



TURNING WORK  
EXPERIENCE  
**INTO WORK  
INSPIRATION**  
A Business in the Community campaign



## Business in the Community: The Big Conversation

Research Report from the event – 15<sup>th</sup> September 2009

January 2010



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## Executive Summary

Key recommendations for business are:

- Aim to improve the quality of work placements to better meet the needs of young people.
- Where possible, aim improve access to work experience for a wide range of young people including addressing rural or disadvantaged areas to broaden the choices available to young people.
- Work with schools and brokers; for example, a local Education Business Partnership (EBP), to improve the matching of the placement to the aspirations or strengths of the young person.
- Integrate the three Insights into their work experience programmes and consider addressing the best practices set out below.
- Consider more flexible timing for their work experience, a number of employers only offer one day or short duration work placements and only during the summer.
- Work together to share best practices. This should include the development of best practices for work experience tasks and activities, or suitable project work suggestions for young people.
- Work together to refine the business case for work experience. Clear articulation and quantification of the potential benefits would be useful as a reference for businesses.
- Get buy-in from key decision makers and communicate the importance of work experience across the organisation. This can be initiated by running an internal big conversation within an organisation.
- Integrate the work experience interactions with other touch-points they have with local schools e.g. volunteering or presentations to schools to help maximise the potential impact and benefits.

# 1. Introduction

On the 15<sup>th</sup> September 2009, 100 chief executives representing some FTSE 100 companies met with 100 young people from around the country at 'The Big Conversation' in London. The event marked the launch of The Work Inspiration campaign ([www.workinspiration.com](http://www.workinspiration.com)) convened by Sir Stuart Rose, Chairman of Business in the Community (BITC).

The event provided a forum for two-way dialogue between business leaders and young people aged 16 – 19 to explore the future of work experience, how it should be improved and the barriers that currently exist.

'Work Inspiration', is a campaign led by Business in the Community in partnership with the independent education foundation Edge and the Talent and Enterprise Taskforce. The corporate supporters included: Accenture, Ballymore, BT, Chime Communications, Logistik, Marks & Spencer, McDonald's, National Grid, Royal Mail and Serco.<sup>1</sup>

## Report Structure

This report details the research findings from 'The Big Conversation' that took place on September 15<sup>th</sup> 2009. The quotations are verbatim. The following sections set out the findings as they were discussed on the tables; this is followed by recommendations that have been developed from the findings.

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<sup>1</sup> The campaign has been developed, supported and endorsed by a range of partners. These include: *Arrival Education, British Council, Career Academies UK, Council for Social Action, City and Guilds, Department for Children, Schools and Families, Enterprise Insight, Harris Federation, Institute for Education Business Excellence, Merlin, Mosaic, National Council for Work Experience, National Education & Employer Partnership Taskforce, NESTA, Talent & Enterprise Taskforce, The Prince's Trust, Teach First, Trident from Edexcel, UK Commission for Employment & Skills, WorldSkills 2011, and Young Enterprise.*

## 2. Initial perceptions of skills gap and work experience

### *The feedback was...*

- Participants were generally aware of the skills gap and thought it imperative that it was addressed.
- Many attendees were not aware of the extent of the skills issue.
- Businesses were seen to be in a 'unique' position to make change happen but they needed the support of schools, young people and government.
- Three key barriers to good work experience are a lack of choice (especially in rural and deprived areas), a lack of inspiring and tailored work experience programmes and poor attitude from young people.

*'Depends on limitations of local employment with many having to resort to working in hairdressers and takeaways' (Business)*

*'My work experience was not career matched; my skills were not matched to the nature of the work and proved to be irrelevant' (Young Person)*

*'Seeing a job that no one in their family does widens aspirations, but it's hard to break out from these circles' (Business)*

### 3. Young People's perceptions of life and work

#### *The feedback was...*

- Young people have high ambitions – most thought that they would attain a degree, have a nice house, car and family.
- Many young people seemed to lack realism in terms of what they could actually achieve or how they would 'climb the ladder' to their dream job.
- Business participants felt that young people should be more realistic in their expectations and respond positively to life changing 'critical junctures' such as having to move jobs, getting into debt and experiencing personal problems.
- A number of young people aspire to work for themselves rather than within a large organisation.
- To help them on their journeys, young participants felt that they needed better support and career guidance.

*'I want to go and do a course in music technology where I should get the chance to make some good contacts so that I can become a sound engineer...ideally for music concerts and bands...that's my path at the moment'*  
(Young Person)

*'I know that I can't do anything I want as it's really competitive out there, but I would love to find something that I enjoy'* (Young Person)

*'Young people need to recognise that there will be barriers that get in their way – life is full of ups and downs'* (Business)

## 4. Business perceptions of young people

### *The feedback was...*

- Business people have a positive perception of young people. However, young people's attitudes still questioned.
- Young people do not always have realistic expectation of work.
- Young people seen as technologically savvy and skilled in creative and communication based industries, perceived to be vital for future employment, but still lacking in practical skills necessary for certain careers such as engineering.
- Improved structure and preparation for work experience would improve the young person's attitude to work experience.

