

The Overlooked Advantage



Exploring the strengths rooted in the experience of disadvantage & the steps employers can take towards inclusion

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THE BROKERAGE

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Foreword

Just like our candidates, at various stages of my life I have been defined by those with more privilege as 'disadvantaged'. For me it was as a result of being the child of a teenage mother; a third generation immigrant; having attended a highly disruptive, poor performing state school in one of the most deprived Council wards of the UK, and later starting University as a young parent myself.

Although challenging, these experiences afforded me the opportunity to develop a range of skills and mindsets that have enabled me to succeed in a working environment and have a successful career. For me, this included: being familiar and comfortable with self-directed learning, an ability to focus in chaotic and high-stress environments, resilience, resourcefulness, confidence (even when out of my comfort zone) and an empathetic leadership style.

Unfortunately, at the time I was going through the challenging life experiences mentioned above, I, like many young people and employers, overlooked the fact that these lived experiences served as valuable catalysts for my personal growth and development. Instead, when comparing myself to my more privileged and successful peers, I focused on my deficits and saw my differences in a purely negative light. When perspective employers did the same, this inevitably led to feelings of shame and not being 'enough'.

Over a decade later with a new vantage point, I can see that the only deficit that existed was in the recruitment practices of the corporate firms I was applying to. Instead of focusing on ways to uncover the unique value of every individual, current practices are often based around biased benchmarks of achievement, that replicate the status quo. These incentivise candidates to try and fit a pre-existing type or mould, even if unattainable, and to hide the true essence and foundation of their identities that, as my personal experience shows, gives them the exact skills we know will allow them to thrive in a working environment. As a result, these outdated practices mean that employers lose out on talent and young people are robbed of their career aspirations and confidence.

At The Brokerage, we are more than aware of the amazing strengths and talents our young people have and chose to commission an independent researcher to uncover this in more detail. The five key strengths identified certainly read across to my own experience, and we know these are replicated again and again amongst our candidates and other working class young people and those from minority ethnic communities.

It is my hope that with this research, that young people are able to recognise the strengths they bring because of, not in spite of the challenging life circumstances they face and redefine the labels placed on them with confidence and pride. Equally, I hope that in the context of the current skills shortage and 'war for talent' employers are experiencing, that they recognise that their current recruitment practices are holding them back.

In the final part of this report we explore the key steps employers need to take to re-design their recruitment practices so they are truly inclusive and encourage candidates to explore the full-range of their life experiences to demonstrate their capabilities. If employers put this into practice, then not only will be closer to achieving our vision, of a world where a young person's ability and aspiration alone determine their career path, but companies will hire better and candidates will feel they are valued and they belong from the very beginning. We're also drawing on this research to develop services that will allow us to support corporates to make the changes we know will have the biggest impact long term. Together, we can be changemakers, challenging the corporate norms and creating an environment where every person can bring their whole self to work.



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What is this report about?

When it comes to describing and defining the identities of young people from working class and/or minoritised ethnic backgrounds we commonly hear language such as ‘disadvantaged’, ‘less-advantaged’ or ‘under privileged’, which describe an individual’s deficits. Rarely is attention paid to the strengths and capabilities they can develop as a result of the systemic inequalities they face in all areas of life. This report intends to plug that gap.

It is widely acknowledged that adversity can foster strength; and as a result, people who face challenges in life are often able to adapt and learn from these experiences, building capabilities that can set them up for growth and success. However, what does that mean in a professional context? How do these personal experiences translate into the workplace? And how can employers ensure they are set up in a way that ensures these talents are not ‘overlooked’.

Whilst it is critical that more is done to tackle the root causes of inequalities, it is also important to recognise that individuals are far more than the disadvantages they experience. In particular, when it comes to the ever-evolving skills and attributes required for the modern workplace, employers must understand that such strengths can exist because of, not in spite of challenging circumstances.[1]

At The Brokerage we know this first hand: having worked with ambitious, talented young people from working class backgrounds for 25 years. Our candidates are/were state educated, from lower socio-economic backgrounds and a large majority are also from minoritised ethnic groups. All groups that are typically ‘underrepresented’ in business and society as a whole. Our candidates are also high achieving academically but do not have access to the same networks and opportunities as their better-off peers - we exist to help address that gap. While we have helped thousands of people access opportunities in high level professions (such as finance, law and insurance) we know that there is still a mindset shift that needs to happen in a lot of organisations. Our candidates are just as skilled and capable as their financially better off peers but employers are failing to recognise their strengths by relying on out-dated recruitment channels and practices that are biased against them.

The status-quo

New outcomes require new actions and failing to take them will allow the status quo to remain. In the context of ‘professional jobs’ in particular, children born into the highest earning families will continue to be among the higher earners [2]. More privileged individuals will continue to be 60% more likely to be in professional roles [3] and only 20% of people working in industries such as law, management consultancy or financial management will come from working class backgrounds.[4]

[1] Ellis, B. J., Abrams, L. S., Masten, A. S., Sternberg, R. J., Tottenham, N., & Frankenhuis, W. E. (2020). Hidden talents in harsh environments. *Development and psychopathology*, 1-19.

[2] Elliot Major, L, Machin,(2018) *Social Mobility And Its Enemies*

[3] Social Mobility Commission (2021). *State of the Nation 2021*

[4] Friedman, S, Laurison D, Macmillan, L, (2017). *Social Mobility, the Class Pay Gap and Intergenerational Worklessness*.

Other industries such as architecture, the media and accountancy also do particularly badly when it comes to these disparities, as do the very top roles across all industries – CEOs.[5]

These statistics reveal a problem with access to professions by working class people but to compound matters there is also a working class pay gap for professional jobs, averaging £6k per year with the largest inequalities found in law and finance [6]. To make matters worse, where class intersects with gender and ethnicity, the disparities compound with respective pay gaps, multiplying together, so that a working-class black woman might earn even less than the combined pay gaps experienced by a working class white woman or a black woman whose parents had better paid jobs.

