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# RECRUITING YOUNG PEOPLE FACING DISADVANTAGE

An evidence review

**Practice summary and  
recommendations**  
March 2022



The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 160,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Youth Futures Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established with an initial £90 million endowment from the Dormant Assets Scheme to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Its aim is to narrow employment gaps by identifying what works and why, investing in evidence generation and innovation, and igniting a movement for change.

# Practice summary and recommendations

## **Recruiting young people facing disadvantage: an evidence review**

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### **Acknowledgements**

This report was written by Iulia Cioca and Jonny Gifford. It is based on a rapid evidence assessment conducted by Eric Barends, Denise Rousseau, Tony Muntun and Emilia Wietrak of the Center for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMA).

Many thanks to Anna Darnell, Chris Goulden, Matthew Poole and Anna Round from Youth Futures Foundation, and to Lutfur Ali, Lizzie Crowley, Claire McCartney, Claire McDermott and Jemeela Quraishi from the CIPD for their advice and feedback on the report.

### **Publication information**

Please cite this report as: Cioca, I. and Gifford, J. (2022) *Recruiting young people facing disadvantage: an evidence review. Practice summary and recommendations*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

This practice summary and the scientific summary are freely available at [cipd.co.uk/evidence-youth-recruitment](https://cipd.co.uk/evidence-youth-recruitment)

# 1 Introduction

## Context

Although youth unemployment has long been a concern, Youth Futures Foundation notes that this was exacerbated during the pandemic, with young people experiencing the greatest rise in unemployment levels. While these have now largely returned to pre-pandemic levels, hundreds of thousands of young people are seeking work and there is an increase in those who are economically inactive.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, job vacancies are increasing and have recently hit record levels in most industries across the UK,<sup>2</sup> with other countries facing similar conditions.<sup>3</sup> After a period of reduced recruitment and hiring, employers are having to compete harder to fill job openings. The increased competition for candidates is driving employers' attention to underutilised pools of talent, who have traditionally been overlooked when accessing employment.

Disadvantaged young people are in most need of these opportunities, and in this context, it is vital that employers can effectively recruit young people from marginalised groups, who may need more support to move towards, or return to, paid work.

## Focus of the review

There are numerous recruitment challenges in effectively identifying talented workers and avoiding bias and discrimination, as previous CIPD research has explored.<sup>4</sup> This evidence review more specifically aims to help employers looking to work with disadvantaged young talent. It addresses the following questions:

- What barriers do disadvantaged young people face?
- What are the best recruitment channels for reaching young applicants from marginalised backgrounds?
- What messages attract disadvantaged young people to apply for a job?
- What selection tools and approaches give an accurate and fair evaluation of young people facing disadvantage?

## Which young people are disadvantaged in the labour market?

From a legal standpoint, tackling disadvantage is often focused on specific protected characteristics – for example, in UK law, age, disability, gender reassignment, marital status, race, religion or beliefs, sex, pregnancy and maternity, and sexual orientation. However, in research, the meaning of 'marginalised' or 'disadvantaged' young people tends to be more generic and vague. In this review, we consider two broad categories of disadvantage that young people can face:

- **Factors not relating to education or skills:** young people who possess the education and skills required to enter the job market can be disadvantaged because of a characteristic unrelated to their job performance – for example, their age, race, skin colour, gender or disability.
- **Low levels of education or skill development:** young people can lack the qualifications, education, or social or professional skills needed to enter the job market, due to factors such as poverty, lack of support, drug use, mental health problems, discrimination or other social issues. These factors can relate to subgroup differences in age, race, skin colour, gender, disability, and so on.

### **An evidence-based approach**

There is a huge volume of research into employee recruitment and selection that is potentially relevant for the day-to-day decisions and actions of recruiters, people professionals and hiring managers. Evidence-based practice offers well-established approaches that help us cut through fads, unvetted information and received wisdom to understand what practices are most likely to be effective. Even though hard proof of ‘what works’ is sometimes elusive, we can identify the best available evidence and pinpoint the practices that give us the best chances of achieving desired outcomes. This review summarises the best available evidence from the scientific literature on ‘what works’ in recruiting and selecting young people facing disadvantage. The insights and recommendations are based on the most robust and relevant research from over 2,500 empirical studies. Each study was assessed by independent reviewers from the Center for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMA) on the basis of predetermined quality criteria.

