Case Study
Make your Mark

What's the issue?

Youth unemployment is a huge issue in the UK, with nearly one million young people not in work, education or training - the highest total since record began. This affects us, because all of these young people are potentially M&S customers, employees or supply chain workers.

Our CEO, Marc Bolland has expressed his concern that: "We are teetering on the edge of allowing a whole generation to remain out of work and disengaged from the world and society." As a responsible, sustainable retailer we want to play our role in tackling this issue.

What are we doing about it?

Marks & Spencer has been committed to ‘doing the right thing’ since we first opened for business 130 years ago and doing business sustainably is part of our DNA.

In 2004, three years before we launched Plan A, we asked our customers which disadvantaged groups of society they wanted us to support into work. They highlighted single parents along with disabled, homeless and young people. Inspired by their concern, we launched an employability programme called Marks & Start, working together with delivery partners - BITC, Disabled Go, Gingerbread, Remploy and The Prince’s Trust.

Marks & Start has been a quiet success story, growing in scale from 500 placements in 50 stores at launch to around 2,000 placements in 300 stores in 2014, when we welcomed the 10,000th participant. Over this period the ‘into work’ rate for participants has increased from less than 40% to 50%.

In 2013, a year in which many were shocked by the ferocity of social unrest that occurred in towns and cities across the UK, our CEO Marc Bolland challenged us to do more to help tackle youth unemployment, setting an ambitious target to provide valuable, accredited work placements for the equivalent of 2% of our workforce.

Our response to this issue is Make Your Mark - a four-week work in-store employability scheme for local disadvantaged young people. We’re working with The Prince’s Trust to reach out to young people who are not in work, education or training in local communities across the UK, offering them the opportunity to complete skills training with us. All participants who complete their placement are ‘accredited’ - which means they can take up any suitable vacancy in an M&S store without having to apply online, or complete an interview and assessment process.

At the end of their placement, we also run celebration events bringing together the young people, their buddies along with senior managers, other businesses and families and those who support the young people. Each participant gives an account of how they’ve developed over the four weeks and it’s evident to see how they’ve grown in confidence and skills in social situations as well as practical understanding of skills in retail. These events are also an opportunity for senior managers to recognize the role existing employees have played in developing others and giving great service to our customers.

What have we achieved so far?

To date, 1450 young people have started Make Your Mark, with over 80% of those who completed going into jobs - the majority of these within M&S.

As well as providing tangible skills and life changing experiences for participants, Make Your Mark also provides many direct business benefits for M&S. It offers us a way to recruit young people from a diverse range of backgrounds, efficiently and at a relatively low cost. We know from our Marks and Start experience that colleagues who join the business in this way are highly engaged and committed to delivering great service to our customers. It’s a great way to help existing colleagues develop leadership, teamwork and other skills by getting involved as ‘buddies’. It also inspires employees across the business who can see the transformation in the local young people who participate in the programme in their store. They tell us it helps to make M&S a better place to work.

Make Your Mark has also had a dramatic impact outside M&S. Thanks in no small part to our CEO Marc Bolland, who has shared our success story with others, it has been the catalyst for a nationwide movement called Movement to Work.
What have we achieved so far? (cont’d)

Through Movement to Work, 15 of the UK’s largest employers have all committed to run training and employability programmes for young unemployed people. Together they aim to offer 100,000 opportunities for young people by 2020 by engaging their supply chains and as a result tapping into the huge potential that exists in SMEs across the UK to play their part also. As a founding member of Movement to Work we’ve also created an ‘accelerator’ effect in our supply chain - encouraging supplier business to join the movement too and incentivizing them to do so by making involvement a pre-condition to reach ‘gold’ standard supplier accreditation with us in future. So far, 100 suppliers have pledged to play their part in helping to tackle youth unemployment.

What happens next?

We want to build on the initial success of Make Your Mark, by fine-tuning the programme. For example, we’re exploring ways to make the accreditation we offer a marketable way into employment throughout the retail industry.

We also want to bring more of our suppliers and competitors into the Movement to Work because we believe it has the potential to help more and more young people find gainful employment in future.

What have we learnt?

Building on Marks & Start to develop Make Your Mark has taught us a number of crucial lessons for the future, some specific to this issue, others more general:

• We achieve stronger outcomes for the young people and as a result, our business by working with skilled partners outside M&S

• Well thought-through Plan A initiatives can ‘spark’ enthusiasm amongst colleagues and help us take them to a bigger scale than ever

• We need colleague ‘buy-in’ for Plan A initiatives - from senior management to the shop floor

• Celebrating success - in this case running Make your Mark graduation events - is a great way to spark new interest inside and outside M&S