

# Young Minds 2026

## The unequal advantage

How access, influence and opportunity shape young people's working lives

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## About the survey

Now in its fourth year, Young Minds is a survey of 2,000 18–25 year olds. It explores the topics of social mobility, early career experiences and feelings of inclusion and belonging in the workplace.

As a snapshot of society today, the results examine the barriers, influences and aspirations of young people in the UK regardless of their background.

This year's survey aimed to achieve equal representation of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as well as segmentation by gender, ethnicity, location, neurodivergence or learning disability. It explored the following themes:

**Access to opportunity:** how social capital, exposure to opportunity and early advantage all shape the support young people have before they've made a career decision.

**Career decisions:** how young people navigate choice, who and what influences them, and the pathways available as they assess opportunities available to them.

**Inclusion & belonging:** what young people value in an employer and their perceptions of barriers to equal opportunity.

**Employer of the future:** what young people expect from employers of the future.

The survey was fielded in January 2026.

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# Foreword

Dan Brookes, Interim Regional Managing Partner for Yorkshire & the North East, and Partner sponsor for Social Mobility & Citizenship at BDO



"I grew up the youngest of three siblings in a working-class family in York. We lived on a council estate, and I remember my childhood being a happy time. In my early years, our next-door neighbour's daughter was training to become a primary school teacher. She used to trial some of her lessons and activities with me. I really believe she gave me learning opportunities that kids from similar backgrounds simply didn't have access to. She was my first real mentor.

I continued to enjoy learning throughout my education, completing A-levels and receiving an offer from Durham University. I was the first in my family to attend university and, in my mind, my future was secured.

But the next step was much more difficult than I had anticipated. I found it hard to access my chosen profession. I didn't have any role models who could guide me in this next step. And, despite working since the age of 16, none of my experience had given me transferable skills (or so I was told at the time). I couldn't put my finger on what I was doing wrong but, in hindsight, I was doing nothing wrong. I simply didn't have the support or exposure to the right type of work experience, nor did I have the right connections.

Some of the findings in this report are concerning, though sadly not that surprising. They are not new, isolated problems, but symptoms of systemic, entrenched beliefs and outdated practices and systems that are no longer fit for purpose - systems that too often reinforce existing advantage rather than extend opportunity more widely. In this context, improving social mobility in the UK is critical. It ensures talent and potential shape life chances, while helping to close opportunity gaps and build a more resilient, inclusive economy.

Every person, irrespective of background, should have the opportunity to achieve their potential. This is an ethos I have applied throughout my career and one I remain firmly committed to.

The challenges I faced in my early career are not unique and there remains so many of those barriers in place today. But when employers, policymakers and the education system commit to working together - to create equitable opportunities, value diversity and create environments where people genuinely feel they belong - we will create a future which is stronger, fairer and more inclusive for everyone.

This report is not an endpoint, but an invitation to business leaders, policymakers, educators, parents and young people alike to share their experiences and ideas on how we can improve social mobility in the workplace and turn ambition into meaningful, lasting change."

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## Executive summary

BDO's 2026 Young Minds survey reveals a generation that is ambitious, principled and highly attuned to the structural forces shaping their early careers.

Having surveyed 2,000 young people aged 18–25, the research highlights how access to support, experience and opportunity all intersect to shape their career choices, perceptions of fairness and expectations of future employers.

Today's young people continue to rely heavily on both career guidance and personal connections as they navigate the transition from education into work. Their career decisions are based on a mix of personal relationships, technology and the visibility of pathways available.

Local business engagement remains the most influential factor, yet those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to benefit from these relationships. At the same time, emerging technologies are playing a growing role in shaping aspirations. We see from our analysis that a sizeable proportion of respondents are turning to AI tools when exploring potential careers.

While the majority of young people believe that career access is equal in principle, this sentiment is conditional. Equality is seen as achievable only if individuals possess the right qualifications, can access relevant work experience or already have industry connections. These conditions expose a gap between perceived fairness and the lived reality of social mobility.

Across demographics, young people agree on the systemic actions needed to level the playing field. They call for strengthened careers guidance, employer involvement in curriculum design, financial incentives for businesses to grow early career opportunities, better transport links and wider availability of paid, high-quality apprenticeships.

