

The Orange Make Your Mark Graduate Panel
Session two summary: perception versus reality in the workplace

HEADLINE CONCLUSIONS:

- Graduates and students believe a more honest, open approach to recruitment will improve their future performance, motivation and loyalty
- Employers should place more emphasis on face-to-face and online networking to identify and attract the ideal recruits
- Employers should exploit young people's social intelligence and adeptness at networking by building "mentor networks" to support their development
- Fear of failure in British business is stifling graduate fresh thinking, holding back innovation and enterprising ideas. Graduates want a risk-tolerant environment where they can learn from their mistakes
- Employers should place more emphasis on integrating graduate recruits into the business to foster the development of vital interpersonal skills
- Graduates feel patronised by some of the perceptions of 'the graduate recruit' and would be more motivated by job titles and roles that better reflect their position as talented, enthusiastic 'fresh-thinkers'

DEBATE SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS:

Network with graduates to establish open, honest relationships

"Find the right graduate for the right job. It should be a two way street when it comes to honesty." Ola Obaro

Life as a motivated graduate employee must start with an honest view of the job and the employer, according to the Orange Make Your Mark Graduate Panel. Panellists are wary of employers that present an idealised picture of their organisations in an attempt to attract the most applicants however; this approach can lead to disillusionment, demotivation and poor graduate retention rates.

Many employers understandably attempt to attract applicants with the best qualifications. However the panel also believes that employers should focus on finding the combination of personality and skills that will fit with their organisation and truly excel as a result. This means giving an accurate insight into life in the company and the kind of personality that will succeed there. As one panellist pointed out: 'the best graduates are not always the right candidates'. If graduates believe they are being treated honestly at the recruitment stage they are more likely to be loyal to the employer.

Despite the stereotype of the work-shy student graduates are not afraid of hard work. However many are shocked at first by the intensity of the work place and companies should not underestimate the effects this culture shock. This generation prioritises work-life balance more so than previous generations and so new recruits are much more aware of the volume and concentration of work. Entering the workplace forewarned and prepared would ease the transition: “the truth isn’t so bad if you know how to deal with it”, the panel agreed. The panel also felt that employers should support learning about work life balance and workload prioritisation.

Graduates can contribute by thinking beyond the short-term goal of getting a job after university. Having at least a simple career plan will encourage them to apply to employers they genuinely want to work for. As a result they will be tolerant of the more mundane tasks that inevitably form a part of the graduate job. Employers for their part can provide a clear road map of development and responsibility so that the graduates feel confident in the opportunity to progress.

The panel recommends: Employers should start to network with students at earliest opportunity and before the formal recruitment process starts. This will give them a more rounded view of their potential recruits and give students more insight into the organisations to which they will potentially apply. Networking should happen online and on a face-to-face, with student, graduates and employees able to meet and mix informally in spaces outside of work that encourage open, honest conversation.

Employers should consider maintaining relationship networks with graduates who are not recruited. Many graduates regard their first job as a relatively short-term role and so applicants rejected today could well be appealing prospects in the future once they’ve gained experience elsewhere.

New graduates are looking for a way to demonstrate their potential above and beyond their job specifications. A simple way for employers to tap into this is to give new graduates the responsibility of developing recruitment networks in their old universities to encourage future recruits.

Employers should collaborate with universities to support a programme offering multiple internships approximately three weeks in length to give students a varied experience of the workplace. Interns would be paid to ensure they are not devalued as a “free resource”.

Build a solid graduate management and mentoring structure

“Good management is absolutely critical. If you have a good manager you go places immediately.” Benjamin Cho

Good management is the foundation of a graduate employees’ success, according to the panel. Panellists are concerned that managers are allocated to graduates with very little forethought and without the necessary skills or training to develop a new recruit.

The Orange Make Your Mark Graduate Panel believes that employers do a thorough job of assessing and preparing new recruits in hard skills at the recruitment and induction phases, but soft skills (e.g. interpersonal, social skills), which are crucial in helping the graduate integrate into the company, are often overlooked. One of the keys to successful management is continuity. One panellist noted: “The people I was working for were different to those who interviewed me – therefore they didn’t understand the skills and experience I have and made no attempt to match my skills with my role day-to-day.”

One of the most effective ways to help graduate talent to develop is to provide a network of mentors. Young people are particularly adept at social networking the panel agreed, largely due to their familiarity with technology. Giving graduate recruits the chance to build a network of mentors, both inside and outside the organisations can make a huge contribution to their motivation and development and be crucial in helping them develop the social intelligence and people skills necessary to succeed in the job. However, a successful mentor relationship depends on a close rapport, so mentors should not be officially assigned. The panel suggested a mentor “speed-dating” forum to match new recruits with suitable mentors.

The panel recommends: Work with current graduate scheme members to tailor management-training modules to graduates’ requirements. Create mentoring networks (ideally including people from outside the organisation) and incentivise senior staff to act as mentors to junior employees.

Employers should attempt to understand some of the broader skills and attributes that recent graduates hold and what this could bring to the organisations. For example, ‘social intelligence’, youth marketing, and technology were cited as skills that graduates feel they excel at. Employers should consider ways that they could better utilise these to aid business growth.