Addressing the problem

As part of a broader, systemic strategy to address these unequal outcomes, it is vital organisations develop the ability to recognise and properly test for the strengths working class young people have, even if they developed those strengths in circumstances that are unfamiliar. If not, young people will continue to be unjustly denied opportunities to have fulfilling professional careers and become socially mobile. And, employers will continue to lose out on talent that would enrich their organisation with diverse skills, experiences and mindsets.

This report seeks to help employers navigate the challenges of optimising their early careers recruitment practices so that they can be equally accessed by underrepresented talent from working class backgrounds and young people of colour.

The next chapter describes the strengths emerging from young people's experience of inequality, drawing on the existing literature, interviews with seven alumni of The Brokerage, as well as five organisations with first-hand experience of the potential that The Brokerage candidates bring (quotes are anonymised).

The final section lays out the steps employers should take to act on the imbalance of representation of young people from working class backgrounds and minoritised ethnic groups in professional jobs. This includes developing organisational empathy, being able to effectively assess skills and experiences during recruitment, as well as developing cultures that make young people feel like they belong. The recommendations are informed by literature on what works, as well as outputs from focus groups with young people and employers working with The Brokerage.

Our hope is that by paying close attention to the dynamics of recruiting and retaining young people from underrepresented backgrounds, employers can create environments for them to talk openly about their experiences and feel that they are valued. Such a richer and more human recruitment process benefits both underrepresented young people and employers.

[5] Freidman, S, Laurison, D (2019). The Class Ceiling.

[6] Freidman, S, Laurison, D (2019). The Class Ceiling.

What do young people with experience of disadvantage bring to the workplace?

The employment penalty of growing up in disadvantage is well-established. Fewer than half (46%) of Black and Asian young people were in work pre-pandemic, compared with around two thirds (68%) of white young people, with the gap widening over the course of 2020-21.[7] Over a quarter (26%) of young people who received free school meals are NEET (not in education, employment or training), compared to 13% of their better-off peers.[8]

In search of the causes and potential solutions to this employment gap, researchers have primarily focused on the negative impacts of disadvantage, including, for example, lower chances of participation in education and levels of educational attainment, which are both linked to employment outcomes. However, this approach has meant that any strengths and positive consequences for young people facing and tackling adversity remain underexplored.[9]

Strengths rooted in the experience of disadvantage

To identify the strengths gained from the experience of disadvantage, we interviewed The Brokerage Alumni, as well as employers of The Brokerage Candidates, asking them to describe moments when young people were particularly good at tackling a task or solving a work problem because they were from a different background. Five themes emerged from those accounts (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Strengths that disadvantaged young people bring to the workplace



[7] Wilson, T., & Papoutsaki, D. (2021). An Unequal Crisis: The impact of the pandemic on the youth labour market. London: Youth Futures Foundation.

[8] Gadsby, B. (2019). Establishing the Employment Gap. Impetus.

[9] Ellis, B. J., Abrams, L. S., Masten, A. S., Sternberg, R. J., Tottenham, N., & Frankenhuis, W. E. (2020). Hidden talents in harsh environments. Development and psychopathology, 1-19.

1. Readiness to learn

In the context of the fast-changing world of work, businesses are increasingly recognising the importance of on-the-job learning to help their staff keep their skills up-to-date: according to one report, 9 in 10 UK employees will need to reskill by 2030.[10] To learn effectively, people need a combination of the right opportunity (in the form of training and resources), but also the right mindset to be open and ready for learning.[11] These qualities - curiosity, high level of ambition, hunger for new experiences and connections - were also mentioned by all employers working with the Brokerage Candidates, as something that set them apart from other young people with more opportunities and resources to draw on:

“What we’ve seen is a drive and ambition that I don’t see in everyone who comes through. The interns are so keen to work with everyone in the business, to get as much out of their placement as they can, because they haven’t had as much exposure to the profession as some of their peers. All of our interns stayed in contact with the people here, they want to continue to have mentors to talk to.” - Employer

“These young people changed the atmosphere [in the company], changed the pace for the teams. They are quick to understand the ways of working, have good questions... and so good at asking for more work! A couple of interns had managers going on annual leave, so as soon as work would run out they’d come up to my desk asking to give them something to do.” - Employer

“They are so much more aware of why they want the opportunity - not “because my dad works in insurance”, but able to articulate why they want the job, where it can take them into the future, what they want to learn. They are giving up their summer holidays for this!” - Employer

These findings echo the work on “growth mindset”, or belief that talent can be developed through hard work (as opposed to a “fixed mindset” that likens talent to an innate ability).[12] Research has shown a growth mindset is associated with greater achievement in education and workplace settings, and can even counteract the negative effects of poverty on achievement.[13] Here is how one young person talked about how their background motivated them to take up every opportunity to learn new skills, develop different kinds of experiences, and build relationships and networks in the workplace:

[10] CBI. (2020). Learning for life Funding a world-class adult education system. CBI.

[11] Hughes, D., Higon, J., Beard, A., Birkin, G., Corley, A., & Milner, C. (2019). What Motivates Adults to Learn? A rapid evidence review of what drives learning new skills in the workplace. Nesta.

[12] Dweck, C. (2016). What having a “growth mindset” actually means. Harvard Business Review, 13, 213-226.

[13] Claro, S., Paunesku, D., & Dweck, C. S. (2016). Growth mindset tempers the effects of poverty on academic achievement. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 113(31), 8664-8668.

