Hark

Building Belonging in a Broken System

How employers can help young people see a future in their sector.



Introduction

Belonging isn't just a feeling.
It's a decision young people make long before they ever apply for a role.

Nearly one million young people in the UK are not in employment, education or training (NEET).[1]

The government has called it a youth unemployment crisis and is responding with announcements and guidance for employers. But the challenges sitting behind that number are structural, and they need fixing at every level to truly tackle the issue.

That's why we've written this report.

Hark is an education agency that connects organisations with young people through schools and communities. We bring educators, young people and employers into the conversation to understand what gets in the way, and what could make a difference. This report draws on those perspectives to explore how employers can help young people see a future in their sector.







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In these pages, you'll hear from two educators: **Gina Visram**, Head of Careers at Alleyn's School and **Liam Plumridge**, Assistant Director at Harrow, Richmond and Uxbridge Colleges, and from **Safa Yasin**, a student at SOAS, University of London, on what it feels like to enter the world of work. Alongside their voices, you'll find examples of what employers are doing, and what the evidence says works.

Leading our thinking on the way through is **Sarah de Souza-Ingle,** Hark's Director of Skills and Employability, who drives much of our work on solutions with employers and schools.

We've combined all these perspectives into a report which reveals the underlying challenges of the national crisis and sets out what employers can do about it.

Let's get stuck in.

1. Office for National Statistics, 27 August 2026

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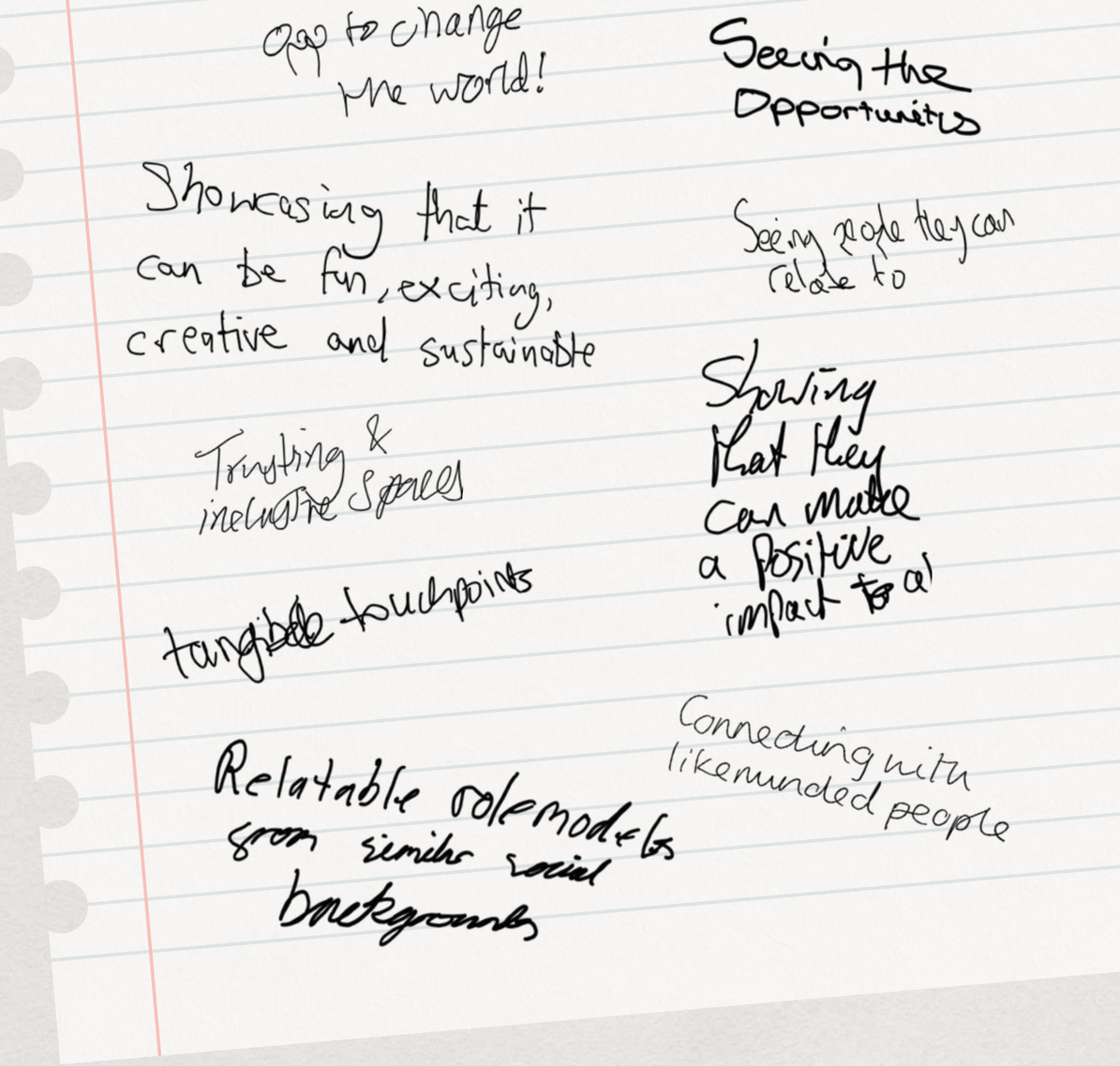
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What would make a young person believe a career is for them?

We've been asking employers this question.

Here's what they told us.



01

A Generation on Hold

Nearly one million young people in the UK are not in education, employment, or training – they are NEET, and the number is growing.[2]

The news is everywhere. Young people are facing what's being called a 'jobpocalypse', and without action, the nation risks a lost generation. With living costs constantly on the rise and entry-level opportunities dwindling, the pathway to a career is more of an uphill battle than ever before.

The government is responding: **Prime Minister Andy Burnham** has called this a "youth unemployment crisis" and shared his ambition to make sure "Britain will value the hard hat every bit as much as the graduation cap." New government guidance now expects schools to build structured work experience into two key stages of secondary school – meaning there will be more windows of opportunity for young people to engage with employers.[3]

It's a step in the right direction and some employers are already responding. **Sainsbury's** has committed to 10,000 work experience placements in areas with high NEET numbers.[4] **National Grid** has announced a £5 million programme to help 5,000 young people who are NEET into work.[5] And major hospitality brands have partnered with the government to deliver 100,000 paid jobs for 18–24-year-olds who are NEET.[6]

But here's where we'd ask employers to look deeper. Because while opportunities like this are essential, they address only a part of the challenge. Behind the youth unemployment crisis lies a story about young people's confidence, belonging, networks and access to opportunity: one we've been listening to, and one this report sets out to share.



Youth Employment UK recently published its 2026 Youth Voice Census report – the largest survey of young people in the UK – exploring how young people feel about life, study, work and general prospects.[7]

While many are quick to assume that young people are too laissez-faire about work and study, the report tells us that young people are ambitious; they want to learn and work and build a good life. But more than half of young people that took part in the survey said that they approach transition points without confidence, and startlingly only 18% believe employers are actually supportive of hiring young people.

Our own **Listen Up research** points the same way. When we spoke to 1,454 young people aged 11 to 18, we found that almost **one in three have little or no confidence** – the equivalent of ten children in every classroom.

The world of work feels too distant, unfamiliar and inaccessible to young people.

These statistics tell us that the world of work feels too distant, unfamiliar and inaccessible to young people, and that creating opportunities alone won't magically solve the unemployment crisis. What young people need is to see that opportunities exist and to feel like they can reach them, and this comes from building belief and belonging.

2. Office for National Statistics, 27 August 2026, 3. GOV.UK, 27 July 2026, 4. GOV.UK, 25 August 2026, 5. GOV.UK, 2 August 2026, 6. GOV.UK, 15 October 2026, 7. Youth Employment UK, September 2026

02

The Belonging Gap

You can open the door, but you can't force someone to walk through it.

Every challenge employers describe – outreach that doesn't land, applicants who rule themselves out, offers that go unfilled – traces back to the same root cause. It's got less to do with the door itself, and everything to do with when a young person decided, long before it opened, whether they belonged on the other side of it.

That decision happens earlier than most employers think. NUSTEM's research found that children make potentially career-limiting decisions before the age of 8 and that ideas of futures and careers start forming as early as the age of 5.[8]

Children make potentially career-limiting decisions before the age of 8.

When we look more closely at a young person's journey through careers education in school, we start to see where the gaps and opportunities are. For example, we know that while children are not making any formal decisions about careers in primary school, they are forming stereotypes that shape what they believe is possible for them. If we put role models in front of children at this stage, then we can address these stereotypes and allow children's aspirations to flourish.

Over the page, our **Careers Education Journey** maps what young people need at every age, so you can see where the gaps are and where employers can step in.



8. C. Davenport and A. Padwick, June 2023

Careers Education Journey

The journey for different age groups and our recommendations for how best to engage them.



Age 5-11 (Primary)

The reality: No formal decisions get made, but stereotypes about careers start forming as early as age 5: shaping what a child believes is possible for them, long before secondary school begins.

The need: Role models to address stereotypes and expose children to real-life experiences of the workplace.





Age 11-14 (Secondary)

The reality: GCSEs/National Qualifications options are chosen at the end of Year 9/S3 and sometimes earlier, as more schools start teaching content early. This is where subject choices quietly start narrowing future doors.

The need: Meaningful interactions with employers that provide clear links between subject choices and a range of career pathways.





Age 14-16 (Secondary)

The reality: Post-16 destination decisions are made often before a young person has had any real exposure to what those destinations are like.

The need: Mentors and practical experiences with employers that support skill building and continue to challenge stereotypes.





Age 16+ (College/Further Education/Sixth Form)

The reality: Young people are now navigating the pathway they picked – apprenticeships, A Levels, Highers, T Levels – often with limited insight into where any of it leads to.

The need: Networks, relationships and industry contacts to stay informed of opportunities.







Building on this idea of interventions in education, we asked educators Gina and Liam for their biggest piece of advice for employers looking to engage with young people in schools and colleges.

For Gina, secondary school careers leader, who sees every day how young people decide what's for them, employers need to show openness: particularly to candidates who don't match a narrow idea of 'culture fit'. This could mean taking someone on who doesn't have all the soft skills, but with some support and mentoring, they can get there. For younger students who aren't at that final decision point though, openness could be showing them that people like them are working within roles that typically aren't seen as for them.

We've seen how powerful this can be through Hark's work with **PRIMED for Law**, an alliance of UK law firms and legal employers. By delivering workshops in schools in underserved communities, we're showing students that a career in law could be for them. Having run 85 of these workshops with over 2,000 students, **87% have reported that they feel better informed about the roles available to them**. As one student put it:

"Please tell them thanks from me, that's definitely what I want to do for a career."

For Liam, further and higher education leader, who works with young people at the point of transitioning into work, employers need to build trust with young people: particularly at the stage of intervention. Whether it's an experience delivered in school or the workplace, employers that give young people the opportunity to develop new skills through mentoring have the highest chance of being able to build that trust.

A good example of this is Future Ready, a programme Hark runs with **JPMorganChase** and is now in its ninth year of delivering. It began as The Schools Challenge and has since evolved into Future Ready, but the aim is the same: to tackle the barriers that stop young people seeing a path into careers. From limited exposure to different industries to a lack of relatable role models, the programme helps by reaching students in underrepresented communities. Delivered in schools across London, we run workshops that put JPMorganChase employees in the room to lead activities, alongside panels with entrepreneurs who bring real-world business thinking to life. Since the programme began, it has engaged over 1,800 students, with **97% feeling equipped with employability skills**.

Both pieces of advice speak to the truth behind building belief and belonging, and that is – quite simply – connection. Whether through role models, mentors or volunteers, young people are far more likely to engage with careers and opportunities when they can connect with someone. And that's not just the opinion of educators, because when we asked **Safa**, student at SOAS University of London, for her perspective as a young person entering the workforce, she said seeing people you can relate to, sharing your thoughts with them and feeling listened to, can make a real difference.

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This brings us back to the original point: that for young people to feel like they belong, employers have to start early, stay open, and build trust and connection.





Young people need to stay open to experiences they don't fully understand yet, and employers need to stay open to candidates who don't match a narrow idea of 'culture fit'...embracing the unknown in a spirit of curiosity is beneficial on the early career journey and beyond.

Gina, secondary school careers leader



As a young person entering professional spaces, seeing people you can relate to, being able to share your thoughts, as well as being able to make mistakes and ask questions without feeling judged, can make a real difference. But it's also about giving people the opportunity to grow into their role, build confidence and gain experience.

Safa, student



Young people need to understand the importance of being efficient and accountable in the workplace. This is why meaningful, industry relevant work experiences are so important. They allow employers and young people to learn from one another and build mutual confidence. Ultimately, successful engagement is built on trust, giving young people the opportunity to prove themselves while enabling employers to invest in future talent with confidence.

Liam, further and higher education leader

03

Building for impact



Although it might sound obvious that relationships and connection are the key to building belonging in young people, there is more to it than what meets the eye.

We hear all the time the challenges that employers face in trying to engage with young people: not knowing how to access schools effectively; volunteers that struggle to communicate with young people; activity that isn't measured or managed sustainably.

The truth is that it takes time to build belonging. One-off interventions might have some impact, but consistent actions that join up over time is the key to making a real difference.

It's consistent actions that join up over time that are key to making a real difference.

This can be hard for employers to do on their own given some of the challenges mentioned above, but that's where partners like us come in. We've spent the last 30 years building relationships with schools, delivering experiences that young people love and teachers value.



Our programmes have reached **90% of schools in England and Wales**, engaging millions of young people. We know how to open doors, create opportunities, and drive change – it's what we do every day.

We understand there's a lot that comes into play when trying to engage with young people, and that's why when we work with organisations, we start with a simple strategy called The Hark Futures Framework.

The Hark Futures Framework helps identify how to move young people from seeing to believing to belonging and then opportunity through a series of relationship-building interventions, where every employer encounter counts.

We use this framework to help employers establish how they can build relationships with young people that create future talent.

The Hark Futures Framework

Our careers framework that helps employers see how they can connect talent with opportunity through strategic interventions.

1. **Build relationships**
2. **Build confidence**
3. **Build participation**
4. **Build capability**
5. **Build belonging**

See outcomes:
Higher attainment, improved transitions, reduced NEET risk, stronger career progression



04 Actions for Employers

Across our work and the research we've gathered, one thing stands out: belonging has to be built, and it must be built early.

None of this is a quick fix. Nearly one million young people are NEET, and more placements alone won't change that if young people don't believe they're for them.[9]

But employers don't have to wait for the system to catch up. Every role model who makes a career feel possible, every mentor who listens, and every volunteer who shows up helps build belief.

Joining those moments up takes a plan — and that's where Hark can help.

At Hark, we design and deliver schools and early careers programmes for employers, helping young people build confidence, discover opportunities and see a place for themselves in a sector or company they might never have considered.

9. Office for National Statistics, 27 August 2026

Hark

We're using the **Hark Futures Framework** to help employers strengthen their work with young people.

Let's talk about how it can help you.

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The education agency connecting you with young people through schools and communities.