

The Avalon Group

Including people who need care and support in the recruitment process

The Avalon Group is an award-winning charity providing flexible person-centred care, support and companionship for everyday life, housing, learning and employment.

Working with over 300 employees and 300 self-employed Shared Life carers, Avalon provides supported living/ community support to a wide range of individuals across the North of England, including areas with low unemployment (i.e. Skipton, York and Harrogate), rural/ coastal areas (i.e. Whitby, Hambleton, Ryedale) as well as areas such as Teesside and Doncaster where pay rates are more competitive. Customers include older adults, people living with dementia, physical, sensory or learning disabilities, mental health difficulties, acquired brain injuries, young people in transition and adults on the autistic spectrum. Staff and carers are fully trained to deliver services that promote the right of every individual to be treated with respect and to be fully involved in decisions about their support.

What we wanted to achieve

Avalon have always encouraged their customers to get involved in recruitment of staff and wanted to give customers the opportunity to get involved in policy decisions in a more formal and meaningful way. And so in 2009, Avalon set up a strategic customer committee (Avalink) made up of 20 customers from across all localities of The Avalon Group.

Avalink was set up to look at policies, processes and procedures from across the whole of The Avalon Group. As part of their work, a sub-group

was created to include customers as part of the recruitment process, not just of their own care staff but of office based posts too.

What we did

The sub-group met over a period of six months to review current recruitment practices and to feedback on issues they felt strongly about. Recognising that interviews can be labour intensive and a challenge for people with disabilities in particular, they started by developing guidance to support customers participating in an interview panel. Advice included suggestions for how best to prepare to interview, questions that could be asked and appropriate attire.

The group then developed a guide for Avalon managers; The guidance for managers included pre-interview support for customers such as deciding with customers in advance whether their participation will be for part of or all of the interview, finding out any specialist equipment/ accessibility requirements in advance of the day and giving plenty of notice to attend interviews.

Feedback after customers had been involved in the interview process included requesting flexibility at interviews to ask impromptu questions, customers being advised the outcome of interviews and customers finding interview days too long. This resulted in a recommendation of a maximum of four interviews a day which is accommodated where possible, or alternatively offering customers the opportunity to be involved in part of the

day such as meet and greet, lunch or just presentations.

Avalon has found that customers included on interview panels often provide insightful feedback about potential candidates, for example, whether eye contact was maintained during conversation and whether they felt as though they had been treated by the candidate in a different way from other individuals on the interview panel.

One of the challenges for Avalon was that sometimes customers included on interview panels wanted to choose someone based purely on having the same interests as them. For example, the potential candidate might have supported the same football team but were in fact unable to work the hours required by the customer. Avalon works with customers to explain the importance of a fair scoring system which helps to overcome similar obstacles.

Avalink has been a huge success for both customers and Avalon and continues to meet quarterly at the Avalon Harrogate office. Customers attend meetings with designated support workers and Avalon supports the group by ensuring a small budget is available to pay for a working lunch plus travel costs. Both customers and support staff are paid at the support worker rate to attend meetings.

To ensure the Avalink group remains affordable for Avalon, the number of members is restricted to 20. However, group members have been establishing 'spin-off' groups in their own localities who meet between meetings, often as part of a social event, to ensure as many customer opinions can be gained as possible.

What we achieved

The customer remains at the centre of everything Avalon does. Establishing the Avalink group has allowed customers to scrutinise all Avalon policies, practices and procedures and to take a more hands-on approach when selecting staff to work at all levels within the Avalon group. This, in turn, helps Avalon to fulfil their mission statement and their values.

The added value is for the customers, who

have developed confidence in their social and relationship-building skills.

Benefits to the recruitment process have included recruiting more suitable staff with the same values and ethos as Avalon as all the panel members are able to assess how the candidate interacts with the customer. The process also contributes to employee retention as Avalon really demonstrates to new staff at the start of their career that their customers are important and are at the centre of everything they do.

Being part of Avalink is constructive and important, as customers should be involved with how our support is provided and be involved with the decisions that affect us.

Rachel, Avalink member

What we learnt

Avalon are constantly impressed and amazed by the suggestions which come out of the Avalink group who often identify issues which have not previously been identified. This has led to changes in their recruitment processes which have benefitted the entire Avalon team. For example, it was recognised that in some areas the support planning process wasn't working as well as it should. Avalon took their concern to Avalink who made really useful suggestions as experts by experience. This led to a full review and redesign of their policy and process.

Inclusion of customers in interview panels has also helped to up-skill employees at Avalon who have witnessed first-hand the benefits a diversity of backgrounds and opinions can bring to decision-making processes.

Involving customers' means the company can be run better.

Paul, Avalink member

For more information please visit

www.avalongroup.org.uk

Skills for Care Recommends

Skills for Care produces a wide range of products and services related to recruitment and retention within the adult social care sector including;

Finding and keeping workers online

A wide range of practical recruitment and retention resources from Skills for Care and other organisations are available.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/findingandkeepingworkers

I Care... Ambassadors

This service enables people working in adult social care to promote their work at careers events etc.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/inspire

Values based recruitment

Recruitment people with the right values is essential for care organisations. These resources explain how it can be done.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/values

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