Meanwhile, young people's aspirations and anxieties are deeply interconnected. The factors they value most in potential employers - flexibility, work-life balance and a supportive and inclusive culture - are also the areas they fear will limit their progression. Caring responsibilities, mental health conditions and appearance-based judgements top the list of perceived barriers to career advancement. This reflects a real need for greater visibility of relatable role models and inclusive cultures in the workplace.

Expectations for the next decade show a clear blend of human and economic needs. While flexibility, inclusion and representation are essential to belonging, fair pay, performance-related rewards and continuous development are critical to long-term security. Young people also expect employers to embrace new technology responsibly and prepare employees to navigate an AI-enabled workplace.



# Theme One: Access to Opportunity

## Connections, exposure and early advantage

Young people's access to careers is shaped less by aspiration but by the networks, exposure and institutional support they can draw on before they ever make a decision.

This access is unevenly distributed across regions and demographics, influenced not just by talent or aspiration but by their social capital and the availability of trusted support.

This theme focuses on the structural conditions that shape early access to the world of work. It explores whether young people are given equal opportunities to engage with employers, secure meaningful work experience and receive consistent, high-quality careers guidance.



### Social capital – why 'who you know' still matters

Those in the North East were almost **five times** less likely to have established connections in the workplace than those from the South East

As part of this survey, 2,000 18-25 year olds were asked about the personal connections they already have within their chosen career to better understand the relationship Gen Z has with the working world when leaving education.

The findings underline just how important social capital is in helping young people move from education into the workplace, whether this is through sourcing relevant work experience, preparing for interviews or finding roles to apply for.

According to Nuffield Foundation's Friends with Benefits report, these connections are crucial in shaping life outcomes. The report demonstrates how economic connectedness - the extent to which people from a lower socio-economic background form friendships with those from a higher socio-economic background - is also a critical driver in improving intergenerational social mobility.

Only **27%** of neurodivergent young people were supported by their personal network to find relevant work experience, compared to **38%** of neurotypical respondents

Respondents to our Young Minds survey that were based in the North East (23%), the South West (21%) and Scotland (19%) were significantly more likely to say they had no established connection to their chosen field, demonstrating stark regional disparities and highlighting just how uneven social capital can be at the start of a career.

Throughout this report, respondents from the North East emerge as a clear outlier, with young people facing greater barriers to opportunity and fewer routes to improving social capital. This reflects long-standing structural disadvantage, also highlighted by the Social Mobility Commission's State of the Nation report, which points to the region's industrial legacy and persistently low levels of social mobility over the past two decades.

These gaps underline the need for more consistent, structured support. Without it, young people's prospects will continue to be shaped by the networks they happen to inherit, rather than by access to equitable choices and quality opportunities.

### Employer exposure – uneven contact with the world of work

The Young Minds research looked at the opportunities young people had to meet with local employers whilst in their education setting. The findings show that while employer encounters are common, they are unevenly distributed. They are often shaped by the strength of school-to-employer relationships and regional labour market conditions.

Demographic disparities demonstrate structural inequalities. For example, white respondents were more likely than those from an ethnic minority to have met with local businesses through the likes of careers events. Meanwhile, neurodivergent respondents or those with a learning disability, were more than twice as likely to say they had not met with local businesses whilst at school, college or university. It's clear that the existing provision does not reach all young people equally and,

without targeted support, the inequalities we see today will persist.

Regional patterns reinforce this picture. In Scotland (47%), the South West (47%) and the West Midlands (46%), levels of education-to-employer engagement were notably high, suggesting active early talent pipelines and better-connected local networks that increase exposure to opportunities.

However, in regions like the North East and North West, young people face greater barriers to building early employer relationships. Respondents from the North East, for example, were almost three times more likely than the overall sample to report having no opportunity to connect with local employers, while those from the North West were more than twice as likely to say the same. Taken together, these findings highlight inconsistent education-to-employment infrastructure across the UK.



The Social Mobility Commission's Regional Insight report echoes this. It highlights a lack of cultural and social capital awareness among today's young people and calls for more sustained, long-term collaboration between education institutions and local employers. The report emphasises that only through coordinated and connected support will young people be able to aspire to – and access – careers that may otherwise remain out of reach.



### Early careers – advice without consistency

Disparities in access to careers advice for young people are just as apparent. Just one in three 18-25 year olds surveyed have, or have had, access to a dedicated careers adviser at school or college. In addition, only two fifths of those from a lower socio-economic background (SEB) have had the opportunity to take part in structured career preparation, such as CV workshops and mock interviews. This compares to nearly half of their peers from more advantaged backgrounds.

