

How leaders can drive social mobility outcomes for early talent

10 actionable steps
to create change

BRIGHT
NETWORK

Foreword

■ **By James Uffindell, Founder & CEO at Bright Network**

As we emerge from the pandemic, there has never been a more important time to drive change in early careers: it's an opportunity to build back better, rethink how we forge equitable and impactful recruitment journeys and address the social mobility and inclusivity barriers that exist in the UK.

The last two years have created a “dark age of declining social mobility” for today's under-25s and the so-called “COVID generation”¹. This pandemic impact has been acutely felt by disadvantaged university students, who often lack the family or friend network to leading graduate jobs after university. Across the whole student population, our recent research shows that 77% believe the pandemic has widened inequalities for young people entering the graduate employment marketplace.

At Bright Network, we passionately believe that the early careers industry can work towards ensuring that every young person has the opportunity to reach their potential. I am delighted that over 100 organisations have put their voice and support behind this paper – as together we look to create real and meaningful change.

During the key 2021/22 campus season, Bright Network brought together senior leaders across HR and technology teams at the UK's foremost employers for three roundtable discussions. The practical takeaways aim to provide a blueprint and advice for all talent acquisition professionals working in early careers functions – I'm proud to share them with you.

I hope you will find these action-first insights useful and join us in championing them.



James Uffindell
Founder & CEO of Bright Network



¹ Covid-19 and social mobility, LSE, Lee Elliot Major & Stephen Marchin, 2020

The leading employers supporting this paper

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The importance and challenges of social mobility

Whether you're just starting out or have well established social mobility initiatives in place, creating positive outcomes for students and graduates from lower socioeconomic or underrepresented groups is a cause that requires perennial attention.

This necessity is driven by both commercial and moral reasons. The economy is amid a talent shortage in many key sectors and, to remain competitive, the UK needs to maximise the potential of the talent available.

In a recent Social Mobility report, the UK was found to have one of the poorest rates of social mobility in the developed world, with many top jobs still going to the small cohort of privately educated – for example, 54% FTSE-100 chief execs went to independent school¹.

The State of Nations report in 2021 on the same topic highlighted the need for action due to the widening the gap between rich and poor caused by the pandemic. If not addressed, this will continue to widen².

Focusing on the graduate experience, Bright Network research shows that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to gain formal work experience or internships during university and perform worse during parts of the application process³. Privately educated graduates still over index when it comes to top graduate scheme offers.

It is important to understand how mature, inclusive, and equitable your organisation's hiring processes currently are. This needs to be coupled with clearly identifying which candidates are from groups in need of support.

As the Social Mobility Commission outlines, measuring and acquiring data on your employees is critical in actioning change. At Bright Network, we similarly advocate the necessity for multi-layered, accurate and insightful data on candidates.

However, measurement is hard and indicators are nuanced. From working with 250+ blue chip employers, we are acutely aware that – even with the best intentions – organisations may have gaps or challenges in acquiring information that would enable an objective overview of pipeline and the candidates therein.

Throughout this paper, we share the suggestions of talent acquisition professionals to shift the dial on social mobility initiatives, as well as practical steps to better understand and champion social mobility within organisations.

There are many other potential obstacles to access, as well as the intersectionality and personal experience of candidates. It's no secret that this is an inherently complex challenge as we seek to enable true equity of opportunity.

² *Social Mobility – It's not where you're from, it's where you're going*, Deloitte

³ *State of the nation 2021: Social mobility and the pandemic*

⁴ *What do graduates want? 2021-22*, Bright Network

The insight discussions with 100+ HR and tech leaders

This paper captures the action points that today's leaders consider essential to support social mobility, our young people and create success for companies in the "new normal". We'd like to thank the contributors who attended our insight events series, which included these topics:

30th September, 2021 & 27th January, 2022

Building Back Better: Social mobility in early careers – hiring for potential, not privilege

27th October, 2021

Building Back Better: Being authentically inclusive in attracting the next generation of talent

28th October, 2021

Driving diversity and social mobility in technology



It all starts with people – an authentic approach to social mobility

1 Transparency

It's critical that organisations are honest about their social mobility and DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion & belonging) maturity. By doing so, it becomes possible to define what success looks like for recruitment cycles and create a roadmap for year-on-year improvements. In turn, by clearly outlining the expected impact of social mobility initiatives, this can be communicated to students, help manage their expectations and, as a result, a more authentic dialogue between candidate and employer can begin.