## **2 Recruitment barriers faced by disadvantaged young people**

Before looking at potential solutions, we consider the research evidence on the nature of the barriers that disadvantaged young people face.

### **Ineffective recruitment channels and adverts**

The first step to obtaining employment is to know about job opportunities and to feel confident in applying for openings. Recruiters and people professionals may rely on communication channels they usually use to advertise roles, such as social media, newspapers or online job boards. However, disadvantaged young people might not have access to these channels due to a lack of resources (for example, internet access), information (for example, where to look for job openings), or confidence. Even when they do read a job advert, the message might not feel relevant or might even paint a picture of the ideal candidate that is not compatible with their self-view. This may deter candidates from underprivileged backgrounds from even applying for a job.

### **Poor selection methods**

Effective employee selection identifies and attracts candidates capable of successfully performing the job’s essential tasks. For this reason, research has focused on what selection tools have the highest predictive validity of job performance – in other words, how well people perform in the test predicts how well they’ll do in the actual job. However, many organisations measure what feels predictive rather than looking for evidence. One example is job experience: the number of years’ experience in similar jobs is required on many job adverts and is a criterion in screening applicants. That said, research evidence indicates that job experience is a poor predictor of future performance – not a strong enough link exists to warrant using it in practice.<sup>5</sup> It might sound counterintuitive, but the bare experience of someone doing a job does not tell much about their performance in that job or if the tasks and context were similar or different. It is even worse to use age as a criterion to select employees – it has no link with future performance in a job and should not be a basis for recruiters’ decisions.<sup>6</sup>

### Subgroup differences

As more organisations aim to recruit from diverse backgrounds and groups facing disadvantage, it is important to be aware of subgroup differences. Selection tools, even ones tested to be valid, can produce subgroup differences, meaning that candidates from disadvantaged groups consistently score lower than peers without a disadvantage. In job selection, subgroup differences translate into fewer opportunities for employment for marginalised young people.

When discussing supporting such groups, subgroup difference is the critical lens to apply when looking at selection. A selection tool can be valid (predicting performance) and/or reliable, yet can nonetheless disadvantage particular groups. For example, the most valid and reliable predictor of performance across jobs is cognitive ability,<sup>7</sup> but tests assessing it also result in high subgroup differences between ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup> Using tools without considering and accounting for subgroup differences can reinforce disadvantages and, as such, recruiters, people professionals and hiring managers may unwittingly be part of the problem.

#### Box 1: What are subgroup differences?

Various tests and evaluation methods (for example, interviews) can produce results that differ between subgroups of the population – for example, males and females, white and black people.<sup>9</sup> Often, these differences reflect a pattern of disadvantage; for example, US research has found that black people tend to score lower than white people on cognitive ability tests (tests that assess things such as reasoning, perception, memory, verbal and mathematical ability, and problem-solving).<sup>10</sup>

The issue is further complicated with findings showing that, in assessing the outcomes that one hopes to predict by using cognitive tests, subgroup differences also emerge: black employees tend to obtain lower performance evaluations than whites.<sup>11</sup>

Given the range of subgroup differences that exist – not only linked to race – it's likely that such differences are due to biased forms of measurement. That is to say, for example, that a cognitive ability test favours white over black people in ways that are not related to actual cognitive ability. Regardless of what causes the differences, the implications for employee selection are clear: people at risk of discrimination are rated lower than their peers. Organisations looking for a more diverse workforce need to be aware of subgroup differences in the selection tools they use and implement strategies to mitigate them.

### Unconscious bias

Where selection tools involve human judgement, such as job interviews, even if deliberate discrimination does not occur, subgroup differences can very easily creep in due to unconscious bias. This phenomenon affects human decision-making in all walks of life. Biases negatively affect the chances of particular groups of people obtaining a job, which leaves them at a disadvantage when it comes to being employed. For example, unstructured interviews leave more space for unconscious biases than structured tools. Therefore, it's the responsibility of recruiters and people professionals to use methods of selection that reduce bias.

