
Thinking outside the B4Box

B4Box, a Salford-based refurbishment company, was honoured with the 2009 GMEC award for Welcoming Differences and Diversity for its 'targeted recruitment and development of those most disadvantaged in the labour market'.

Other partner organisations – who shared the company's aims to help people with barriers to employment - were impressed enough to nominate B4Box after only one year of trading.



While a little nonplussed by the award, managing director Aileen McDonnell, who employs 14 staff, believes that disadvantaged or not, everybody deserves a chance.

She said: "I have an open door policy when it comes to hiring. I don't care about a person's past and I don't care where they're from. Once they begin working for B4Box I judge them on their work alone, nothing else."

The B4Box strap line is 'Building for the community', a statement of intent that could be applied equally to their staff as their clients. Even though most of Aileen's employees originate from areas of deprivation, she said: "It is true that some people living in deprived areas or who are long-term unemployed don't want to work, but most do. They often just need to be given a chance. Once they're on the job you can't distinguish between them and everybody else."

When asked if she has an interest in helping people in this 'hard to reach' category, Aileen said: "I have an interest in not discriminating – and not putting people into categories! I fast tracked them on to NVQ Level 2 in the multi-skilled maintenance module - on full minimum wage, not the apprentice rate – and 11 out of 14 qualified, a percentage that is unprecedented I believe."

The employees, aged between 24 and 40, perform a variety of tasks on site from joinery to plastering and most things in between on property refurbishments throughout Salford and Manchester's social housing sector.

B4Box's incredible record with the first cohort of 11 NVQ passes – 10 at Level 2 and one at Level 3 - was achieved not only through their own hard work and Aileen's determination, but also with help from Salford City College where the trainees attended day release.

Aileen said: "Salford College has been a very good example of employer-led practice. They have been very helpful. But we hired some very able young people - those who are more committed than the average worker because they appreciate the fact that they were given a chance. I manage to find people who are looking for a break to prove themselves in the workplace. But this is not the view that most people have of the long-term unemployed. Personally, if I was unemployed I would do anything but go through a 'pretend' job scheme. I would want a real job at the end of my training, which is what we offer. I've now hired every one of my qualified trainees."

There are many benefits to employment: our employees come off benefits and tax allowances, while they attain self-respect and a life-long trade. On a more personal level they start forming a more positive view of themselves, which is essential for greater self-respect.”