



“Rethinking Early Careers: Fresh Insights for Future-Proofing Your Workforce”

Recently, I had the pleasure of chatting with the wonderful Vivienne Meredith. We delved into the ever-changing world of early careers. With our shared experiences in HR and talent management, we explored how organizations can truly future proof early career talent initiative.

The Need for Change in Early Career Programs

Serena started with her observation that early career programs seem to have broadly stagnated. She noted that despite the introduction of systematic graduate and apprenticeship programs, there has been little innovation. Serena emphasized the need for organizations to pause and reassess their approach, asking, **“Why are we doing it, and what are we trying to achieve?”**

Vivienne shared her experience with me of successful programs. Commenting that focusing on new capabilities, such as digital skills, data science and scientific innovation, can keep programs relevant and aligned with future business needs. **“The most successful programs I’ve seen are those that experiment and refresh annually,”** She also acknowledged that variety in the approaches and pathways made available, aided staying current in this space.

The Role of Line Managers

A significant part of the discussion centred around the role of line managers in supporting early career employees. I pointed out that not all managers are suited to guide young talent, especially those young talents educated during the COVID-19 pandemic. I shared a case where an apprentice was left unsupported due to a mismatch with their line manager, leading to poor performance reviews and a lack of networking opportunities. **“Support is essential, especially from line managers”.**

Vivienne added that we, as line managers need to understand the unique experiences of early career employees and be flexible in our line management approach. Emphasizing the importance of standing in the shoes of these individuals and helping them bridge the gap between education and the corporate world. **“Flexibility and understanding are crucial”.** Drawing on experience as a non-executive director for a school multi-academy trust, she commented on the importance of understanding the perspective of students making career choices, such as deciding whether to go to further education or direct to work, **“Organisations that can provide paths to attract and nurture students who have made different choices are the winners”.**

Shifting from Early Careers to Continuous Careers

The conversation progressed to asserting the need to shift from early careers to continuous careers. Vivienne suggested that organizations should focus on career-long learning and development rather than just the initial stages. **“It’s about careers, not just early careers”.** I agreed, advocating for a more agile and experimental approach to talent development. **“Experimentation and flexibility are key”.**

We agreed on the importance of creating deliberate opportunities for networking, relationship building, and exposure to senior leaders. I mentioned that these opportunities should be intentional and not just about superficial activities like **“cake Thursdays.”** Although Vivienne said she does like cake, she agreed that sometimes, **“What we’re missing at**

the moment are human connections, accidental learning, relationship building, inspiration from each other, and support.”

Addressing Future Skills and Remote Work Challenges

I turned us to the importance of identifying future skills needs. **“Taking a step back in an organization and looking at what are the skills of the future that perhaps I don’t have or don’t have enough of, and then scanning across the talent landscape, graduates coming into the organization are ideal to bring some of those future skills,”** I shared that this approach allows organizations to shape and mould these roles early in their careers.

Vivienne suggested we discuss the challenges of remote working in the current flexible world, which has been a regular conversation with clients. Noting that while flexibility suits many, it raises concerns about how new employees learn and integrate. **“We learned through osmosis in the office, overhearing conversations, and asking quick questions, now, with remote work, we need to find a balance to ensure future generations have similar learning opportunities.”** This highlights the importance of deliberate efforts to create environments where accidental learning and human connections can still occur.

We agreed that organisations need to further emphasize the importance of giving back to the next generations. Building accountability of seasoned employees and leaders to pass on their knowledge and immerse early career employees, so they can be even better than we were, as they progress. **“We need to be deliberate and required to giving back to the next generations rather than purely satisfying the requirements of our own roles. It’s about having one eye on the next generation all the time, ensuring accountability, setting expectations, and fostering leadership for the future.”**

Key Takeaways

1. **Embrace Continuous Careers:** Shift the focus from early careers to career-long learning and development. Implement programs that support employees at all stages of their careers, ensuring ongoing growth and adaptability.
2. **Foster a Culture of Experimentation:** Encourage regular updates and experimentation within early career programs to keep them aligned with future business needs. This approach can help identify and develop new capabilities essential for the organization’s success.
3. **Enhance Supportive Leadership:** Equip line managers with the skills and understanding needed to effectively support early career employees. This includes recognizing the unique challenges faced by those educated during the COVID-19 pandemic and providing tailored guidance.
4. **Create Deliberate Connection Opportunities:** Move beyond superficial activities and focus on meaningful interactions that foster growth and development of those who will lead the company next.
5. **Develop Critical Skills:** Focus on building problem-solving, judgment, and decision-making skills in early career employees. These skills are essential for navigating the complexities of how work gets done in an augmented, automated and a co-piloted workplace.