**Box 2: What is unconscious bias?**

Bias is *'a tendency to have a subjective opinion or view toward or against an individual, an ethnic group, nation, religion, or social class, etc.'*<sup>12</sup> It makes our decisions suboptimal, meaning we are less likely to achieve the outcomes we set out for. Over recent decades, one of the major insights from psychology is that our thinking is often intuitive, fast and effortless, relying on mental shortcuts ('heuristics'). Daniel Kahneman labelled this 'System 1', contrasting it to the analytical, slower and effortful 'System 2' thinking.<sup>13</sup> The two processes are necessary and complement each other, but we are often highly intuitive even when we want to be objective. This means that a great deal of bias is unconscious.

One example is 'affinity bias', which describes how we are drawn to people we know or who are similar to us. This can introduce bias from characteristics that are irrelevant to the job – such as someone's accent, clothes, or even favourite football team. A related example is 'status quo bias', which, in an organisational context, can mean we want to work with people similar to those we've worked with before. As a result, a manager may want more of the existing skills in their organisation and be blind to the benefits of capabilities that fill a current gap.

Even when trying to objectively assess a candidate, we are susceptible to 'confirmation bias'. Already in the first few minutes, interviewers form impressions of candidates' suitability – often based on affinity bias – and for the rest of the interview ask questions with the (often unconscious) aim of confirming that first impression.

Of course, not all bias is unconscious: in conscious discrimination, people can recognise, accept, and even embrace their prejudices. Nor does it follow from the existence of unconscious bias that we should necessarily train people on the psychology of it: it may backfire and increase bias, as we have discussed elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

**Recommendations for practice**

- Check the first pool of applicants you get for job openings, and whether it includes people from a disadvantaged background. If not, the issue might be with the recruitment channels and messages in use. To establish this may need analysis of official statistics – for example, on the proportion of ethnic minority groups in your region.
- Before starting to select candidates for a job, identify which capabilities are needed to perform well. Use validated methods of job analysis to identify the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by good performers.
- Don't use age or job experience as criteria to screen or select employees. Age and the number of years of experience are not good predictors of job performance.
- Use valid and fair tools to assess the relevant capabilities. Whether you develop them in-house or use a supplier, gather or ask for data about predictive validity and subgroup differences.

### 3 Reaching disadvantaged young people

The first step recruiters and people professionals have to take in employing disadvantaged young people is to get the message about vacancies out to them. The usual communication channels might not work for reaching disadvantaged young people; for example, they may not see a job advert if a recruiter relies on LinkedIn. Barriers can be that they lack confidence, do not know how to job search effectively, or do not know enough about the job market to find the right job opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

Instead, there is some evidence to suggest that people from disadvantaged groups often rely more on personal contacts and their informal networks to find employment opportunities.<sup>16</sup> Therefore recruiters could be more effective if they actively reach out to local communities and engage with spaces and places where disadvantaged young people are more likely to be represented.

#### Recommendations for practice

- Invest in getting to know the target group(s) – their activities, interests, networks and social gathering places.
- Customise recruitment practices based on local context and target group characteristics – a national or uniform approach is less likely to work.
- Partner with people or organisations, such as charities or social enterprises, that already work with disadvantaged young people to better understand their needs and issues.
- Due to the customisation effort required, you might consider taking a longer-term focus on a specific group of disadvantaged young people rather than changing target often (for example, having a different initiative each year).

### 4 Attracting disadvantaged young people

Beyond recruitment channels, messaging also appears to make a difference. Targeted marketing techniques can effectively reach specific groups, including young people in general and especially disadvantaged groups. For example, ethnic-specific targeting approaches could include cultural cues such as language, symbols or images of people from similar ethnic backgrounds. Another example is for a job advert to state that the employer is Disability Confident,<sup>17</sup> that adjustments can be made to the interview process, and potential candidates can ask for any other adjustments they need to take account of a disability. Such approaches to job adverts targeting disadvantaged young people can be an effective strategy to reach them and raise their awareness of the job opportunities.



### Box 3: What is targeted marketing?

Messages aimed at attracting people to a product are rarely generic. Targeting consists of isolating a segment of the population that the company wants to serve and building a message that is more likely to appeal to that specific group.<sup>18</sup> This involves a first phase of getting to know the target group, their characteristics, preferences and needs. A next step is to build a marketing message that appeals to the target group and results in them feeling positively affiliated to the brand and having higher purchase intentions.

