

# UNPLUGGED AND DISCONNECTED:

Mastering Hybrid Networking  
for Early Careers.

Interaction

# EARLY CAREER NETWORKS - WHY EMPLOYERS NEED TO STEP-IN AND STEP-UP

## Setting the scene

It's an obvious point that the pandemic changed how and where we work – and hybrid working looks set to stay. But what's interesting is that the knock-on effect of this on networking is only just hitting the headlines. For those employed before the pandemic pre-existing networks can be leveraged from home. For those just entering the workplace it's a different playing field, and not necessarily a level one – and much more needs to be done.

This new challenge sits along an age-old one in that different generations need, want and value different things.

Employers have an enormous opportunity and challenge on their hands. They need to feed their talent pipelines from the rich seam of early talent to bring fresh ideas, innovation, creativity and digital native capability into their organisations. But they must also up-skill line-managers to know how to engage, motivate, coach and support this population so they perform to their peak.

And in amongst this sits the critical need for early talent to develop their emotional intelligence, to be able to navigate a path through the complexities of hybrid working, and be able to build the networks and knowledge that are essential for ongoing professional success.

Ground-breaking research from the **University of Leeds (UoL)** suggests employers have not only a duty of care in this respect but are in danger of destabilising EDI and social mobility initiatives through lack of action. Employers need to:

1. seek to understand the generational traits and differences
2. up-skill line-managers to support their early talent
3. provide behavioural development for early talent that supports post-pandemic fall out
4. step up and step in to understand their hybrid workplaces and implications for networking.

## 1. Seek to understand the generational traits and differences.

Understanding the values, beliefs, behaviours, and needs of different generations is key when thinking about how best to recruit, develop and retain early talent.

This school of thought hasn't changed, but there is a general sense of 'heightened' traits coming to the fore. This is because we are currently experiencing and seeing the developmental 'lag' brought about by the pandemic for all our young people.

The answer? We need to adapt our thinking and expectations, increase our curiosity and empathy and work *with* the current situation in order to come through and out the other side.



Areas to explore that we know are important to early talent include, but are not limited to:



### Let's take an important example... well-being and mental health

The **2023 ISE Student Development Survey** [3] showed that the provision of virtual development and virtual working combined with the long-term effects of the pandemic, have contributed to an increase in mental health issues in early talent. Compared to previous years, 64% of employers said that the number of graduates and apprentices with mental health issues has increased.

More students and graduates are talking to Interaction facilitators on our early talent programmes about their poor mental health. They report feeling isolated as they work from

bedrooms which offer them no distinction between working space and 'life' space.

They are experiencing feelings of not being seen, valued or appreciated by the company and this results in disconnection which can affect their mental health.

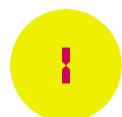



Early talent need more support than ever before. Most are lacking business readiness and human skills due to the lack of social interactions and work experience opportunities. To address this, employers need to adapt programmes, so there is more face-to-face interaction, social skills training and remote support available. Line managers also need training on how to manage and support early talent (Gen Z). Most employers (55%) believe that remote development activities are less effective at developing early career hires than in-person events and yet some employers are still using mostly virtual interventions.

## 2. Up-skill line managers to support their early talent

The role of line-managers has always been pivotal for new talent. It can be 'make' or break' for young people joining an organisation — and no more so than in current times. Effective, timely and high-quality line-management is critical in helping early talent find their feet, increase speed to value, and encourage retention.

Employers need to ensure that line managers are both willing and able to support early talent, and recognise that line managing across the generations (let alone between individuals) is not a 'one-size fits all' approach.





Raising awareness of generational differences and how to work with these to get the best performance is critical.

However market research shows many companies are continuing with the same early talent programmes as before the pandemic and not providing sufficient line management training to sit alongside this.

The benefits of adapting programmes and increasing line management training is that early talent will feel more connected, supported, more able to contribute, and importantly feel a real sense of belonging.

What's important is to provide line manager training, briefings and forums to explore the many aspects which are important to early talent, and help them know how to manage for optimal performance.

**If this meets resistance, step-up and be bold!** — challenge the status quo, dispel myths and encourage mutual trust and respect through exploring initiatives such as reverse mentoring, to break down barriers between generations in the workplace and encourage two-way learning.

### 3. Provide behavioural development for early talent that supports post-pandemic fall out

We have long known that it's not 'what you know' but 'how you go about it' that makes a difference at work. None truer than for early talent who are developmentally on a greater journey than those who are (in theory anyway!) 'longer in the tooth'.

