



IMPROVING YOUNG PEOPLE'S INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE - **WHAT WORKS?**

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The next 12-18 months present a critical opportunity to improve employment outcomes for young people, as the government introduces a range of initiatives to improve rates of worklessness and insecurity:

Reforms to the age people can claim health-related benefits aim to increase the numbers of economically inactive young people participating in training and the workforce;

A new Youth Guarantee commits to providing opportunities for training, an apprenticeship or help to find work for all young people aged 18 to 21;

The Employment Rights Bill seeks to ensure employers are offering better paid, more secure jobs for young people – including measures to increase the minimum wage for young people, ban exploitative zero-hours contracts, and provide day-one employment rights that could enhance job security, balance and protection.

However achieving these goals will rely on the actions of employers, many of whom are facing rising costs and an uncertain economic outlook.

In June 2025, Timewise and the Youth Futures Foundation brought together employers from diverse sectors* to explore their ideas and reflections on the role of employers in supporting more young people to access good jobs and careers. This briefing note sets out why employer engagement in this agenda is critical, the challenges employers face at organisational level, and what they can do to recruit and retain more young people. We also set out implications for wider policy and practice seeking to support change.

*The event included representatives from the construction, gas, transport, logistics, recruitment, culture, sport, early years, social care and local government sectors.



1. Why should employers **support young people** to access and progress at work?

Good quality work supports young people to thrive and contribute at a crucial transition point in their lives. Employers have a key role to play in supporting young people to gain the skills, behaviours and experience they need to navigate the world of work – not all of which can be taught in a classroom. In doing so they are helping to build the workforce of the future for their organisations and sectors.

Over the past four decades, however, employers have become less involved in the recruitment and development of young people entering the labour market for the first time. This is associated with a large increase in the number of young people staying in full-time education, and a parallel decline in opportunities to earn and learn in the workplace for those leaving education.¹

When young people do enter the labour market, they are concentrated in sectors with high levels of

insecure work, most notably distribution, hotels and hospitality. Many spend years cycling in and out of insecure work and unemployment before they find more stable and better paid work – creating long term damage to employment and earning prospects.²

Today almost one in eight (12.5%) young people aged 16-24 years old are not in any form of education, employment or training (NEET).³

There has been a large rise in the number of young people that are economically inactive due to mental health reasons and neurological conditions.⁴

Research commissioned by the Youth Futures Foundation shows insecure employment plays a key role in declining mental health among young people.⁵

Of those in work, nearly three in ten (29%) employees aged 18–20 years report experiencing multiple negative aspects of job quality (measured as low levels of pay, job security, wellbeing, satisfaction and autonomy).⁶

One in eight young workers are on a zero-hour contract, compared to less than one in 40 older workers.⁷

Young people are more likely to work volatile and variable work schedule patterns (a combination of evening, night, and variable hours). Research has shown this results in a higher likelihood of reporting poor health and depressive symptoms at age 50 than for those with stable standard work schedules.⁸



The joint Timewise and Youth Futures Foundation roundtable in June 2025 gathered employers across different sectors to understand the challenges they face in hiring and training young people, and how they may respond to the government's initiatives to improve youth employment outcomes. This discussion is important not only for young people's futures, but for our society and economy. If the UK could match the lowest NEET rate in the OECD, held by the Dutch, we could see an additional 500,000 young people in employment and an increase to UK GDP of £69 billion.⁹

2. What is **stopping employers** from hiring and training young people?

Participating employers agreed that effectively nurturing and developing young people was critical to long-term economic sustainability and viability of firms. The group included sectors that are struggling with high vacancies, structural skills gaps and issues of an ageing workforce. They saw a clear business case for attracting and retaining more young people in their sectors and organisations, and some were already seeking to do so.