Meanwhile across regions, careers advice is inconsistent. In the North East, only a third of respondents said they had received advice on their career choices or further and higher education pathways from their teachers. Young people in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and Humber reported the highest level of teacher support and guidance, with 50% saying they had been offered those conversations and advice.

## *Early access does not only shape what young people can do; it also shapes what they believe is possible.*

A 2024 report from the OECD examined how unequal access to careers guidance reinforces social inequality. The findings show that young people from a lower social-economic background are less likely to access high-quality and personalised careers guidance and are therefore less likely to pursue a higher-level career. The OECD's report shows that education environments have a critical role to play in improving social mobility, but the systems they have in place often fails to offer targeted support where it is most needed.

Taken together, the findings explored in this theme point to an unequal starting line. For some, access to networks, advice and experience provides early advantage. For others, the absence of these support systems creates barriers that compound over time. This matters because improving social mobility – both for this generation and for those that follow - requires systemic change that tackles the inequalities embedded within the institutions surrounding young people.

The effects of this unequal start extend beyond opportunity alone. Early access does not only shape what young people can do; it also shapes what they believe is possible. When exposure to employers, careers advice and professional networks is inconsistent, career aspirations and choices are formed on uneven ground. For some young people, pathways feel visible, easy to navigate and supported. For others, decisions are made with limited information, partial guidance or a reliance on informal sources.

The following section examines how young people navigate career decisions within this context, and how influence, technology and perceived risk interact with the access gaps highlighted in theme one.

### Insight from upReach

upReach is an award-winning social mobility charity that works with leading employers and universities across the UK to provide employability-boosting interventions and targeted support to students from a lower socio-economic background.

**Nick Bent, Chief Executive Officer at upReach says:**

"The findings from BDO's Young Minds research are important and, unfortunately, they confirm what we at upReach already know: young people from low-income backgrounds do not have equal access to career success.

We have all heard the saying "it's not what you know, it's who you know", yet many still fail to acknowledge the role that social capital plays in career success. This research also lays bare just how uneven social capital is across the country, with some regions facing far steeper barriers than others when it comes to building connections in their chosen field.

Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not."



