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ISSUE16

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01

FOREWORD

WHY HUMAN CONNECTION STILL MATTERS

ROGER CHAPMAN FIEP (GUEST EDITOR)
Head of Service Delivery
The matrix Standard

It is a great privilege to be the Guest Editor for this edition of the Institute of Employability Professionals Journal. As Head of Service for the matrix Standard, I am often engaged in debates regarding quality, and our theme for this issue could not be timelier, exploring the value of human interaction in a world increasingly using Artificial Intelligence.

The accelerating integration of digital tools has brought new efficiencies to our sector, challenging us to redefine the right balance between technology and humanity. The sources within this Journal explore this dichotomy thoroughly, moving beyond the simple efficiency versus integrity argument.

THE DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY

We must acknowledge the tangible strengths that Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital platforms offer. In adult education, online learning is often the favoured delivery model, with technology widely identified as an enabling factor that can facilitate broader reach. Organisations are increasingly utilising Large Language Models and automated systems to reduce the time staff spend on basic administration.

Tools such as the 'Magic Notes' software trialled by the Growth Company demonstrate that AI can reduce the administrative burden on frontline professionals without compromising quality. This allows advisors to focus on speaking and listening, making interactions feel more relaxed and helping to build trust.

However, this digital transformation must be navigated with caution. As Chris Webb articulates, users are turning to AI for deeply personal subjects, such as therapy and careers advice, yet we must remain cognisant of existing issues with data accuracy, bias, and fabricated content. Algorithms are trained on data which, if biased, will replicate those inequities unless design teams are diverse in both identity and thought. Therefore, risks relating to bias and confidentiality require careful and managed oversight.

Furthermore, we must be wary of transactional AI tools in foundational support activities like action planning. If participants are not involved in the co-design of their plan, such tools may potentially remove agency from the individual. Employability programmes are most impactful when co-created with the people they serve. Research suggests that AI struggles with questions centred on 'why' and 'for what purpose', which are essential for promoting self-determination. We must ensure technology enhances, rather than undermines, the individual's sense of control over their employment journey.

PROTECTING THE HUMAN TOUCH

If technology represents potential for scale, human interaction remains the irreplaceable 'engine of employability'. Articles from the NHS, the Growth Company, and the team at Offploy demonstrate that outcomes ultimately rise and fall on the quality of the relationship. Peer mentoring, for instance, thrives because it encourages deep human connections

Roger Chapman FIEP is Head of Service for the matrix Standard and a Fellow of the Institute of Employability Professionals. With over three decades of experience in quality management, he has dedicated his recent career to enhancing standards of information, advice, and guidance within the UK employability sector. He leads a national team of assessors and has been pivotal in modernising frameworks to ensure high-quality delivery across more than 1,500 organisations.

grounded in lived experience, which builds confidence in a way a chatbot cannot.

Dr Jackie Le Fèvre highlights the vital role of personal values in navigating uncertainty. Values are emotionally rich ideas about things that matter enough to act upon, and while universal, each person has unique priorities. Le Fèvre argues that a machine is no substitute for a professional who can empathetically connect through these values, helping individuals feel seen and heard at a deeper level.

Tom Staunton expands on this through a 'relational ethics of care', arguing that ethics occur between people when the right qualities of a relationship –such as 'engrossment' and giving full attention to the other –exist. He posits that AI is ultimately 'ambivalent' toward the client and can only be designed to mimic caring rather than truly feeling it. Crucially, there is a significant 'accountability gap' because AI cannot take moral responsibility for the advice it gives or learn from scrutiny in the way a human practitioner does.

The involvement of the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) in this edition further illustrates the necessity of this human bridge. Social prescribing addresses non-medical, health-related social needs by employing Link Workers who have the time to understand a person's unique circumstances. By co-producing personalised plans that focus on what matters to the individual, social prescribing provides a vital link between healthcare and employment services, often helping people overcome complex barriers to work.

While qualities such as trust, integrity, and empathy are vital, they can be difficult to operationalise systemically. They are not merely 'soft skills' but are strategic interventions. To sustain them, we must actively resource human connection, ensure caseload models allow time for genuine dialogue, and provide institutional support.