However, employers also highlighted some of the challenges of hiring and training more young people in the context of financial pressures and an uncertain economic outlook:

- **Employers noted that the desire for ‘work-ready’ employees** could create hesitancy in investing in young people. Reductions in staff training and development budgets and the need to ‘do more with less’ is exacerbating a focus on workers that can hit the ground running, rather than taking the long view of how to meet workforce needs.
- **Even when organisational commitment to hiring and training young people is strong**, individual managers and teams are not always willing to do so – due to a combination of time and capacity constraints, management skills gaps, negative perceptions and unrealistic expectations of young people.
- **There were concerns that managers would need more support** to be able to support young workers with mental health issues – such as guidance on how to discuss and manage conditions with them.
- **Existing approaches to hiring and onboarding are not always geared towards younger and less experienced candidates** – with heavy reliance on ‘tried and tested’ recruitment channels, selection methods and induction. This limits employers’ ability to attract and retain young people.
- **A perceived mismatch between dominant workplace cultures and the values**, needs and expectations of younger workers may be affecting retention – particularly in lower paid sectors and those with high numbers of site- and shift-based staff, where employers said they were finding it difficult to meet higher expectations for greater flexibility and balance at work.
- **There was limited awareness and understanding of measures in the Employment Rights Bill** on zero-hours contracts and flexible working and how these may relate to young people in particular. Research from the United States, where similar measures were introduced at the State-level, found that a lack of employer awareness and response limited the effectiveness of regulations to improve employment practices.¹⁰
- **The insights from employers at the roundtable suggest this could also be an issue in the current UK context.** This highlights a need for more evidence about what good looks like when it comes to hiring and retaining young people, and that more support and encouragement may be needed to ensure employers engage proactively with efforts to improve pay, job security and flexible working for young people and other workers.



3. Meeting young people's expectations and needs in the workplace: **what does 'good' look like?**



Research by Workwhile supported by Youth Futures Foundation explored how young people define good work, using the words of young people most affected by unequal access to it.¹¹ The definition goes beyond decent pay to focus on an organisational culture that nurtures and develops young talent:

“ Good work means feeling valued, fulfilled and supported. It means being respected and treated fairly in a workplace that is diverse and inclusive, where there is open and honest communication and decent pay. Everyone should have a voice.

“ Good work is done to a high standard and gives you a sense of achievement. It happens in a place where you can make change happen. Good work protects your health and wellbeing. You're excited to tell your friends and family about good work, not because they ask but because you're proud of it.

Employers across different sectors recognised the importance of purposeful work to many young people, the desire to feel valued, and to have opportunities to learn and progress. Participants discussed that, to attract and retain more young people, organisations need to be vocal about their organisational vision and purpose, to be transparent about their policies and opportunities, and to respond to young people's desire to balance work with wider interests and commitments. Echoing findings from surveys with employers, there was a perception that young people placed greater weight on positive approaches to diversity, inclusion and work-life balance than previous generations.¹²

The discussion highlighted a range of existing good practice and ideas among employers about how to hire and retain more young people.

HIRING & ACCESS TO WORK

Recommendations from the discussion suggest that employers can:

- **Support young people's knowledge of career pathways** – including through work experience and careers events with local schools, colleges and universities – to ensure young people have information about the range of jobs and careers available, including people from underrepresented and minoritised communities who may lack networks providing knowledge and insights into different sectors and occupations.
- **Invest in dedicated skills and training pathways for new entrants** that offer support to socialise young people into the world of work, as well as gain skills and experience in the role.
- **Be vocal about the organisation's vision and values**, and transparent about the policies and benefits available for staff – including access to flexible working, the support young people can expect in the role, and development opportunities.
- **Ensure job descriptions use simple, accessible language** and provide a clear description of what the job will look like day-to-day to ensure a good fit with the reality of the role.
- **Advertise and promote widely in places where young people are likely to be looking**, rather than standard recruitment sites – including local and peer networks.
- **Tailor the recruitment process to score attitudes and skills**, rather than experience – moving away from CVs and including questions about how candidates have overcome challenges.
- **Include practical elements as part of the selection process**, rather than traditional interviews alone, and consider paid job trials.
- **Ensure recruitment panels are diverse** and provide information about the recruitment process in advance, including the questions that will be asked, to support people with less experience and different learning styles to perform to the best of their ability.
- **Provide unconscious bias training for recruiting managers** and encourage them to look past lack of experience and focus on training people for the role.



