

Young people, employability and the induction process

This research examines the early experiences of young people in their first jobs, from the point of view of both the young people themselves and the organisations that employ them. It focuses upon a number of key issues that are central to the concept of 'employability' and concentrates in particular upon the initial period of induction into the workplace. The study, by a team from Leeds Metropolitan University, found:

-  For most of the young people, the concept that there no longer exists a 'job for life' had become firmly embedded. Many saw their early labour market experience in instrumental terms (e.g. a 'stop gap' until their ideas developed or simply a way of earning money to pursue other ambitions, such as travel).
-  The findings confirm that employers tend to focus upon 'softer' skills and behavioural attributes in the recruitment process, with a less prominent role played by formal qualifications. Most of the young people seemed to have taken on board the message that formal qualifications are often a necessary but not sufficient condition for obtaining the types of jobs to which they aspire.
-  Most employers interviewed thought that schools and colleges provide inadequate preparation for young people in relation to what is expected of them in the world of work. However, young people tended to emphasise the benefits of the social aspects of their education, notably in enabling them to get on with different types of people, communicate effectively, work in teams and so on.
-  Almost without exception, employers felt that young people who had undergone a period of work experience while at school were better equipped than others for the world of work. Young people expressed similar views, although there were some misgivings about the quality of some work placements.
-  The induction processes provided by employers for their young recruits varied widely. There appeared to be very limited recognition of the specific needs of young recruits. The use of mentors or 'buddies', and regular review and feedback, would seem to be particularly appropriate for new young recruits.

Background

Despite the large amount of research that has been undertaken on young people (including graduates) in the labour market, relatively little is known about the induction process that occurs once young people have entered their first job. In particular, there are research gaps in relation to particular groups of young people, notably 'non-disadvantaged' groups, 17- to 19-year-olds and those who do not participate in government-sponsored programmes. Moreover, the understanding of the concept of 'employability' varies between young people, employers, educationalists and policy-makers, with potentially important consequences for labour market policy and practice.

This research drew on the direct experiences of 30 young people entering their first jobs, and 39 employers recruiting young people to address a range of issues in relation to the recruitment, employment and particularly the induction of young people into the workplace.

Young people in the labour market

It is clear from the interviews with young people that, for the vast majority, the concept that there no longer exists a 'job for life' had become firmly embedded. While many of the young people had clear career ambitions (in terms of occupation at least), the majority appeared to have a less clear outlook. One consequence of this is that many young people saw their early labour market experience in instrumental terms (e.g. a 'stop gap' until their ideas developed or simply a way of earning money to pursue other ambitions, such as travel).

This tendency has also been noted by many employers, to the disappointment of some, for example smaller businesses looking for longer term loyalty in their staff. However, some employers – for example in areas such as financial services and call centres – had adjusted to the new situation and appeared to accept that they cannot expect young people to be loyal, committed and see a long-term future with one employer.

Skills and attributes required and possessed

Like a number of other studies, the findings confirm that employers tend to focus upon 'softer' skills and behavioural attributes in the recruitment process,

with a less prominent role played by formal qualifications. The opinions of this sample of young people were remarkably consistent with those of the employers. Most of the young people seemed to have taken on board the message that formal qualifications are often a necessary but not sufficient condition for obtaining the types of jobs to which they aspire. They recognised that communication skills, team-working ability, organisational skills, customer service and so on are all important. There was evidence that many young people had worked explicitly on developing such skills.

Where there does appear to be a significant divergence between the views of young people and employers related to the extent to which young people *actually* possess the necessary 'employability' skills. By and large, the young people interviewed were confident in their ability to demonstrate these skills and attributes. Employers, on the whole, were much less positive about this, often feeling that educational institutions were focusing too strongly on academic skills and qualifications, at the expense of employability.

A further area where employers' and young peoples' views might be brought together more explicitly is in relation to ICT skills. When asked about the things that they value most about young recruits, many employers mentioned their ability with computers. On the other hand, few young people mentioned this explicitly. The probable explanation is that young people simply take their IT skills for granted, often not realising how valuable they might be to some employers. Encouraging young people to be more positive about this aspect of their skills might help some to improve the way they are viewed by potential employers.

Role of schools, colleges and universities

There did appear to be a divergence of view between employers and young people about the role played by young people's experiences at school or college in preparing them for the world of work. As with other aspects of this research, it is difficult to generalise because of the relatively small sample size. However, the majority view among employers was that schools and colleges provide inadequate preparation for young people in relation to what is expected of them in the world of work. Some employers had more positive things to say about educational

establishments and others expressed the view that most do as much as can be reasonably expected. However, a sizeable number of employers tended to be cynical and/or negative about the role played by schools and colleges.