“Coming from a background underrepresented in [the company I worked in] I was much more determined to succeed, show that I appreciate the opportunity given to me, that I’m not a fluke. People like me don’t get into companies like this. During the programme you do rotations. After the first one, I researched the different parts of the business to work out where I want the next rotation to be. I reached out to two people to learn more about their work and got a chance to talk to the CEO through taking initiative. People were very receptive to me because not everyone had that courage and determination to do their own research. And I got to have a better understanding of what a CEO or a CFO does.” - **Former Brokerage Candidate**

2. Desire for excellence

Another quality, which young people participating in this research associated with their upbringing, is a “can do” attitude to challenge, combined with a desire to do their best at it. This ability to self-motivate, take initiative, and pursue a goal is consistently valued by employers, particularly as a differentiating factor when selecting for entry-level jobs. In a recent survey 8 in 10 of employers highlighted attitude and aptitude for work as the most important factor when recruiting graduates. [14]

Having to apply extra effort in working was often described as a way to compete in biased environments that are biased against you and resonates with the findings of another study that described some of its participants “wanting to do better than what [others] thought” to dispel the negative stereotypical beliefs that others held about them.[15] Despite the apparent pressure to work hard put upon them, the Brokerage alumni also saw it as a source of motivation and strength:

“Parents always told me that in an environment where [people like you] are not commonplace you have to work harder. You need greater attention to detail, care more about the outputs. Whilst if your parents have connections, you might have a certain level of comfort that is not conducive to excellent work. When you are from a different background you have more to lose. For the right person it’s a welcome pressure. It’s positive in terms of outcomes, helps focus the mind.” - **Former Brokerage Candidate**

“You learn to dress a bit smarter. You learn how to go above and beyond to not intimidate people [as a young Black male] and that puts you into a good stead because you are always thinking about how you are speaking and behaving. You check your work twice.” - **Former Brokerage Candidate**

[14] CBI. (2021). Skills for an inclusive economy. CBI/Birkbeck Education and Skills Survey 2021.

[15] Thiele, T., Pope, D., Singleton, A., Snape, D., & Stanistreet, D. (2017). Experience of disadvantage: The influence of identity on engagement in working class students’ educational trajectories to an elite university. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(1), 49-67.

Increased productivity and drive amongst young people growing up with experience of disadvantage have been observed by the Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, who noted that “employers who recruit talented people who elsewhere get filtered out of the system [say] that those employees often bring something extra to the business: the hunger, grit, ambition and drive of those who have succeeded against the odds.” [16] Employers working with The Brokerage used strikingly similar ways to describe the young people coming through their programmes, praising how relentlessly these individuals sought opportunities to do their best:

“For all of them it was the first time anyone in the family stepped foot in a professional environment. They see it as their chance, an opportunity to grab. All of them ask us, ‘How can I do better and ensure it turns into a long-term thing?’ It made them work so much harder [than others]. They didn’t want to waste a single moment.” - **Employer**

3. Emotional and cultural intelligence

Over the past decade employers who pay attention to diversity and inclusion have been investing in identifying and developing inclusive leaders, “who are aware of their own biases and preferences, actively seek out and consider different views and perspectives to inform better decision-making”. [17]

Emotional, as well as cultural intelligence (ability to suspend judgment until information becomes available beyond the ethnicity of the other person[18]) were described to come naturally to The Brokerage Candidates who have had experience of growing up in diverse communities, regularly interacting and adapting to people from different backgrounds. Previous research has similarly linked lower socioeconomic status with people’s greater sensitivity to social cues, explaining that people from these backgrounds have little control over their environment and are forced to pay much more attention to others who can have an influence on their life outcomes, honing their empathy skills and detecting changes in their social relationships.[19] One research participant described the moment that highlighted their emotional and cultural intelligence in an assessment centre:

“Coming from a background that is a bit more sporadic and not structured develops your ability to think on your feet, be a team player, understand the dynamics [of a group], develop emotional intelligence. I noticed I am able to think more creatively and push forward to navigate the situation, compared to some other young people I’ve met.

“In one assessment centre I took part in there was a group project – I noticed one person wasn’t really getting a chance to speak, and I thought it was really unfair. So I asked that person what ideas they had and got them to contribute. When I got feedback later on, I heard I came across as having good interpersonal skills, acting like a team player, being able to navigate the dynamics within a room.”

- **Former Brokerage Candidate**

[16] Milburn, A., Shephard, G., Cleal, P., Johnston, D., Attwood, T., Gregg, P., Hamilton, D., Carrie, A.M., Guy, C., & Williams, C. (2013). Business and Social Mobility: a Manifesto for Change. Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission.

[17] Moss, G. & Sims, C.M. (2016). Inclusive Leadership... driving performance through diversity! ENEI.

[18] Triandis, H. C. (2006). Cultural intelligence in organizations. Group & Organization Management, 31(1), 20-26.

[19] Kraus, M. W., Piff, P. K., Mendoza-Denton, R., Rheinschmidt, M. L., & Keltner, D. (2012). Social class, solipsism, and contextualism: How the rich are different from the poor. Psychological Review, 119, 546–572.

Recognising the historic lack of diversity within their organisation, another employer pointed out that these new perspectives offered development advantages to more experienced staff. Through engaging with young people the senior staff were practising skills that would be relevant when they connect with external customers who have similar backgrounds and needs:

“It is also great for our associates’ development – because they get an opportunity to develop skills on how they explain the law, what they are working on, to someone who has very little awareness of the sector.” - Employer

4. Creativity

Creativity has been consistently highlighted as a skill that will grow in importance over the next decade[20], with forecasts suggesting creative occupations would grow twice as fast as the average growth in UK jobs by 2024.[21] As new technologies are introduced in the professional services sector, increasing automation of routine tasks means that employers are looking to complement these with soft skills that machines are not capable of, such as innovation, creative thinking, and complex problem-solving.

Drawing on previous experience of navigating a way around a situation with limited resources is an important and distinct ability of those growing up in a context of disadvantage. For some young people this context will prove to be just this kind of challenging environment that underpins development of new skills and abilities to make the most of a difficult situation, harness the limited resources available, and maximise the outcome.[22] Several employers described the resourcefulness and creativity in how The Brokerage Candidates tackled challenging tasks:

“They brought very different problem-solving skills [to the task], being focused on how they can help, how they can get to the outcome the company needed. When we were looking for our next charity partner, they went out to do their own research, contacted our offices in the US to get their perspective and tap their networks, presenting three options to choose from. It gave us a whole new world that we weren’t experienced in terms of our funders. Their work had long-term impact, and the approach they took is now embedded into how we find partners.” - Employer

“To help the team develop their skills she found and attended a few LinkedIn webinars and then shared her learnings with the team in a professionally formatted deck. She outlined key highlights and considered her audience well with the delivery. She also enriched her presentation with conversations undertaken with LinkedIn account managers, helping to build knowledge and awareness within the team, with positive feedback across management. She also built good relationships with other parts of the business to experiment and implement her learnings in real time.” - Employer

[20] Easton, E. & Djumalieva, J. (2018). Creativity and the future of skills. Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre. Nesta.