RETENTION

Recommendations from the discussion suggest that employers can:

- **Invest in line managers to shift workplace culture** – ensuring they have the time and capacity to support new entrants and the skills to connect with their workforce; provide effective feedback; and support mental health and wellbeing.
- **Provide wraparound support for new entrants** – and, where relevant, consider the balance between in-person versus online onboarding processes. Employers felt that it can be harder to integrate and support young people if lots of senior managers are working from home, and highlighted the need for new staff to connect with their managers, colleagues and peer groups in person as well as online.
- **Provide clear line of sight to different career pathways** and skills development for new entrants – including those that are not necessarily linear through to management.

- **Support young people to integrate socially**, connect with colleagues and learn. Ideas included mentoring and coaching programmes (including peer-to-peer and ‘reverse’ mentoring), regular training, and the benefits of creating cohorts of new entrants (two or more apprentices rather than just one, for example).
- **Create workplace forums and staff networks** (LGBTQ+, young people, racial justice and women’s networks etc) to enable staff to build social connections, bring their whole selves to work, communicate their needs, and contribute to workplace decisions and improvements.
- **Support autonomy and learning** – moving away from task-and-control forms of management and instead aiming to develop leadership, accountability and voice.
- **Co-create what ‘good work’ looks like with young employees** and explore models to support long-term job satisfaction and health – including improvements to job security, greater control over working hours and more flexibility in where, how much and when people work. Communicate the options widely and transparently.

Many of these suggestions are reinforced in research about how to improve outcomes for young people from minoritised communities and create a more diverse workforce. Youth Futures Foundation’s 2024 Discrimination and Work survey found that almost half of young people from an ethnically minoritised background have experienced prejudice or discrimination when seeking to enter the workplace. Of those who have faced discrimination, seven in ten (70%) have considered changing jobs or the industry they work in.¹³ The report calls on employers to review recruitment practices to eliminate discrimination and bias, ensure jobs are being advertised in places where young people can access them, offer guaranteed work experience placements, and train line managers to support an inclusive culture. Youth Futures Foundation’s recent research with the Institute of Employment Studies on how to engage employers to support equality, diversity and inclusion also noted the importance of equipping line managers to support marginalised employees.¹⁴

More widely, employers at the roundtable suggested that place- and sector-based ecosystems could support more employers to hire and train young people. Some had positive experiences of existing schemes run by local authorities, employment providers and/or group training organisations. They highlighted

the role of these intermediary organisations in supporting young people’s awareness of different opportunities through local careers programmes and good information, advice and guidance services; ensuring a good job-person fit when applying for a role; providing guidance for employers on good practice; and working alongside employers to support the development of young people’s skills, behaviours and knowledge in the workplace.



4. Questions requiring further investigation

Improving employment prospects for young people requires action to improve levels of insecurity in the sectors where young people are concentrated, as well as increasing the number of opportunities for young people in sectors offering better paid and more stable work.

The roundtable highlighted good knowledge and practice of inclusive hiring practices among employers from a range of sectors. The insights into retention of young people mirrored wider research suggesting that this is linked to social integration, a good person-job fit, and the development of a strong connection to the people and the role ('job embeddedness').¹⁵ Youth Futures Foundation is already developing an evidence-base to support good practice in these areas through a series of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs). RCTs are considered the "gold standard" for generating evidence, as randomisation attempts to reduce or remove bias, allowing a rigorous examination of the relationship between an

intervention and an outcome. Over the next three years Youth Futures Foundation will run around 14 RCT's with trailblazing employers to understand the impact of different recruitment and retention practices. These trials aim to develop what really works for both employers and employees, enabling informed decision-making that creates real change for young people.

Employers also highlighted the role of key job quality factors such as autonomy, voice, pay, work-life balance and health and wellbeing in supporting the long-term retention and development of young people. However, the discussion suggested that many sectors, organisations and managers are struggling to reconcile operational realities with higher expectations for flexibility and balance – particularly in sectors with a high proportion of 'frontline' (public-facing and/or site-based) staff.

There was a need for more clear evidence and detail to shape workplace practices in these areas and ensure employers engage positively with measures to improve workers' access to flexible working and job security in the Government's Employment Rights Bill. Given the high levels of insecurity young people experience in the workplace, the role of flexibility and stability on young people's retention rates, health and wellbeing should be a priority for further exploration.