What anecdotally and now the research is starting to show us is that early talent needs more development than ever before to compensate for the 'lost covid years'.

A case in point is that compared with pre-covid and 2022, more employers have reported greater concerns about the attitudes and behaviours of graduates, students and apprentices than their workplace or technical skills. [1]

Tellingly early talent report they are not necessarily struggling with the tasks they are being set but more with the broader context. They are unsure of how the work they are doing fits in with the wider business and are having difficulties with understanding the culture, workplace norms and etiquette of their organisations [2]. Hello hybrid world!

With the advent of increased virtual talent development programmes, coupled with hybrid working, early talent report that they feel unable to build a strong and lasting community with other members of their cohorts (let alone with their teams and across the business). In reality they are getting significantly reduced exposure to their peers than in previous years which makes them feel detached from both the programme and their colleagues. What was once perhaps exclusively in-person on-boarding, induction and training, is now blended with virtual. Although this might save on budget, it comes at a cost.

The upshot? Firstly the in-person versus virtual blend needs careful planning, and secondly, development focus needs to not only address 'typical' work-readiness and emotional intelligence areas, but be broadened out to



encompass cultural, practical and logistical areas. Not to forget, how to forge networks in a virtual/in-person working 'mash-up'.

So far this year we have heard from unprecedented levels of early talent that they were considering leaving organisations shortly after they had finished their programmes, either due to lack of flexibility and control or lack of support. The good news is that this 'trend' can be reversed through the right type and level of development coupled with effective line management.

#### **4. Step-up and step-in to understand their hybrid workplaces and implications for networking**

This is such a rich seam to explore! And the innovative UoL research lays the situation bare — employers, ignore this at your peril.

Early talent who are hybrid working report having less access to their team and managers. They don't want to disturb people and so don't necessarily ask questions or clarify information. This can lead to making assumptions about their tasks and inadequate delivery. They also find it difficult to get involved in projects outside their direct teams which reduces their networking reach and ability.

What can we learn from this? Hybrid working can't only be about policy and one size does not fit all. All employers of early talent need to be aware of the gaps, and be proactive about reducing and/or removing them.

Development programmes which worked before now need reviewing and updating.

Hybrid working and line manager training must be included.

Employers must take responsibility for providing new starters with the skills they need to be able to thrive in the hybrid workplace.

Workplaces shape social networks and interaction, and networks are an essential part of any early talent programme. This is why it is imperative that this group spend time in the office when they first start. Networks and connection are so important for a whole host of reasons: knowledge sharing, inclusion, resilience, retention, to name just a few.

The UoL research highlighted that although a lot of people want to work from home, it's been proven that office working is beneficial, with individuals reporting higher job satisfaction and engagement, rated their performance better, helped colleagues more and experienced less work-family conflict when they work from the office. Hybrid working, with purposeful attendance in the office, is therefore highly recommended.

Purposeful office attendance is important in helping new starters become established. The feedback we are hearing is that going into the office is a waste of time if others are not there for them to network with. Restricting office attendance 'just because we say' can be a real turn off. Early careers employees don't necessarily think that meeting someone in their cohort for lunch, or grabbing a coffee and a chat is important but more just a waste of time but these types of social interactions can be priceless.

#### **What can you do?**

Employers need to address the areas 1-4 detailed above *and*:

#### **Invest in training**

For all of the reasons stated earlier and also because the UoL research highlighted that 74.4% of the office workers surveyed said they would like to receive training for hybrid working.



Some of the topics listed were:

- social etiquette
- being inclusive
- running effective meetings
- time management
- developing professional networks
- how to seek and provide advice and feedback
- coordinating and connecting/networking
- resilience and personal brand.

These things may not come naturally to early talent. Don't assume they do!

### **Be aware of/be proactive about blockers/challenges**

This includes EDI (e.g. aspects relating to ethnicity, gender, social economic background etc) as there needs to be equity in hybrid working. Reports show that more ethnically diverse employees prefer to work at home. Why is that? Is it because the office environment isn't supporting them or encouraging them in the right way?

It's not just about policy. In order to give everyone the same opportunity to succeed you may have to treat and support people differently – as well as cater for different preferences born out of circumstance and/or personality preference.

Line managers need to understand how to flex and manage boundaries accordingly.

### **Provide Clarity**

Employers must provide clear boundaries, structures, and policies around hybrid working - to both new starters and their managers. Don't assume employees (and particularly new talent) understand what's expected of them.