*'The younger they are, the more they seem to know about computers...they can definitely teach me a thing or two about techy things' (Business)*

*'Young people really need to portray greater enthusiasm, but I can understand why they may not given their previous bad experiences' (Business)*

*'It's essential that young people understand what work is and get used to it, which means coming in at certain times and performing some set duties' (Business)*

*'There have been numerous instances in my experience when young people have turned up expecting the unrealistic: they wanted to be driving the car before learning how to drive' (Business)*

*'Young people need to have a positive attitude, show enthusiasm to learn and be respectful of the opportunity that they have been given' (Business)*

## 5. Perceptions of work experience

### *The feedback was...*

- Young people perceived work experience negatively and as a 'waste of time'. The key grievances included:
  - Being given mundane tasks – not being provided with an insight into the real world of work.
  - Not being integrated into the team or treated like an employee.
- Business participants were aware of the wide ranging benefits of good work experience for young people, business and schools.
- However, many business participants felt that the business case for good work experience had not yet been fully expressed and specified.
- Criticism was voiced by business over the lack of guidance and support they get when arranging work experience.
- The timing (i.e. in the summer and a one or two week block) of work experience was felt to be in need of review – young people, businesses and schools should be allowed to be more flexible.

*'My work experience has been completely pointless – I didn't do anything interesting: it doesn't paint a good picture of what work is' (Young Person)*

*'When I did my work experience, they treated me like a dogs-body, I wasn't like them' (Young Person)*

*'My teacher set me up with a work experience in the local hairdressers. It turned out to be a really un-awe-inspiring experience and showed me nothing about what I wanted to know about' (Young Person)*

*'I don't see work experience as worthwhile in its current state; it's just something to put on their CV. I've had young people in before and they seemed bored and didn't get anything out of it. This was my fault and theirs' (Business)*

*'The mandatory 2 week work experience period is widely deemed to be too rigid. An effort from an employer is needed to gear the experience around the young person's character, passions and strengths' (Business)*

## 6. Key elements for a good work experience

### *The feedback was...*

- Best practice was seen to be already in existence, primarily in some larger organisations – however, a need to share and adapt it was highlighted, especially for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).
- There was agreement in incorporating some or all of the good practices into current work experience programmes.
- However, strong links were highlighted between these, which meant that incorporating them in unison would produce a greater impact.
- A distinction was identified between those tangible good practices that are 'practical' and those intangible ones that are 'attitudinal'.
- There was broad agreement as to some obvious good practices that would improve work experience. These include:
  - Making available real and challenging tasks or projects for the young person.
  - Improving the planning and preparation of the work experience.
  - Feeding back to the young person and evaluating the work experience.
  - Making the experience fun, insightful and stimulating.

*'IBM do a Dragon's Den type activity where work experience students come up with their ideas and get feedback from professionals – they find this really fun' (Business)*

*'The Bank of America work experience scheme was brilliant in integrating me into the team and showing me the ropes. I even got to go to America for a stint... they also allowed me to use their office space for my own business idea and kept up a relationship with me' (Young Person)*

*'Get placement people working on tasks which they can take ownership of and use their skills' (Business)*

*'Employers should allow young people to feel part of the team, show them how a team works and its benefits' (Business)*

*'It's very rare that business and young people get in touch before they come in on the first day; this should happen as a matter of course so that the experience can start with concerns and objectives ironed out' (Business)*

*'Work experience is not just one week; it is about the before and after, it needs to be seen as a whole entity' (Young Person)*

*'An induction style meeting would pre-empt how the experience would unfold and address potential stumbling blocks' (Business)*

*'Employers should be interested in young people and what they have to offer for their duration of the work experience. What can the company gain from this? It should be seen as a win-win situation' (Business)*

*'I want to feel like the experience is for me and not for anyone who walks through the door' (Young Person)*

*'I feel work experience is so rigid at the moment just like school, why can't I choose where to go?' (Young person)*

*'Employees should offer themselves as sponsors or coaches that extends beyond just mentoring' (Business)*

*'The young person should follow up with the company every year – "remember me". You constantly have to sell yourself – this work experience must be built upon' (Business)*

*'Why not bring the young person back in the summer holidays or after they finish school to build on what they already know' (Young Person)*

*'It would be nice to get some kind of payment like we do in normal jobs...it shows that they care' (Young Person)*

*'Something to take back to school like a reference with comments on the job that young person did and how they performed. A certification or a prize giving if more than one young person was at the placement' (Business)*

*'Need to make an effort to be seen as an employee, but expect to be treated as an adult in return' (Young Person)*

## 7. Improving Work Experience: The Three Insights

### *The feedback was...*

- All the Insights were seen to be good ideas that would drastically improve work experience programmes. There was real interest from the business participants in taking them back to their own organisations,
- Many were pleased that the Insights are not prescriptive and that they can be integrated into existing programmes and adapted.
- The first two Insights ('All About You' and 'Look Behind the Scenes') were seen as intuitive and already part of many work experience practices.
- 'Careers Happen' was seen to be highly innovative - the Insight that would serve to enhance current programmes the most.

