



SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Early Careers Virtual Roundtable

A YEAR IN REVIEW - 2020 TO 2021

No. 9

Thursday 14th
January 2021
10am - 11:30am

Overview

The new year often brings an opportunity to turn over a new leaf and focus on new priorities. With the pandemic still ongoing, however, the next roundtable in the series became a platform to discuss the learnings and approaches organisations could take into 2021.

Would blended approaches to learning and working replace the now common 'virtual'? Would candidate attraction grow with an end to the virus in sight? How would future learners be engaged with?

Attendees of the ninth roundtable included:



Key points



The beginning of lockdown measures last March presented organisations with unprecedented challenges. Many of the first roundtables we held were filled with questions, and uncertainty on how to take candidate pipelines virtual. Some of those questions still persist, but with almost a year of experience, survival, and in some situations, growth it was time to look back on the last 10 months so that we could all look forward to the next.

1

The notion of 'Stop. Start. Continue.' started the discussion with some of the attendees being open with fact that they were almost certainly not returning to face-to-face meetings or working until the start of 2022. Protecting staff, saving money and time, and also simplifying logistics were all valid reasons for this. It was hoped for some that a blended approach could be utilised, combining the 'best of both' in virtual and face to face but it was hard to put a timeline on this given the current circumstances.

2

Virtual assessment centres and work experience were also likely to stay as they are too, unless a role requires access to the work site. Candidate engagement had been sufficient since moving to mostly virtual practices, but a blended approach could work well too. It was understood that many roles benefit from in-person experience and that these were likely to return to the workplace before others.

3

Many organisations have had to adapt entry requirements to be 'more realistic' in line with the changing exam grading protocol. For some it was an opportunity to amend entry requirements as a whole, understanding that not all of what they were asking for was relevant anymore, or at least could be achieved in other ways (UCAS points).

4

Generally, it was accepted by attendees that grade screening is still an uncertain area and that a strategy would develop as the year plays out, whether that is the introduction of more lower-level training programmes, the review of soft skills and organisational fit, or simply being less specific about subject grades required.

5

For many of the attendees, the government kickstart programme was of prime importance to their candidate attraction strategy in 2021. The programme is said to offer many new routes to hiring diverse and capable talent. But most importantly there is take-up because it is the right thing to do.

6

Despite the widespread interest in Kickstart, however, there is said to exist many barriers to organisations getting involved. From the costs associated with paying national living wage, food subsidies and technology, to the red tape associated with organisational involvement in the programme. Some attendees have positions and teams ready to go, but are being hindered by the necessary applications.

2021 Stop. Start. Continue.



Reflecting on a year of mostly virtual recruitment practices, it seemed many attendees were in acceptance them continuing for the time being. Where this wasn't possible, or where office-based learning was beneficial, a blended approach of virtual and non-virtual working would be a likely focal point for the future. On the whole, it wouldn't be until 2022 that organisations look to hire and employ in person, however.

The conversation



The topic started off with an honest view that face-to-face meetings are likely not to even be considered in the workplace until 2020. One attendee explained that with the safety of their employees and learners paramount, it simply wasn't appropriate to consider these meetings at this time. To add to this, with the resources and peace of mind saved by reduced travelling for face-to-face meetings, it didn't make sense to reintroduce them at this stage.

The roundtable agreed but it was also widely accepted that face-to-face meetings do present many benefits, and for some businesses there aren't any alternatives – particular where on-site working is still required. For this reason, a blended approach was agreed as a good idea amongst many attendees who looked forward to a time when this strategy is more accessible.

For one attendee, however, the matter of how they would like to meet, or work was simply out of their hands due to the fact they operate as a consultancy. The way meetings and work must be conducted is largely down to their customer base who make some of the decisions on how they would like to be serviced.

Virtual assessment centres present many of the same challenges and opportunities as face-to-face meetings and working, with the online world presenting more benefits than not. A key positive being that the same level of candidates are still accessible from the computer screen as in the physical domain. For one attendee, virtual work experience had been going particularly well, with candidates demonstrating positive progress and expressing great feedback.

