



CASE STUDY

WESC Foundation teams up with BMC Azurri to help provide new work experience opportunities for visually impaired and disabled students



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WESC Foundation, developed as a branch from the WOES school, which was founded in 1837, is set to provide more ground breaking work experience placements for the visually impaired.

The WESC Foundation formally the West of England School & College for young people with little or no sight has developed into a complex educational and research centre, providing specialist training and support for blind and visually impaired adults and students, both on campus and through its outreach services department.

The Challenge

The WESC foundation currently runs five charity retail outlets and is the first of its kind offering real work experience placements, in accessible environments for young people with sight loss and additional complex needs. This gives them the chance to contribute and learn new skills. The biggest problem facing WESC was how to create a safe and practical work environment that was able to cater to a variety of needs for both their visually and physically disabled volunteers. Their IT systems were a core part of this problem, as they needed to be specially adapted, accessible and easy to use for both able and disabled staff.

The BMC Azurri Solution

WESC wanted to create a fully functioning retail environment, specially adapted to fit the needs of the work experience adults. Equipment such as ground rails, specialist fittings and Ma1595 tills, which had been specially designed for the visually impaired and adults with other disabilities, had been fitted. The volunteers had learnt their way around the till with initial help from a sighted companion. WESC realised that their systems needed to be updated, but were concerned at the potential problems this would pose for their staff, who may struggle to adapt to any new systems.

Having understood the complex and sensitive nature of the charity's requirements, the team at BMC Azurri rose to the challenge and set to work finding the most appropriate solutions for their unique needs. In 2014, touch screen Gift Aid tills were installed by BMC Azurri in 3 WESC charity shops, and Andy Roberts from WESC set to work devising a colour coordinated till layout with larger buttons, and fewer departments as well as creating braille overlays. BMC Azurri collaborated with Andy lending equipment and support to help Andy refine his idea.



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The solution in practice

The benefits of the new system aren't just about the commercial improvements in efficiency, procedures and Gift Aid donations. Like many charities, the primary driver for the WESC Foundation was 'what can we do to better benefit those people that the charity was created to help?'. In this case, those people include the shop workers themselves. One volunteer who was blind, deaf and mute had learnt to read Braille. She came to work at one of the WESC charity shops in Honerton. She used a "deaf blind communicator" a device paring allowing dialogue between the customer and the volunteer by way of both QWERTY and braille text. This has opened up the outside world to her, allowing her to fulfil potentials and exceed expectations. Another volunteer, Ian, who is both autistic and blind, has been fully trained to work on the shop floor and on the tills. He is now able to train employees in the use of the system and it has greatly benefited his quality of life and given him great confidence.

"Our work with the WESC Foundation has been particularly rewarding, because not only have we delivered a robust and fit for purpose solution that meets the commercial needs of the organisation, we have also helped to ensure that many visually impaired people continue to get the opportunity to contribute to society and gain some independence and confidence through work placements," explains Alastair Petrie, General Manager at BMC Azurri".

A bright future ahead for the WESC Foundation

The WESC Foundation has plans to expand its estate to 10 shops in the next 3 years. Before 2009, no one was offering real work experience for the disabled. Thanks to Andy's commitment to making the retail experience more accessible and with the help of industry suppliers like BMC Azurri, WESC can recognise its aims to help even more people with disabilities become fully involved in their society.

"BMc Azurri really took the time to understand our complex needs, as many of our volunteers have disabilities that needed to be taken into account. Our new touch screen Gift Aid tills have made a huge difference to the way in which our volunteers are able to engage in the daily activities of running the shop.

We have four registered blind wheelchair dependant learners undertaking weekly work experience and one registered blind wheelchair dependant adult who volunteers two days per week. The slave screen fitted with the braille overlay that was installed on the lower part of the counter provides volunteers with the ability to work alongside fully able staff which is having such a positive impact for all.

We are really excited about our plans for further shop openings over the next 2 years. I am sure BMC Azurri will be a key player in helping us to make this a reality," says Andy Roberts, at WESC Foundation.



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