The same tactics can be applied to make people engage in an action rather than buy a product. With recruitment campaigns, employers want to get good-quality candidates to apply for the job. By using targeted job adverts, organisations can be more effective in reaching the target group of potential applicants and encouraging them to apply.

### Recommendations for practice

When scoping job specifications and drafting and testing job adverts, take a planned and conscientious approach to making sure they appeal and feel inclusive to marginal or disadvantaged groups.

Key groups to involve are:

- people from the group(s) you are trying to reach, either inside your organisation or external to it
- recruitment or marketing specialists who have experience working with the disadvantaged young people you are trying to recruit.

## 5 How should interviews be used?

Interviews are ubiquitous in employee selection, but they come in many shapes and forms and vary widely in how they are designed, conducted and evaluated. The more structured, uniform and aligned to the requirements of the job they are, the better they work as selection tools, becoming more predictive and less biased by subgroup differences. Below we describe the main ways recruiters and people professionals can improve their selection interviews and turn them into better tools to evaluate candidates.

### Use structured interview guides

Structured interviews have a fixed format, where recruiters ask the same questions, in the same order, to each applicant. The questions are prepared beforehand and are strictly linked to what the job requires. While recruiters might see them as rigid as there's less space to adapt the conversation, structured interviews are better because of two key reasons: first, their structure minimises bias and substantially reduces disparities related to race, gender, age and disability; and second, they are better at predicting future job performance.<sup>19</sup> Since these are the two primary goals for any effective selection process, structured interviews are the first step in giving fair and fitting employment opportunities to disadvantaged young people.

### **Work with clear evaluation criteria**

To improve selection interviews, people professionals can also work on how they are evaluated. For example, using ‘anchors’ or benchmark answers to guide assessors’ judgements reduces bias and makes interviews more valid.<sup>20</sup> Anchors must be based on a thorough assessment of the demands of the job and graded to give assessors examples of good, acceptable and poor answers. When interviewing, recruiters should match the candidate’s answer to the benchmark answers and rate them accordingly. This practice improves the predictive power of interviews and makes them better tools for reducing bias against disadvantaged young people.

### **Train and use the same interviewers**

In addition to improving interview questions and evaluations, recruiters and people professionals can also work with the interviewers themselves. For example, by training interviewers on how to conduct structured interviews and use scoring anchors, they improve the reliability and validity of selection interviews, ultimately reducing bias.<sup>21</sup> Training should also include hiring managers who act as interviewers, aiming to introduce objective scoring criteria and consistent questions. It seems this is not yet standard practice: in a CIPD survey conducted last year, only 54% of respondents said their organisations provided training to hiring managers.<sup>22</sup>

A different way to improve interviews, especially when they are not structured, is to have all candidates for a job meet the same interviewer(s).<sup>23</sup> If the same person or panel conducts and evaluates all candidates, this improves the validity, as some factors are constant.

### **Recommendations for practice**

- Use structured interviews to assess all candidates for the same job position, including disadvantaged young people.
- Prepare structured interview guides and clear evaluation grids based on an analysis of the job you’re recruiting for. Define the questions to be asked, their order, and provide examples of ‘ideal’ and ‘poor’ answers, together with a clear indication of what the rating scale is.
- Offer refresher training for recruiters on how to use structured interview guides and evaluation criteria. Help them become confident with the interview tools by allowing practice and reflection.
- Organise joint sessions where recruiters see and evaluate the same interview, discussing their ratings and resolving discrepancies. This can help build a shared understanding of the rating criteria.
- Whenever possible, use the same person or panel as interviewers. This is likely to work well for small pools of candidates.

## 6 Tests and other selection tools

Interviews are clearly not the only selection tool that recruiters can use. What does the research evidence tell us about how other approaches can reduce or even perpetuate disadvantage?

### Cognitive ability tests

A large body of research suggests that cognitive ability – also known as IQ, general mental ability (GMA) or general intelligence – is the strongest predictor of job performance across jobs.<sup>24</sup> Valid and reliable cognitive ability tests are thus highly recommended as a way to make selection more equitable and support the recruitment of disadvantaged young people, as well as hiring the best talent.

