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SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

**Employer Roundtable**  
The Work  
Environment

**No. 13**

Thursday 13th  
May 2021  
10am - 11:30am

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Overview

We are now on a path out of the pandemic, offices are beginning to reopen, and businesses are evaluating the role of offices in an increasingly hybrid world. With 86% of businesses saying they will not be going back full-time, what does this mean for the hiring process and onboarding experience for early talent candidates?

In this Roundtable event we explored the expectations of candidates versus what businesses are currently able to provide.

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Attendees of the thirteenth roundtable include:



With many more attending...  
Pitney Bowes  
Fujitsu

Transport for London  
RPA  
SMRS

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## Key Points

**1** All businesses are struggling to reconcile the balance between home, work and hybrid working, and how this is best utilised while keeping one organisation and one culture.

**2** Organisations are keen to understand not only the skills that are needed now (which may be transient), those that will be useful long term, and what is not able to be taught right now but is essential for the future.

**3** Remote working has allowed organisations the ability to bring together diverse groups across the country, with barriers such as travel removed.

**4** Pre-boarding is essential to long-term success of candidates and needs to be planned well. Getting sponsorship at senior level is critical, as is getting managers and mentors ready for their new team members.

**5** Organisations need to strike a balance between the business' demands and a flexible approach to working, to accommodate early talent team members. Whether this is through such elements as 'Bring your own technology' or the flexibility to select their own desk equipment.

**6** A blended and individualised approach is needed going forward to ensure each individual feels supported in their chosen role or career, no matter where it takes place.

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# The concept of a hybrid approach to working and the role of offices



Getting the work environment right for employees is just as important as the work they produce. In the right environment, businesses benefit from greater productivity, efficiency and employee satisfaction. With over a year of remote working under our belts, how has this affected the way employees perceive remote working versus office environments? And how are businesses tackling the gap between what young people expect and what is achievable?

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## The conversation



Among attendees of this roundtable, there was a consensus that most established employees enjoy the benefits of working from home and would like to continue remote or hybrid working in the future. But, when asked, younger employees joining and currently within these organisations would prefer to be in the office, for reasons including greater opportunity to learn, the social aspects of work, and struggling with the work-life balance working and living in their bedrooms.

One organisation stated that their apprentices have the desire to shadow other employees and sit with their colleagues in-person, saying it would make them feel more comfortable when asking questions. However, this also needs to be balanced with the apprentices' other needs, including spending less time and money commuting. Another attendee challenged that whilst they know that this is an essential part of the process, how can you create a brilliant and consistent experience for an apprentice if the whole team work in a hybrid model with varying work patterns?

One participant stated that manager involvement was crucial to resolving this issue. If you manage an apprentice and they need to be in a face-to-face environment, it is the manager's responsibility to accommodate this. One organisation is assessing the differences between the type of work that should happen in an office and work that should take place at home. For example, collaborative, practical and coaching activities should be face-to-face, whereas homeworking should be focused on getting through your to-do list. This is helping them to understand and explain to employees what is needed or expected across their organisation.

Most organisations moved their hiring process to entirely virtual during the pandemic, taking advantage of lower costs for attendees to travel to assessment centres, and a much wider talent pool. Attendees stated they would continue with many facets of this new operation, especially as they have had greater engagement and attendance, particularly from diverse and less socially mobile candidates. Despite the predicted 'digital divide' associated with remote working, it seems that barriers such as travel were more likely to hold back these groups in engaging with early careers opportunities before the pandemic.

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Attendees agreed that the approach would need to be both blended and personal when considering the return to the office. One participant stated that there can be a temptation to have a 'one size fits all' approach, especially with apprentices, but that this simply isn't going to work long-term. Their business will be implementing a one-on-one approach to their individual working environment. This is important for mental health and wellbeing too, with many organisations stating they have concerns that the lack of face-to-face interaction isn't allowing them to pick up on non-verbal cues that indicate there could be a problem. To tackle this, one business has set up a mental health forum to encourage awareness and openness about mental health issues across the organisation. These sessions have been well-received by employees, with new hires asking to be included in these sessions during the hiring process. To tackle any feelings of isolation for young new employees, other attendees shared their experiences of creating an online community using Microsoft Teams hubs and social platforms, including Tik Tok and Instagram, to help individuals connect from wherever they are in the country.

The long-term effect of hybrid working on young people is a concern for these participants, with many attendees stating they are concerned whether they are giving young people skills for life. Communication skills were a key point of conversation, discussing what a conversation/presentation/meeting looks like online compared to in a physical environment. One attendee stated young people would have to 'start again' learning a whole new set of skills about how to behave in an office and time management working in a hybrid role.

Ultimately, considering the soft skills people need to be successful in both a virtual and a face-to-face environment will be crucial to the success of organisations.

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# Pre-warm and setting candidates up for success



With candidates selected and preparing for day one, how can business set early careers employees up for success? In this conversation, our attendees discussed how organisations can help employees mentally prepare, as well as plan their physical working environment.