Next steps

- Ensure your application process includes social mobility identifiers
- Analyse your pipeline to understand which social mobility indicators are present and assess whether you're making progress. If you're mid-campaign this will allow you to focus more resource on encouraging more applications from a lower socio-economic background to apply for roles compared to previous years and cohorts
- Focus in on conversion at each stage of your application process, to identify areas which may unfairly disadvantage or restrict access to certain candidate groups

Insight

It's no secret that collecting data can be challenging. Some issues to be aware of include:

- Source of data is unreliable or subject to self-declaration errors
- Channels or routes into an organisation's pipeline vary in their data capture
- Optionality to provide data creates information gaps on some candidates

That said, it's important to prioritise accurate responses to social mobility questions, which in turn become indicators to use throughout your hiring process.

The Social Mobility Commission's "key question" is "what was the occupation of your main household earner when you were about aged 14?". Through a set of well-defined multiple-choice answers, such as "modern professional" or "technical and craft occupations", this information avails a useful foundation for understanding a candidate's background. For early talent, this of course queries a relatively recent period for candidates, which could ensure greater accuracy in answers.

Other questions to supplement and form a deeper profile might include:

- What type of school did you attend?
- Were you eligible for free school meals?
- Did either of your parents attend university?

A hybrid or algorithmic approach to quantify these questions (or a select set) is often the fairest and most comprehensive way to determine the social mobility status of a candidate.

2 Educate teams

It's vital to support your own teams (both inside and outside the HR function) in discussions around underrepresentation and the positive impact that a more diverse workforce can provide. Our contributors agreed that this is more nuanced than just capturing how a representative workforce can better serve the breadth of customers or clients. It also includes discussing why underrepresentation exists and how our unconscious biases or behaviours can be detrimental to social mobility efforts. The objective should always be to enhance knowledge and understanding, not to blame or judge.

Next steps

- Engage external experts to audit your current selection processes
- Have a schedule of DEIB events or insight articles in your internal comms plan
- Assign a leader in your team that is your expert in diversity and social mobility, ensuring all processes are built with them as a key contributor

Turning plans into action

3 Build company-wide support networks

It's important to create action-orientated networks within organisations. For many organisations, there is a lack of accountability when considering social mobility, which can result in relevant indicators being missed. Nonetheless, many companies already have specific interest or support groups, which can create inclusive environments for employees and support or lead outreach work with candidates. The next stage is to ensure that these groups are supported and form an organisation-wide consensus, across all levels of seniority. This is how these critical groups can become culturally embedded within organisations..

Next steps

- Ensure your special interest groups are present both internally and externally
- Incorporate these groups directly into your recruitment or application activity, encouraging them to share their expertise on how best to encourage social mobility in application processes and onboarding

From our members

Role models allow applicants from underrepresented backgrounds to feel more comfortable when applying for positions. To see a person from their background in a position they want to be in also boosts confidence and will lead to a better application on their behalf as their end goal becomes more realistic.

Jonida, Imperial College London,
Computer Science and
Mathematics (2024)

4 Find role models

Central to these support networks are a company's role models. As a candidate, it is daunting engaging with a company and seeing few or no employees that are from a similar background. Connecting applicants and current team members that have shared experiences is a powerful way to create authentic and impactful support for underrepresented graduates in a company's application process. In the discussion, our contributors concurred that role models cannot be *forced* – indeed, some employees may not wish to be involved – but they can be encouraged through highlighting the benefits and empowering team members to take ownership of the role.

Next steps

- Create a formalised programme for enabling role models to be involved in early talent processes, engagement activity and onboarding
- Create a mentorship scheme which pairs new graduates from underrepresented groups with role models to aid greater retention rates

Case study

A HR leader shared how, in some recent assessment centre feedback, a graduate explained how they felt unwelcome and disconnected due to a firm's partner discussing their recent ski trip. While some candidates were able to engage, this candidate – from a lower socio-economic background – felt alienated. It's important to get messaging right, even in our informal dialogues.

Achievable objectives – building for success

5 Targeted and bespoke messaging

Authentically connecting an organisation with underrepresented candidates enhances social mobility. This takes two essential forms: highlighting that the employer is championing DEIB and, on a targeted level, ensuring communication to each demographic is relevant and engaging. Our contributors emphasised the need to talk to candidates on their own terms, creating individual journeys based on their career focus and the barriers to them achieving this. By being targeted and relevant in areas such as messaging, application processes, coaching and onboarding, underrepresented candidates will have the opportunity to put their best foot forward whilst organisations maintain a fair experience for everyone.