To support employers in building upon their current work experience programmes, BITC developed three Insights into how work experience can be improved. These are simple and easy sessions that can be integrated into existing programmes or used to develop new ones.

1. 'All About Me'
2. 'Look Behind the Scenes'
3. 'Careers Happen'

### 8.1 Insight 1 – 'All About Me'

*The 'All About Me' Insight ensures each young person is given the time, one on one, to talk about their passions and interests. It's the job of the employers to listen and to translate what they hear in terms of strengths and opportunities and relate them in terms of job competencies and skills, within their own business and the wider world of work.*

*'This insight ensures every young person is given the time, one on one, to talk about their passions and interests and to express themselves so we can understand personality and drive' (Business)*

*'I feel this would be a very beneficial activity for the student. It will help them to focus, progress their thinking and make the employer aware of what you are trying to accomplish' (Business)*

*'A key way of learning is to establish flaws and find a solution to rectify them. This step sets out to achieve just that so could help make experience more relevant to the young person and fit into the culture' (Business)*

*'Good idea as it may establish a common ground and break the ice so the person can feel right at home, putting them in a position to get the most out of the opportunity' (Young Person)*

*'If the person in charge could understand the employee they can come up with individual ways of dealing with them – helps the young person understand that they are more than just a cog in the wheel' (Business)*

*'Enable the young person to appreciate what personal brand is and how personality and tastes can support them in developing a career' (Business)*

## **8.2 Insight 2 – 'Look Behind the Scenes'**

*This is a simple and easy way of presenting them with different personality types that represent how varied the roles are within a company and how different characters, skills and interests suit different types of jobs. The objective of this session is for young people to understand the variety and scope of opportunity in the world of work and use this knowledge to see how to apply their talents and skills to what they might do in the future.*

*'Gives you an understanding of the complexity of an organisation, how it works together and have a chance to experience options that they may know little or nothing about' (Young Person)*

*'Some young people may need support to forge a link between their skills and the breadth of opportunities available to them' (Business)*

### 8.3 Insight 3 – ‘Careers Happen’

*‘Careers Happen’ is designed as a fun and interactive session that demonstrates the different and varied ways in which careers actually happen. It is a simple way to show that careers are often not linear and that people can and often make decisions that don’t work out but from which they learn valuable lessons about themselves and which often create new opportunities.*

*‘Great ideas and careers are seldom planned. The key is showing that there’s no ‘straight and narrow’ path – careers go up, sideways and even down’  
(Business)*

*‘I think this is super important as the world will change and all young people change their minds. I think there is an element of right place, right time and grabbing every opportunity that is offered to you – we need to promote this ethos in young people’ (Business)*

*‘Case studies of people who are older and worldlier are a brilliant idea because they can help direct young people into a career’ (Business)*

*‘Explains to young people what skills are i.e. not always qualifications or length of service etc. it can be attitude, motivation etc.’ (Business)*

## 8. Taking the campaign forward

### *The feedback was...*

- All were responsible for managing the success of the experience before, during and after the work experience through good communication, openness and feedback.
- Participants felt that any culture of 'going through the motions' (in both the business and education) should be curbed and replaced with a more open, forward-looking and collaborative approach
- **Young people needed to:**
  - Talk to classmates and become ambassadors for the campaign.
  - Communicate and spread the campaign message digitally.
  - Actively keep in touch with the companies they met at 'The Big Conversation' and make the most of this experience by leveraging change in business.
- **Businesses needed to:**
  - Talk to their supply chain and colleagues to share best practice and inspire change, whilst integrating 'Work Inspiration' into established HR processes.
  - Create an ongoing dialogue and relationship with schools, brokers and the wider community and encourage greater engagement with young people.

