

## Leadership, Direction, and Action

By Mark Cameron, Chief Executive Officer, The 5% Club



After a crisis, the young and those at most disadvantage often suffer unseen from any economic aftershock. And there is now sufficient evidence that COVID-19 has created a perfect storm for the most fragile and underprivileged in our society – such that any modest improvements to social mobility and inclusion made over the last decade risks being brutally reversed.

There is a risk that the COVID-19 legacy becomes increasingly toxic as disadvantage increases and is felt across the generations spanning early schooling right to transition-into-work – and likely to need a decade to put right. This is a complex issue, the resolution of which will require significant and targeted investment to put right. That will include investment in inclusive and accessible skills development by employers – ranging from work placements and traineeship through to apprenticeships and structure graduate scheme. The 5% Club believes that latter focused investment should be seen by companies to be as important as their actions to reduce CO2 Emissions.

Some quite bold statements, but I believe that we need to “shift the dial” and push for a skills revolution. This will require all employers and leaders – large and small alike – to drive a shift from the passive position of “skilled hiring” with a reliance on the State and others to grow the required skills base, towards a more active stance of investing and growing the skills themselves. And in so doing, they must ensure that their approach is inclusive and accessible to all.

I am privileged to be the CEO of The 5% Club! Our members are driving change. They aspire to have 5% of their workforce in ‘earn and learn’ positions (including apprentices, sponsored students, and graduates on formalised training schemes) within five years of joining. As a collective, they currently achieve 6.1% - but we want to go further.

We are a constant champion for increased levels of inclusive workplace learning. This action is a driving force in growing the UK skills base, increasing quality employment, and ultimately improving our national prosperity. These skills also close the productivity gap, increase social mobility, drive inclusive growth, and help to boost the economy.

While the actions of Governments in this area have been welcome, including the recent publication of the Skills White Paper here in the UK, it is clear there is more that can be done. Leaders must pull this into their core values, organisational ethos, and culture, and look to grow the skills base to meet the needs of all employers, where and when they are needed most. And this must be realised in a way that truly benefits the individual, their employer, and the country as a whole.

The UK Prime Minister has made clear that following our departure from the European Union, the Government will focus on levelling up Britain and spreading opportunity across the whole country. “Earn & learn” schemes are central to this goal and will be crucial to ensuring every worker is skilled and able to contribute. This requires the removal of bias within the education system.

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It is not just about top achievers and the graduate pathway – levelling-up is key to ensuring parity of investment and esteem across all skills and learning pathways. This has only become more vital in the wake of COVID-19.

The scale of the challenges facing young people in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overstated. The decisions that the Government takes now will be life-defining for millions of young people across the country. Building Back Better after the pandemic will only succeed if we address the skills gap that currently exists in our society. Our country came together with an incredible spirit of social responsibility to get through the last year. It is now time to come together as a nation and ensure that we are doing all we can to support the younger generation who will be so crucial to our national recovery for many years to come.

The education and subsequent access to employment opportunities for a generation of young people has been badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has heightened awareness of inequality – including such issues as digital and space poverty – which have negatively impacted on the ability of many to participate in remote working and/or learning. Whilst imperfect, prior to the pandemic, most workers were afforded and experienced the same working environment. As workers were encouraged to work remotely, each experience was unique and shaped by their own private circumstances and financial situation, which for many has proven to be exceptionally challenging. As we potentially move to a new norm of “hybrid-working”, leaders and employers must develop a fresh perspective for “inclusive remote working” to ensure we reduce - rather than magnify - inequality within our working practises. Remote/Home working can be beneficial in many ways, but this cannot come at the risk of fewer opportunities for young people to go into office environments for training or work experience programmes.

The resultant economic downturn will also disproportionately impact those young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. As competition for places (work, college, and University) increases, there is a risk that traditional credentials are used as a coarse filter to reduce application numbers. Many of these credentials are based on qualifications, prior experience, and broader development (such as participation in youth and/or sports organisations), and are not held by the disadvantaged, meaning they risk being overlooked for many opportunities.

The Government must find new ways to support and encourage employers to provide opportunities for young people to obtain work experience, employment, and training opportunities during this difficult period to optimise transition to the workplace and give every young person a foothold on the employment ladder. Employers must play their part, and their leaders must ensure they do.

Now is the time for leadership, direction, and action.

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