[21] BEIS. (2017). Industrial Strategy: building a Britain fit for the future. London: BEIS.

[22] Suor, J. H., Sturge-Apple, M. L., Davies, P. T., & Cicchetti, D. (2017). A life history approach to delineating how harsh environments and hawk temperament traits differentially shape children’s problem-solving skills. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 58(8), 902-909.

These findings are consistent with broader literature on the relationship between cultural diversity and higher creativity in teams.[23] For example, one employer described how a more creative solution - designed by The Brokerage interns - allowed the company to appeal to a more diverse talent pool through new ideas about attracting, recruiting, and retaining young people with similar experiences and needs:

“We did a workshop to target aspiring mathematicians [with our career offer], teaching them the basics of insurance. Our interns went through the workshop themselves and brought the whole new perspective to it. They came up with much more engaging activities, such as “code breaking”, as a sort of a quest where pupils applied their GCSE-level maths to find out about our sector. They also included tips and advice to children on how they should focus their effort when going through it.” - **Employer**

Combined with emotional and cultural intelligence, creativity and innovation skills of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can help employers foresee and mitigate the negative impact of their products and services on diverse groups. For example, companies are now recognising that workforce diversity is a critical factor in a more equitable design of technology solutions.[24] In one example, a Brokerage candidate's input helped make a decision about launching a new product:

“One of my clients was looking to develop an app that would be used by people living in council houses. He comes from a very middle-class background and didn't know how that environment works. And I was able to leverage my background and experience of growing up on a council estate to advise on how to develop this product. And in fact, we realised as part of this work that it wasn't the use case we thought it would be.” - **Former Brokerage Candidate**

5. Resilience

In 2020 resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility were identified as new additions to the Top Skills for 2025 by the World Economic Forum.[25] These so-called “self-management” skills were ranked highly by employers across sectors and geographies, and their increased importance is a direct response to the shock of the pandemic and the ever-accelerating pace of change in new technologies and ways of working.

These are also the skills that young people participating in the research linked closely to their experience of growing up with a disadvantage. They reflected on their attitude to setbacks, explaining that difficult circumstances prepared them for facing workplace challenges with greater resilience. In the words of The Brokerage alumni and employers:

[23] CIPD. (2018). Diversity and Inclusion at Work. Facing Up to the Business Case. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

[24] The Catalyze Tech Working Group. (2021). Action to Catalyze Tech: A Paradigm Shift for DEI. Available at: <https://actreport.com/about/>

[25] World Economic Forum. (2020). The Future of Jobs Report 2020. Geneva: World Economic Forum.

“Having gone to a rough school in inner city London, I have a certain level of fearlessness for the general world. It toughens you. Now the challenges I go through day to day aren’t as big of a deal, compared to how some others might perceive them...You have higher tolerance to things, you can better manage and appreciate stress.” - **Former Brokerage Candidate**

“One of the [applicants] was very honest about their background and what they have overcome, including being excluded at 14 and going to a specialised school, yet going on to have incredible A-levels. Some of the recruiting staff struggled with that honesty, whilst others could see how they have overcome difficulties and deserve an opportunity. This is what set them apart and was unique. A query from a sticky client is nothing compared to that.”
- **Employer**

Young people further explained that the source of their resilience is the ability to remain optimistic about different situations, and taking ownership of reacting and responding to events to influence the outcome:

“I always believed even if school can be bad, you can take something positive from it. You have to be more level-headed with yourself and focus on what YOU can do, because the environment can’t do it for you.

“When applying for work experience I was aware of the situation I was in and I knew I couldn’t let the [negative] cycle around me continue. I needed to compensate for the environmental pressure, and prioritise surrounding myself with people that are positive influences. That’s a skill I learnt quite young that paid off over the years. It’s a lot of pressure because it’s down to me. I don’t allow myself to say, ‘Oh, it’s just because I was put in the wrong team.’, when something doesn’t go the way I want.” - **Former Brokerage Candidate**

Personal costs of developing strengths through disadvantage

Young people contributing to this research were invariably humble about their experiences, pointing out the privilege they did have, be that a supportive family environment, or the fortune of getting into a “good” school. But they also spoke honestly about the personal costs of having to cope with the challenges brought on by their backgrounds and the bias they face as a result, and expressed hope for change for the next generation of young people like them:

“You internalise your trauma to the point when it becomes your strength. I was given a chair that was a bit crooked, but I didn’t want to be the person who complains, and [instead wanted to be the person who] makes the best of opportunity. We try our hardest to just make the best of the situation.

“It’s akin to survivor’ guilt, because I would feel lots of regret if I was given the opportunity from The Brokerage and I didn’t make the most of it. I want to do the best job and leave a lasting impression. So, it’s better for the next person they hire from an underprivileged background.” - **Former Brokerage Candidate**

The acknowledgement of strengths rooted in experience of disadvantage is, therefore, not an invitation to freely capitalise on the skills and mindsets that these experiences can help advance. Nor is this report intended to be a 'business case', justifying why underrepresented young people should be employed as a way of improving the bottom line. Instead, it's an opportunity for employers to become aware of how challenging circumstances can become a source of strengths and reframe how less-advantaged young people are viewed by others in the organisation.

Specifically, employers can help their managers contextualise young people's skills during assessment and selection, and foster an environment where young people feel comfortable to share the full range of their relevant experience. The next chapter describes these and other steps employers need to take to create a more inclusive recruitment process.



What can employers do?

Few employers would disagree that socioemotional skills and qualities - such as resilience, drive, a growth mindset or emotional intelligence - are valuable in the workplace. According to the latest Employer Skills Survey, lack of self-management skills was partly responsible for about half of hard-to-fill vacancies (52%), and lack of team working ability - for about a third (34%).^[26] But, we also know that not all employers are effective at designing the recruitment process to prioritise and assess these strengths.