**Nick Bent,**  
CEO upReach

### Personal insight:

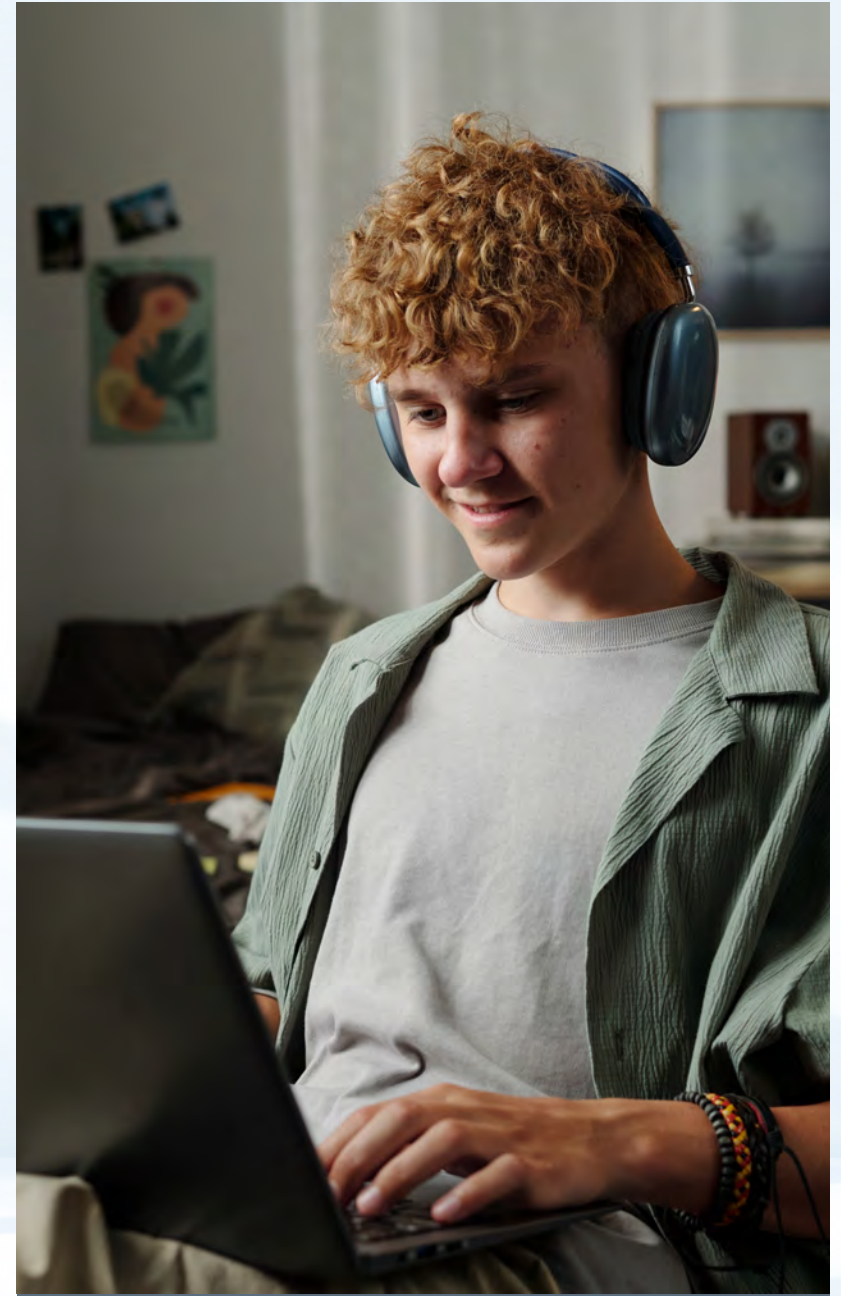
"The Social Mobility Foundation (SMF) has played a significant role in shaping who and where I am today. When I was a teenager, I aspired to study at the London School of Economics - I had good grades and thought that would be enough, but as nobody in my extended family had attended university, knowing how to get there was a challenge. I quickly found myself worried about how feasible my goals really were, and whether building a strong career path was even an option for me.

I came across the SMF and was accepted onto their residential internship programme. They provided me with opportunities I would never have had access to, including a mentor who was pivotal in developing my confidence.

Without organisations like the Social Mobility Foundation, access to opportunities is limited for people who find their choices restricted by factors they have no control over. Young people from more deprived areas or those that don't have inherited networks deserve the same opportunities and chances as those who can more readily access them."



**Saleisha Ford,**  
M&A Executive at BDO



# Theme Two: Career Decisions

## Navigating choice, influence & pathways

Building on the access gaps explored in the previous section, this theme looks at how young people navigate career decisions within unequal systems. It focuses on route visibility, perceived risk and the influence of advice, technology and expectations.

Many young people base choices on the options they encounter most often, the pathways that feel most secure or the advice sources they trust, even when that advice is informal, inconsistent or shaped by technology rather than personal experience.

While most 18-25 year olds surveyed believe that access to their chosen career is equal in principle, this belief is often conditional. Equality is understood to exist only if certain prerequisites are met such as holding the right qualifications, securing relevant work experience or already knowing someone in the industry. This reveals a gap between the idea of fairness and the realities young people face when navigating choices within an uneven system.

Together, these insights show that career decisions do not happen in a vacuum. They are made within a context shaped by early influences, inconsistent information and differing levels of support. For social mobility, this is critical: when pathways are chosen based on partial information or constrained visibility, inequalities risk being reinforced rather than challenged.

### Who and what influences decisions

Overall, **35%** say relationships or opportunities with local businesses has the biggest impact on their career decisions

**40%** of young people from a higher socio-economic background said relationships with local businesses had the biggest influence on their career decisions

Only **29%** of those from a lower socio-economic background said local businesses had the most impact on their career decisions

The survey responses show that relationships - including with family, friends, teachers and local businesses - and emerging technologies play a significant role in shaping young people's career decisions.

The single most influential factor cited in shaping their early career decisions was the opportunity to build relationships with local employers (35%). Interestingly, those from a higher socio-economic background (41%) ranked this as being more influential than those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (29%).

Advice from family networks also plays a crucial role, particularly among ethnic minorities. There are regional variations too, with family members having a higher influence on career decisions than that of teachers or careers advisers in the South West, North West and the North East. This type of influence combines trust, cultural understanding and a perceived legitimacy. In other words, families may unknowingly be taking on the role of sense-making agents, helping young people interpret complex career information.