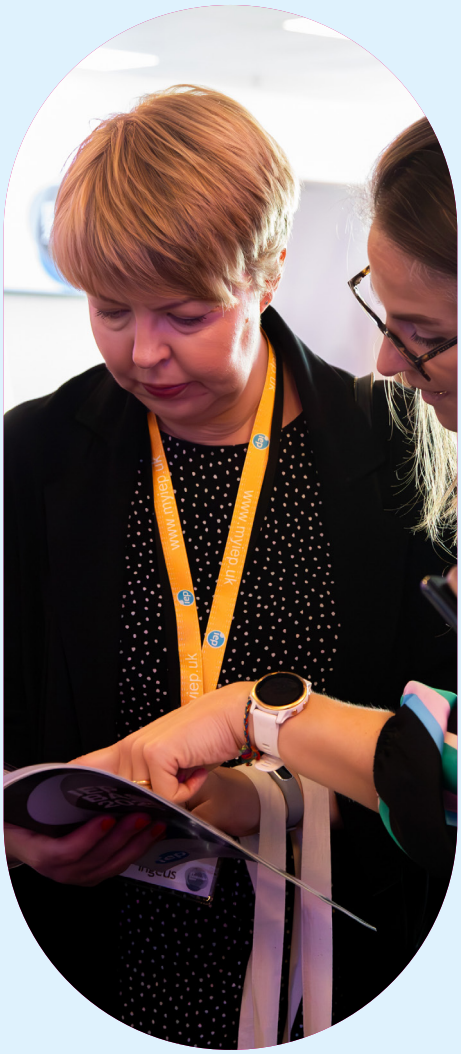
The challenge lies in translating ethical choices into governance, ensuring that compassion and respect are embedded in practice, not left to evaporate into goodwill alone. As Stella Ngozi Mbubaegbu CBE highlights, quality interaction must be resourced as seriously as outcomes.

INSIGHTS FROM OUR CONTRIBUTORS

This edition presents a wealth of insight into meeting these challenges:

- Alex Howley highlights the profound difference between being heard by a machine and being understood by a human.
- Hayley Lord argues that equity, empathy, and compassion should be the underpinning values of digitalisation to ensure the human aspect is not lost.
- Victoria Sylvester argues that human interaction is a social, emotional, and economic imperative, offering practical design principles for relational work.
- Stella Ngozi Mbubaegbu CBE focuses on intentional human connection and intergenerational collaboration to dismantle barriers.
- Dr Jackie Le Fèvre explores how connecting through values provides a framework for decision making and self-compassion.
- Chris Webb stresses that context matters, arguing our humanity and empathy are timeless qualities that allow us to work with the whole person.
- Maryam Bello-Tukur demonstrates how human interaction powers co-design, co-delivery, and co-journeying.
- Maureen Deary outlines the risks of over-reliance on digital-only models, particularly for neurodivergent learners and those facing socio-economic barriers.
- The National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) explores how link workers bridge the gap between health and employment through co-produced personalised plans.
- Offploy advocates for "connection over correction," using lived experience to turn employability into a life-changing journey.
- Yes Manchester highlights the advisor as a change agent whose most powerful tool is active, empathetic listening.
- Tom Staunton argues that the unique ethical relationship between professionals and clients necessitates person-to-person delivery to ensure accountability and authentic care.
- Jeffrey D. Korzenik's "Untapped Talent" is featured in a compelling book review, providing a pragmatic blueprint for second chance hiring. The review highlights how reframing the narrative around criminal records is both a moral imperative and a strategic business advantage

I invite you to read on and engage with the vital insights offered by our contributors.



02

NEITHER ONE NOR THE OTHER: WHY FACE-TO-FACE EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT REMAINS CRUCIAL IN AN AGE OF AUTOMATION

ALEX HOWLEY FIEP
Operations Director
The Growth Company

Over the past few years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has begun to reshape the world of employment support. Many organisations now use Large Language Models (LLMs), Automated Transcription Systems, and other digital tools to reduce the time staff and service users devote to basic administration.[1]

The use of these technologies is only likely to become more commonplace. Indeed, the new government recently signalled its intention to encourage their widespread adoption, with a view to improving public services, promoting innovation, and boosting economic growth.[2]

So, what should our approach be in this brave new world? Will drop-in centres be filled with robots come 2036? And if so, should we be raising the alarm?

The truth is likely to be more prosaic than the hype-merchants and doomsayers would have you believe. I am a realist on AI, operating from the principle that it is here, and it is here to stay. What's more, I have seen the benefits of using it in a professional setting first-hand. However, I am also mindful of the fact that technology is only ever a tool. No matter how advanced the next generation of AI models become, they will always fall short when it comes to authentic empathy, understanding, and dialogue.