Nonetheless, cognitive ability tests can still have serious flaws, resulting in subgroup differences – for example between different ethnicities.<sup>25</sup> However, the best tests – that is, those that are the most established, widely tested and rigorously constructed, such as the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale – do now compensate for subgroup differences so should not disadvantage marginalised groups. So it is critical that people professionals are savvy consumers when using cognitive ability tests. We suggest that recruiters ask test vendors about the nature of the tool and its use in selection. Specific questions to ask may include:

- Which tests do you use and who developed them? In particular, were they developed in-house or are they more widely established? Even having a brief look on Wikipedia will give you some idea of the trustworthiness of a number of tests.
- What are the psychometric properties of the test? In particular, how well does it predict job performance (predictive validity) and how stable are results over time (test-retest reliability)?
- Does the test reduce bias by compensating for subgroup differences? If yes, for which demographic groups does this apply?

Recruiters can use variations of cognitive ability tests, or use them alongside other tools. For example, an alternative to general cognitive ability tests is testing for more specific aspects of cognitive ability, such as verbal and numerical skills. This has been found to reduce the subgroup differences between racial/ethnic groups.<sup>26</sup>

Another, more wholesale, change is to use educational attainment – or in the US, ‘grade point average’ (GPA) – as an indicator of potential. This is a less valid predictor of performance than cognitive ability tests, but educational attainment is a factor of motivation as well as ability and, as such, it reduces subgroup differences, although this is less so during higher education.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it may make sense to use educational attainment for less complex or skilled jobs and do so alongside cognitive ability tests.

### Situational judgement tests

Situational judgement tests (SJTs) are an assessment method that present candidates with a situation they would face on the job and several possible actions in response to it. Candidates have to choose either the most effective action or the one they are most likely to do, depending on test instructions. The candidate’s decision is then compared against how effective the various options are, as determined through job analysis.

SJTs can help evaluate skills, knowledge or personality traits. The first condition to a valid SJT is that the skills they aim to assess are relevant for performing the job well. When used alongside interviews, SJTs improve the validity of the assessment.<sup>28</sup>

However, subgroup differences can appear with SJTs. For example, US research on SJTs has shown that white applicants perform better than black, Hispanic and Asian applicants, and women perform slightly better than men.<sup>29</sup> If the candidate pool includes young people from various racial groups, SJTs might be a tool to use with care, or alongside strategies to reduce their subgroup differences.

### **Work samples**

Perhaps the easiest way to ensure the selection method is relevant to the job is to use work samples, which consist of the candidates doing hands-on job tasks. For example, a computer scientist could write code, or a trainer could hold a mini-training session. With work samples, it's easy to ensure relevance for the job, but they still display subgroup differences, with black applicants scoring systematically lower than white applicants.<sup>30</sup> The content of the work sample might make a difference, as in-basket and technical exercises resulted in more considerable gaps between white and black applicants. In comparison, role play and oral briefings led to lower differences.

### **Assessment centres**

Assessment centres are a 'one-stop shop' that include a wide range of tools. These might include tried-and-tested tools of work samples, cognitive ability tests and structured interviews, but also other tools that are potentially proprietary or bespoke and not rigorously tested. The variety of assessment centres makes it hard to comment on their effectiveness as a selection tool, since it depends on what they include. Thus, the first step when considering an assessment centre in selection is to ask what it consists of and critically look at the validity of the individual tools that are used, as discussed above.

There is research to suggest that, even if some of the tools in an assessment centre are valid, the other exercises included on top add little value: for example, in comparison with cognitive ability tests, assessment centres bring only a 2% increase in validity.<sup>31</sup>

What's more, assessment centres don't fare well when looking at subgroup differences. Research from the US shows that black and Hispanic candidates score consistently lower than white candidates, while women score higher than men.<sup>32</sup> So, also from the point of view of subgroup differences, assessment centres are not a good option.

Overall, employers may do well to spare the significant investment needed to use assessment centres and stick to the basics, using the core selection tools that are supported by evidence.

### Recommendations for practice

- Use cognitive ability tests as the most robust way to predict performance, but make sure you use ones that compensate for potential subgroup differences. Ask your providers for details of the tests they use.
- If you develop selection tools in-house, an ideal approach would be to pilot them with a heterogeneous group including disadvantaged young people, analyse the data for any subgroup differences, and make adjustments before going live with the job selection process.
- Failing that, a lighter-touch approach would be to sense-check the tools with target groups or experts (for example, from charities) who are familiar with them.
- If commissioning selection tools externally, ask suppliers for information about subgroup differences in their tool and how they are mitigated. If focusing on specific disadvantaged groups, ask for data on how their tool fares in this population. Take the information into account when deciding which tools to buy.
- Track early data in your own recruitment and selection process to detect any subgroup differences. If the tools you use disproportionately disfavour disadvantaged young candidates, consider changes you can make to mitigate this effect.

