

What is a meaningful encounter with the world of work?

It is now widely accepted that encounters with the world of work are vitally important for all young people. For example employer engagement is now at the heart of the UK's Department for Education's careers strategy and international bodies like the OECD argue that it is essential that young people engage with workplaces as part of their education. This is because encounters with the work of work help to broaden young people's horizons, raises their aspirations, challenge stereotyping, increase their motivation to learn, ensuring they have the skills and knowledge they need and are well informed about the full range of modern jobs and career routes into them. In doing so it also helps reduce the mismatch between young people's career aspirations and the reality of the labour market.

This article captures what is meant by "*meaningful encounters*" and describes a [toolkit](#) we have developed specially to help state schools plan their career provision and identify and help young people who need more support: those who are disengaged from learning or have misaligned aspirations and / or are uncertain about their future.

Over the last decade, strong and consistent evidence (see appendix) has indicated that teenagers who participate in activities with employers whilst in school can anticipate doing better on average than expected as young adults in the world of work. The studies also show that school-age encounters with people in work is commonly linked with reduced risks of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and with better earnings. What's more, our recent research has shown that employer engagement is commonly linked with better academic results.

The following activities could be classed as encounters with the world of work:

- Career insight talks
- Career speed networking
- Career fairs
- CV workshops
- Mock interviews
- Assembly inspirational talks
- Mentoring
- Work 'taster' events such as games and competitions
- Workplace visits
- Job Shadowing
- Work experience
- Visits to open days at further and higher education institutions

Activities cover both very short one-hour careers-focused interactions through to work experience placements lasting a week or more; it also ranges from interventions requiring considerable preparation and management e.g. mentoring to those requiring less prior management e.g. career speed networking.

While studies show that positive results are commonplace, they also show that they cannot always be taken for granted and that simply organizing an encounter with an employer doesn't necessarily guarantee impact. So, what does make the difference? How can schools maximize the chances of students gaining as much as possible from their encounters? How can they know if encounters are likely to be meaningful?

Where can we expect to see change happen?

A meaningful encounter will of course be one that makes a difference in an important area of a young person's life. Reviews of high-quality studies which have explored the impact of employer engagement activities find that such changes can be identified across four important aspects of young people's lives:

- their understanding of jobs and careers;
- their possession of knowledge and skills demanded by employers;
- their possession of knowledge and skills needed for successful school-to-work transitions; and
- their attainment while in education.

What's so special about an encounter with the world of work?

What makes employer engagement special is that it draws upon resources and experiences linked to the world of work which cannot be easily replicated in the classroom.¹ It offers young people something new and different to what they can normally expect. When young people interact with workplaces (and the people who work in them), they gain access to two primary things:

- access to information about the working world and how it relates to their own decisions about education; and
- opportunity to apply knowledge and skills developed in classrooms in real-world settings. It is in this difference that meaning is found.

This is relevant across all four of the very different aspects of employer engagement listed above, but in different ways. The research base is strongest in the area of young people's understanding of jobs and changes and that is a good place to work through what "*meaningful*" means in one specific area.

Authenticity

Employer engagement offers young people something different - and this is why **authenticity** is so important to employer engagement. Authentic encounters are ones which ring true for a young person, providing insights which are hard to dismiss. More than that, the more authentic the insight into the working world, the more reliable that insight can be expected to be. Consequently, the chance for young people to interact with people from the world of work, to be able to **ask them questions about the reality of the workplace is vitally important**. Young people listen to such people in a way they would never do to a teacher – even if they are telling them exactly the same thing e.g. "*you need to get these grades if you are to get a career in*". Young people are more likely to trust the information they receive from people who are actually doing a particular job or who have taken a certain career route than from people whom they perceive as having vested interest in the information they are providing e.g. a commercial provider promoting a course from which they derive funding. Employer engagement is just one element of careers provision and **it's vital that all young people have access to high quality independent impartial careers advice and guidance** and up to date labour market information.

¹ Employer engagement programmes can provide schools with additional resource, for example as reading partners or as mentors, where the volunteers status as an employee (someone with direct connection to the working world) is of less importance than the fact that they are an adult, who is not a family member or linked to a school, expressing interest in a student. However, even in these circumstances, the volunteers status as an employee can add significant value to interactions.

For more details on this and the importance of social capital and ‘*non-redundant trusted*’ information please see our book ‘*Essays on Employer Engagement in Education*’ published by Routledge 2019 and the work of the American sociologist Mark Granovetter and his seminal paper ‘*The Strength of Weak Ties*’².

More is more

The evidence tells us that as well as being authentic, encounters with employers should be **numerous** if they are going to be as meaningful as possible. **Young people need to hear from a wide range of people** from different social, economic and ethnic backgrounds; people working in different sectors – app designers to zoologist and at different levels – apprentices to CEOs; and whom have taken a variety of career routes, including starting their own business, following an apprenticeship or going to university.