*'Everyone has to work together and communicate to really take this campaign forward. It has cross-party benefits and so it must receive cross-party support' (Business)*

*'Large companies such as ours need to do something to help the smaller establishments that don't have the same resources as us' (Business)*

*'Businesses need to have a carrot dangled in front of them to really take it seriously; unfortunately many would not do it without a reward' (Business)*

*'Simply put: I need to tell the people in my office about this, both those below me and above' (Business)*

*'At the moment work experience seems distinct. We seem to be making things harder for ourselves by excluding it from normal practices' (Business)*

*'It would be great if someone would go out and talk to people within the community, really engage young people within schools' (Business)*

*'The campaign should be about young people and for them – this is what I loved about today's event' (Business)*

*'Only a few of us here today and there are thousands of people at school today and we need to tell them about today and what's happening' (Young Person)*

*'There is a lot of time during the normal school day when we could share our experiences and help others like me to make the right choices' (Young Person)*

*'We need to communicate with young people in an appropriate way – Facebook, Twitter' (Business)*

*'Could have a forum to allow others to talk about work experience with photos, video diaries and podcasts of their experience, something more interactive' (Young Person)*

*'Get companies to link with schools and come in and show us what they're all about' (Young Person)*

*'Young people need to prove business wrong and show what they are made of; dispelling stereotypes is vital to changing mindsets and motivations' (Business)*

## 9. Key Recommendations

We have summarised below the key recommendation that have been developed based on the findings from the research. First we have set out the recommendations for business; this is followed by the recommendations for other parties, including BITC, the public sector and the education sector. Finally there are a series of specific recommendations that can improve work experience.

### Recommendations for Businesses

- Aim to improve the quality of work placements and should try, where possible, to address rural or disadvantaged areas to broaden the choices available to young people.
- Work with schools and brokers; for example, a local Education Business Partnership (EBP), to improve the matching of the placement to the aspirations or strengths of the young person.
- Integrate the three Insights into their work experience programmes and consider addressing the best practices set out below.
- Consider more flexible timing for their work experience, a number of employers only offer one day or short duration work placements and only during the summer.
- Work together to share best practices. This could include the development of best practices for work experience tasks and activities, or suitable project work suggestions for young people.
- The business case for work experience should be defined, developed and communicated across the business sector. Clear articulation and quantification of the potential benefits would be useful as a reference for businesses.
- Get buy-in from key decision makers and communicate the importance of work experience across the organisation. This can be initiated by running an internal Big Conversation within an organisation.
- Integrate the work experience interactions with other touch-points they have with local schools e.g. volunteering or presentations to schools to help maximise the potential impact and benefits.

## Other recommendations

- There is a need for improved advice, information and guidance on careers and the world of work to make young people's expectations and aspirations more realistic.
- There is value in exploring ways to offer entrepreneurial work experience targeted at young people who aspire to work for themselves.
- A review of the timing of work experience is recommended as this does not work for young people or business. Does work experience need to be a one or two week block in the summer?
- Measures to be put in place to improve the support and advice available to employers to help them improve their work experience practices.
- Initiate sector based Big Conversations to drive commitment, understand common issues, improve engagement and drive forward the campaign.
- Continue to involve young people in the campaign and in the development of work experience as they are key stakeholders in the success of the campaign.

## Specific Recommendations to Improve Work Experience Placements

A wide range of recommendations or good practices for the improvement of work experience were identified.

- Set expectations appropriately at the induction stage of the work experience, whilst being realistic and practical.
- It is worth planning the placements properly and integrating them with school timetables and needs – there would be benefit in the development of planning templates or good practices to support business to improve their work placement planning.
- Give the young people exposure to a wide range of experiences, supported by the use of Insight 2 ('Look Behind the Scenes').

- Establish a mentoring system or buddy system to provide support to the young person during work experience.
- Introduce the young person to a range of areas across the business, e.g. marketing, Human Resources, Purchasing etc., to grow their understanding of the true scope of functions in an organisation.
- Provide honest and transparent evaluation and feedback at the end of the work experience. This should give the student an honest evaluation of their performance as well as capture their feedback on the work experience.
- Be prepared to develop ongoing relationships with the young person and their school. This will allow the young people to have the opportunity to come back and build upon their work experience
- Consider some kind of 'token' payment, incentive or reward for completing the work experience. It may be appropriate to pay expenses for the young person.
- Make the experience fun and insightful – suggestions included having more diverse and practical tasks, using multimedia where appropriate, and having the ability to engage with different personalities in the organisation.

## 10. Summary

Both young people and business perceive work experience to be vitally important, and something that needs to be improved. Those in attendance also agreed that business is in a 'unique' position to demonstrate to young people, through work experience, what the world of work is like and that they have the opportunity to positively influence the aspirations of young people, building their awareness of the possibilities, developing their aspirations and helping them to choose the correct career paths.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance and urgency of this campaign and the need for business and young people to make change happen and become ambassadors of the campaign.

There was very positive feedback on all the Insights that BITC have developed. Participants showed a real interest in these Insights, with many pleased that the Insights are not prescriptive and that they can be integrated into existing work experience.

There was consensus that young people are central to the campaign and must continue to play a key role in its direction and development. Chief Executives attending 'The Big Conversation' pledged to dramatically improve the work experience their companies offer.