With this in mind, let us consider two case studies from the Growth Company vaults: one that shows how AI can support employment advisors, and another that highlights the value of lived experience and human connection.

'MAGIC' NOTES?

Around six months ago, one of our teams in the North West began trialling Magic Notes, a piece of software that records audio from meetings and automatically generates a written summary. The software was originally designed for social workers, but it has quickly spread to other casework settings, including the Employability sector.[3]

As with so many AI-based enterprise tools, Magic Notes aims to reduce the administrative burden on frontline professionals, giving them more time to deal with clients. My colleague, Director for Employment Lynne Maguire, has been involved in the pilot from the beginning. She has been suitably impressed by its impact: "Using Magic Notes means advisors can focus on speaking and listening to the person in front of them, instead of worrying about jotting everything down. It makes the interaction feel more relaxed and genuine, which helps build trust between the advisor and their client.

"The summaries it produces are clear and structured," she continued, "and it picks up on the key points without needing any personal details; just first names. It has not only improved the quality of our notes, but it has also freed up time for advisors to concentrate on follow-up actions and supporting participants. It's made a noticeable difference."

Tanina Sheath, a senior service manager working on an IPS programme, agreed with Lynne's assessment: "I've worked as an advisor for around 20 years, and I've always been a bit of a perfectionist about

Alex Howley FIEP is an Operations Director at the Growth Company. A graduate of Newcastle University, Alex has 26 years' experience in the Employment and Skills sector. Alex started out as a Recruitment Consultant in 1999, before moving on to other roles, including Senior Project Management in the Further Education sector, Economic Affairs Manager in local government, and Head of Youth Initiatives at Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

updating case notes. For most of that time, I did things the old-fashioned way, scribbling with a pen and paper during meetings, then typing everything up later into the CRM.

"I love having one-to-one conversations with participants, but there was always a nagging feeling afterwards of having to update my notes. I think tools like Magic Notes can take away a bit of the dread. I can properly engage with the conversation and nothing gets missed."

The pilot scheme has also helped Tanina in an even more profound way: "I was diagnosed with ADHD 18 months ago, which has helped me understand why I might have occasionally procrastinated when trying to complete case notes.

I'd put huge pressure on myself to make sure everything was perfect, which often meant I'd take quite a long time to finish.

"I feel as though AI allows me to have good meetings with colleagues and participants and follow up faster than before. I've genuinely changed how I work and how I feel about my work."

When applied to a clear and specific end, then, AI can reduce the time advisors need to spend on paperwork, without compromising quality or compliance, making it easier for them to focus on the most important part of their job: helping people.

PEER MENTORING

One programme that does just that is the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Peer Mentoring scheme, which the Growth Company delivers in the Liverpool City Region.

While it shares many of the principles that underlie models such as IPS and supported employment, peer mentoring is based on a simple premise: people with lived experience of substance dependency are best placed to support others who are experiencing similar difficulties. Given their familiarity with the subject, peer mentors have a unique, intuitive understanding of people's needs – a particularly effective quality when it comes to empowering affected individuals to access treatment and employment opportunities.

Another one of my colleagues, Beth Law, stands as a testament to this approach. "Many of the participants that I work with have faced significant challenges that have made it hard for them to hold down a job," she told me.

"In addition to addiction, they may have had a chaotic upbringing, experienced homelessness, been excluded from mainstream education, or struggled with an untreated or undiagnosed health condition.

"The main benefit of peer mentoring," Beth explained, "is that it shows people things can always change for the better. I have 15 years of personal experience with substance dependency, so in a way, when I sit across from them, I'm giving them a glimpse of a potential future."

To be sure, a recent DWP evaluation found that peer mentoring works well because it encourages deep human connections. According to the study, mentors were able to build trust, offer practical advice, and help participants take steps towards achieving their goals. While the authors identified some logistical challenges – like finding enough mentors and suitable spaces – the overall impact was clear: peer mentoring helped people engage more fully with support services and make real progress in their recovery.

Some techno-optimists argue that it is only a matter of time before a chatbot can produce the same results, pointing to the fact that some people already use ChatGPT as a free therapist. For my part, I am sceptical that a probability machine will ever replicate or replace the nuance and often intangible rewards of human relationships. After all, there is a difference between being heard and being understood. One should never underestimate the profound consequences of such a difference.

