

Introduction

I am a strong advocate of work experience, having undertaken such opportunities at the end of my compulsory education, an accomplishment which I feel was integral to kick starting my career, being offered a place at the university of my choice, and ultimately a job in a technical role at the forefront of the nuclear industry.

Such is my enthusiasm for the concept, that I have recently taken up a CSR (cooperate social responsibility) coordinator role on top of my day to day job, which involves organising outreach events for the local community as well as helping to coordinate future work experience opportunities for the area.

The knowledge I have learnt from this, along with my own individual recollections and that I have heard from others, of work experience, has allowed me to put together this short narrative on the subject and the key barriers involved with it. This includes;

- What I perceive good quality work experience to be (reflective, challenging and well planned) and the expectations of the young people and businesses involved.
- The main challenges faced by young people wishing to apply to such opportunities (personal connections with industry, not skill, dictating who is successful at applying) and businesses wishing to provide them (lack of funding and perceived value of work experience), and how they could possibly be overcome (implementing a central database of work experience opportunities, and potential funding/levy schemes).

What does “good quality work experience” look like? What do young people and businesses expect to get from it?

Good quality work experience is one that truly gives a young person an insight into the working world, not only encompassing the specific tasks that individuals do in their day to day jobs, but the wide range of skills they utilise to do so. As such, good quality work experience is;

- Reflective, with young people being given the opportunity to do work similar to what actual employers of the company are doing, so that they can get an accurate representative view of what it is like to work there.
- Challenging, involving tasks which allow young people to apply and practice knowledge learnt in school, and not simple menial tasks such as data inputting or the common cliché of making tea, which will carry very little benefit. As part of this, young people should be challenged to practice soft skills, such as communication, independent working and team working abilities, which they are likely to be relatively unfamiliar with.
- Well planned, in an efficient manner that facilitates young people to make the most of their limited time at a company, and spend the majority of time doing tasks instead of waiting around. This includes having appropriate tasks ready for them to undertake, and any necessary training to do them organised beforehand.

By ensuring these factors are implemented, the expectations of young people regarding work experience can be met, which includes;

- Developing key soft skills, such as independent learning, communication and team working abilities, which are not developed to the same extent in a purely educational (i.e. school) environment.
- Enhancing their CV, giving them the necessary experience to obtain jobs in future, an especially important point in the increasingly competitive job market where experience is key.
- Gain a better understanding of the working world and what it entails, something that cannot really be taught and can only be fully appreciated by experiencing it in person.
- Gain a better understanding of why and what they are being taught, by observing how knowledge is applied in the real world.

Businesses also have a range of expectations from work experience, including;

- Fulfilling their CSR quotas, thereby demonstrating to the local community that they are a responsible, ethical company, which can in turn result in increased consumer trust and subsequent rise in sales. It can also serve to meet contractual agreements with customers that request a certain level of CSR be met.
- Staff development, with those coordinating and helping with the work experience developing skills such as project management, budget control and communication skills, all of which can also count towards key career milestones such as chartership.
- Educating and inspiring young people about the industry, not only helping to grow the future workforce for the sector, but also make the public more aware about

the positive impact businesses have, and dispel common myths, which is especially important in potentially controversial industries such as nuclear.

How do differences between young people (e.g. geographic location, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, disability) affect the work experience opportunities they people have?

Although I cannot particularly comment on the specific differences listed here, having only experienced and observed a limited sample in relation to work experience myself, I feel the greatest barrier to work experience relates to the *connections* young people have, which is common to *all* regardless of these other differences: Those that do not have links with people working in industry, such as their relatives or teachers, are much less likely to obtain work experience than those that do, irrespective of their skills or talent. In a minor case, young people that lack these connections simply do not hear about companies offering work experience as they are not widely advertised/only advertised to specific groups/schools, and in a major case are barred from applying altogether as they are offered directly to specific individuals.

Both of these cases I have experienced in the past when I myself have tried to apply for work experience (and, to a lesser extent, actual jobs), only to lose out to those that have been offered it directly, without having to go through a formal application process, due to a family relation working in the company. Of course, such an approach is far from fair as the emphasis should be on offering placements to the best candidates, and served to make the process frustrating and off-putting, a message that is surely the opposite of what such schemes should be trying to achieve.

How could resources to help young people find out about and access work experience be improved?

A central, online platform in which companies can post work experience opportunities could be very beneficial: when I have been applying to work experience in the past, I have found it hard to find out which companies are offering work experience and which are not, often resorting to making my own enquiries with them directly. Such a process can be quite time consuming, and I have known it to put many young people off looking for work experience themselves.

An online platform would serve to overcome this however, and would also serve to overcome barriers discussed in the previous section where placements are only offered to specific groups/individuals, especially if advertising through this medium is made a requirement for any possible incentive programmes (see next section).

Furthermore, such a platform would be beneficial to businesses offering the work experience as well, as advertising such opportunities effectively (such as in my current CSR co-ordinator role) can be quite time consuming, often involving having to get in touch with numerous schools in the area manually. This can be problematic if funding for such activities is limited, and may explain why work experience is often advertised only to a select few.

How could barriers to business offering work experience be overcome?

I believe one of the biggest barriers to work experience posed by businesses is lack of funding. While I believe many companies desire to offer work experience to their local communities, I think several choose not to as they simply do not have (or are not prepared to dedicate) the resources required to facilitate it.

Such an issue could potentially be resolved using some form of funding or levy scheme (such as the apprenticeship levy) to incentivise offering work experience, and secure the necessary finances to do so. Alternatively, companies could be educated about the value of doing work experience, and the benefit for both young people and the company itself, so they feel more prepared to dedicate resource to it.

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