Regardless of what approach to candidate recruitment and learning takes place in 2021, the attendees agreed unanimously that being pro-active in employing it was the key here. Where candidate and business alike face uncertainty, it is the role of the business to create certainty. And for the attendees of this roundtable, that meant choosing a recruitment and learning path and sticking to it.

Candidate Grades

Screening for recruitment



The government's difficulties in measuring candidate grading in 2020, together with their decision to grade candidates by teacher review in 2021 presents many challenges to business. With doubt cast on the accuracy of candidate grading as a denominator of potential, the roundtable was keen to discuss other ways in which quality candidates could be identified and screened for employment.

The conversation



With the grading announcement only just being made by the government, it was hard for one attendee to be sure of how this would affect screening for them. A few other attendees agreed, saying that keeping the candidates engaged and reassured is of high importance in the meantime, until a strategy has been identified.

For other attendees, the situation hasn't changed their candidate screening at all, saying that grades are only and only ever have been an indicator as opposed to the bottom line. It was widely agreed that focussing only on grades can be a massive barrier to accessing capable and diverse talent and so should never lead the recruitment procedure.

Another attendee has taken a more practical approach by planning the introduction of more level 3 apprenticeships. They were in a position to agree that academics is not a sign of an effective candidate, but they do have their place in the selection process. Introducing lower-level apprenticeships simply allowed them to cast their net wider without affecting their current process.

Asking for higher grades than is required to undertake an apprenticeship is probably not the best solution to screening anymore according to one attendee; but they are said to be largely influenced by their associated training provider and what they can accommodate. Regardless, the grade boundary issue might not be a challenge they will face for some time and so more information is needed before conversations with their provider could progress.

More attendees joined the conversation with examples of screening techniques that don't require school grades; UCAS points were achievable for candidates in a number of different ways and offered a good place to start. Another organisation had said that grades are far less effective at determining ability than cultural fit and assessment days for them.

For TheTalentPeople, disparity between grades advertised by candidates and those actually achieved had been identified, calling into question the accuracy of some candidate CVs. Based on findings after integrating with the government grading system, it was recommended that a wide selection of criteria be taken into account and questioned before making hiring decisions.

Overall candidate fit was widely agreed to be a key focus for hiring in 2021. Additionally, providing support for individuals entering a virtual learning and working world was also key, having identified some negative attitudes towards adoption of this style.

Kickstart what will it achieve?



As the roundtable continued to explore what 2021 could offer organisations hungry for talent, the kickstart scheme became part of the core conversation. Of the attendees there seemed to be division, however, between those that had set up and successfully managed to work with kickstart to engage new talent, and those that were struggling with the costs and red tape associated with the programme.

The conversation



The first contributor was keen to get involved in kickstart but wanted to plan so for when a face-to-face environment was possible. This was largely due to the support that would be required by candidates but also because the added benefits of experience that in-person learning offers.

Another attendee agreed, also mentioning that considerable human resource was required to begin kickstart. This was particularly the case with a consortium approach being the preferable route for them. The first priority being to decide which firms would be good choices to make up that consortium.

For an attendee that had made strong headway in beginning Kickstart, their challenge was more around red tape presented by the programme. Having generated around 350 vacancies and put forwards considerable human resource to manage them, they were struggling to become accredited and were lost in the paperwork required to begin such a venture. The government guidelines had been found to be very restrictive for them.

This was entirely contradictory of another attendee, however, who had experience little friction in the creation and filling of their Kickstart vacancies at their organisation. Line Manager training for them had become the biggest priority in being able to provide great training and succession planning. They also communicated a strong consideration for the hidden costs associated with Kickstart, whether this was in providing the necessary technology for candidates to work remotely, feed them, or offer minimum living wage as standard. Others agreed.

It was generally accepted that Kickstart creates a lot of fall-back on the employer and with candidate retention figures not available yet, there was considerable risk to starting. With candidates also 'battle-weary' and tired from the uncertainty the pandemic had created, it was potentially too big-a risk for some.

In conclusion

If you liked what you read, you can access the **last roundtable highlights here**, where we covered candidate attraction and hiring for gender diversity.

You can also **access our resources hub** here to read all our recent insights, events coverage and toolkits available.

If you would like any more information on TheTalentPeople roundtables, please contact Tom or Chris personally on their details below.

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