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Issues addressed:

- A bit about the Wood Works
- Trainees
- Creating a positive environment
- Supporting people at work
- Balancing the business and support
- Skills for employment

A bit about the Wood Works

Tell us a bit about The Wood Works.

The Wood Works (TWW) is just over 1 year old and we currently have 4 trainees, 1 Workspace trainee, myself as manager and a supervisor. Any profit made is ploughed back into TWW offering further trainee opportunities, purchasing new equipment etc. The business is open Monday to Friday and on Saturday mornings.

What does the team actually do?

We offer rescued wood for reuse. We collect waste wood from construction sites, households and wood-trades people for reuse. We grade, sort and clean the timber at our Edinburgh premises where good quality wood is sold at a reduced price to DIYers, builders, hobbyists, architects, gardeners and wood enthusiasts. We can also cut to size while you wait and deliver to your door. Our collection charges are less than the standard waste disposal method of 'skip and dump' and more sustainable than the landfill or incinerator route.

So the customer benefits from:

- a more sustainable option for managing wood waste and reduced waste disposal costs

Social Firms seek to create good quality jobs for severely disadvantaged people within supportive and successful enterprises

For more information on Social Firms and how to join us please go to our website or get in touch by email sfs@socialfirms.org.uk or call us on 0131 225 4178.

www.socialfirms.org.uk



Evidence of success

- The positive response we receive from repeat customers
- The positive feedback we receive from our trainees
- Low absenteeism
- Continued retention of our original team
- A genuine sense of "good work, done well"

- an efficient collection and delivery service from trained staff
- a source of constantly changing and low priced recycled wood

Trainees

How long do trainees spend with The Wood Works?

There is no time limit on the trainees' attendance at TWW except for the Workspace trainee who will be with us for 9 months and is really focusing on moving into full or part time employment. The other trainees can stay with us for as long as they need to and as long as the relationship is mutually beneficial.

What does the Social Firm mean by "mutually beneficial?"

This means that we have a team of people who are developing their employability skills, their mental wellness and are contributing to the Social Firms. Everyone benefits! We very much believe that everyone has skills to offer and in the right atmosphere they can really flourish. People can be supported, develop new friendships and have a chat and a laugh but they will also be stretched with new opportunities and challenges and need to be 'up' for at least having a go. We stress that it is okay to have a go and make a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes, but it is a chance to learn a new skill or re-discover a forgotten skill.

Do some trainees stay with the Social Firm a long time?

Well, The Wood Works is only just over a year old but I know in the other Social Firms there are some people who have been attending for several years. As long as the person is developing and supported this is hugely positive. Coming along and contributing to a real business and meeting friends and colleagues who care can help to maintain an individual's mental wellness. Research has shown that, for people with enduring mental health issues,

there is a significant reduction made in hospital admissions and doctor's appointments.

Creating a positive environment

How does the team achieve this positive environment?

The team is really supportive of each other and everyone's hope for their future has really grown. We really value the contribution made to the business and the trainees really value the opportunity. The trainees receive lots of job coaching from myself and the supervisor and also help each other out. By working in a group to get the job done everyone develops their communication and team working skills. Everyone also gets health and safety training, manual handling training and we'll soon be doing customer care training. Everyone really looks out for each other and because they care about the success of the Social Firms they take great pride in their work and the customer service they offer.

Supporting people at work

Has anyone had any struggles?

When mentally unwell many people lose confidence in themselves and stop contacting friends. They end up sleeping in late and then cannot sleep at night. Both these factors can contribute to social isolation and depression. By attending a few shifts each week trainees have something to get up for which can help re-establish good sleep patterns and increase inclusion. A good night's sleep really helps people function in the day and is essential in a working environment. We state this expectation at the beginning and really encourage trainees to achieve this goal. New trainees may start with later starting shifts and as they develop a routine they can then swap to morning shifts. Once people have managed to get in on time for a couple of months they have the confidence that this is no longer an employment barrier.

What do you do if a trainee is experiencing a difficult time?

Sometimes the Social Firms might be the only stable place in a person's life so they can be really pleased to focus

Key Learning Points

- Enthusiasm is infectious – if you can generate it, the solutions to short term, daily or long term problems can be solved within the team
- The hours are long but the rewards great especially when you notice personal development and achievement within individuals and the team



Top tips

- Research is everything – know your market and customers
- Make as many contacts with other networks as possible
- Support and training is crucial if trainees are to develop along with the business
- Involving the whole team in the business strategy and aims leads to a sense of common identity and pride in what we do and how we do it

their energies on something positive for part of the week. Other people may withdraw and not turn up for their shift. When a trainee first comes along we ask them to contact us ASAP if they ever need time off but this doesn't always happen at first. We are lucky at Forth Sector to have a Training & Support (T&S) Team. One of the coordinators from this team visits us regularly and gets to know the trainees well. If someone is going through a difficult time the T&S coordinator will get in touch with them to see if we can help. They might also refer the trainee to a specialist or just listen. We would remind the person that they are a valued member of the team and ask them to keep in touch with us until they are ready to come back. This communication is vital in a working environment. If a person requires a longer period of time away from the Social Firms we keep in touch with them and organise a staged return. This means that they can come back for one shift a week and build their stamina slowly.

Have any of the staff experienced mental health problems?

Throughout Forth Sector several of the staff has had personal experience of mental ill health. We strive to have a mixture of experiences as this is realistic and helps to

Next Steps

- To increase our capacity so that The Wood Works can support more individuals and recycle more wood
- The continued training and involvement of the trainees and staff to develop further the business and individual development

educate more people. Some staff members have formerly been trainees and have made the leap to be an employee of Forth Sector whilst other people move into open employment. We can only employ more people by growing the business. It is vital to have the trainee placements as a way for people to build their stamina and gain the necessary skills in a supportive environment.

Balancing the business and support

Is it difficult to manage this and keep the business running?

If the business is going through a particularly busy time and one person (or more) is off it can put stress on other people. This is one reason why Social Firms are integrated supported work places. We do a lot of forward planning to make sure the work is spread out but we also have to do enough work to cover the cost of running the business: paying the rent, the bills, the wages etc!

Employment Skills

When people are thinking about employment what skills do they need to have in place?

When people are with us they are supported and encouraged to develop good attendance and time-keeping skills, communication, personal presentation, customer care as well as team working skills. We believe that if a person can develop these skills then they can be trained to do the actual tasks of any job they want.



Forth Sector is a social enterprise. It operates small, commercial, supportive businesses (Social Firms) which provide employment opportunities for people with mental health problems.

People whose mental health is a barrier to them gaining open employment can attend as a trainee, benefiting from practical experience in a supportive realistic working environment.

Forth Sector are also piloting a project called Workspace. Workspace trainees are moving towards work within 9 months. They get a placement within the Forth Sector office or in one of the Social Firms which provides real working experience. The group also comes together once a week for training in areas such as IT skills, customer service, team working, assertiveness, confidence, interview skills, CV building etc.