Our research, which is commonly cited, has shown that young adults who recall interacting with employers on **four or more** occasions can expect much better outcomes than classmates who never remembered engaging with people in work or who did so just occasionally. This is because young people’s career interests are consistently very narrow and reliably unimaginative: internationally 30% of teenagers are interested in just ten very specific jobs, half are interested in just three economic sectors. Career aspirations are heavily linked to the background of learners – to their gender, social class and whether they are from migrant backgrounds. Effective career advice and guidance challenges such assumptions and broadens career thinking and employer engagement can play an important role in this.

New and useful

Consequently, the more a young person engages with the working world, the more likely it is that they will learn something **new and useful** about the labour market and the more likely it will be that this new information will challenge the assumptions and expectations which have driven their prior career thinking. It gives them a believable insight into the working world and how it relates to their own decisions about education: how hard they study? What and where they plan to study in the future? It challenges stereotypical thinking and gives them confidence by helping them to think critically about work and how they will ultimately enter it.

One of the most important insights from research is that young people are often good judges of whether their encounters are meaningful. If they agree that they were very useful, they probably will be. It is consequently very reasonable to engage students in the design of programmes and certainly ask them what they thought about interactions. Young people can expect to benefit most from their interactions with employers if they reflect their needs and are organized as part of their school’s careers advice and guidance programme.

² See Chapter 5 in *Essays on Employer Engagement in Education* <https://www.educationandemployers.org/essays-book-launch/>

Start early

As well as being numerous, to maximise the positive results of employer encounters, they should begin when students are **young**, deliberately challenging the assumptions and expectations which begin in early childhood..

But we **should not** be providing careers advice in primary schools. (see ‘starting early – the importance of career-related learning in primary school³). Instead we should on focus on broadening horizons and raising aspirations, giving children a wide range of experiences of the world including the world of work. It is about opening doors, showing children the vast range of possibilities open to them and helping to keep their options open for as long as possible. There is a range of attributes, skills, and behaviours that can be encouraged in this early stage of a child’s life that will support them into the best possible position as they begin their transitions to secondary education and to future life. It’s about bringing learning to life, showing how the subjects they are doing relate their futures; giving primary aged children the chance to meet people from the world of work through programmes such as [Primary Futures](#) is a key part of this.

What activities are most likely to be meaningful?

For schools, it is easy to understand how some employer engagement activities are more likely to give students access to meaningful encounters related to their career thinking. **Job fairs** expose young people to occupations and careers that they might not have considered previously. Compulsory classroom **career talks, careers carousels and career speed networking sessions** ensure that student and (occasionally) teacher assumptions do not get in the way of young people learning something that will be valuable to them. **Workplace visits and job shadowing**, where students go into a place of employment with the deliberate goal to learn about work can be expected to enable deeper learning than placements where the student is engaged in doing tasks typical of an occupation (though that of course can be a very useful learning experience). As students get older, **work experience placements** can confirm aspirations and help learners progress, for example, by connecting them with potential recruiters, developing familiarity with work cultures or by securing useful references.

Targeting and personalisation

In order to ensure that students will gain new and useful information about the world of work schools, as may already do, need to acknowledge the need for some **targeting and personalisation**. To optimize impacts, what students can access through their school needs to be in addition to what they have access to at home. Schools need to understand the interests and experiences of their students through one to one career sessions and they should anticipate, moreover, that young people from less advantaged backgrounds are likely to need greater interventions than their more privileged classmates. Employer engagement needs to be strategically delivered to make encounters more meaningful and so maximise the chances of young people being more motivated to achieve their potential and pursue a career that meets their skills and interests.

³ <https://www.educationandemployers.org/career-related-primary/>

Variety in employer encounters

Research highlights that different employer engagement activities are likely to be useful in achieving different outcomes for young people. Employer encounters are not just about developing careers thinking they can also help young people gain knowledge and skills demanded by employers, prepare for their transitions into work and enhance their academic attainment.

In preparing young people for effective transitions into work for example, **mock interviews** and **CV workshops** as well as activities that demand young people be personally effective in unfamiliar environments, like **work experience placements**, are likely to be of greatest value. Similarly, the softer skills so valued by employers in recruitment can be expected to be developed through experiences, like **work experience placements** and **enterprise competitions** which give young people the chance to apply their knowledge and skills in environments which feel authentic. In both areas, impact is linked to the authenticity of the experience. In terms of academic attainment, activities like **career talks**, **mock interviews** and **work experience placements** which give young people an unambiguous reminder of the value of education and qualifications in the labour market can be expected to have the greatest benefit. This is because encounters with employers are likely to be motivating by presenting new information through experiences which are hard to ignore. Consequently, effective school provision will be **varied** in its use of different employer engagement activities.

Other school-led career activities contribute to what young people get from their interaction with the world of work. Career classes, meetings and informal chats during the day and other informal and formal career-related learning activities can be viewed as a preparatory/reflection tool by which young people get into the mindset of finding out more when meeting external speakers. Schools can help young people to get the most out of interactions by helping them put their experiences into **context**. Effective schools will help young people to **think critically** about their encounters with the working world, preparing well and reflecting afterwards.