Over the past decade, organisations have begun applying so-called strength-based approaches in their talent and performance management. These approaches seek to identify and develop employees' strengths as a path to increase their productivity, rather than seeking out and correcting their weaknesses.

Yet, this thinking has not been consistently applied to shine a light on the strengths and potential of young people that have been primarily defined by their experience of disadvantage. The existing research means that wider society is much more aware of the negative impacts of growing up in challenging circumstances, rather than the strengths that this experience can help develop. In the words of one employer interviewed for this report:

"It's nothing about them being disadvantaged. They are advantaged in so many ways, but they don't realise it themselves because they didn't have the opportunities." - Employer

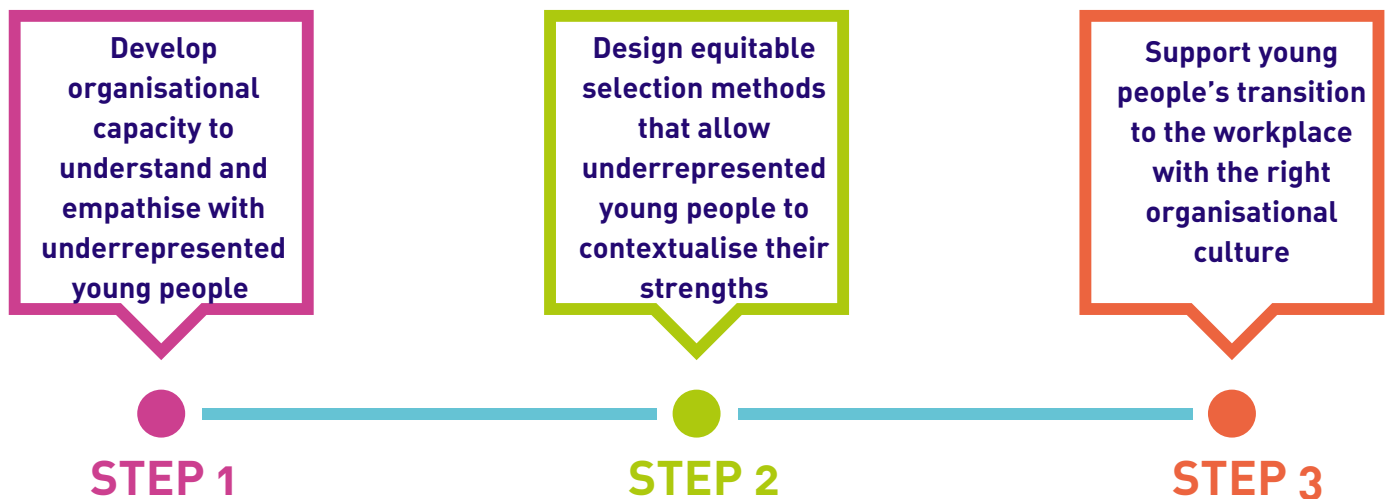
Negative perceptions of underrepresented young people can affect both individual recruitment decisions, as well as the recruitment approach as a whole. At an individual level, this can mean, for example, that hiring managers judge a young person's ability on the type of university they attended or the extra-curricular activities they did or did not do, filtering out candidates that don't fit with their perception of achievement. At the organisation-wide level a bias towards privately educated, middle class candidates can inform decisions on how a job is described, where it is advertised or the assessment and selection methods used, making a role appear less attractive or even unattainable to young people from underrepresented backgrounds.

Not only do these approaches limit access to a wider pool of talent for employers, unsuccessful experiences of the job application and selection process can also create and/or reinforce the negative beliefs in young people that they are not "good enough" and these jobs are not for people like them, causing them to abandon their career ambitions.

Based on recommendations from young people and employers who engaged with the early findings of this research, Figure 2 presents a three-step approach to a more inclusive recruitment process, from how job opportunities are positioned and described, to selection methods, to ensuring young people thrive within the organisations once they join.

[26] Winterbotham, M., Kik, G., Selner, S., Menys, R., Stroud, S., Whittaker, S., & Hewitt, J. H. (2020). Employer Skills Survey 2019. Department for Education.

Figure 2: Steps towards a more inclusive recruitment process



Step 1: Develop organisational capacity to understand and empathise with underrepresented young people

In order for individuals and organisations to see young people from underrepresented backgrounds for their strengths and potential, rather than the disadvantages they have experienced, companies must start by addressing the negative stereotypes and bias held (consciously or unconsciously) about less-advantaged young people.

Whilst conventional Unconscious Bias training has been shown to be ineffective in changing biased behaviour[27] and in some cases leading to more discrimination[28], there are enhanced approaches that have been shown to be effective. These programmes provide employees with information that contradicts stereotypes; allows them to connect with people whose experiences are different from theirs; and take place over a longer period of time, all leading to increased motivation to be inclusive.[29]

In addition, the importance of empathy in leadership and its connection to behaviour, is well established. Empathy enables us to connect with others in a real and meaningful way[30], we have less empathy for those who are different to us and are likely to treat them less favourably as a result.[31] Therefore it is important for employers to grow organisational capacity to empathise with experiences of young people who have faced disadvantage: to see and understand their frame of reference, to appreciate what it might feel like to go through and to live with the impacts of those experiences. Empathy is shown to be positively linked to ability to recognise ethical issues in decision-making (such as recruitment from underrepresented communities).[32]

[27] Forscher, P.S., Lai, C.K., Axt, J.R., Ebersole, C.R., Herman, M., Devine, P.G. and Nosek, B.A., 2019. A meta-analysis of procedures to change implicit measures. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 117(3), p.522.

[28] Kalev, A., Dobbin, F. and Kelly, E., 2006. Best practices or best guesses? Assessing the efficacy of corporate affirmative action and diversity policies. *American sociological review*, 71(4), pp.589-617.

[29] Gino, F. and Coffman, K., 2021. Unconscious Bias Training That Works Increasing awareness isn't enough. Teach people to manage their biases, change their behavior, and track their progress. *Harvard Business Review*, 99(5).

