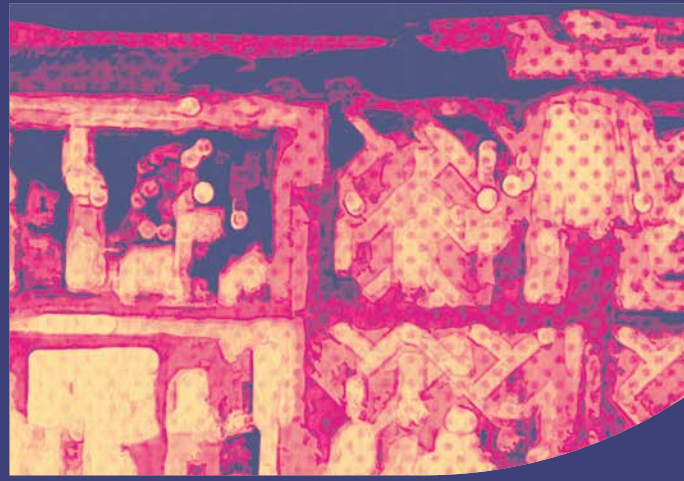


Ladders of Opportunity: How top UK businesses create new routes into work

Executive Summary





Georgiana Bristol and Nick Tyrone at Barnardo's, Swansea, Page 70

Executive Summary

“Obviously, I need to provide for her. I mean, she’s alright now, we’re on Universal Credit, but I don’t want her looking up to me and being like, ‘Oh, my dad’s on Universal Credit. He doesn’t do nothing for work.’ I want to give her a reason to work herself (when she’s old enough). You know what I mean? I’m just trying to do it right by her.”

The quote above was given to us by Josh, a young man in Ashton-under-Lyne who just wants to get a job and escape from the cycle of welfare dependency. Over the past nine months, we have conducted research across a large portion of the UK, visiting England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the process. We have heard dozens of stories like the one Josh gave us – from people who want to work, but find the system works against them.

This will include many people who are currently deemed ‘long-term sick’. Between 2019 and 2023,

the number of people who were economically inactive for most physical disabilities rose a little. This was due to Covid and was to be expected. However, we see the most dramatic upturn in people claiming sickness benefit in the category ‘Depression, bad nerves or anxiety’. In this category we see a jump from around 965,000 across the country in 2019, to 1.35 million in 2023.¹

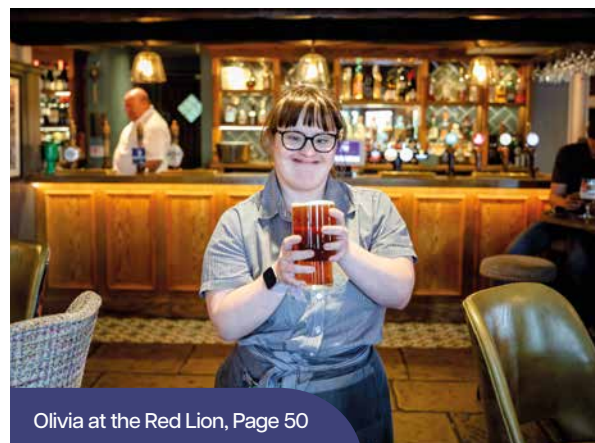
Ladders of Opportunity is a report which is about the journey people make within their vocational lives and the rungs along the way. Each new skill learned, each new position or job that is acquired, is another step on their own personal ladder of opportunity. Even for older workers, the ladder never stops going up – everyone benefits from lifelong learning. Opportunity never goes out of anyone’s life, it just requires some adjusting at times to see where the ladder takes us.

1. **ONS economic activity data sets** (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/economicinactivity/datasets/risingillhealthandeconomicinactivitybecauseoflongtermsicknessuk2019to2023> - accessed April 6, 2025)

1. Hiring locally	14
2. The long-term sick	40
3. Young people (aged 16-25)	66
4. Unique groups (such as ex-offenders, veterans and the homeless)	98
5. Older workers (aged 50+)	124

The Government's Get Britain Working white paper is a big step in the right direction towards helping to create the two million jobs our economy needs to keep these ladders open to everyone. But since there are only roughly 800,000 job vacancies, the Government can't create 1.2 million jobs on its own. That's how many need to be created to get the employment rate up to 80 per cent. We need businesses to create and continually provide those jobs. It is the mission of the Jobs Foundation to help support those businesses.

