

Movement to Work – Employer of the Year application for M&S

Marks and Spencer have shown incredible dedication and support for young people over the past year, and despite the challenges of COVID-19, successfully delivered 30 employability programmes across over 100 UK stores, making a transformational difference to 350 young people.

Marks and Spencer have supported The Prince's Trust for over 15 years, investing over £1m per annum to support around 1,200 young people every year through our employability programmes, Marks and Start, that are jointly delivered by M&S and The Prince's Trust. As of the end of 2020, we have supported over 9,000 young people through these programmes, with around 85% of young people moving into paid employment.

In 2020, The Prince's Trust faced significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic - our centres were closed, and all face-to-face programmes were postponed or cancelled. The Trust pivoted their programme delivery online to ensure that we could continue to support young people throughout the pandemic.

Marks and Spencer were also badly hit, with clothing, home, and hospitality across the UK closing during lockdown. In addition, M&S were undergoing a significant business refocus and restructure, causing more uncertainty.

Despite the multitude of challenges, M&S were completely committed keen to supporting young people, particularly during a time when they needed it most. M&S were a driving force when it came to innovating our programmes for virtual delivery and working through all the obstacles presented by the pandemic. Whilst other retailers had withdrawn from their charitable work, M&S stepped up to champion and support young people through a difficult period.

M&S and The Trust worked collaboratively to adapt and innovate our Marks and Start programmes for blended virtual workshop delivery and in-person work placements, moving from a prescriptive programme schedule to a more flexible approach. Due to the introduction of virtual employability sessions, M&S enhanced their own internal Marks and Start learning journey for the young people, creating digital learning modules aligned to the new skills and behaviours needed for a Customer Assistant role during the pandemic. M&S also created new tools for Line Managers, so they were equipped to support young people, particularly given the challenges they were facing. This improved the young people's prospects of securing a role and long-term employment and enhanced the support that the young people received from Line Managers. M&S' attention to detail and consideration for young people when designing and adapting their digital programme content demonstrates their innovative and thoughtful approach to supporting young people.

Due to frequent changes in local lockdown restrictions during September as the Tier system was announced, it was unclear when non-essential retail stores would be opening. M&S were also in the middle of a restructure, with various parts of their business having to close and staff still on furlough. Instead of cancelling the programmes, M&S remained committed to supporting young people and agreed to push back the programmes until there was a clear date for when non-essential retail stores were opening again.

By the time a programme start date was agreed for 26th October, M&S and The Trust had four weeks to plan and prepare. M&S kept young people at the heart of every decision and remained flexible and adaptable. They ensured that the virtual employability sessions were

condensed so young people spent a minimal amount of time on a digital screen and reduced the young people's working hours from the usual 9am – 5pm to 10am – 4:30pm so young people weren't traveling during peak hours. The mental health and wellbeing needs, and safety of young people were of paramount importance to M&S, who introduced a wellbeing session during the young people's store inductions, and spoke to each young person about COVID safety, ensuring they were equipped with hand gels and face masks. The willingness from M&S to adapt and change to ensure the programme worked for young people was outstanding and demonstrates M&S's passion for making a positive difference to young people.

Even after all the challenges posed by the pandemic, M&S were also in the middle of a company restructure, so were unable to share which stores were taking part in the Marks and Start programme until two weeks before the programmes were due to start. M&S staff were also coming back from furlough at the same time, leaving little time for them to learn the new programme content. Despite this, M&S pushed to keep the programmes running instead of postponing or cancelling them to ensure they could still support young people into work during the weeks leading up to Christmas. M&S staff also went above and beyond, attending training sessions and communicating frequently with The Trust to ensure that they were well-equipped for the new programme structure and that young people were going to get the best experience.

1,470 young people were contacted about the programmes in less than 3 weeks, with 486 young people attending the programme Taster Day, which exceeded our target of 450 young people.

On 26th October, 30 programmes commenced in over 100 stores across the UK, bringing together 350 young people. The programmes ran smoothly despite it being the first time that Marks and Start had been run digitally, and M&S did a fantastic job of supporting young people during their work experience despite challenging COVID measures. The Marks and Start programme looked very different to usual, and M&S staff proved their resilience and tenacity by adapting well to the changes to ensure young people received a great experience.

During the programme, local lockdown restrictions presented more uncertainty, but M&S continued to overcome these challenges and remain flexible. For example, when Wales went into a 17-day "firebreak" lockdown M&S remained committed to continuing the Marks and Start programmes post-lockdown, extending these programmes in Wales by two weeks to ensure the young people could complete their work placements. England also entered a second national lockdown half-way through the programme, but M&S decided to still continue the programmes and ensure young people could complete their work placements and receive a fantastic overall experience.

The Marks and Start programmes ended on 20th November, with 275 young people completing the programme. Across the UK, M&S and The Prince's Trust ran virtual celebration events to acknowledge all that the young people had achieved over the 4-week programme. Every store involved in the programme ensured that the young people were celebrated and made to feel special despite not being able to run an in-person celebration event.

Despite a company-wide recruitment freeze, M&S continued to show great dedication to young people, and 238 (86%) then moved onto a 4-week fixed-term contract within an M&S store and were also offered a further 2 week fixed-term contract to support peak trading leading up to Christmas.

2020 has been a challenging time for everyone, but young people have been especially affected. Marks and Spencer have demonstrated their passion and commitment to supporting young people by continuing to run their employability programmes despite a difficult year for

their business. M&S overcame a variety of COVID-related challenges to ensure their programmes were a success for young people and provided them with valuable work experience and a great outcome post-programme. M&S are wholly deserving of Employer of the Year award!

“M&S has a longstanding commitment to helping disadvantaged young people into work. We have been working with The Prince’s Trust for the last 16 years and have been able give work experience opportunities to over 9,000 young people in that time. We cherish our partnership with The Prince’s Trust, in particular we value their knowledge of our business and quality support they provide to our programme participants.

We know that young people have been severely impacted by COVID-19 and M&S is truly committed to helping those in our communities who need us most. We have been able to continue our “Marks and Start” programmes throughout the pandemic and look forward to reaching out more and more young people, providing work experience and peak working contracts later the year.” - **Emma Lucas - Head of Talent & Development at Marks and Spencer**

“The last year has been a powerful litmus test of the strength of our partnership foundations and commitment to work together. In what has been a very tough time for retailers and young people, M&S has stood out as a driving force to help The Trust innovate and be there for young people. This has resulted in our partnership becoming even stronger, and it is a source of huge pride across both organisations. Thank you, M&S.” – **Stephanie Bagworth – Senior Head of Corporate Partnerships at The Prince’s Trust**