[30] McKee, A., 2016. If you can't empathize with your employees, you'd better learn to. *Harvard Business Review*.

[31] Gino, F. and Coffman, K., 2021. Unconscious Bias Training That Works Increasing awareness isn't enough. Teach people to manage their biases, change their behavior, and track their progress. *Harvard Business Review*, 99(5).

[32] Human Change Agency. (2019). Empathy: the Neglected Superpower The role of empathy in leadership decision making.

Furthermore, and critical to improving outcomes for young people from working class and minoritised backgrounds, 'empathy' is different from 'sympathy' - a sorrow or concern for experiences of others, which is the feeling generated by the prevailing perception of people as 'disadvantaged'. Previous research studying stigma has found that experiencing empathy helps us identify similarities and feel closer to people who we initially perceive to be different to ourselves. [33]

Through this understanding and empathy, organisations will be better equipped to design and implement equitable and inclusive recruitment practices aimed at allowing underrepresented young people to succeed during the recruitment process and beyond.

Recommendations

- Recruitment teams, hiring managers and other influential decision makers should be supported with training and experiences that serve to counteract stereotypes of underrepresented young people and provide opportunities for connection to build understanding and empathy. Studies show that this can be done effectively through training and workshops that highlight examples of less-advantaged people who have achieved success within relevant industries.
- Directly expose employees to real-life talented young people with relevant career aspirations. To achieve this, companies can host workshops and insight days as well as longer term relationship building opportunities such as mentoring, work experience and internships, the latter of which allow for larger numbers of employees to benefit from interaction and relationship building over a sustained period of time.
- Supplement initiatives designed to encourage interaction with training and other programmes that raise awareness amongst employees of the systemic inequalities and barriers that underrepresented people face.
- For deeper engagement, emotional intelligence and perspective-taking training can help individuals put themselves in the shoes of less-advantaged young people and better understand the impacts of their lived experience.
- Another way to gain a fresh perspective and learn is by joining and supporting communities and platforms that bring together people from diverse backgrounds.
- Host group discussions and workshops amongst employees which can help individuals learn about others' views and experiences.[34]

[33] Batson, C. Daniel, Polycarpou, Marina P., Harmon-Jones, Eddie, Imhoff, Heidi J., Mitchener, Erin C., Bednar, Lori L., Klein, Tricia R., Highberger, Lori. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol 72(1), Jan 1997, 105-118

[34] Gino, F. and Coffman, K., 2021. Unconscious Bias Training That Works Increasing awareness isn't enough. Teach people to manage their biases, change their behavior, and track their progress. Harvard Business Review, 99(5).

Box 1 below demonstrates how one employer identified and tackled implicit perceptions of disadvantaged young people in recruitment.

Box 1: Case Study A

“When I joined, we outsourced many of our entry-level roles, and the workplace experiences we did run were generally offered to staff members' children, or clients' children. We were only ever getting the same kind of talent through - the people with previous knowledge or experience of insurance. Our recruitment approach had to change to ensure we attract and capture a different kind of applicant at the earliest possible stage.

“The first thing we did was put applicants' education and experience into context, to ensure we don't oversee someone talented because of how the environment around them impacted their achievements. We looked at 50 CVs to decide whom to interview, and of those 44 applicants came from [schools and places] we've never heard from before.

“We also started using a virtual interviewing platform to be able to see more candidates at the interview stage, and be able to reflect on their responses in light of what we learnt about their socioeconomic backgrounds. We watched back [the interview recordings] from that perspective and ensured that line managers are much more aware of the socioeconomic side of things.

“To address bias, we trained everyone on EDI, including on managing unconscious bias. This is to make sure that candidates can talk about examples of strengths they developed in their personal life as evidence of competency. So that if candidates are willing to share these experiences with us, we are not unfair in judging them negatively because of their background or the way the example is presented. We asked managers to look for the advantage instead of the disadvantage.

“Having worked with The Brokerage, it is refreshing to be hiring people who don't have the experience or privilege of knowing about the industry. This means we have a new perspective on how to appeal to candidates and clients who don't know about us. And many of our managers have become passionate about mentoring and developed their own skills.”

Step 2: Design equitable selection methods that allow underrepresented young people to contextualise their strengths

Research suggests that recruitment design is the single most important intervention to have an impact on eradicating bias and unequal outcomes. Therefore, a vital step for employers who wish to move to a strengths-based approach as a design principle for their recruitment practices, is to review all stages of existing processes to identify implicit barriers and biases.

To support the recruitment of underrepresented talent, there are number of changes that can be implemented ranging from how jobs are presented and advertised - i.e., removing professional 'jargon' and non-essential requirements from job descriptions, investing in early outreach to underrepresented communities, limiting employee referral schemes, and insisting and incentivising recruiters (if used) to provide diverse shortlists. However, while we would encourage these practices, many of these interventions focus on the top of the recruitment pipeline, increasing the chances that underrepresented candidates apply for roles, but these steps alone do not support their chances of being successfully selected.

Challenging the status quo in recruitment also means having to change organisational reference points on what 'good' looks like. Lack of diversity within the organisation, as well as limited expertise in hiring candidates from underrepresented backgrounds can result in young people not being taken seriously or misunderstood during the selection process. Worse, some employers avoid acknowledging candidates' life experiences completely, not knowing where to start.

Similarly, young people from underrepresented backgrounds know only too well that references to their background can unhelpfully highlight the differences between them and hiring managers, often side-stepping these topics in applications and interviews:

"It's difficult [talking about the full range of your experiences] because there is an undertone of favouritism. In job interviews I choose to draw on examples from professional life, which means I'm "code switching" – I use words I won't use with my peers, I don't talk about my background." - **Current Brokerage Candidate**

As a result, the recruitment process is impoverished - both through lack of employers' knowledge on how to meet individual applicants' needs and talk about differences with sensitivity, and through young people's lack of confidence to relate their lived experience to the skills and qualities that employers are looking for.