Over the past nine months, we have conducted research across a large portion of the UK, visiting England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the process. Within England, we have spoken to companies, charities and trade organisations in the North East (both Tyneside and Teesside), the North West, the Midlands, the South West, and the South East. We have spoken to organisations large and small, taking in some of the largest employers and the most recognised brands in Britain, while also making sure the voice of small and medium-sized businesses is heard, in terms of the ladders of opportunity they offer.



Olivia at the Red Lion, Page 50



Girls in Tech, Gateshead, Page 30



Nick Tyrone in Swansea

Through our research, we were able to discover some of the principles of best practice that apply to hiring, training and retaining staff. We have boiled down the commonalities – the ideas around best practice that cross all boundaries, across every cohort covered in the report – into eleven guiding principles, detailed below. The principles form an acronym: **OPPORTUNITY**.

Opportunity for all

Poverty hotspots

Partnerships

Older workers

Return to the office

Technology (AI)

Unique groups

Novel ways of hiring

Internships and apprenticeships

Training for soft skills

Young people

Oppportunity for all

There has been a huge increase in people in the UK being economically inactive due to long-term sickness since the Covid pandemic. This is not only unsustainable from a government spending perspective, given the overwhelming majority of these economically inactive people will be on benefits (and often a high level of benefits), it almost certainly isn't the best thing for those involved. People who want to work should be supported into employment. We need to make it easier for people with mental health issues to be in work, whenever that is possible.

There are many options for doing this effectively, as our research has uncovered. We saw how pastoral care works at Lynas Foodservice in Northern Ireland (see page 52) as one example. The Government's Get Britain Working white paper has some good ideas around this, trying to focus as much as possible on getting those who can work into employment. Solving this issue is vital to the country's economic future.



Georgiana Bristol in Swansea

Poverty hotspots

Economic factors weigh heavily when it comes to how talent is distributed across the country – and it's understandable that many employers feel like there isn't enough talent in their local area to fill the gaps in their staffing. Yet hiring local talent pays dividends for decades to come, as we discovered at Sage (see page 27) and Accenture (see page 26). Local employees will often stay with you for their whole career.

In all sectors and all sizes, from tiny SMEs to the largest corporations, businesses are the most important players in getting people into work. What we've found in our research is that not only are companies leading the charge in terms of competing for the most obvious young talent, but they are also searching deep to hire the unobvious talent. Programmes like the ones Barnardo's (see page 72), The King's Trust and Marks & Spencer (see page 76) run for the bottom quintile of the socio-economic spectrum aren't simply a matter of social good, but rather are about discovering talent in hard-to-find places for business reasons. These are people who companies know will make valuable, loyal employees.

Partnerships

As we initially discovered when researching our foundational report, *Two Million Jobs*, colleges and other post-secondary educational institutions can be a great way to train present and future employees. Many large employers work directly with colleges to design the ideal courses to ensure there is a crop of people ready-made for their business. A local college that is looking to help local employers with their skills needs, such as Gateshead College (see page 29), can be one of the best sources of talent from the local area.

We also discovered that partnerships with charities and other non-profit organisations can be remarkably valuable in terms of getting people into work. Organisations working on the ground to help increase employability, like Shaw Trust (see page 62), play a vital role.

Older workers

A false assumption is sometimes made that people over 50 are financially secure and, therefore, if they find themselves suddenly out of work, they do not particularly need to work ever again. Yet there are scores of people in their 50s and older who lose jobs they require for their basic survival. Combine this with the fact that as we are consistently raising the retirement age, there is a logic being created that with people living longer, we need people to work longer.

However, we haven't taken these considerations on board, in terms of how society thinks about employment for people over 50. If we expect people to work to a greater age, then we need to tackle the ageism that is rampant in society, as well as put more thought into how we get unemployed over-50s into meaningful employment. Aviva (see page 129) does great work in this area, but we need more large employers to take the situation seriously.

Return to the office

An innovation borne of necessity in the Covid era, allowing employees to work from home when necessary and feasible, has been a good innovation for plenty of businesses. But it is also worth talking about the downsides of working from home. Young people often require an office environment to learn their profession, as well as create a professional network. On top of this, a lot of jobs, particularly blue-collar roles, cannot be done from home, which means this can become a middle-class-only domain. David Nieper has made being present at the primary place of work a key component of working at the company (see page 18) to positive effect.

A company thrives on its culture – and it is difficult to create that or keep it going when everyone works remotely. Having your employees in the same room at the same time allows ideas to be sparked that might otherwise not be.



T echnology

Our use of tech is progressing to a place where, in the very near future, we should have AI applications which can make it easier to both hire and efficiently train people with most readily diagnosed neurodivergences and mental health issues. In terms of training people with a wide range of neurodivergent conditions, AI could be the key that unlocks employment for so many people currently unable to find a job. The work of Meganexus in the Career Transition Partnership (CTP), done in conjunction with the Ministry of Defence and Reed in Partnerships, is a great example of this (See page 110).