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## The conversation



Communication and building a community before day one was vital for our attendees to keep candidates warm and maximise retention throughout the hiring process. Being virtual enables businesses to bring people together quickly and easily. One organisation sends the details of the apprentices' mentors and buddies before day one, so they can make contact and ask questions that they might not want to ask their manager. Another attendee has found success in running pre-boarding sessions via Zoom. This allows them to do a large group session for all new apprentices with the ability to split into smaller breakout rooms, emulating the experience of a face-to-face onboarding day. Each tailored breakout session is attended by the apprentice, their line manager, and their mentor, allowing them to get to know their support network before joining.

One attendee assesses whether apprentices can complete some 'pre-apprenticeship' work before day one. Getting the essential set-up steps completed gets their apprentices in the right frame of mind before they start, helping them to assimilate with their teams faster.

Preparing candidates extends to their physical work environment too, including aspects such as furniture, technology, and connectivity. Young people are unlikely to have worked from home before, and helping them set up their working environment is a great way to keep them focused on joining the organisation.

Two attendees provide an allowance to new employees to purchase a desk or chair for their homeworking environment from their preferred suppliers. This provides individuals with control over how the equipment fits in with their existing home set-up and provides ergonomically sound equipment reducing any occupational health risks in the future.

When it comes to technology, it seems the expectations of established employers versus apprentices are very different. One attendee stated that whilst most employees are used to being handed a laptop on day one, many young people prefer working on a tablet or their home PC. If they were in the office environment, they might get used to their company-issued technology as everyone else is using it. However, working from home can lead to individuals reverting to using technology they are most comfortable with, which leads to problems with security and keeping data protected. Organisations at the event stated they understand the productivity benefits associated with 'bring your own device' and want to consider this before individuals join their businesses. However, larger organisations feel they may struggle with implementing this while maintaining security.

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Broadband internet accessibility again has been a challenge during the pandemic, especially for employees in remote locations and those who have multiple people using the same connection. One business invested in setting up broadband internet connectivity for all employees to ensure they could work from home effectively during the pandemic. Other companies have again had to provide a personalised approach for individuals if they are having internet problems. Before they start, understanding the employees' requirements will set them up for success on their first day, especially if they are attending onboarding activities virtually.

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# Life from day one and candidate onboarding



It is day one and the new employees are ready to hit the ground running. Whilst many businesses will have prepared them for the environment they will be currently working in, what does the onboarding journey look like when that environment changes? How do we prepare young people for the differences in home and office working?

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## The conversation



Within this discussion, attendees were keen to delve further into the differences between working from home and working in an office environment and how each one affects the employee onboarding experience.

Organisations whose apprentices joined pre-pandemic have developed their virtual working practices, with the apprentices and established employees adapting together. However, other attendees have apprentices whose only experience is working from home, and for them, transitioning into the office environment will feel like starting from day one again. It was widely acknowledged that there is a gap in knowledge between these groups, therefore setting expectations and educating young people about appropriate business etiquette in the various working environments is crucial to their future success in the business.

A number of the businesses who attended are running training on how to present yourself best at work in both virtual and office environments, e.g. dress code, not bringing personal phones to a meeting etc. Attendees are aware that some apprentices haven't had the opportunity to build self-awareness around how they present themselves at work and in an office environment. It is understood to be much easier to learn by doing, or by watching your colleagues, and picking up on desirable/undesirable behaviour. It was widely agreed that businesses must not assume young people know this, and it is the organisation's responsibility to ensure they are explicitly told.

Setting expectations around the use of social media is critical for candidates joining from day one. Social media is a fantastic tool that has revolutionised how we do business when used correctly. If misused, it can also be a huge pitfall for people and companies around the world. One participant has introduced their communications team into their onboarding session to provide training that helps new hires know how to appropriately use internal and external communication platforms and the importance of presenting their best selves online.

For many, mentoring is the most significant factor in a successful onboarding journey. Connecting existing and new apprentices was a common theme, with many employers enabling interaction between both groups from



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pre-boarding all the way throughout their apprenticeship. One attendee stated it was essential to give new hires a 'sense of team, virtually' by being mentored by existing apprentices. Another organisation has found setting up sessions that are not designed for 'work talk' have been successful in keeping candidates engaged and supported throughout their apprenticeship.

Recognising the benefits and the desire of young people to have more time in-person with their colleagues, many of the attendees are keen to start factoring in an office-based section of their onboarding process. One organisation responded that, whilst they would usually have all apprentices gather at their office in central London, they will reintroduce this as apprentices attending their local branch to provide face-to-face interaction on day one. One participant seconded this approach stating their concerns that the welcome for the most recent apprentices has been 'too cold'.

Attendees also agreed that underpinning all practical aspects of the onboarding journey, ensuring management teams are prepared and upskilled to manage apprentices is the most crucial factor in successful onboarding. Several attendees are running management best practice sessions to ensure managers of current and new apprentices can share knowledge and maximise the success of the apprentice onboarding.

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### More from the roundtable...

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You can also catch up on our previous discussions via our [resource hub](#).

If you're looking for more in-depth insights into candidate behaviour, we're pleased to be able to offer you our own research into the world of early talent – read more [here](#).