In contrast, employers who can recognise that the diversity of experience is what makes up an individual and find ways to embrace differences during recruitment will have a far more nuanced picture of candidates' ability to inform their assessment, like in one example shared by an interviewee:

"At the time I was interviewing for this job, rap culture in the UK was growing. Artists were coming up from similar socioeconomic backgrounds to mine, telling their story of growing up in London. During the interview I was able to speak to that from my personal perspective, and provide examples in the interview that were very specific to the challenge the business was experiencing. I had a background in mathematics and economics like many other applicants, but I was also the only person of colour, and was able to pitch an idea for an artist to the marketing team speaking from a first-hand perspective. Immediately I was in an elevated position." - **Former Brokerage Candidate**

Even when employers are interested in the applicants' strengths and potential, they need assessment methods that are effective at eliciting and assessing these qualities, and acknowledge the diverse needs and experiences of the candidates.

Most selection methods are aimed at progressively eliminating unsuitable candidates to facilitate a hiring decision. To ensure a consistent and fair approach during recruitment, employers might favour methods that allow comparing candidates dispassionately and objectively. Yet, these very methods may mean that many underrepresented young people, who are likely to have less access to practice tests and networks that can coach them through the process, will not even get a chance to demonstrate their strengths to employers.

Even if they do get to the interview stage, young people face a host of other barriers, as they might not look, speak, or behave in a way that fits the typical employee profile. Whilst many organisations are committed to challenging the potential biases among their hiring managers, they may still assess candidates against their 'cultural fit'. Of course, employers want to make sure that they employ people whose values are aligned with the ones of the organisation, to avoid in-work conflict and see greater engagement among their staff. However, there is a risk that hiring managers look for familiarity when deciding what counts as talent that 'fits'[35]. Since less-advantaged young people are likely to be interviewed by managers from a more privileged background, they are also likely to be assessed on experiences they did not have an opportunity to have, as described by one employer:

"Once we changed our recruitment strategy and started seeing candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds, we also realised that managers were better at connecting with people who went to the same university or followed the same football team. We had to work hard to change that, train managers on being consistent in asking questions and assessing responses."

- Employer

As well as ensuring consistency there is also an issue about how young people are encouraged to talk about themselves. The Brokerage Candidates participating in this research were unanimous in their desire to bring their whole selves to the recruitment process, discussing how employers could best appreciate the merits of candidates' lived experience. They agreed that corporates must seek a balance of creating space for candidates to share such experiences, yet not forcing questions about it, 'where it doesn't fit'.

For these young people, experience of disadvantage is simply a context in which their skills and mindsets develop, not a feature or a quality in its own right. The application process and interview questions can best reflect that by continuing to focus on testing skills and attitudes relevant to the specific role, but ensuring that applicants are comfortable including their lived experience when they present themselves to the employer.

[35] Ashley, L. (2010). Making a difference? The use (and abuse) of diversity management at the UK's elite law firms. *Work, Employment and Society*, 24(4), 711-727.

This approach supported the shared sentiment from research participants regarding the importance of authenticity in corporate messages and approach, pointing out that organisational commitment to increasing diversity and representation is one of the things they consider in a potential employer. When researching companies Brokerage Candidates told us that they look for consistency between the overarching equity, diversity and inclusion statement and strategy and their actual experience of the different recruitment stages. 'Signals' of authenticity might include visible diversity across the organisation (for example, among the senior leadership team or on the hiring panel), types of questions asked in the application materials, as well the way managers react to responses and examples that draw on experience of growing up disadvantaged.

Recommendations

- When asking questions as part of the interview process hiring managers could **emphasise to candidates that examples could draw on life experiences** - whilst being mindful to assess the level of skill, not the context in which it was developed.
- Similarly, any **questions about personal experiences should clearly relate to the skills and qualities required for the role**, to avoid coming across as a tick-box exercise.
- One practice frequently mentioned by employers working with the Brokerage is using **scenario-based interviews and assessment centres** to appreciate a candidate's potential. Rather than drawing on examples from previous experience, these approaches invite candidates to imagine what they would do in situations that model a typical workplace challenge. Performance in situational interviews has been shown to be a good predictor of on-the-job performance[36], and the method could be particularly effective at capturing the kinds of socioemotional strengths that underrepresented young people bring.
- Consider **using games and team working tasks** during recruitment to enable candidates to demonstrate their skills, creativity and potential in action. The Brokerage young people agreed that they felt much more empowered when asked to do presentations or tackle scenario-based tasks to demonstrate their skills, compared to completing assessments focused on previous experience or psychometric tests that typically look for 'the right' answer.
- To ensure fairness and invite diverse perspective during the recruitment process employers also highlighted the importance of a **highly structured approach** for assessment, with required **competencies pre-defined and understood by the hiring team**, and - in some cases - having a **standardised bank of questions** that managers could choose from, with each question linked to a specific competency being tested.
- Moreover, **diversity of the team shaping the recruitment process, as well as application review and interview panels** can support contextualising the experiences and examples shared by the candidates.

[36] Latham, G. P., & Sue-Chan, C. (1999). A meta-analysis of the situational interview: An enumerative review of reasons for its validity. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 40, 56-67.

Box 2 below demonstrates how one organisation has taken a holistic approach to making assessment centres more inclusive, considering both the content of the assessment questions as well as manager awareness and behaviours.

Box 2: Case study B, best practice at Newton

“Our one-day assessment centre consists of a blitz interview and a group activity. We are now giving the candidates the information about what will be expected of them on the day, and this information explains the multiple things we look at.

“As hiring managers we look at the person as a whole. For example, we consider experiences and interests outside of work that signal what skills and attitudes they might bring. We are also looking not just at the response, but also the interaction to assess their skills in working with other people, how proactive they are. We have removed any questions about previous work experience, focusing instead on school life and things outside of school.

“Our central business administration team sets the questions that are closely linked to our organisational values (such as integrity and passion for excellence), but are phrased in a way that resonates with young people’s level of experience and are open, so they can draw on any example that is relevant. These questions are shared with the candidates in advance. As managers, we can select which questions we ask on the day.