Conversely, respondents from Yorkshire & Humber placed a higher value on the influence of advice from teachers and careers advisers (46%) than from their family (33%), and those from the West Midlands were more likely to seek the influence of their friends (27%) than any other personal relationship.

These distinct regional patterns imply that the influence of authority through the lens of personal relationships is shaped locally. In the regions where family influence outweighs that of formal guidance, career decisions may be made through inherited knowledge and legacy expectations of job roles. Meanwhile, in areas where friendship groups have a hierarchical standing, this could be reflective of cultural factors and a more collective sense of identity.

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### Technology as a career decision maker


The findings show that technology is no longer a peripheral influence on career choices, but a central decision-making tool for many young people. Digital platforms are not only increasingly shaping what options young people see, but how accessible and achievable those options appear.

Three quarters of respondents reported using digital sources to help inform their career choices, including AI tools (29%), social media influencers and advertising (25%) and other online research (21%). This points to a growing perception of technology being a legitimate and authoritative source of advice, often filling the gaps of traditional guidance.

Ethnic minority respondents are significantly more likely to utilise AI tools (40.5%) as were respondents from the South West (36%), East of England (33%) and Yorkshire & Humber (32%). In cultures or regions where institutional trust may be weaker or engagement feels exclusionary, digital tools may be perceived as more neutral, equitable sources of information.

For young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, technology seems to be actively substituting traditional sources of guidance. Respondents in this group were more likely to turn to AI tools (28%) than parents and family (26%), and to social media influencers (22%) than their friends and peers (20%). This suggests not simply preference, but compensation. Where intergenerational knowledge, networks or confidence may be limited, young people rely on the tools most readily available to them.

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For social mobility, this matters: while technology can broaden access to information, it cannot on its own bridge gaps in opportunity. Utilising both personal relationships and technology for careers guidance is important, but without the infrastructure to translate insight into real-world experiences – such as employer engagement, work experience or guided pathways – existing access gaps persist.

These findings also indicate a shift in how career guidance is consumed: continuously, informally and iteratively, rather than through fixed points or structured conversations. Ultimately, decision making has become non-linear, and systems designed around one-off touchpoints risk falling behind the realities that young people now face.

***Respondents from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to turn to AI tools (28%) than parents and family (26%), and to social media influencers (22%) than their friends and peers (20%)***

## Choosing between routes – university and apprenticeships

**21%** of university students from a higher socio-economic background said their parents expected them to go

Students from a lower socio-economic background were **twice as likely** to undertake an apprenticeship than a university degree

Young people from Yorkshire & Humber were **seven times more likely** to undertake an apprenticeship than go to university

The data suggests that choices between university and apprenticeships are often shaped less by informed comparison and more by visibility, encouragement and perceived legitimacy.

For example, those who chose university saw it as an easier, more accessible and future-proof pathway, with a 'prestigious qualification' backing them. They also felt they were more likely to get a place on a university degree than a high-quality apprenticeship, and that it provided more career options.

Additionally, respondents from a higher socio-economic background were twice as likely than those from a lower-socio economic background to say their parents expected them to go to university. Not all were aware that degree-level apprenticeships existed.

For students from a lower socio-economic background, the pattern shifts. They were twice as likely to undertake an apprenticeship than they were a university degree, pointing to a preference for routes perceived as more accessible and financially secure. However, only 10% of respondents explicitly cited the cost of university or an unwillingness to take on debt as a reason for not going.

This suggests that, while upfront costs are not always articulated at the point of decision making, they may nonetheless influence perceptions of risk and value, particularly when alternative pathways offer paid employment and clearer transitions to work.

Once again, regional differences reinforce this picture. Young people from Yorkshire & Humber, where levels of education-to-employer engagement were high, were seven times more likely to choose an apprenticeship over university - the highest proportion of any region. Across demographics, key drivers for an apprenticeship route included encouragement from teachers, the availability of local opportunities and a strong belief that an apprenticeship was the best route for them.

***Opportunity conditioned by access to prior advantage is not opportunity equally shared.***

## The myth of equal access

**70%\*** from a lower socio-economic background believe better career guidance, improved transport links and the opportunity to meet local businesses would all benefit them in accessing high quality employment

\*Combined stat

**A quarter** of young people believe business leaders should be given the opportunity to influence the curriculum to ensure they have the relevant skillset when leaving education

While the findings show that young people broadly perceive there to be equal access to their chosen career, the reasons they give indicate that this 'equality' is conditional. Access is seen as achievable only if certain prerequisites are met.

