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Addressing the Early Careers Conundrum:

Employer strategies
to attract and retain
tomorrow's talent



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The specialist skillsets of professionals within STEM have always been in high demand. But with an ever-widening skills gap across UK industries, competition for talent is as fierce as it has ever been. How organisations respond, to preserve and develop talent within their workforce now and for the future is key.

As such, the importance of finding and nurturing the next generation of STEM talent through engaging, impactful early careers initiatives is huge – as is making investments in them and developing the workforce of the future, now.

As we embark on 2025, aside from planned changes to **apprenticeships** and the launch of **Skills England** announced in the Employment Rights Bill and the 2024 Autumn Budget, the UK government is also set to introduce measures to inspire younger people and open avenues into work and future careers. It was recently announced that **subsidised jobs** are being explored to address the number of youths currently not in employment, education or training (NEET), for example.

Engaging with early careers talent isn't without its challenges though. An evolving demographic, difficulty balancing a company's talent requirements and potential budget restrictions, and disparity between skill demand and availability, are all barriers to overcome.

AI is also significantly transforming early talent recruitment, making the process more efficient, personalised and data-driven for employers and candidates alike, while simultaneously raising potential challenges including those around transparency and trust.

So, how can business, HR and procurement leaders tackle the early careers conundrum and create a more sustainable workforce?

Defining early talent

To begin tackling early careers challenges across STEM, first we need to put right the mismatch in terms of how ‘early careers’ is defined. As Darren Topping, Director of Solutions & Insight at Impellam Group recently explained:

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It’s easy to think early careers will mean graduates or school and college leavers, but it doesn’t. Those in this group include anyone starting a new career ladder or role. Some people fall into the trap of thinking of just young fresh-faced graduate with a certain level of education, when what we actually mean is someone starting a new career, regardless of any other element.”

— Darren Topping,
Director of
Solutions & Insight,
Impellam Group



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This sentiment is echoed by our early careers experts across all Impellam brands. Chris Blackburn, Director of Skills Group, added,

If we think about the work we’ve delivered at Impellam under the early careers umbrella, we’ve engaged with prison leavers, those transitioning out of military as well as those moving across sectors. We’ve also collaborated with Lorient to retrain people in digital skills. Every single one of these individuals fall into the early careers category, and employers need to be aware of the full breadth of this demographic to really maximise the opportunities that come with engaging them.”

— Chris Blackburn,
Director of Skills Group



The benefits – and necessity – of engaging with these groups

The current state of play across industries, many of which are coping with the conflicting challenges of high productivity demands and dwindling workforces, is putting emphasis on the need to commit to early careers talent.

As Blackburn explained:

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We're facing low unemployment – the lowest for 40 years – while vacancy rates remain high. The UK lost 350,000 people because of Brexit and by 2032 it's predicted that there will be a million less children in school due to declining birth rates. Workforce sustainability is under threat if employers don't focus on building a thriving early talent community. The fight for these individuals is going to become more intense in the coming years because of where we are as a nation, so getting it right now really is crucial.”

— Chris Blackburn,
Director of Skills Group



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The benefits extend beyond the need for specific skills, though. A drive to make workforces more diverse, to provide career opportunities for all, is high on many agendas. According to SRG Account Director, Laura Docherty, engagement with early careers talent has the power to promote diversity across industries:

For those businesses that really get their early careers talent strategy right, the potential is significant. These individuals are often the changemakers within a business. They bring diversity of thought to the table and they challenge and question the norm, all of which adds significant value to day-to-day business operations.”

— Laura Docherty,
Account Director,
SRG



As such, early careers strategies are being intrinsically linked to EDI, a trend that will no doubt continue well into the future. The benefits of this are multi-fold, also enabling the ability to not only hire the very best talent available but give them every reason to stay with an organisation long-term too.

Employers that are developing the future generation of the workforce will be the ones to hold their loyalty, as Topping, one of our own long standing early careers recruits explained:



Attrition is often a lot lower when you've been involved in bringing someone into the profession or industry. I've been with Impellam 16 years, and you do have a greater sense of loyalty when you start your career with a business and evolve with them. We also can't overlook the sheer value to a business of someone who is built and shaped exactly for your company, versus someone who's not."

How to get it right?

Talking about the objectives and benefits of early careers is simple. Implementing strategies to make the very most of them isn't quite as easy. However, with the right approach, finding, hiring and nurturing the next generation of talent, their potential and skills can lay the foundations for the future of STEM.

Promoting and supporting a shift in mindsets and processes around hiring is a must. Early careers talent will likely not have the skills, experience or possibly the qualifications that would have historically made a candidate stand out from the crowd. Moving to skills-based hiring and assessments can look beyond this, though, as SRG's UK Early Careers & Industrial Placement Programme lead for GSK & ViiV Healthcare, Holly Hall, explained:

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It's important to explore new perspectives when it comes to recruiting and assessing early careers. Employers shouldn't simply focus on the standard CV and cover letter as this can be detrimental to success. There are so many assessment tools, such as gamification, to make your process stand out. We've seen at GSK how breaking down barriers can really work. They're not asking for people to have a set grade or be on track for a certain qualification.

There may be individuals who are fantastic from a technical or potential point of view, but they don't have that support network to help teach them how to write a CV or cover letter, for example. Removing this really opens up that opportunity. Instead, the focus should be on strength-based interviews and asking the right questions, including scenario-based ones, to identify if they truly are passionate about working for the company or in the industry. It does take a shift in mindsets for hiring and recruitment though. You do have to go on a bit of a journey to reshape how applicants are vetted, engaged and interviewed.”