In all my years, I have never heard a single person say that they would like their bank of choice to become more automated. On the contrary, countless people have told me that they would like to see more local branches on the high street and for a human being to answer the phone when they call the number on the back of their credit card.

Peer mentors speak to this phenomenon. They do more than provide pre-scripted answers gleaned from a well-structured database. They often help participants build confidence, navigate complex systems, and stay motivated, all through patient face-to-face engagement. In this way, they can transform a transactional appointment into a consequential relationship, with all the benefits that entails.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As employment support continues to evolve in response to technological innovation, it is vital to preserve and promote the human elements that make these services truly effective. Personalised support, grounded in empathy and shared experience, remains irreplaceable. Technology can improve how we support people, but it is human connection that ultimately delivers meaningful change and outcomes.

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03

THE HUMAN TOUCH IN A DIGITAL LEARNING ERA: BALANCING HUMANITY AND TECHNOLOGY IN ANDRAGOGY

HAYLEY LORD
Employment and Skills Manager
South Tyneside Council

In recent years online learning has overtaken traditional classroom learning for adults, largely accelerated through necessity during the COVID pandemic.

With online learning widely acknowledged as the favoured delivery model by learners, and staunch educationalists championing the value of traditional classroom-based teaching, the dichotomy remains prevalent - but is this a case of efficiency over integrity?

THE NEW 'NORM'

The notion of incorporating technology into learning is a familiar concept to most, but at the intersection of evolving delivery models, the balance of human versus technological intervention is being rapidly redefined. In their latest 2024 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, The Learning and Work Institute reported the highest levels of adult participation in learning since the survey was first issued in 1996, directly linking increased participation with a rise in independent and online learning, post-pandemic.

With over two thirds of the circa 5,000 respondents reporting elements of their main learning being delivered online, an overwhelming 86% identified technology as an enabling factor in their learning, and 93% reported feeling confident in using technology for learning. However, with around one third of learners stating that they learned independently, the current trajectory could seek to redefine 'traditional delivery models' and signify a shift into a new era of learner-led computerised adult education.[1]

THE MORAL DILEMMA

Practitioners across the sector are acutely aware of how financially challenging the current adult skills landscape is, with the Institute for Fiscal Studies reporting significant government funding cuts per capita in further education, and classroom-based adult education recently falling victim to over 40% spending cuts in comparison to the 2009-10 figures.[2]

Acknowledging these exigent demands is pivotal in understanding the growing use of online learning. In today's climate, strategic leaders are often forced to prioritise wide reach, 'quick win' provision over the more conventional yet less lucrative face to face delivery model which often promises a more personalised and humanistic approach.

Given my role as a Quality Assurance Practitioner in funded Further Education, and a strong advocate for Social Emotional Learning (SEL) approaches, I often find it difficult not to flinch at the concept of fully learner-led, online provision. As a champion for the social aspects and human interactions that enhance lifelong learning experiences, I struggle to appreciate the alignment between fully independent, remote delivery models and the frameworks and regulations we are required to adhere to, to ensure provision is robust, compliant and high-quality.

Hayley Lord, BSc, MBA, CMgr FCMI, is a senior leader with over 15 years' experience in Further Education, recognised for her commitment to learner-centred adult education. As Employment and Skills Manager at South Tyneside Council, she leads quality assurance across a £6 million ESFA-funded adult education portfolio supporting around 2,500 learners annually. Hayley teaches Post Graduate Educational Mentoring and Leadership at the University of Sunderland and is undertaking a PhD building on her MBA Senior Leader Apprenticeship.

Her awards include North-East Degree Apprentice of the Year 2024, Highly Commended Health and Public Services Apprentice of the Year 2024, and South Tyneside Council Employee of the Year 2024. Her doctoral research focuses on tackling challenges faced by economically inactive residents through holistic approaches to skills, health, and employability interventions.

Yet in their 2018 Research Report, The Department for Education presented 'inconclusive' findings of a randomised control trial (RCT) of the relative effectiveness of face-to-face compared to blended learning in 19+ literacy and numeracy provision. The report denoted insignificant variances in achievement rates, yet disappointingly cited a range of shortcomings in the ability to measure reliable outcomes in the study.[3]

Similar research deduces 'the effect of e-Learning compared to face-to-face learning is essentially zero'.[4/5]

Therefore in terms of quality, given these findings, and appreciating that we frequently see many independent, remote delivery models verified and celebrated by Ofsted, is it remiss to label all online provision as the poor relative of traditional classroom learning?

