

Sainsbury's

Students often bring an interesting new perspective and dimension

Sainsbury's is one of the big four supermarkets, with 785 stores across the UK, also offering a wide range of non-grocery items, online ordering, and financial services via Sainsbury's Bank. Over sixteen million customers shop at Sainsbury's every week and about 150,000 people work for the company. Following good trading results from Christmas 2008, Sainsbury's is considering creating jobs at a time when many other companies are under significant economic pressure.

The company has been offering work experience placements for about ten years and last year offered 25 places, a mixture of short placements lasting eight weeks in the summer and full-year placements starting in September. In future, the company would like to focus more on the longer placements. Head of leadership development, Sue Round explains the scheme's benefits for the company:

"The main reason is because it helps us get sight of the best candidates early on: about 10% of those we take onto our graduate entrant scheme have already done a placement with us (last year, that was six out of 56 graduates). The other – more altruistic – reason is that we see providing students with experience of working life as part of our wider corporate responsibility."

Because the company is often looking for very specific knowledge and skills – such as product technology or supply chain management, much of Sainsbury's recruitment targets particular universities and disciplines. Graduate entrants don't work in every area of the business and Sainsbury's is primarily looking for students who already know they want a career in a particular aspect of retailing.

Sainsbury's advertises the scheme via different media – directly to universities, via exhibitions, campus fairs and websites. Teams of staff from the business's different function areas work closely with universities to ensure they understand which students are likely to have the knowledge Sainsbury's needs.

Summer placements are available in logistics, information technology (IT), product technology, online, human resources (HR), commercial and buying. One-year placements focus on product technology and development, together with own-brand marketing. The emphasis for the students is on developing business skills such as project management and business influencing. Students are based at the London Store Support Centre or in a distribution centre across the country. Each placement ends with a performance review and an offer of a place on Sainsbury's graduate training scheme for some.

Every student undergoes an induction process, which includes a period working in-store so they may appreciate "what the business is all about". After that, they go to the division they've opted for, so they can learn what that aspect of the job is really about. Line Managers report that, if they come back as a graduate trainee, they are ahead of the game.

There are challenges – not so much with the individual students, but with filling all the vacancies in the areas where there are skills shortages, such as buying and food science. Universities do not always manage to anticipate far enough ahead where demand for employers will lie – but the students themselves add real value to the business, through fresh thinking, passion on sustainability and sourcing, and often an interesting new perspective and dimension.

As with all its staff, Sainsbury's analyses application data to see the demographic characteristics of the people it is recruiting to the placements and the graduate scheme, and as Peter Burnham, company occupational therapist explains:

"We do an adverse impact analysis on the different aspects of diversity to check that our assessment tools operate fairly for everyone. The pool isn't always as diverse as we'd like, because for various reasons university students don't reflect the population as a whole. When we work out what needs to change, then we target our activity accordingly – so for example, we are looking to work with various disability organisations to make sure disabled graduates get a fair opportunity to demonstrate their abilities."

Round encourages employers thinking of offering work placements: "Definitely do it – and, if you can, offer students a one-year placement, as that's where there's highest demand, with more and more universities incorporating work experience into their degree courses. With a whole year available, students can build up a portfolio of relevant experience in different business areas."

www.sainsburys.co.uk/graduates



“I took on real projects and loved working with a variety of people from suppliers, the marketing team and product technologists to develop new concepts. The work is fast paced, hands-on and hugely rewarding.”

Nicole, product development placement



“With so much change in the supply chain there were lots of opportunities for me to get involved in really exciting projects while meeting a wide variety of people. It also helped me with my degree on my return to university.”

Will, supply chain placement

Key points:

- A mixture of paid summer and one-year sandwich work placements, mainly in support roles with a short period in-store
- Placements are targeted at students studying relevant technical subjects with an eye on recruiting them as graduates
- Graduates who've undertaken a placement are seen as “ahead of the game”.