— Holly Hall,
UK Early Careers &
Industrial Placement
Programme Lead, SRG



Timing is also crucial to success. The earlier in the transition process that you engage with early careers talent, the better, particularly as competition for people grows. According to Blackburn, this forward-facing approach has worked well for those firms and sectors that have a strong early careers track record;

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If we look at our best successes in recruit, train, deploy, it's primarily aviation businesses. When a plane is ordered, it takes up to eight years for it to be delivered. That means organisations in this industry must sort their workforce plan a lot further in advance than many other sectors. They are investing now to be able to meet future talent demand in business-critical skillsets.”

— Chris Blackburn,
Director of Skills Group



Considering and shaping the applicant journey is also crucial. Business, HR and procurement leaders are aware of the potentially damaging impact that a negative experience can have on people and, as a result, the future hiring and retention of talent. It is no different with early careers talent. However, given the now complex mix of those that fall into this category, it is imperative to consider tailored approaches to meet the expectations and needs of a broad and diverse pool of people.

Docherty commented:

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Younger demographics often need a lot more support and more hands around them during the recruitment process than someone with prior corporate experience. You may have someone that has never gone through an interview or job application process, so they don't know what to expect, or what good looks like. For these individuals it's important to make sure that you're keeping them fully informed to keep them engaged. What we don't want to see is people drop out because they don't understand what's expected.”

— Laura Docherty,
Account Director,
SRG



AI in early careers hiring

Artificial intelligence is both a tool to make early career resourcing more efficient, and a potential challenge to overcome at the same time. AI is becoming a part of everyday lives both in and out of work, and that extends to the recruitment process.

According to Willo's 2024 Hiring Humans research, employers are broadly open to using the tools themselves, with 45% believing that there's a place for AI in hiring, if used cautiously and ethically. Most talent leaders expect to use, or are already using AI in some way, yet the majority have some concerns about AI's ethical implications and strategic planning. We also know candidates already use AI in the job search and interview process, raising further questions about candidate experience.

While attention is often given to the time saving benefits that AI brings to companies, it can be a useful tool for engaging early careers talent too, as Hall explained:

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For this group in particular, if someone sees that a company isn't using AI itself or is banning the use of it, it could turn candidates off from applying. Data from Arctic Shores shows that 50% of students indicated that they would think a company is behind the times if it banned GenAI while a third wouldn't want to work for the business as a result. It is important to be mindful of how your decision on AI usage will impact your access to talent."

— Holly Hall,
UK Early Careers &
Industrial Placement
Programme Lead, SRG



This particular issue has made headlines, with reports of [accountancy firms](#) banning the use of AI in job applications receiving widespread criticism. While an equilibrium is yet to be found, some of those that make up the early careers demographic are already using AI and expect to longer term. According to regular pulse surveys commissioned by Arctic Shores, use and proficiency of GenAI is rapidly accelerating and 88% of recent graduates use GenAI regularly – up from 73% in October 2023, while 47% expect to use GenAI in the application process not only for tailored applications or CVs, but also for prompts and responses during interviews. From a social mobility perspective, allowing the use of artificial intelligence can also be a support tool, particularly for those with little to no prior experience of CV writing or interviews.

How AI is used in early careers recruitment is an evolving process, but, as Docherty explains, the best starting point is to set clear boundaries;

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We have seen varying levels of acceptance of AI in businesses. Some are completely ruling it out and taking the very strong stance that individuals will be considered to be cheating if they use AI. Then you have others with more of a balanced approach that recognise that people are using AI to some extent. What we need to see is organisations defining very clearly what their level of acceptance is when it comes to using AI in the application process and, indeed, in day-to-day work environments. Until that happens, there will be a potential mismatch and lack of understanding on what's acceptable and what isn't between talent and employers.”

— Laura Docherty,
Account Director,
SRG



Making early careers recruitment work for you

The need for and benefit of a strong early careers talent programme is undeniable, yet many businesses are yet to truly capitalise on the potential of this community. There could be a fear of both the unknown and of being too far behind the competition, but in reality, the majority of companies are in the same position.

Moving the dial in the right direction now is crucial, especially to get ahead of the competition. Planning and implementing early careers strategies can be a tricky navigation, but thankfully there are experts, like Impellam and its supporting brands, that have the knowledge and connections to drive success.





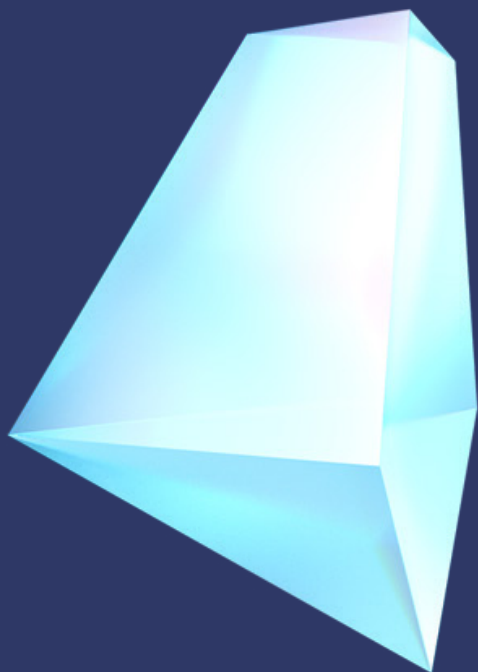
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can accelerate your early
careers recruitment?

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