THE MIDDLE GROUND

In a recent article, The European Association for the Education of Adults accentuated the importance of educators going beyond simply providing digital equipment and access. They acknowledge the challenges involved in digital delivery and inclusion, citing competence, confidence and inconsistency as the main barriers to the mobilisation of effective digital provision.[6]

This is further reinforced by Mondli Hlatshwayo, author of the MOJA Journal of Adult Education paper Digitalisation in Education: Bringing Adult Education into the Debate. Hlatshwayo cautions 'As a starting point, equity, empathy, and compassion should be the underpinning values of digitalisation in education. It means that the human aspect of education should not get lost in the technical details of digitalisation'.[7]

A recent Financial Times article endorsed a more synthesised model for executive learners which better integrates online and face to face provision by offering both options simultaneously. This promotes the need for a blended approach to support a balanced and democratised learning experience, allowing learners to make informed choices about not only how, but also when they learn. Learners are invited into campus for seminars, but can otherwise access both recordings and digital resources, with the expectation of a highly personalised and tailored learner-led experience. The article acknowledges that learners are not monolithic beings, but instead able to adapt and adjust their learning episodes to better meet the demands and priorities in modern-day life. Whilst the article acknowledges a predisposition towards in-person delivery for higher-level learners, Louise Croft, Managing Director of Executive Education at the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School introduces the notion that a hybrid approach better aligns with the current workplace practices and post-COVID lifestyle changes, which we have observed in recent years.[8]

The Wales Centre for Public Policy provides valuable insight into their move toward a unified approach to community-based wellbeing services from 2022, stating 'access to a service, group, or activity, involves not just being able to walk through the door, but how it feels to walk through, and how it feels once we're inside. Whilst they recognise the role of digitalisation in removing barriers and engaging with a wider demographic, it was highlighted that research on this topic had been more focused on 'service efficiency rather than efficacy or experience' reinforcing the argument that the approach may not be wholly learner centric, with the potential to erode a societal ability to connect organically.[9]

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

In a rapidly changing environment, we are impacted by digitalisation in almost all aspects of our lives, both personally and professionally. A large proportion of courses offered in adult education are designed to support entry into the job market, or work-based progression, and we must therefore recognise that workforce digitalisation and growing automation require both teaching practices and practitioners to evolve, if we are to keep up.

Monica Eliza Mortoga articulates this relationship beautifully in The Journal of Educational Sciences, stating 'The synergistic combination of adult

education and digital technologies not only imparts tangible skills for today's workforce, but also fosters a broader understanding of diverse global perspectives, ultimately equipping learners with the knowledge to address complex challenges in an increasingly interconnected world.'[10]

What is important, is that whilst we acknowledge the benefits of human interaction, we must not forget to embrace the role of digital technology and the ways in which this medium can enhance delivery and learner experience, producing learners who are both prepared and attractive in the current employability market.

THE EVOLUTION

The opposing rationales for digital versus classroom-based delivery present equally compelling arguments and points for consideration. Acknowledging elements such as the significant reduction in carbon footprint that digital delivery produces requires careful balance against the instinctive understanding of human emotions and personalities gained in a classroom, which one can simply not gain through a computer screen.

Is this a case of fear of the unknown, resistance to change, or in some instances, have we just not quite established the happy medium between the levels of human and digital interaction in the optimum delivery model? What is clear is that both technology and education are here to stay, and when used collaboratively and thoughtfully, can significantly enhance the learning experience.

So perhaps I should not flinch in future when presented with the challenge of quality assuring elements of learner-led remote delivery, but instead approach this with an open mind to be persuaded to better embrace the new digital era. To put it simply, as Charles Kettering, prominent American inventor and engineer known for his significant contributions to the automotive industry famously said,

'The world hates change, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress.'

