

Pret A Manger: training and mentoring

A job recipe that works

Pret A Manger's apprenticeship scheme is designed to remove the barriers to employment for homeless people and former offenders, and help them break the cycle of deprivation to become valued team members

When it came to lunch on the go, college friends Julian Metcalfe and Sinclair Beecham were fed up with the usual fast-food fodder. They wanted what they saw as healthier, tastier options. And so, 25 years ago, they set about selling their own brand of freshly-made sandwiches.

The formula became an instant hit. The sandwiches flew off the shelves. From that first outlet in the central London district of Victoria, Pret A Manger now counts more than 260 stores around the world.

As with any business, those early days proved foundational. It was in Victoria that Pret's creators toyed with the menu that would prove so popular in the future. The company's Victoria beginnings carry another legacy too: a corporate commitment to tackle homelessness. At the end of their very first day's trading, Julian and Sinclair donated their leftover food to folk sleeping rough in the immediate vicinity. The custom stuck.

Since 1995, when the founding duo established the company's own charitable foundation, Pret has sought to structure its support for homelessness in a more formalised way. The Pret Foundation Trust annually donates 2.4 million products to a variety of homeless charities, as well as donating cash (£1.1m over five years) and professional services too.

Three years ago, it struck Nicki Fisher, Pret's head of sustainability, that the time had come to assess the effectiveness of their support. "We took a look at the issue holistically and tried to work out how to break the cycle of homelessness," she explains.

It's not easy. Homelessness tends to precipitate further problems. If you've no fixed address, banks are unlikely to give you a bank account. Without a bank account, it's difficult to get a job. Without a job, the temptation to commit crime – or repeat offend in many cases – is exacerbated. It is a vicious cycle.

How could a large retailer intervene? Sponsoring a skills-learning scheme to increase youth employability could be one option. Advocating for increased vocational training could be another.

What Pret actually decided to do was set up its own in-house apprenticeship scheme. Targeting homeless people and former offenders specifically, the food outlet chain offers a work placement for three months.

Co-ordinated and funded through the Foundation,

the apprentices are treated the same as every other employee: they undertake the same tasks, work the same hours and, above all, get paid the same wage. "Getting paid the same is crucial to making them feel valued and part of the team," says Fisher.

Pret isn't blind to the leap that full-time work can represent for those unaccustomed to 6am starts and shop floor responsibilities. Each apprentice, for example, is given £100 at the outset to ensure they have suitable clothes and the company pays for the cost of their travel for the entire three months. "We do this to remove all the obstacles that prevent them from working," Fisher adds. Training is also provided during their placement, as well as guidance from a mentor.

A regular pay packet is clearly a critical step to help people get back on their feet, but that is not the whole picture. The feeling of self-worth that comes from employment and the chance to be part of a team also make a profound difference, according to Fisher.

"The network of friendship among our employees is very strong and the apprentices get amalgamated into this. In some cases, they even end up renting a place together," she adds. The success rate to date has been extraordinary: more than 85% of the apprentices have stayed on and now work as full-time employees.

Jay is evidence of how the programme is turning individual lives around. Finding himself homeless at the age of 22, he joined Pret's apprenticeship scheme in 2009. Two years on and he's a 'hot chef' – a role that includes maintaining all hot food quality and equipment to training other team members – at the company's Regent Street branch in London.

Jay was referred to Pret by Michael Kenny, director of St Mary-le-Bow Homeless Project, one of the eight homeless charities affiliated with the programme.

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the company

Pret was launched in London in 1986 by college friends and business novices, Sinclair Beecham and Julian Metcalfe. Their aim of proper sandwiches avoiding the chemicals, additives and preservatives common to much of the 'prepared' and 'fast' food on the market today. Pret owns and operates more than 250 shops in Britain, the US and Hong Kong, with annual sales of £350m. There are 213 shops in the UK, three-quarters of which are within the M25 commuter belt, selling more than 30 million sandwiches and baguettes a year. Total sales growth worldwide in 2010 is expected to be close to 18%. Founders Beecham and Metcalfe set up The Pret Foundation Trust in 1995 with the aim of alleviating poverty in the UK – particularly focusing on the homeless. The trust is funded by company and customer donations, as well as the proceeds of an annual auction for staff and suppliers.



them onto an apprenticeship and then into a job,” Kenny says. “Most employers just don’t want to know.” He credits the positive atmosphere and management support in Pret’s stores, plus the on-the-job training, for the scheme’s “remarkable success”.

Not all apprentices adapt. Fisher cites the case of one young man who was arrested midway through his placement for dealing drugs. The difficulty for older people to change negative behavioural patterns means Pret tends to favour younger candidates, but this is by no means a hard and fast rule.

The majority do complete the apprenticeship, however. And for them, Pret offers a full-time position where it can. Their consequent loyalty is one of the unexpected business benefits for the company, Fisher admits. “We’ve given them a break when others would write them off. That they are still working for us shows the level of loyalty that creates,” she says.

The positive response among management and employees in participating stores represents a second ancillary bonus. For a store manager, seeing an apprentice successfully through his or her placement is seen as a “feather in their cap”, says Fisher. Likewise, employees feel “specially chosen” that their store has been selected for the programme.

Pret uses its internal magazine and other internal communication channels to spread the word about the initiative across the company as a whole. Broader communication has been limited so far, though. A percentage of the sale of a few Pret products goes towards funding the programme. For these, there’s some on-pack messaging. A small amount of in-store communication exists too.

In general, however, Pret has preferred to “keep quiet” about the programme, admits Fisher. The reason is partly cultural (Pret tends to eschew heavy advertising) and partly because it is still early days. Three years in and Pret has 43 apprentices but aims to increase the number to between 70 and 80. As the programme beds down, Pret could leverage its success in its wider communications. By the same token, advertising the programme could present an

opportunity to bring it to scale. As yet, no other employers are involved. Were that to change, Fisher admits, more long-term openings for apprentices could become available.

St Mary-le-Bow’s Kenny would be the first to welcome such an expansion. “This kind of programme should be developed ... so more young people can be paid and can become independent,” he states. “Our primary concern and goal is that the apprentices get into permanent employment. So far, we’ve been able to accommodate that, hence the 85% success rate. The 15% who haven’t stayed with us have left because they’ve dropped out, not because we’ve been unable to place them.

“As the scheme expands to cities across the UK where we may not be able to absorb them into the business, we will forge links with other employers to help ensure they find permanent employment.”

■ Further information: nicki.fisher@pret.com

World of work: the busy team at Pret’s outlet in the Strand, central London

comment PRET A MANGER



Pret A Manger’s founders integrated the concept of corporate responsibility into their business model from the start: making healthy, fresh produce and working to tackle a local problem. Pret A Manger’s internal apprenticeship scheme is having demonstrable positive impacts on participants; they are given the opportunity to learn new skills and meet new people, with financial and mentor support. The true value of this approach is reflected by the fact that 85% of participants stay with the company in full-time employment. The desire to develop partnerships and engage with other companies to push this initiative forward makes Pret A Manger a leader in its sector.

Points to note:

- Pret A Manger is addressing the problem of homelessness effectively by adopting a holistic and long term approach.
- The programme provides immediate and long term benefits for participants.
- Internal communications means employees are engaged with the scheme and motivates them to support it.

SABRINA BASRAN, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS