

## **“I didn’t want my future to be shaped by how little money my parents had”.**

Words which were spoken during a catch up with one of our trainee solicitors.

12 February 2021

*This article was first published in Trust Journal by the Confederation of School Trusts on 11 February 2021.*

Words which were spoken during a catch up with one of our trainee solicitors. The trainee’s family rank as ‘low’ in socio-economic terms. Having had to fight every step of the way to follow her ambition to become a solicitor, her dream career is now tantalisingly close.

Having recently ranked fifth in the highly respected Social Mobility Foundation Index, an achievement we rightly celebrated, social mobility has never been higher up the firm’s agenda. Despite the progress we’ve seen, including providing the above trainee the opportunity to achieve their dream, the stark reality is so much more must be done to reduce social inequality.

To drive the agenda forwards, education providers and employers alike must take a collective approach to ensure the creation of a fair playing field. Social mobility can only improve when those opportunities are transparently and evenly presented to a more diverse socio-economic population.

A study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) painted a sobering picture for social mobility: for each year a child spends in education, the gap between rich and poor grows appreciably wider, with the attainment gap accelerating with each year. Just one in 10 students from poorer backgrounds are likely to achieve similar career success as those from wealthy backgrounds. Sadly, it isn’t difficult to see how this happens.

Children from more prosperous families essentially travel in an educational fast lane when compared to their less advantaged peers; there’s more support and guidance from home, they benefit from the interventions of their (better-educated) parents and they can often access resources that the children of less affluent parents cannot. In addition, Covid-19 will further widen the attainment gap according to the Department for Education, as mental health and technology ‘poverty’ issues increase.

According to the study, by the age of 15 approximately 13% of the variation in UK students’ performance is determined exclusively by their social background.

But it’s not all pessimism. The OECD also argues there is evidence to suggest “poverty need not be destiny”. Access to excellent teaching and mixing of students across all backgrounds deliver higher results for all with social mobility prospects for disadvantaged students significantly improving

Informing and connecting students with available opportunities by linking them with potential employers is essential to improving social mobility. Students whose family members are from a professional background, have a far greater knowledge of how to go about finding opportunities, and have more connections to secure work experience. So, employers and schools are critical when it comes to building alternative support networks for students who do not easily have access to these advantages.

There has never been a better opportunity for employers and schools to build relationships with one another, either locally or nationally, by taking advantage of the ‘new digital normal’ brought on by Covid-19. Collaboration conversations are easier than ever.

Employers are highly motivated to ensure they have a diverse workforce and they are adapting their approach as a result.

In 2016, we removed our requirement for minimum A-level grades for our graduates and now anonymise all applications/CVs before the hiring manager receives it. Candidates now apply with any degree classification and we evaluate their more innate capabilities, broadening our definition of what we know makes a good lawyer and exploring experiences and achievements that the person can bring outside traditional academic achievement. Four years on we've seen the diversity of our early careers' population flourish in every diversity and inclusion measure. Our talent pool has never been healthier.

Switched on employers are also eager to forge longer term partnerships with schools and the education sector, offering greater access to the skills sessions, industry contacts and career insights. Again, Browne Jacobson have a long-standing partnership with the National Literacy Trust making those essential contacts between ourselves and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although the focus is on helping their reading and writing skills, the greater value is showing them the life and career possibilities that are available to them. And with over 40% of our lawyers being the first generation in their families to have gone to university, we are empathetic to the challenges facing them.

Now Covid-19 has challenged employers like us to rethink our approach to finding and attracting talent by developing a more effective on-line presence. This offers a fairer playing field, opening up access to previously 'exclusive' events and, by recording them, making these sessions available for future students of all backgrounds to access at their leisure.

For all the good work employers are doing the task is immense. But if brave, schools and employers can help breakdown traditional careers barriers and make a real difference to the career prospects of disadvantaged students. We just need to open our minds, hiring processes and our contact books. Amen to that.

Browne Jacobson has been recognised as a top five employer for advancing social mobility in the Social Mobility Employer Index 2020 – the second year in a row in which the firm has been named in the rankings.

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