Focus on integrating graduates into the business once they are recruited

“The mentality of moving on comes from your job title. You feel like you are part of a short-term scheme, not part of the company.” Orange Make Your Mark Graduate Panellist

The Orange Make Your Mark Graduate Panel believes there is a definite stigma attached to the word “graduate”. Having graduate in your title is considered to affect the way colleagues and clients view you. This impacts motivation, self-esteem and sense of belonging. Graduates report finding it harder to feel involved in the organisation or believe that they have real responsibility. In the worst-case scenario you believe “you are segregated from the company. That’s why graduates feel that once that stage is over they will leave,” according to the panel.

Networking is also considered crucial, both to getting on and settling in. Students and graduates are generally adept at networking, particularly in the online world. While the panellists recognise that a large part of the responsibility lies with them to integrate into the organisation, graduates should also be encouraged and supported to network in the workplace by managers. This experience can also help identify possible mentors and encourage their development as business people.

The panel recommends: Drop the “graduate” from job titles. Consider alternative, more positive titles that better reflect the fresh thinking and new ideas that recent graduates could bring. Encourage managers and mentors to support the graduates in networking around the organisation. The more people they know, the quicker they will feel at home.

Be bold about giving responsibility to encourage motivation and loyalty

“The more exposure we get to success and failure the better. If you wrap graduates up in cotton wool they won’t develop any business acumen.” Ola Obara

Graduates typically enter their first jobs with high hopes of responsibility and achievement. Unfortunately, too many are disappointed according to the panellists and leave after a short time. Patience often pays dividends in the view of the more experienced panel members and work could be done to more accurately set the expectations of new recruits. However, organisations could more effectively harness this enthusiasm by giving graduates responsibility and a degree of autonomy when they arrive.

If employers were serious about the long term development of their workers then it would be in their interest to entrust responsibility from an early stage. This is particularly true given that graduates are not necessarily looking for ‘jobs for life’ but would happily stay at companies while they felt recognised and rewarded.

Organisations shouldn’t be afraid of giving graduates a budget and the space to pursue a project or idea. This experience can be invaluable to their rapid development and increases motivation and loyalty, according to the panellists. As an example, while £1000 could be easily spent by a company sending someone on a training course which might have little impact, alternatively this sum represents a considerable investment and commitment if it were offered as funding for a business start-up idea within the company.

Crucially, organisations must be more prepared to tolerate failure. In an economy that increasingly relies on creative thinking and enterprising ideas to maintain competitive young people need to be encouraged to experiment. Worryingly, in many organisations we are developing a culture in which “many students don’t want to try things, because they are concerned they will fail.”

Graduates who work in highly regulated industries can be offered a creative outlet that benefits their motivation and loyalty through activities outside the normal job role, but that are recognised by the employer nonetheless. As one panellist describes: “In my role we are trying to break the traditional mindset and mould but there are lots of regulations, so we show our enterprise skills in non-role activities like fundraising at work.”

The panel recommends: Give graduates the autonomy, time and budget to work on projects within the business, either opportunities they’ve identified or proposed by managers. Allow them to succeed and fail on their own, then help them evaluate what happened. Use this experience as a test bed to develop professional skills alongside graduate training programme and objectives.

Business start-up schemes within workplaces represent a way that small investments could potentially have huge rewards for the company – in terms of retention of staff, and new product development. The business start-up ideas should represent solutions to current and genuine business problems – perhaps around staff motivation, engaging with new groups of customers, or developing more efficient processes. These are all things that ‘fresh-thinkers’ could approach in innovative ways.

Encourage enterprise and banish the fear of failure

“It’s about having the environment and space.” Matt Drage

Willingness to take risks is inextricably linked to creativity, so a culture that stigmatises failure will discourage creative and enterprising ideas. For graduate employees, entering the work place with a fresh perspective and enthusiasm for their new jobs, this can prove especially demotivating.

With a variety of sectors represented, from corporate finance to education, the Orange Make Your Mark Graduate Panel recognised that some industries and organisations are more able to put “big ideas” into action than others. However, graduates should be encouraged nonetheless to think innovatively of ways to add value to their organisations – the simplest idea can yield big rewards.

The panellists concluded that graduates would benefit from advice from managers or mentors on where and how to channel their creative thinking to benefit the organisation and develop their personal business acumen. An unfortunate, but all too common experience for graduates is when they develop an enterprising idea, which fails to go further because no one is empowered to approve it. While not every idea might be put into action a process needs at least to exist, otherwise employees will become demotivated in the knowledge that “nothing will ever happen”.

The panel recommends: Creativity is about adding value: support graduates in spotting where creativity can be applied and harness their enthusiasm and fresh thinking for the good of the organisation as a result. Allow employees the space to be enterprising. This can be formalised (e.g. 10 per cent of hours per week) or encouraged on an informal basis. Introduce policies that encourage a creative environment, e.g. make “innovation” a KPI, or create a programme in which senior management gives creative challenges to graduate teams to solve.