging from 'a huge breath of fresh air to the team' to 'a really helpful and friendly member of the team'.

**What does he think about the scheme?**

'It was the "second chance" that I needed. I lost my way in the past, knew I had to get a job, but wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

'The main problem was motivation, although now I have plenty of that.

'I want to study harder and take on more at work. It has been good to see how the engineers and other members of the team work here, and there is no reason – if I work hard – that I can't be a senior manager one day. That's what I'm aiming for.'



**Angela:** A mum returning to work after nine years. At the job interview for the post with London Borough of Croydon she was nervous, anxious and lacked confidence after such a career gap, so she opted to work two months part-time on a reintroduction placement.

After this fortnight, she found she was enjoying herself, and this was also showing through her work. Within weeks, she had fitted into the team and was up to speed with her colleagues. Her work, personality and commitment ensured her manager recommended paid work.

**What does she think about the scheme?**

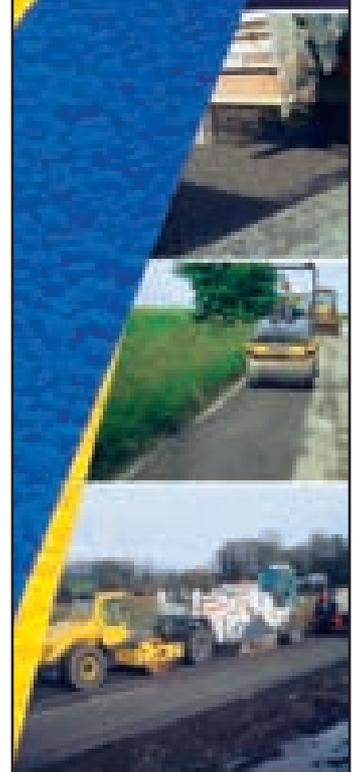
'It is a fascinating insight into how local government works. It has boosted my confidence, which I was lacking because I had fallen behind on certain key skills after not working for so long to look after my children.'



**Sumayya:** A teenager with personal issues and no development since GCSEs. She had taken no further studies and her work experience was as a junior hair dressing assistant with part-time work as a shop assistant. At interview, she asked for an opportunity to have a shot at a different career because she was now a long way behind her contemporaries in experience and skills, and wanted to leave her past behind and move forward. Like Angela, Sumayya started at the council on a work placement, and similarly, rediscovered her confidence and ability, flourishing within days. Three managers picked up on this and wanted her on their teams, and she was taken on.

**What does she think about the scheme?**

'It has given me a fresh start and I enjoy the different aspects of my work. It has been very good to get some training, and I look forward to more in the future so I can progress even more within the department.'



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## skills &amp; training

**Joanne:** Gained a degree but never gained work experience, and was totally lacking in confidence. After she was taken on recently, David says: 'We are following a similar path with Joanne and, if she shows the same level of commitment and delivery, I am confident she, too, could become the fourth paid member.'

**What does she think about the scheme?**

'I think this is a great scheme to give people the chance to progress in a new career and take a completely different direction.'



**Elisha:** A young mum with only a limited work experience as a shop assistant, Elisha was lacking confidence in an office environment. She expressed interest in a placement and has developed significantly over the last two months.

**What does she think about the scheme?**

'Being a young mum, the work gives me the flexibility to work and be home for my children when I need to.'

It has really shown me what I am capable of, and I am enjoying being a part of it.'



**Stephen:** A qualified silver service waiter, he quickly realised that was not the job for him and, at 17, found he lacked the experience to decide what he really wanted to do. Since joining David's scheme, however, Stephen has thrown himself at all the tasks given to him, impressing those around him by taking notes and learning. His natural abilities have been recognised by the managers, David says.

**What does he think about the scheme?**

'I wanted a job doing something that I could be excited about getting up for every day, and that's what I've got now. It's great to be a part of the team we have here, and I am confident I will progress and do well here.'



**Kriss:** Qualified to NVQ level 2 in woodwork, but not happy with this choice of a career. Since joining the scheme, Kriss has offered an enthusiastic approach to the tasks, and has started to develop a good understanding of how a parking services department operates.

**What does he think about the scheme?**

'I want to aim for the top. It has been good to see how council departments work. Unless you are part of it, you don't actually realise what goes on at a council and the amount of work involved. I want to study and possibly become an engineer one day.'



after taking up a senior interim post in London Borough of Croydon Council's parking services department – a role which has already seen him improve performance within the department – David was given permission to start work on his 'into work' scheme.

After finding an agency which supplied previously-unemployed people to organisations such as local authorities, he set up the scheme and welcomed two work experience students. This number soon grew to seven, and some have already been offered full-time, paid work.

'I placed these people in those areas where I previously encountered the most resistance to the work experience scheme,' David explains. He says that this resistance came initially in the form of negative comments such as, 'We do not want to waste our time with people like this', or, 'We have no time to train them', and even, 'There is nothing in it for us.' It proved to me a smart move.

'Interestingly, I personally have never offered any of these work experience people paid work,' David points out. 'It was those very managers in the departments where they were placed, those who made the comments, who completely changed their minds.'

As well as training received from the council, all the current work experience people have been studying in their spare time. As well as working on a presentation to be given to senior management at Croydon, they have been studying business orientated subjects such as change, quality, risk and project management as Croydon's parking services department goes through a period of restructure and change.

Such is the success of the scheme that the London Borough of Brent Council is now looking at it with interest, as are a several other local authorities. Brent will soon be piloting a 12-week pilot training course for the unemployed, organised by David.

As he says: 'I think we have more than proved that this approach does work. People do the training, get work experience – and get work.'