“[One of the candidates we interviewed] was rejected by every other apprenticeship scheme. By the time he got to us he had nothing to lose, and spoke with honesty about his experiences. With the interview format - a presentation about himself, a few formal questions, and quick-fire questions, such as “Who would you have for your ideal dinner party?” - he felt like we were trying to get to know him rather than judge him by formal qualifications and personality match. It made him feel that this is a company he’d like to work for. When you’re 18 that’s a rare feeling, you [are lucky] to be offered a job.

“We also provide written feedback to candidates, so that we as a hiring team can collectively reflect on the quality of our decision, and the candidate can learn about themselves - even if they are unsuccessful this time.”

Step 3: Support young people’s transition to the workplace with the right organisational culture

The true measure of an inclusive recruitment process is whether underrepresented young people thrive in the workplace after being offered a role. Given the challenges of attracting young people to roles that they don’t perceive to be ‘for them’, young people successful in securing jobs are unlikely to immediately feel like they fit in. One of The Brokerage’s Alumni reflected on why they ultimately decided to leave the industry they initially started in:

"I had a positive experience of recruitment. At the interview I wasn't concerned by the background of people who interviewed me, as they viewed me for who I am. But the industry didn't catch up to where the company was. When I looked across the floor in the underwriting space, there was a lack of [visible] diversity. If I had to spend 60-80% of my time in that sphere – I wouldn't want to be there. That was the key reason I didn't feel the insurance sector was for me: I didn't want to be the only black person who works in this company or this sector."

- Former Brokerage Candidate

Turnover of new hires due to a lack of fit should be a concern for employers from the start - else their efforts to attract and hire underrepresented young people will not result in an increased organisational diversity. But the same lack of diversity makes it difficult to help those from underrepresented communities feel they belong in the workplace. The Brokerage's young people described how the 'code switching' continues after the interview - in changing their appearance, using a different 'workplace voice', or eating lunch alone to avoid questions about their traditional foods; effectively behaving in the image of a typical employee of organisations they worked in.

These differences and everyday habits contribute to underrepresented young people feeling like imposters in the workplace - a theme that resonated across many interviews. And, they reinforce the distance between different groups of staff, limiting opportunities for knowledge exchange and mutual learning, for harnessing the strengths that underrepresented young people bring.

Recommendations

- Organisations should take care to not stop at the point of offering young people jobs, and consider ways to facilitate their transition into the workplace, helping them build meaningful and mutually beneficial connections with the rest of staff.
- Employers working with the Brokerage have been successfully using reverse mentoring as a way to help staff understand different perspectives. This approach helps young people develop networks and clarify career opportunities, and find professional sponsors. Meanwhile, senior leaders benefit from learning about and empathising with lived experience, having a better understanding of how organisation-wide decisions might impact underrepresented groups of staff, perspective employees and customers.
- Another emerging practice is inviting young people to speak at corporate events about their lived experience, as well as reflections on going through recruitment with the company to raise awareness of good practice among hiring and line managers.
- At the same time, there is a need to adopt a strategy for wider culture change, including through establishing clear diversity and inclusion goals and accountability for achieving those, specifying what good looks like at all stages of the recruitment and onboarding process.
- Regular and representative staff surveys can be used to complement objective metrics (such as strength of applicant pipeline and retention), providing insight on barriers and challenges experienced by specific groups in the workplace.

- As well as increasing awareness of equity diversity and inclusion issues across the organisation, employers should seek direct feedback and perspectives from underrepresented young people on how their career offer and application process is perceived and can be enhanced to help attract other people like them. The Brokerage has run a number of focus groups with young people on behalf of our corporate partners, and the insights they have provided have led to changes that will enhance those organisations' ability to attract and retain underrepresented talent.



Conclusion

The ultimate motivation for The Brokerage to commission this research has been the 83,000 talented young people that we have worked with over the past 25 years. As we have supported them by providing insight and knowledge about the corporate world and given them an opportunity to access professional opportunities, it has always been clear to us that they are more than capable of achieving great things in their careers. And indeed, many of our alumni of gone on to successful careers in the City and beyond, including senior roles at some of the most high profile corporates. However, a quick glimpse at employer diversity data highlights that there is still a lot to be done if these opportunities are to be accessible for all young people from working class backgrounds.

As a social mobility charity, we are keen to add a new perspective to the common narrative around 'disadvantaged' young people - yes, our young people are from working class and in many cases also minoritized ethnic backgrounds, and have faced challenges, but through their lived experiences they have also developed many skills and attributes. While we are certainly not suggesting that the societal obstacles that have contributed to their challenging circumstances shouldn't also be addressed, it is important to recognise these strengths, and that employers in particular pay attention to how they support candidates to share the depth of their skills and experience.

The strengths this report has identified as being rooted in the experience of disadvantage: readiness to learn, desire for excellence, emotional and cultural intelligence, creativity and resilience, are all highly desired by employers, and yet often their recruitment practices and processes are not allowing them to be seen. This means that not only are young people losing out, but employers may be inadvertently overlooking the most talented candidates.

The report has also identified three steps and the corresponding recommendations that employers can undertake to address this, to stop overlooking these advantages. While tweaks to the recruitment and selection processes are an important part of this, there are also wider changes to the culture and capacity of the organisation to empathise and support young people from underrepresented groups that are crucial if long term change is to happen. A fundamental part to all of this is ensuring that the perspective of young people is understood and considered at every stage and as a charity, in response to this research, we are in the process of developing a suite of programmes and services that will help corporates to do just this, via our 'Changemaker' offer. Ultimately, it is long term changes we need to see if we are to achieve workplaces that are truly inclusive and young people's voices should be part of that process. Once that happens, then a world where a young person's ability and aspiration alone determine their career path becomes possible.

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We believe in equal access to opportunity irrespective of background or race, and talented young people getting the jobs they deserve in a world where their ability and aspiration alone determine their career path.

For 25 years we have supported less-advantaged young people achieve their career potential; providing opportunity and helping them take their first step into a professional career. We also work with employers to drive a culture shift in the workplace, helping them make meaningful change and include diverse talent irrespective of background or race.

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