These conditions include achieving the right qualifications (48%), securing relevant work experience (42%) or already having established workplace connections (23%). In other words, these conditions can become a gateway to opportunity for some but remain a significant barrier for others.

Rather than levelling the playing field, these conditions often replicate existing advantage. For social mobility, this reinforces the critical truth: opportunity conditioned by access to prior advantage is not opportunity equally shared.

The barriers perceived across different demographics also highlight how these young people rationalise this inequality. Differences across socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicity and neurodivergence imply that structural inequalities affect how young people experience or access career pathways, and they prioritise



different forms of support to counter these imbalances. For example, those from a lower socioeconomic background emphasise the need for improved career guidance (24%), whereas ethnic minority respondents see transport (27%) as a barrier.

Alongside perceptions of fairness, respondents identified tangible actions they believe would help young people access high-quality jobs after leaving education. These priorities closely mirror the barriers identified earlier, reinforcing the role of systemic – rather than individual – factors in shaping outcomes.

- ▶ Giving business leaders a meaningful role in shaping the education curriculum
- ▶ Improving the quality of careers guidance
- ▶ Creating more structured opportunities for young people to engage with local employers
- ▶ Providing better and more affordable transportation links to expand opportunity.

### Personal insight

Fab Lanza is an Audit Trainee at BDO in the Midlands. He is a school leaver apprentice and an Explore BDO alumni. Explore BDO is a three-day insight programme aimed at students meeting the lower socio-economic criteria and in years 12-13 of school.

Fab says: "I don't think students receive enough information about apprenticeships and other job opportunities when considering their career options in school. From my own experience, I felt pushed towards applying to university, even though it wasn't my preferred choice. I only developed an awareness of alternative career pathways because of my own research and student network. Having access to a range of quality career support, advice and guidance just simply wasn't offered at school."



**Fab Lanza**  
Audit Trainee

### Insight from Enactus UK & Ireland

Enactus UK & Ireland supports students and young people across the country to engage in social action and social enterprise. Its mission is to be recognised as a leader in developing socially minded young leaders of the future.

#### **Amy Brereton, CEO of Enactus UK & Ireland says:**

"You cannot aspire to a path that you don't know exists. Talent is everywhere, but opportunity, or certainly the awareness of opportunities, is not.

Our approach at Enactus is to provide the bridge to remove the barriers of geography and social capital when it comes to unlocking potential. Working alongside partners like BDO, we create a space where every student can build the skills to engage with the professional world, giving them access to employers and roles they would never have known how to reach, let alone secure."



**Amy Brereton,**  
CEO of Enactus UK  
& Ireland

### BDO Policy Recommendation

BDO has advocated for the introduction of an apprenticeship clearing-style system to better match candidates with employers. We therefore welcomed the Government's announcement, in February 2026, of a new pilot apprenticeship matching service as a positive step towards improving access and reducing friction in the recruitment process. To maximise its impact, the Government should maintain momentum on delivery and continue to work closely with employers to shape both the design and implementation of the system.

In particular, two principles will be critical to its success:

- ▶ Alignment with recruitment cycles: the platform must reflect the timing and flexibility of employers' hiring practices, rather than imposing rigid application windows.
- ▶ Fair and transparent access: safeguards should be introduced to ensure equal visibility for employers of all sizes, preventing larger or more recognisable brands from dominating candidate attention.

# Theme Three: Inclusion & Belonging

## What young people value and what they fear will hold them back

What young people value in employers is closely linked to their perceptions of where barriers to equal opportunity still exist.

The importance they place on flexible working (26%), work-life balance (24%) and an employer having a supportive culture (20%), align with the view that caring responsibilities (27%), mental health challenges (25%) and appearance-based judgements (25%) are the biggest obstacles to progressing in the workplace. Overall, 95% of young people identified one or more barriers they believe exist which prevents them from getting a job or being promoted to a more senior position.

In other words, the conditions young people want employers to provide are often the areas where they also feel most disadvantaged.