IMPROVING FLEXIBILITY AND STABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE: EXAMPLES FROM THE FRONTLINE

Timewise has worked with employers in health, social care, construction and retail, among others, to support greater 'Shift-Life Balance' for staff, including fair notice periods for shifts, stability from week-to-week, and input into working hours.

Changes have led to better staff motivation and retention. For example, in nursing we worked with NHS Royal Free Hospital to give workers more control over their working patterns and reduce the number of fixed arrangements through self-rostering. Staff turnover reduced from just under 30% to just over 17% after implementing self-rostering on wards. These changes can also improve productivity: UCLH saved six hours on average per roster period for management time after introducing self-rostering.

In the US a randomised control trial (RCT) with the retailer GAP across 28 stores in Chicago and San Francisco found that good scheduling practices had benefits for both the business and workers. The introduction of more stable scheduling offering greater predictability and control over working patterns led to lower stress and better sleep quality for staff. The changes also reduced staff turnover and improved sales. The report recommends 'more experimental studies of new scheduling strategies by firms, including initiatives to increase hourly workers' input into their schedules, promises of minimum hours, and protection from mandatory overtime'.¹⁶

Trialling approaches to fairer scheduling in sectors like retail, hospitality or health in the UK could make a major contribution to the evidence base on how best to improve job quality, health and mental health outcomes for young people.



Key takeaways for policymakers include the importance of:

Supporting greater job security as a foundation to support young people's transitions into work;

Tackling negative perceptions of young people among employers and supporting them to adapt standard hiring practices;

Promoting good practice, including on flexibility and stability in the workplace;

Raising awareness of the new initiatives and legislation in order to mitigate a lack of engagement and response.



Employers: can you help test new approaches?

Are you an employer seeking to attract and retain more young people? Do you want to showcase leadership on a priority area for government?

Help us test new approaches that improve long-term employment and health prospects for young people:

Youth Futures Foundation is setting up trials with employers over the next three years to explore 'what works' when it comes to supporting young people to gain and sustain good work. To find out more and find out how you can be one of these trailblazing organisations visit: [What works for recruitment and retention - Youth Futures Foundation](#).

Timewise bridges the gap between employers and employees to ensure that work works for everyone in today's modern world. Get in touch if you are interested in learning more about good practice or trialing new approaches to scheduling, work organisation and job design that support greater stability, flexibility and balance for young people: info@timewise.co.uk



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- 5 Pierce M, Bai Y, Taxiarchi V, Hugh-Jones S, Abel KM, Patalay P and Demkowicz O, 2025, Understanding drivers of recent trends in young-people's mental health, Youth Futures Foundation.
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- 7 See Office of National Statistics, 13 May 2025, EMP17: People in employment on zero hours contracts – dataset.

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- 9 See Youth Futures Foundation, 27 September 2023, 'Tackling youth unemployment could generate £69bn for UK economy'
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- 13 Youth Futures Foundation, 2024, Discrimination and work: breaking down the barriers faced by ethnically minoritised young people
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Timewise's mission is to create healthy, equitable and inclusive workplaces for all by widening access to good quality, flexible work. We are the UK's leading experts on job design and we tackle barriers to change with both policymakers and employers. Through our research, we evidence the need for good flexible and predictable work to boost the living standards of low and middle earners. We believe good flexible jobs enable employees to gain increased autonomy and control over how much, when or where they work. Through our programmes, we trial practical solutions and scale these through consultancy and campaigns.

www.timewise.co.uk

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Youth Futures Foundation is the national What Works Centre for youth employment, with a specific focus on marginalised young people. We want to see a society where every young person can achieve good work. Our work has two overarching objectives to bring about system change for marginalised young people:

1. To find and generate high-quality evidence to better understand England's youth unemployment and inactivity challenge, and most importantly to learn what solutions work to address this
2. To put evidence into action with policy makers and employers who have the means to make direct impactful change within the system for young people.

We believe that the young people who are most affected by the system must be at the heart of efforts to change it. That is why we meaningfully involve the voices, perspectives and participation of young people experiencing marginalisation throughout our work.

www.youthfuturesfoundation.org