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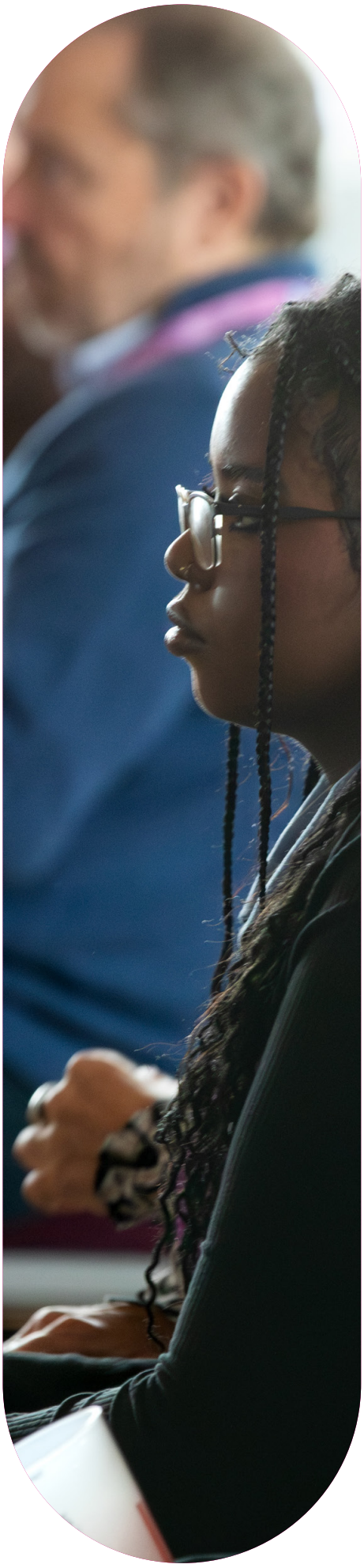

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04

THE HUMAN CONNECTION: BUILDING EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH INTERACTION

VICTORIA SYLVESTER
Senior Education and Workforce Development Leader

SUMMARY

Human interaction is not a decorative add-on to Employability services — it is central. When learners engage deeply with people (mentors, coaches, employers, careers professionals), the effects ripple across confidence, wellbeing, identity, networks, and ultimately labour market outcomes.

Embedding this relational dimension is a strategic investment in individuals, communities, and the workforce.

THE SOCIAL AND STRATEGIC VALUE OF HUMAN INTERACTION

In a world increasingly mediated by digital platforms and algorithms, the human factor can seem optional. Yet, paradoxically, that is when it becomes all the more essential. Digital tools can deliver information, but they struggle to deliver trust, empathy, and meaning.

Lived expertise is the idea that professionals bring not just technical knowledge but stories, judgments, failures, and tacit understanding, which allow learners to 'see into' the real world of work. This bridges the well-known gap between classroom theory and workplace realities. These interactions trigger ripple effects – positive secondary outcomes that extend beyond immediate guidance. When learners feel understood and supported, they are more likely to:

- **E**ngage proactively with their training (attendance, active participation, persistence),
- **W**iden their networks (peers, professionals, employer contacts),
- **I**nternalise an identity as someone capable, employable, and ambitious,
- **G**ive back — e.g. mentoring others, volunteering, sustaining local talent ecosystems.

Employability professionals also benefit. Through ongoing, grounded interaction, they detect emergent skill gaps, shifting labour market needs, and systemic barriers among learners. That intelligence can then inform curriculum design, policy discussions, employer engagement, and institutional strategy. From a systems perspective, human-centred employability work helps align demand and supply more tightly: by shaping learners to meet real employer needs, reducing under- or mis-employment, and anchoring talent locally.

EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH: WHY INTERACTION MATTERS

Mentoring and employability research consistently shows that relational quality, duration, matching, and emotional safety are critical – not all mentoring is equally effective.

Key studies include:

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Victoria Sylvester is a Senior Education and Workforce Development leader with over 25 years' experience in the Skills and Employability sector. She has held senior leadership roles spanning operational delivery, quality, curriculum design, and organisational strategy. Victoria has led teams through sector change, managed complex stakeholder environments, and built strong employer and partner relationships. She specialises in raising standards, improving performance, and aligning education programmes to labour-market needs.

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Together these studies underline that meaningful, consistent human interaction transforms employability outcomes across settings.

SUPPORTING HEALTH, IDENTITY & EMOTIONAL NECESSITY

Beyond technical skills, human interaction meets psychological and emotional needs — particularly in contexts of uncertainty. Mentors and professionals can:

- **V**alidate identity and aspiration.
- **P**rovide psychological safety.
- **O**ffer perspective and normalise setbacks.
- **E**ncourage resilience and hope.

Calling human interaction an emotional necessity recognises that belonging and empathy are central to growth. Learners often cite one meaningful conversation as their turning point — when someone truly believed in them. This emotional anchor drives motivation, confidence, and persistence.