Next steps

- In line with your social mobility or diversity aspirations, have a calendar of activity to engage these groups, such as through specialist events, running your own insight day or coaching programmes
- Encourage the business to take part in industry-wide initiatives to highlight your commitment to DEIB, as well as ensuring you “practice what you preach” internally throughout the organisation

Top tip

Bright Network members are interested in hearing more about your opportunities but in a way that doesn't make them feel alienated or detached from the process. High touchpoint experiences are more important than ever for Gen-Z, including **insight days** specially tailored to different groups of students. Whilst these cannot be used as hiring events, they're a great way to authentically champion your company's culture and inner-workings.

6 Change what's measured

It's important to sense check what an organisation values most in candidates. Ultimately, traditional or conventional ways of assessing candidates are partly responsible for the lack of diversity or the exclusion of underrepresented groups. The result of this is that some groups may filter themselves out of an application or, without coaching, will be less equipped to partake in certain stages of the process. Our industry has advanced to include different and more innovative forms of assessment, which can be coupled with coaching to ensure each stage provides a true reflection of candidate potential and, for example, not just the ability to take a test or perfect interview technique.

Next steps

- Pre-empt stages of the application process that may cause candidates challenges and provide active coaching as part of the process
- Rethink how potential or ability is measured – if using traditional psychometric testing, review the possibility of building in contextual or judgement testing

Our research revealed

40%

of black heritage students are concerned about tests in the application process, compared to 29% across the whole student population.

7 Review traditional application criteria

Adjusting the criteria for applying is another step picked out by senior leaders. Students from underrepresented backgrounds are likely to have attended lower performing schools. These students are also less likely to have completed a formal internship to boost their CV – only 23% of students from a non-selective state school have done an internship, compared to 35% from a private school.⁵ Conversely, state-educated students are much more likely to earn money working part-time to support their study, which demonstrates and develops essential skills overlooked in some application processes.

Next steps

- Audit your current application requirements – consider removing school grade or university tier requirements. Many leading employers have already done this
- Consider creating a stream specifically for social mobility candidates
- Actively train recruiters to look for transferrable skills picked up during part-time job work experience

From our members

I believe that employers should take into consideration experiences that aren't directly related to a specific internship as I have felt from personal experience that working in areas such as retail has helped me adapt to different situations in the workplace just as much as my formal internship experience.

Shushovan, Kings College London, Economics and Finance (2022)

Case study

I couldn't put him in front of my boss. He spoke four languages, does voluntary work in Africa, however, didn't include any of this on his CV. We rewrote his CV with him and, after guidance, he was able to be presented as the impressive candidate he truly was. We now send out interview guides to each candidate, ensuring they can make an impact when we see them.

⁵ What do graduates want 2021/22, Bright Network

Next steps

8 Take risks to create change

Our contributors echoed that driving social mobility is not easy – it’s about taking risks, whether that’s on candidates, incrementally transforming culture or adjusting recruitment processes. If year after year, you’re hiring graduates who “fit” a certain mould of successful candidates of previous years, it won’t lead to meaningful change. Only through proactive efforts will we truly bring about positive change and create a more equal playing field for today’s students and recent graduates.

Top tip

Challenge your senior team members to end “informal” internships, which are too often from the friends and family network, and not contributing to creating a fair level playing field for other candidates. Whether such a candidate is offered a role or not, they will have gained experience for their CV, giving them an advantage on future applications others don’t have access to.

Changing the story for technology teams

One of our three discussions focused on technology teams, which are often too homogenous, with women, ethnic minorities and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds underrepresented across the sector in the UK. As with the other discussions, we were joined by leading practitioners, passionate about driving industry-wide change.

Panellists:

Andrew Halley
Amazon
Technology Team Leader

Sharon Moore MBE
IBM
CTO for Public Sector

Kavi Pelpola
Atos
Chief Digital Officer

Shannon Okyemba
Bright Network Technology Academy, with LBG
Consultant



9 Change routes to access

A theme from the 40 senior technology leaders in attendance was around access to technology and the different routes to forging an interest in software engineering. Those who have people around them that can aid learning, have opportunities at school or meet role models in the technology industry are much more likely to develop tech skills at a young age. This, in turn, leaves people without this access behind and potentially disenfranchised by the sector. To build a diverse technology team it's vital to enable and empower *routes in* from different learning and educational backgrounds.

Next steps

- Diversify how you engage technology talent, whether that be through wider university partnerships, bootcamps or graduate programmes
- Review what a technical test should include, and test for potential rather than full aptitude when engaging junior talent
- Identify social mobility challenges within current teams and actively rectify this within your recruitment outreach and engagement

Insight

Change won't happen organically. We need to be proactive, identify the nuances or behaviours that make people feel uncomfortable. We need to work harder to work together – but the result will be that the work is better.

