

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a graduation ceremony. It shows the silhouettes of graduates against a bright, warm sunset sky. Several graduates have their arms raised in celebration, and a graduation cap is seen flying through the air in the upper left. A large, dark blue circle is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the title text.

Emerging Talent – Class of '21

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On 26th June TALiNT Partners hosted a virtual webinar with a panel of experts from MyKindaFuture, Debut, PeopleScout and eArcu, to consider how the events of 2020 and 2021 have shaped the early careers market.

The last 18 months have created a “perfect storm” according to Simon Reichwald, Strategic Lead for Talent at MyKindaFuture, created by the combination of skills gaps, Brexit and COVID-19. The impact increased competition for talent but, as Simon noted, especially in diverse STEM talent.

As the UK comes out of Covid restrictions, the competition for talent is as fierce as ever; average salaries are up and declined and reneged offers currently sit at an average of 14%, with some employers seeing this rise as high as 30%. The challenges are even greater in the early talent space where employer competition for high potential candidates has combined with changes in how Generation Z weigh up the attractiveness of potential employers. New talent is looking for mutual values, career development and ethical practices; and if they can't see it, they walk away.

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Research by PeopleScout

Zoe Jeanes, Sales Director for Debut flagged how important diversity and inclusion is in emerging talent recruitment in the UK. Debut's recent research findings shed light on the complexity of



Debra Sparshott
Employer Programme
Director
TALiNT Partners

achieving a diverse cohort of early careers starters, with pipeline diversity decreasing as candidates go through the process.

According to Debut's report, employers are looking at this problem from the wrong direction, focusing on improved messaging and process change, rather than increasing their understanding of the behavioural differences in job applications across different minority groups. Their research showed that black candidates will apply to 38% more jobs than their white counterparts; increasing the likelihood of the candidate being counter-offered. Issues around confidence, “real and perceived challenges” around culture are driving candidates to spread the net more widely. Those who believe that they will find a job are likely to have a better chance of doing so as they believe it is worth continuing to look. This demands measures within TA pipeline planning if a truly diverse hire is to be achieved.

The gender challenge has not gone away either; Rowena Bach, Talent Strategy Director for PeopleScout reported that whilst females make up 55% of the student population, they represent only 40% of applications. Her research found that confidence levels were even lower for female graduates who are 5 times less likely to apply for a role because they worry they are unsuitable. As Rowena rightly pointed out, “When it comes to job applications, the more you do, the less confident you become” so the behaviour perpetuates itself.

This raises many questions. How conscious are employers of how their student application process encourages and enables young talent, rather than just screening and assessing them? How can TA leaders find out? And crucially, what can be done within the education system to improve application confidence in minority and female talent?

Method of engagement is important too. We have seen digitalisation accelerate rapidly during the pandemic, but Gen Z are way ahead of us.



They expect a digital, anytime-anywhere experience; their “normal” is delivery apps, video chats, streaming content, they expect engagement to be bespoke and on-demand, Zoe reminded us. Rowena added to this Gen Z perspective, calling out the need for a personalised journey, which speaks to their underlying anxieties and concerns with sensitivity that empowers them.

Andy Randall, CEO of eArcu sees the onboarding experience as critical in securing a post offer hire. Post-pandemic, workplace transformations such as flexible and remote working, have added a new dimension of complexity in winning brand attachment and retaining new joiner enthusiasm.

How can something as dry as pre-employment screening be made a more immersive experience? How can employers create a post offer journey, which brings the candidate closer to their brand? “Following up on promises” is a good start, Andy suggested, ensuring the candidate feels part of the team before they join it, and creating a clearly communicated plan for their first few weeks will help your new starter prepare and keep them motivated. Andy advised employers to “Keep looking for ways to improve / shorten the post offer process”.

Even organisations who are successful in early talent recruitment are seeing a discreet shift of focus from D&I to I&D. The challenge for employers is how to retain and develop their young employees in an inclusive workspace, particularly when it comes to socio-economic equality. Simon shared recent findings of a government taskforce looking at socio-economic diversity, which showed that career progression for those from a lower socio-economic background is slower by 25%, regardless of either ability or skills. A lack of progression is rated as the predominant reason for early talent resignations.

Worried employers are looking at specific retention strategies for these employees; tools and interventions to combat this imbalance across the


socio-economic divide. Selective mentoring support is increasing, and senior leaders are being encouraged to share their own stories of development and progression to demonstrate opportunity. Andy suggested that allocating peer “buddies” can provide strong connection pre-start, urging employers to find creative opportunities to bring people together in the space between offer and start– even if outdoors and with social distancing.

Inclusivity is of primary importance to Gen Z. This is a challenge when recent research by MyKindaFuture found that less than 1/3 of UK employees feel they belong and of those of those who don’t, 80% are considering leaving their company within the next 12 months. Inclusivity, or the perceived absence of it, is costing employers dearly. Their research also estimates that the price of lost early talent is £46K per person.

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Visibility is key. Without clear data on what is happening within an organisation, attrition can be misunderstood, with TA seen as culpable for bringing in the wrong talent, rather than recognising that the organisation has not lived up to its promises of inclusivity and equanimity.

So how can employers differentiate themselves, validating their messages to early talent,



particularly in terms of things which matter most to this generation; ED&I, work-life integration, and personal development? Debut found that many who graduated last year are worried. They feel a lack of control over their careers.

It was interesting to note, from Debut's research, that early talent perceive they never hear back from employers, despite employers saying they do give feedback. This was supported by PeopleScout's findings which showed that 9/10 employers said they give feedback, whilst only 4/10 candidates claimed to have received any. Is it a question of timing or is it about the process itself? How far away from "on-demand" is the average experience of a graduate or apprentice? Most organisations require a big commitment from applicants completing their application journey. Through conversations with 300 students, PeopleScout found that 35-47% candidates are dropping off before they had even applied.

Automation brings speed, consistency and candidate enablement to the early career application process, reducing administration and duplicate effort through the journey but, without striking a balance between technology and human intervention, the candidate's emotional investment in your role may be too weak to fend off competition. Andy's view was that technology can significantly improve the


candidate experience but, when it comes to culture, stickiness and connection, human contact is essential. The rise in candidate "renegs" suggests that the balance is not right, yet.

We know the competition for early talent is as fierce as ever, that a transparent, personalised, on-demand application increases the likelihood of retaining the candidates through the life of the application process. It seems that understanding how Gen Z think and feel, and then building your candidate journey to meet them may increase both pipeline and starter retention.

Students feel impacted by what they see as a contracting job market, meaning that they are more likely to be "open to all roles" but their focus remains finding a job which offers career development and future prospects.

Simultaneously, employers are looking to drive a far broader range of candidates removing barriers which prohibit application, in order to find hidden gems. Some might say this is an attitude which is overdue, but there is a balance to be struck between "we have a wide view of what our talent looks like" and "we hire anyone".

Early talent recruitment is a complex and continually changing landscape; speaking to an expert makes good sense.



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Debra Sparshott
Employer Programme Director
TALiNT Partners



debra@talintpartners.com