There was also a clear divergence of views among young people. Significant numbers felt that their school, college or university experience had not been helpful in relation to their first job. However, there was a tendency for young people to emphasise the benefits of the social aspects of their educational experience, notably in enabling them to learn to get on with different types of people, communicate effectively, work in teams and so on. Ironically, these are precisely the types of attributes that many employers suggested are missing among many young people.

The role of work experience

This is an issue for which there was almost complete unanimity between employers and young people. Almost without exception, employers felt that young people who had undergone a period of work experience while at school (either through formal programmes or through part-time work) were better equipped than others for the world of work. Young people expressed similar views, although there were some misgivings about the quality of some work placements.

There is an important point here. It seems that many of the employability skills that these employers were seeking can only be learned in 'real life' employment situations, even on a temporary basis, such as two- or three-week work placements. While young people may feel that they are picking up the required skills through their educational work and associated social and sporting activities, employers particularly value actual work experience. A corollary of this is that there is a limit to the extent to which educational establishments can 'teach' the necessary skills and attributes, even where extensive efforts are made to simulate the work situation.

This argument suggests that activities such as extended periods of work placement or work placement on a part-time basis (say one or two days per week) may be beneficial for many young people. Moreover, it could provide a vehicle through which employers might engage more effectively with the education system, without incurring substantial direct or indirect costs. Indeed, they might get the

benefit of an additional pair of hands in the short term, and a potential employee in the longer term.

The induction process

The results of this study confirmed both prior expectations and the findings of earlier research – that employers vary widely in the nature of the induction processes provided for their young recruits. These variations manifested themselves in terms of the length of time, the degree of formality, the topics covered, the extent of integration with training activities and the frequency and method of review. The reaction of most young people to the induction they had experienced was positive, or at least neutral. There is clearly a tension between the need for new recruits to become competent at their jobs and their understandable desire to get involved as quickly as possible.

From the point of view of the employer, much depended upon the nature of the job, the type of employer (particularly size and sector) and the frequency with which they recruit young people. In general, the more regularly young people were recruited and the larger the employer, the more formal the induction process.

While these findings do not paint a uniform picture, three issues emerge as being of particular relevance to practitioners and policy-makers:

- First, there appears to be very limited recognition of the specific needs of young recruits, particularly those entering their first job. Most employers adopt a 'one size fits all' induction policy that may, in some cases, be to the detriment of young recruits.
- Linked to the above point, the use of mentors or 'buddies' would seem to be particularly appropriate for new young recruits. This research revealed a number of examples of the successful use of this approach, and its more widespread adoption might help young people to become attuned more quickly to the social and cultural aspects of the workplace, which many find difficult.
- Finally, regular review and feedback, together with a clear link to training and development activities, are essential for the successful operation of an induction process. There is no blueprint as to how

this should work in practice – the research revealed a range of formal and informal approaches – but it is clear that young recruits in particular benefit from regular feedback in the early weeks and months of their employment.

Improving the employability of young people

The majority of young people and employers accepted that the responsibility for improving employability rests with a range of individuals and agencies. In particular, a lot of employers mentioned schools and parents as bearing a responsibility.

This small-scale research did not reveal any blueprints. However, it does suggest that, if employers want more ‘employable’ young people, they need to accept their share of the responsibility. Most employers interviewed did feel that they had a role to play, and many were indeed playing an active role. However, a minority of employers appeared to place the vast majority of the responsibility at the door of schools and young people themselves.

Work experience was the factor most widely mentioned as likely to improve employability among young people. As noted above, this has its problems and it is unlikely that all young people will enter their first employment with sufficient ‘real’ experience of the workplace, including the important discipline of turning up every day and on time. This can only be learned in a ‘real life’ situation. The researchers conclude that a renewed focus on the induction process as providing a type of advanced work experience would be very helpful to both employers and young people.

About the project

The research was carried out as part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s Work and Opportunity research programme. It was undertaken by researchers at the Policy Research Institute (PRI), Leeds Metropolitan University, in conjunction with colleagues from the Human Resource Development Unit (HRDU), Leeds Business School. The research involved in-depth interviews with 30 young people who had previously participated in a youth cohort study in the Bradford district. Detailed interviews were also undertaken with 39 employers in the same area, covering a range of sectors and size groups.

How to get further information

The full report, **Young people, employability and the induction process** by Steve Johnson and Tom Burden, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Work and Opportunity series (ISBN 1 84263 061 X, price £14.95).