Only

8.5%

of technology leaders are from minority backgrounds in the UK⁶

Just

25%

of software engineers are female⁷

The digital skills shortage is projected to cost the UK

£140bn+

over next 10 years⁸

10 Champion outreach

As well as encouraging wider access, it's critical to nurture different voices and perspectives within technology teams. It's in a person's early career that this is most crucial. This means ensuring that voices are heard, encouraging curiosity and passion, whilst actively being aware and removing language or old thinking about what software engineering *should* be.

Next steps

- Champion your technology team members from underrepresented groups internally and externally, such as through outreach events or school and college engagement
- Open the doors to your teams in the recruitment process, whether that's through mentoring or insight days, providing a real-world perspective for potential candidates

Insight

Treating everyone the same is not the same as treating everyone equally.

⁶ The Inclusive Boards agency

⁷ National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT)

⁸ Consultancy.uk, Digital skills gap could cost UK £141 billion in GDP growth

The 10-point action plan

- 1 Transparency** – identify social mobility indicators and analyse pipeline conversion at each stage in order to target disproportionate attrition of particular groups of candidates
- 2 Educate teams** – engage external experts, schedule DEIB events and empower team members to be social mobility leaders involved in your recruitment planning
- 3 Build company-wide support networks** – champion your company's special interest groups internally and externally, as well as enhancing your outreach to relevant underrepresented groups
- 4 Find your role models** – establish a formalised programme for enabling role models to be involved in early talent processes, engagement, and mentoring
- 5 Targeted and bespoke messaging** – develop a schedule of activity to engage with underrepresented candidates, such as through events or industry wide initiatives
- 6 Change what's measured** – pre-empt stages of the application process that may put candidates at a disadvantage and consider new approaches to testing aptitude
- 7 Review traditional application criteria** – reset restrictive requirements, such as around tier of university, school grades or internships over part-time work
- 8 Take risks** – this is uncharted territory for many organisations, one which requires proactive change
- 9 Change routes to access** – diversify how talent is engaged with, from new partnerships to unexplored graduate programmes
- 10 Champion outreach** – open the doors to your recruitment processes to your teams and, ultimately, let them meet their future team members before they even start

In summary

Now is the time for collective action as a sector. A focus on social mobility is needed more than ever as a result of the pandemic and, with that, large employers have an excellent opportunity as we build back better. It's a proven fact that a more diverse workforce results in a better working environment, superior business performance and delivery of products or services. Encouraging people from all backgrounds also widens competitive graduate talent pools resulting in more effective recruitment.

Treating everyone the same is not the same as treating everyone equally. Today's students and recent graduates have differing needs and requirements, whether that's predicated on their background or educational journey to date. To create an authentic and fair process, it is crucial that we factor this into our recruitment journeys and application processes.

We hope this paper encourages organisations to audit their own processes and the advice gives you implementable actions for the near future. Bright Network is here to support you to drive change in your business and across the wider industry.



Let's continue the conversation



There is no end to championing and improving social mobility. We want to hear and share your stories, insight, and ideas. This paper has been written based on the insight of 100+ talent acquisition leaders and we all acknowledge there is more to do in this space, as we look to maximise inclusivity. If you'd like to be part of the ongoing discussion at Bright Network through our insight papers, events, and student and graduate engagement, please get in contact with Alex on employers@brightnetwork.co.uk

Bright Network and Technology Academy

Bright Network was founded in 2013 to provide the next generation with the advice, insight, and opportunity to succeed as the workforce of tomorrow. We are passionate about ensuring that every young person, regardless of background, can reach their potential. Our platform supports a network of over 600,000 students and recent graduates connect with their future employers across all sectors and professions. We are at the forefront of supporting social mobility and equity of opportunity. We have invested £8M+ in our technology platform to better develop and match our members with over 250+ leading blue-chip companies, including Goldman Sachs, Google, PwC, Dyson and Network Rail.



In January 2021, we launched Bright Network Technology Academy with the mission to train over 100,000 students and recent graduates in technology skills across the next 5 years. By doing so, we aim to directly address the UK technology skills shortage, and provide upskilled and diverse technology talent to leading employers and their engineering teams.

Bright Network Technology Academy provides a free, no strings attached, three-month training programme, empowering every student to apply regardless of background. The successful graduates then provide a flexible and impactful addition to companies that are passionate about building a diverse workforce and hiring best-in-class junior developers.

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