The data shows that young people have a desire to feel represented and included in the workplace. They want employers to demonstrate they are actively countering the pressures and barriers they see around them by making opportunity visible and tangible. According to a report by Youth Employment UK, almost a third of young people felt they did not have positive role models in their community.

Where pathways to success feel unclear or inaccessible, the absence of visible role models can reinforce those perceptions of exclusion. Role models can help shape their identity, support their transition into adulthood and begin to make decisions which have a real-world impact.

Similarly, the value placed on diversity, inclusion and having "people like them" (20%) in the workplace corresponds directly with concerns about bias linked to identity (21%), neurodivergence (24%) and socioeconomic factors (20%).

We're seeing a generational shift in priorities too. Salary is no longer the primary driver of importance when choosing an employer. Young people value psychological safety, purpose and wellbeing over traditional financial motivators. There's a real focus on values that are shaped by social inequality, mental health pressures and a heightened awareness of discrimination.

The Social Mobility Commission's Perceptions of Social Mobility in the UK report aligns with this. Its findings on what is important to people show that priorities held in the highest regard relate to health, happiness and wellbeing, with less weighting placed on earning a high income or having a professional or managerial job.

That said, young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds were, unsurprisingly, nearly twice as likely as others to identify salary as the single most important factor when choosing an employer. This highlights a clear equity gap, where for some it is a privilege to be able to prioritise flexibility and balance, yet for others having financial stability is crucial to their sense of security.

Overall, young people's aspirations and anxieties track closely: they want inclusive, flexible, supportive workplaces. Many believe that current systems are not yet set up to recognise or accommodate their real-world circumstances. These perceptions – often shaped by lived experience – are reinforced by long-standing regional inequalities in labour market opportunities and appear stubbornly embedded in this generation.

Overall, **95%** of young people believe there is some form of barrier in place preventing them from getting a job or being promoted to a more senior position

**A third** of female and neurodivergent respondents believe caring responsibilities is a barrier to being offered a job or promoted to a more senior position

Almost **a quarter** of neurodivergent young people say it's important for them to see 'people like me' when considering an employer

## Spotlight on Neurodiversity

### Personal insight

**Miles Nikolic is an Audit Quality Manager at BDO** and was formally diagnosed with autism as a young adult. He says:

"When I think about equal access to opportunities for individuals with a neurodivergent condition, it strikes me that talent is widely distributed but access is not.

What levels the playing field is when employers are clear about what 'good' looks like. Transparent processes, flexibility in how to work and managers who focus on outcomes over performance 'theatre' help a lot.

Neurodivergent young people will often face challenges in the workplace. In order to raise the bar in creating equitable opportunities for all, employers need to actively demonstrate their willingness to provide reasonable adjustments and be open-minded and curious to the ways in which people may demonstrate their knowledge differently."



**Miles Nikolic,**  
Audit Quality Manager

### BDO insight

"Whether already in the workplace or at the very start of their careers, what this research shows is that many of today's young people with a neurodivergent condition feel they are not being afforded the same access to opportunities and are facing barriers which hinder their progress. There is a clear and urgent need for structured employer engagement and guaranteed equal access to careers support to ensure no young person is locked out of opportunity before their careers even begin.

We need to show young people entering the workplace that diversity of thought drives success and, by valuing our differences, we unlock a wealth of creativity and innovation."



**Sarah Hillary,**  
Partner sponsor for  
Inclusion & Belonging  
at BDO



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## Theme Four: Employer of the Future

The survey findings demonstrate a shift in what young people want from work and, by extension, what they expect from their future employer. Their expectations extend beyond immediate job choices to encompass what a sustainable, fair and future-ready workplace looks like as they progress through their career.

As set out in the previous section, flexibility and work-life balance sit at the heart of these expectations. These factors shape not only short-term job preferences but also the longer-term vision of what constitutes a good employer.

Flexible working and balance are no longer seen as optional perks but as core components of a modern workplace. This emphasis is particularly prominent among young people who may face additional barriers in the workplace.

Respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds (29%) and those who are neurodivergent or have learning disabilities (20%) placed even greater emphasis on flexibility than other groups. For these young people, flexible working is not a lifestyle choice but a prerequisite for equity and inclusion.

For a generation that has grown up highly attuned to issues of equality and identity, representation serves as both reassurance and a marker of organisational integrity. As they look ahead, young people want an employer who embodies fairness in its workforce identity and demonstrates this through its operating culture and leadership behaviours.