Of course, AI and other technological advances will come with downsides. They may make certain jobs, even whole sectors, redundant, resulting in fewer jobs in some places. A balance needs to be struck here, and the Jobs Foundation is interested in companies doing work that aims to achieve that balance.

U nique groups

Ex-offenders can make a valuable contribution to a company and are often cited as being model employees. Hiring them is also a chance to do something good for the community, to add social value to a company, as employment is key to keeping recidivism rates down. The work of Timpson and Tempus Novo are great examples of this (See pages 104-107).

Veterans are often highly skilled individuals with an amazing amount to offer any business – as Northumbrian Water discovered (see page 112). Encouraging veterans to become entrepreneurs is something we should be doing more of as well.

Homeless people are often simply those whose lives took an unlucky turn – as we discovered at Hair at the Academy (see page 116). With a bit of support, they can turn into valuable employees who just might be long-term fixtures at the organisation that takes a chance on them.



Celebration Day at Marks & Spencer, Page 76

Novel ways of hiring

Organisations need to engage in fresh ways of finding talent, particularly amongst young people and those with mental health issues. Moving away from a CV-based model of recruitment, with a focus on finding a more agile match between employer and employee, is one idea that seems to work for many of the companies profiled in this report. Another is tailoring the interview process to better fit Gen Z candidates. We found that recruitment agencies such as Pollen Careers (see page 56) are leading the charge on this.

“A big issue these days is trying to discover new talent and finding the old ways of doing it inadequate.”

Internships and apprenticeships

While post-secondary institutions can help businesses find and utilise interns and apprentices, a company creating its own scheme can also be a great way to find new employees. South West Water is a great example of a company we researched that has built its own scheme that has worked brilliantly to fit the organisation's needs (see page 22).

Creating your own internship or apprenticeship can be time-consuming to begin with, but it will also deliver employees tailor-made for the organisation's needs. Ultimately, it is up to any employer to decide between an external or internal internship and apprenticeship programme, but both can be very effective.



Workers at Pret A Manger, Page 120

T raining for soft skills

A big issue for employers these days is trying to discover new talent and finding the old ways of doing it are inadequate. Many businesses we have spoken to over the last 18 months have told us that discovering the right talent amongst the 16- to 25-year-old age group can be tricky.

A lot of this comes down to 'soft skills': knowing how to create a CV that will stand out; understanding what is expected in an interview and how to respond to certain key questions; knowing how to dress for an interview. Some people, particularly from more deprived backgrounds, will lack these basic skills. Getting them up to speed on this is often the key to helping them find and retain employment. What the Pret Foundation does in this area is a good example (see page 120).



The Jobs Foundation is looking to do further work on best practice in the coming years, working with as many businesses that employ elements of best practice as we can. Creating the two million jobs the economy needs won't be easy – but doing so begins with understanding what best practice looks like and then spreading the word. We invite you to join us in our mission.

This report is the next phase in our mission to champion the role of business as a force for good. By travelling across the country,

Y oung people

Youth unemployment is the worst of all age groups from a societal perspective, given the way it echoes through the years to come. A person who can't find a job by the time they reach 24 will very likely struggle throughout the rest of their working life. If a young person has fallen into the trap set for them by generational joblessness, then it will be even more difficult for them to pull themselves out of it later. Ensuring as many young people as possible get into meaningful employment is one of the most vital things for society to accomplish. Thankfully, large companies like the MAG Group (see page 84) and smaller organisations like 20/20 Levels (see page 88) are doing great work on this.

"They see you as a dinosaur that is irrelevant in today's workplace. But I've still got plenty of energy and on the good days, when I manage to get through the fog of not having a purpose, I still have the drive and tenacity to strive for a better future for myself, and through my business idea, a brighter future for others. So, I'm not giving up."

That quote was from Will, working with Shaw Trust to get a job, but finding it a massive challenge. Employers across the UK are doing so much to create and provide the jobs we need to keep this country moving forward – but they can do more. We hope this report on the best practices for hiring, training and retaining staff is used by businesses of all sizes, across all sectors of the economy.

speaking to businesses large and small, from a wide range of sectors, the Jobs Foundation has understood directly from employers themselves how meaningful jobs are created. While there are many challenges ahead in generating two million jobs across the UK, this report is filled with organisations which are doing tremendous things on the ground already. We will continue to talk about the companies that excel in terms of hiring, training and retaining staff. They are the future.