## 7 Conclusion

There is a huge body of research on employee recruitment. Within this, we find high-quality research evidence on how employers can make recruitment more accurate and less biased, to give fairer opportunities to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The first step is recruitment through targeted and tailored messages delivered through the channels that disadvantaged young people might already use, such as their informal networks.

In selecting candidates, structured interviews are far better than free-flowing unstructured discussions at ensuring valid and fair selection. This means being very clear on the job requirements up front, carefully wording questions that will tap into these, and asking all candidates the same questions. Accompanying structured interviews with other tools such as SJTs or work samples appears to be a good strategy to increase the accuracy of the evaluation, while not reinforcing the pattern of disadvantage.

Cognitive ability tests are the most robust way to predict performance across jobs, thus being a valuable selection tool. When choosing which test to use, employers should consider how the different tools on offer compensate for subgroup differences, to ensure equal opportunities are given to candidates.

### Areas for future research

This review gives a reliable account of the most robust research relating to effective recruitment of disadvantaged young people. However, we note that the scope of this review did not include some specific areas that are worth investigating in their own right.

First, the review did not investigate research on reducing different specific forms of disadvantage – for example those due to social class, which often relates to but is distinct from race. Sociological research not covered in our review has highlighted disadvantages faced by people who do not possess the ‘right’ knowledge, behaviour or manner, style of speech, dress style, and so on for a social group.<sup>33</sup> These factors relate closely to social class. They can mean, for example, that regardless of race, working-class candidates may face very real barriers because they have a strong regional accent, or wear clothes that are considered inappropriate.

Second, the review does not assess recruitment practices that actively prioritise candidates from disadvantaged or minority groups. This can be a contentious area, as the legality of practices differs between countries (for example, on the use of quotas); it is also made more complex by the fact that the use of terminology can also differ between countries (for example, ‘affirmative action’).<sup>34</sup> One of the best-known examples is the Rooney Rule, which requires National Football League teams to use race-based quotas for interviewing (although not for selecting) coaches, and which has been transposed to the English Football League and the English Football Association.<sup>35</sup> Although some econometric analysis does exist on the Rooney Rule,<sup>36</sup> this and other such action fell outside the scope of this review.

What we can say is that different approaches are relevant for the two groups discussed in this review: that is, for disadvantages not relating to education or skills; and for low levels of education or skill development. For marginalised young people who are skilled and well educated, employers can reduce disadvantage by de-biasing selection tools and decision-making processes. However, this will not help candidates who are less well educated as a result of being marginalised: this group will always tend to score lower in selection tests, even ones which have been de-biased. For these groups, it is more relevant to look at more active forms of positive or affirmative action. These could have major policy implications and are another important area to investigate.

Third, although we looked at barriers to reaching disadvantaged young people, the scope of this review did not include the effectiveness of other forms of targeted positive action, such as information, guidance, networking and development opportunities. A particular form encouraged by the CIPD is employer-led community outreach activity aimed at young people from disadvantaged groups. For example, employers can engage with schools and colleges to raise awareness of, and promote, opportunities within a sector or industry.<sup>37</sup> This can be important because young people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to receive careers advice or work experience and placements.<sup>38</sup> However, we need more research to understand the impact of such interventions.

### **Concluding thoughts**

There has long been a need for recruiters and hiring managers to give equal access to employment to all members of our society. This has become even more urgent during the pandemic, which has entrenched divides and further disadvantaged those with the weakest positions in the labour market. The moral case is not just about employers opting to do something for the greater good of society when hiring; they should endeavour to not be part of the problem themselves by failing to consider potential candidates’ disadvantages and ultimately overlooking segments of society.

Some of the positive steps that recruiters, people professionals and hiring managers can take are minor adjustments, but collectively could make a real difference. With every job opening, there are opportunities to reduce disadvantage instead of reinforcing it and, at the same time, find new talent that adds value to the organisation.

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Issued: March 2022 Reference: 8221 © CIPD 2022