When asked to consider the next decade, young people emphasised expectations which blended financial security, personal development and future-readiness. Many highlighted the importance of performance-related bonuses or additional benefits (25%), fair pay that keeps pace with the cost of living (24%), and access to continuous learning and development (23%).

For employers, these expectations represent not just evolving preferences, but a roadmap for supporting long-term progression and social mobility within the workforce.

These insights signal that, while cultural conditions shape immediate preferences, long-term expectations are centred on stability, growth and adaptability - qualities that will determine whether an employer can support young people through a rapidly evolving labour market and geopolitical landscape.



Similarly, they want to work for employers who embrace new technologies (23%) and are prepared to evolve with industry and societal change. This reflects a strong awareness that careers will be shaped by rapid technological and economic transformation, and that long-term employability depends on an employer's ability to adapt.

Taken together, these findings highlight a generation that is seeking employers who can support both their human and economic needs.

Flexibility, inclusion and representation underpin their sense of belonging and wellbeing, while fair pay, development opportunities and future-readiness are essential to their sense of security and progression. Seen through the eyes of young people, the employer of the future is one that blends these expectations seamlessly – offering a supportive, adaptable and values-driven environment that nurtures growth and recognises the diverse realities of working lives.

In short, young people are not just looking for jobs, but for workplaces that will see them work, win and thrive in their careers.

#### Insight from Arctic Shores:

As the next generation places greater emphasis on flexibility, inclusion and career development in a fast-changing world, recruitment processes need to reflect these desires while spotting those with the potential to thrive.

Arctic Shores is an innovative provider of task-based assessments that have responded to this shift. By combining neuroscience, AI and gamification technology, its approach captures thousands of data points to gain deeper insight into a candidate's potential rather than relying purely on experience or education. In focusing on potential over polish, Arctic Shores helps widen access to opportunity and supports fairer progression, aligning closely with the principles of social mobility.

#### Robert Newry is Chief Explorer at Arctic Shores, he says:

"This is a generation who don't simply want to tell you what they capable of, they want to show you. By enabling young people to demonstrate their skillset, potential will not just be discovered, it will be uncovered."



**Robert Newry,**  
Chief Explorer at  
Arctic Shores

#### Personal:

**64%\*** say an employer of the future should offer flexibility, take ED&I seriously and have strong environmental and sustainability credentials respectively.

\*Combined

#### Financial:

**Almost 50%\*** say they want an employer who offers the opportunity to earn bonuses or extra benefits and fair pay which keeps up with living standards.

\*Combined

#### Future ready:

**Over 40%\*** say an employer who offers opportunities for continuous learning and development, embraces new technology and is ready to evolve as the world changes will be most important to them as their career grows.

\*Combined





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## Conclusion

Together, the survey findings present a compelling picture of a generation that is optimistic about their potential but realistic about the structural barriers that are shaping their early careers. While young people believe in the principle of equal access, many continue to experience, or anticipate, inequity tied to social capital, geography and socio-economic background.

Young people are clear about what would drive meaningful change. They point to a need for stronger and more consistent careers guidance, deeper and earlier employer engagement and systems that do not rely on inherited networks or happenstance encounters. These factors are critical for improving social mobility, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for whom gaps in access and opportunity remain most pronounced.

Their expectations of employers reflect that same desire for fairness. They want to be in an organisation that values flexibility, representation, inclusion and wellbeing as core features of a good employer, not optional benefits. These sit alongside a growing focus on financial security and long-term development.

As the workplace continues to evolve under the influence of AI and technological acceleration, we need to view social mobility through a longer-term lens. Young people want employers that can support both their humanity and their future readiness. They want organisations that invest in skills, embrace responsible innovation and create environments where all employees can thrive, regardless of their starting point. In this context, social mobility is not a single transition point or simply an early career issue, but an ongoing process shaped by a lifetime of access to opportunity.

The challenge now sits with employers, policymakers and the education system to align structures, expectations and opportunities with the realities young people face. Improving social mobility will depend on the ability to design equitable pathways into and through work, foster genuine belonging and ensure that potential is recognised and nurtured wherever it exists. Those organisations that rise to this challenge will not only advance fairness and inclusion but will build more resilient workforces and contribute to sustainable economic growth. In doing so, they will be best positioned to attract, develop and retain the workforce of tomorrow.

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