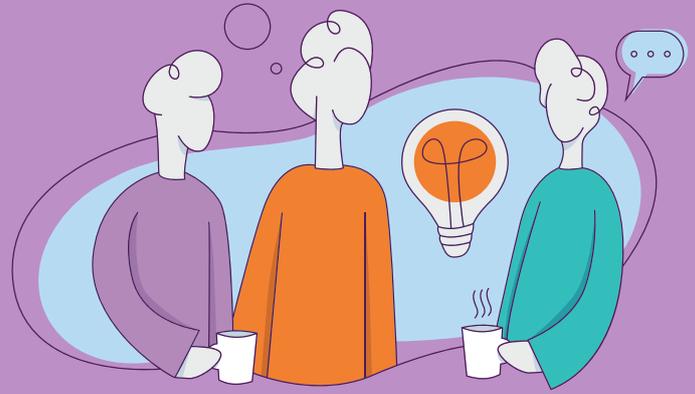


DEMYSTIFYING SOCIAL MOBILITY FOR SMES



Social mobility forms part of the responsible business programmes of many big companies. It's important for SMEs to think about social mobility when considering community engagement, diversifying talent and employee recruitment and retention.



Every business can be a force for good
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WHAT DOES SOCIAL MOBILITY MEAN?

It's defined as the link between somebody's job or income and their parents' job or income. In other words, social mobility is about making sure that someone's background doesn't determine their future. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, research suggests that the crisis is likely to impact the most disadvantaged young people through their time in education and into the workplace.

SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE UK

The Social Mobility Commission's latest white paper ([State of the Nation 2018-19](#)) shows that 60% of people in professional jobs come from professional backgrounds themselves and 34% come from working class backgrounds. Typically, people from working class backgrounds earn 24% less a year than people from professional backgrounds.

Education can level the playing field and promote social mobility but there are still barriers stopping young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds accessing top jobs. [The Sutton Trust](#) suggests that a lack of social mobility is a growing problem: only 40% of respondents believe that people in the UK have equal opportunities - a significant decrease from 53% in 2008.

WHY SHOULD IT MATTER?

[Korn Ferry's Future of Work study](#) found that by 2030, we can expect a talent deficit of three million workers in the UK. That means it's even more important that companies actively try to increase the pool of suitable candidates as a way of rejuvenating the job market. Essentially, businesses are only as good as their people, so it's vital for their success that employers identify and recruit the best people. Issues related to social mobility are complex, but there's no doubt that all businesses, as key influencers on society, play a major role in improving and advancing social mobility.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOCIAL MOBILITY

People from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have suitable equipment to access digital tools. The lockdown will hit young workers the hardest: employees aged under 25 were about twice as likely than the rest of the workforce to work in a sector that's now shut down. And it's likely that employees from less-advantaged backgrounds will suffer because opportunities are kept close to people with resources, contacts and know how.

SMES AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Addressing social mobility is an opportunity for you to develop a competitive edge. It might seem daunting to put this into practice, especially if you have fewer resources to help you run extensive initiatives and programmes. However, there are lots of effective ways to develop your business case for social mobility to attract and nurture employees from diverse backgrounds - they don't need to be resource heavy or expensive.



We've highlighted five things you should consider as an SME when you're addressing, and ultimately improving, social mobility:

1. Work in partnership with others

Collaborating with experts can be a good starting point when you're developing your social mobility agenda. The Social Mobility Commission has developed a [directory of notable charities and organisations](#) that can support you on your social mobility journey. Many of these involve a cost but there are some offering free resources and solutions, such as the [Social Mobility Pledge](#) which focuses on three achievable aims:

- Outreach: partnering with schools by highlighting some in your local area and focusing on underperforming ones.
- Access: offering apprenticeships or work experience opportunities to disadvantaged young people.
- Recruitment: embedding open recruitment practices that promote a level playing field for candidates, such as name blind or contextual recruitment.

The Social Mobility Foundation's [Employer Index](#) ranks the UK's top 75 organisations in the actions they're taking to improve social mobility. You can use its [key findings](#), useful recommendations and case studies and fit them to your business priorities.

2. Encourage employee volunteering

Volunteering plays a central role in boosting social mobility, and employees can volunteer their time in a variety of ways. Participating in mentoring programmes, delivering skills sessions and conducting a mock interview are all low-cost cost-effective, and they're also good for your employees' wellbeing as people are often keen to volunteer. You might need to encourage others to think about volunteering – you could do this by showing that it's a priority for your business and making volunteering part of your appraisal process. It's important to help your employees make the best of volunteering opportunities, so make sure it's clear to them what volunteering they can do and help them understand the skills they have to offer. You should carefully pair mentors and mentees because you want to know it'll be a good fit, but there are several mentoring programmes, schemes and brokerages who can do that for you. Finally, celebrate the volunteering your employees are doing! Talk about it in team meetings, emails to all employees and on your intranet (and look at our resource on communicating your responsible business programme for more ideas).

3. Use data effectively

Data is so useful and can help create a benchmark that works for you. When you better understand your social mobility baseline, you can better understand your priorities and areas of focus.

Measuring socio-economic diversity is often the biggest barrier employers face. That's partly because social mobility isn't a protected characteristic of the Equality Act 2010, so it's difficult to in reach a standard. That means it's useful for you to understand what you'll measure your business against – some options are free school meals, being the first of your family to enter higher education or attending a state school.

There are several indicators of disadvantage but it's important that you establish what you'll measure. You could use the Social Mobility Commission's Employer Toolkit, which is free to access, to help with this. As a starting point you could focus on the [Appendix A](#), which suggests questions to use to measure socio-economic background.



4. Look at your recruitment process

Focusing on socio-economic background can widen your talent pool which could increase your competitive advantage as a result. This is more important than ever, as some businesses are struggling to survive in this climate.

Developing a way to recognise unconscious bias or introducing blind recruitment can make a big difference to your recruitment process. By making small adjustments, such as removing university names from CVs, you'll help interviewers see the person in front of them rather than the reputation of their university.

Offering apprenticeships or partnering with local schools to offer work experience placements is an effective and low-cost way for your business to nurture talent. You could look at creative ways of providing work experience opportunities, such as virtual internships or projects. These can be incredibly worthwhile for people with aptitude but without professional-level experience in gaining the skills and knowledge they need to excel.

5. Focus on progression strategies

The culture within a company makes or breaks diversity efforts. [Evidence](#) suggests that employees from lower socio-economic background on average outperform their more advantaged peers. That means your outreach efforts will work best when you back them with strategies to help the socially mobile succeed once they're through the door.

Making sure your management team leads from the top and communicates a positive attitude towards social mobility initiatives will have a significant impact on creating a welcoming environment. It's important that you give all new employees time to meet with senior managers.

Mentors can provide expert advice and guidance which helps employees from disadvantaged backgrounds progress in their careers. You could review your CPD and training policies so you can offer new mentoring opportunities to employees who have a reduced workload as a result of the pandemic.

