

News

Employers reminded of work experience responsibilities after teenager takes over Southern Rail's Twitter

12 Jul 2017

By **Annie Makoff**

15-year-old Eddie was on the frontline of rail company's customer service strategy

Experts are reminding employers to “heavily supervise” those on work experience placements after a 15-year-old dealt with questions and comments on Southern Rail’s Twitter account.

Eddie introduced himself on Twitter yesterday afternoon, which was followed by staff requesting that the account’s followers “lay off the abuse” while the teenager was in charge. Users across Twitter – as well as many of Southern’s 162,000 Twitter followers – used the hashtag #AskEddie to speak to the teenager.



Follow

Hi, Eddie here! Here on Work Experience and ready to answer your questions! 🤗

2:39 PM - 11 Jul 2017

One tweeted: “Why do English men always wear socks and sandals on holidays?” while another asked: “What’s the air velocity of a swallow?”

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Hairy Angus @HairyAngus

11 Jul

Replying to @SouthernRailUK

Hi Eddie, my question is....What's the air velocity of a swallow



Southern ✓

@SouthernRailUK



Hi, for an unladen swallow, it is 50-65mph.. [#google](#) ^Eddie

2:37 PM - Jul 11, 2017



5



43



495



Jules Graham @_julesgraham_

11 Jul

Replying to @SouthernRailUK

Why do English men always wear socks and sandals on holiday?
[#AskEddie](#)



Southern ✓

@SouthernRailUK



Personally, i prefer flip-flops so i couldn't answer! ^Eddie

2:25 PM - Jul 11, 2017



1



4



109



Many Twitter users were impressed with the teenager's responses, although others saw the exercise as a cynical move by Southern to improve its reputation, which has recently been marred by a string of high-profile strikes. Eddie is due to resume his Twitter duties later today.

Despite the generally positive reaction across Twitter and much of the media, Jenny Goulding, director of Agile HR Consulting, warned that HR has a "dual responsibility" to ensure that work offered to those on work experience is meaningful and facilitates making "pragmatic decisions" about future study, while making sure it "protects the interests of the company" from a PR perspective.

Emma O'Leary, employment law consultant at ELAS, added: "It is important that [those on work experience] are heavily supervised and not exploited with menial tasks. While Eddie's Twitter takeover went down well for Southern Rail, we assume someone was supervising his responses and hope he was shielded from any abusive messages. Otherwise the experience could have been a disaster for the student and the company."

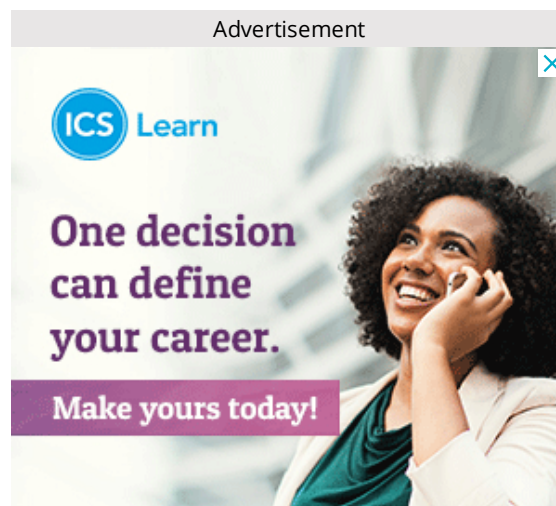
O'Leary also pointed out that there are "strict regulations", such as working hours and health and safety, around the employment of young workers and those on work experience, so companies should still adhere to those requirements.

"Before taking on work experience placements, the employer should ensure they have employers' liability insurance, which covers them for work experience students," said Michelle Landy, solicitor at Backhouse Solicitors. "Students will also need lots of supervision to ensure they don't put themselves at risk. Every placement should always begin with a health and safety briefing."

Meanwhile, Kelly Tucker, director at HR Star, told *People Management* that tasks for those on work experience should ideally feature some social interaction to help develop people, communication and listening skills, while tasks involving taking in information and written communications would also be beneficial. "At the same time, it always pays to encourage participation in different areas of the business if relevant and appropriate," she said.

But HR also has a responsibility to act if they believe a work experience student is asked to do something inappropriate. Landy urged HR to intervene in such circumstances and set a more appropriate task. "A student on work experience should not undertake work that is beyond their physical or psychological capacity," she said.

A Southern spokesperson said: "We are pleased to have given Eddie an insight into working life in our social media team and are thrilled to see that he won over so many of our customers yesterday. We have been very impressed at his quick-wit and positive approach at the age of just 15. Eddie's time with the Southern Twitter team was part of a structured work experience programme with Govia Thameslink Railway – for which the intake has more than quadrupled this year – which Eddie has excelled in. During this time he has spent time with train service managers, as well as information controllers, train service assistants and fleet control managers."



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