A positive hybrid environment can be created and maintained if the expectations and boundaries are clear and understood. Paint a positive picture of what can be achieved through hybrid working and policies and practicalities which support this and overcome potential issues. Employers need to think about the optimum balance for their early talent and ensure regular opportunities for cohort/team/organisational face-to-face exposure.

### **Offer work experience (Intern/ Industrial Placement Programmes)**

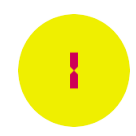
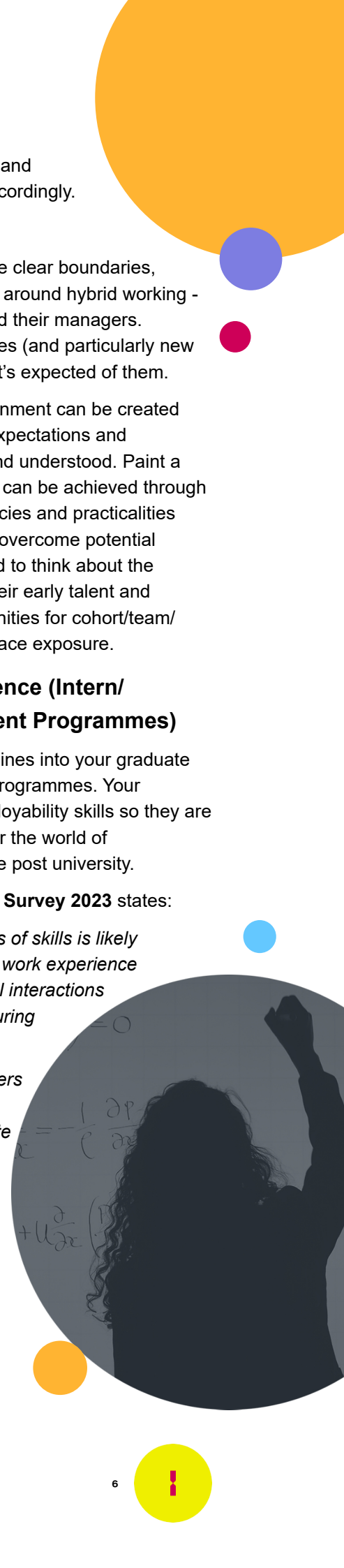
They are valuable pipelines into your graduate and other early talent programmes. Your students will learn employability skills so they are better equipped to enter the world of professional working life post university.

**The ISE Development Survey 2023** states:

*“The lack of these types of skills is likely attributed to the limited work experience opportunities and social interactions available to students during the pandemic.*

*The majority of employers (72%) agreed that graduates who complete an internship or placement arrive with better skills and attitudes (compared to 63% in 2022).” [3]*

**Don't ignore the data!**



And finally... as early talent L&D professionals, you're not alone in this!

There is a whole network of people willing and able to help, share knowledge and experience and provide support.

**Interaction** are part of a community called [The Talent Forum](#). It's an employer-led network, where like-minded L&D professionals, across a range of industries meet up to share information and help each other by providing support and sharing best practice. During the pandemic the quarterly in-person events were replaced with weekly Friday morning calls. Due to the success of these they remain in place. Feel free to come along. [Register here](#).

## About us

Like what you hear? Interested in finding out more?

We're an Employee Owned training consultancy with a conscience underpinned by clear values and a commitment to sustainability both for the impact of our work and organisations we work with.

For over twenty years we've worked in close partnership with clients to support, develop and enhance the skills and behaviours of the early talent population. Our experiential approach ensures training is both engaging and effective in delivering genuine behavioural change.

Our commitment to this valuable work remains unchanged. We wholeheartedly believe in shoring up this critical pool of talent and providing them with the skills, attitudes and behaviours to thrive in today's complex workplaces.

**Join us in stepping in and stepping up to help early talent thrive.**

[Visit our website](#)

[Follow us on LinkedIn](#)

[Find us on Instagram](#)

email us: [info@interaction-LD.com](mailto:info@interaction-LD.com)

## Further Reading

[<sup>1,2</sup>] [University of Leeds Reports:](#)

[Starting your career during a pandemic](#)

[Where is your office today? Part One](#)

[Where is your office today? Part Two](#)

## Interaction Resources

[Early Talent Insight](#)

[ISE 2023 presentation](#)

## ISE Knowledge hub

[Setting early talent up for success](#)

[Do young people like hybrid and remote work?](#)

[5 ways to support hybrid workers from less privileged backgrounds](#)

[Graduate programmes hybrid - mental health issues increase](#)

[<sup>3</sup>] [ISE Student Development Survey \(available to members\)](#)

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The people  
development  
people.