An outcome-based approach

Given the considerable pressure schools are under, often with very limited resources for careers provision there is understandably the temptation to only focus on numbers: how many young people were involved different activities, how many volunteers visited the school, how many events were organised. Indeed, some seem to believe that all that is needed is 'four encounters with the world of work' over secondary school. However, as shown above this is not the answer. It is vital to design a provision that has roots in the outcomes highlighted by the evidence base. Just because schools are now required to show they are meeting Gatsby benchmarks, this shouldn't turn into a 'box-ticking' exercise. In order to maximise the benefit of encounters with the world of work, outcomes should be prioritized over output.

How to tell if young people need more support

Longitudinal studies which follow people from early childhood into adult life show that some students do better than would be expected given their qualifications and backgrounds once they get into work. Students who do better than expected are more likely to have engaged with the world of work through their school or through a part-time job whilst they were in education. They will also have thought carefully about their career aspirations, talking to people in school about their plans. Such students can see why what they do in the classroom will be useful for their later lives. We have taken these insights

from research and created a new tool to help schools assess which young people need the greatest additional help. It has been tested with hundreds of pupils and allows career guidance activities to be targeted.

Free toolkit for schools

The **free [toolkit](#)** we have developed includes a survey and a scoring system for schools to use internally. It provides the insight needed not only to improve career provisions but to support young people who are disengaged, have misaligned aspirations and/or who are uncertain about their future. The survey can be used by schools as a means to evaluate young people's attitudes and experiences related to the world of work. It provides insight as to whether career events have helped young people to think critically about the future, to talk about it with others and to reflect on their learning and its connection to their future. It is designed to allow schools themselves to simply to assess what they are doing and target effort accordingly.

Whether using our toolkit or any other assessment frameworks it is important that the emphasis is on **quality over quantity** of employer encounters. Young people are bombarded by information and advice in school, online and in the community. We can't control the environment outside the school, and we can make sure the limited time they have in school to learn the knowledge and skills required for the modern workplaces is well spent.

*Nick Chambers
Education and Employers
www.educationandemployers.org
September 2019*

For further reading see:

- [Contemporary Transitions: Young Britons reflect of life after secondary school or college](#)
- [Socialised social capital? The capacity of schools to use careers provision to compensate for social capital deficiencies among teenagers](#)
- [Indicators of successful transitions](#)
- [Employer engagement in education: Insights from international evidence](#)

Connecting schools and volunteers

And for schools looking for volunteers from the world of work who are willing to visit and talk to young people about their job and career route please see the free on-line service www.educationandemployers.org. It has nearly 55,000 people – from all levels, apprentices to CEOs and all sectors, app designers to zoologists

Appendix: Research by Education and Employers

Since our launch in October 2009, Education and Employers has sought to understand the difference employer engagement in education makes to young people and the economy. We work with academics and researchers from around the world and our research is regularly cited by international organisations. The research, which has informed and influenced a range of government policies both in the UK and internationally, shows that employer engagement helps improve social mobility, tackles gender stereotyping, reduces the likelihood of young people becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), increases the amount they earn in adult life and helps them make better informed career choices.

In 2013 we published the *“It’s who you meet”* report, which looked at the impact that encounters with the world of work had on young people. It showed, for the first time, that there was a statistically significant positive relationship between the number of employer encounters that a young person experienced in school and the likelihood of them becoming NEET. The young adults who recalled **four or more** activities while at school were **much less likely to be NEET** and on average **earned 16%** more than peers who recalled no such activities. This landmark report, often simply referred to as *“Four or more”* has been widely cited internationally and in the UK Government’s Industrial Strategy, the Department for Education’s Careers Strategy, OFSTED guidance and the Gatsby Benchmarks.

Our key research findings over the last 10 years include:

- 1 Encounters with the world of work are linked with improvements to GCSE results ([2019](#))
- 2 The career aspirations of young people are often based on gender stereotypes, socio-economic backgrounds and TV and social media. There is a significant mismatch between the jobs children aspire to and projected workforce needs. The difference between children’s career aspirations from the age of seven to 17 are marginal ([2013](#), [2018](#), [2019](#))
- 3 Employer engagement has an impact on student motivation as the result of linking the curriculum to the world of work ([2018](#))
- 4 Employer engagement during school years is linked with increases in the amount young adults earn once in full time employment. ([2014](#), [2016](#), [2017](#))
- 5 Employer engagement is linked with reductions in the likelihood of becoming NEET. Young people who do four or more activities during secondary school are less likely to be NEET during their 20s. This insight has driven the commitment in the Department for Education’s 2017 Careers Strategy that every young person should have a meaningful encounter with employers whilst in secondary and informed the Gatsby Benchmarks. ([2013](#), [2017](#))

All of our research findings together with other research from around the world can be accessed via the [free searchable on-line library](#).

<https://www.educationandemployers.org/research-main/>