STRENGTHENING THE WORKFORCE & SYSTEMIC IMPACT

Embedding human-centred interaction benefits the wider system:

- Bridges the skills mismatch between training and industry demand.
- Shortens transition time into employment.
- Retains talent locally and enhances regional economies.
- Improves professional wellbeing and retention in the Employability sector.
- Informs policy through evidence and feedback loops.

Large-scale mentoring models, such as the Wise Group's programmes, demonstrate relational approaches can scale without losing depth, strengthening employability infrastructure across communities.

PRACTICAL DESIGN PRINCIPLES & IMPLICATIONS

Evidence and practice suggest key design principles:

1. Duration and intensity – relationships need time (9–12 months minimum).
2. Matching and choice – ensure mentee input for better relational fit.
3. Relational training – mentors need empathy, boundary, and trauma awareness skills.
4. Clear expectations – co-create goals and structures.
5. Reflection and supervision – protect quality and mentor wellbeing.
6. Blended methods – combine face-to-face with digital access.
7. Evaluation and feedback – capture both data and stories.
8. Inclusivity – ensure access for diverse learners.
9. Scale with fidelity – preserve relational quality while expanding reach.
10. Institutional support – resource relational work as core, not optional.

A HUMAN FUTURE: FROM IMPERATIVE TO PRACTICE

Digital tools and AI can provide structure and information but cannot replace empathy, encouragement, or genuine human presence. Human connection remains the driving force of transformation.

To embed it systemically is to invest long-term in individuals, communities, and economies. It is not a 'nice to have' but a social, emotional, and economic imperative. Institutions like the Centre for Employability Excellence can help gather data, share best practices, and influence policy – ensuring relational employability becomes a foundation of the future workforce.

05

MAKING THE MOST OF AN ETHNICALLY DIVERSE, MULTIGENERATIONAL BRITAIN:

HUMAN INTERACTION AS THE BRIDGE BETWEEN ANTI-RACISM, ETHNIC DIVERSITY, AND EMPLOYABILITY

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SUMMARY

Across Britain, five generations now work side by side, bringing different life experiences, communication styles, and cultural expectations to enrich the workplace. At the same time, ethnic diversity is arguably one of the country's greatest social and economic assets.

Making the most of ethnic and multigenerational diversity requires human interaction that is grounded in trust, empathy, and active listening. Drawing on the work of the Black Leadership Group (BLG), Five: Generations at Work by Rebecca Robins and Patrick Dunne, and Antiracism: A Critique by John Solomos, this article explores how embedding anti-racist practice and intergenerational collaboration can improve employability professionals' daily interactions in diverse contexts leading to better experiences and outcomes for all ethnicities.

1. A Moment for Human Connection

Human interaction is not a 'soft skill'. It is the foundation of positive outcomes in the workplace. A data dashboard might identify a gap, but a conversation closes it. When practitioners take time to really listen, they uncover patterns of exclusion that rarely appear in statistics: the applicant told they are 'not quite the right fit', the young person transitioning between home and workplace culture.

Dialogue that is both relational and radical, recognises that equity is achieved not only through structures but through everyday acts of recognition, empathy, and advocacy.

John Solomos, in Antiracism: A Critique (2022), reminds us that anti-racism cannot survive as slogan or sentiment alone; it must live in the continuous process of dialogue and action. He writes that the challenge is to "develop conversations about how we can move forwards in terms of policy and political agendas that tackle racialised inequalities and divisions."

2. Anti-Racism Benefits Everyone

The BLG frames anti-racism not as opposition, but as opportunity: anti-racism benefits everyone. This is a crucial mindset shift. The same interactional practices that remove barriers for Black* people, listening, reflection, co-design, also make workplaces more collaborative, creative and adaptive for all ethnicities and generations.

Solomos cautions that anti-racist work often falters when institutions rely on statements rather than transformation. It is easy to 'celebrate diversity' but harder to change patterns of power. Shifting from the merely performative requires what the BLG calls intentional human connection –time, trust, and courage to move from non-racist to anti-racist behaviour. It also requires learning together across generations and cultures and deepens mutual understanding and resolve.

In Five: Generations at Work (2024), Robins and Dunne echo the need for human renewal, quoting Einstein's prediction that society would one day require a "quantum leap in human relations." They argue that with five

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generations now in the workforce, we must move from an 'Other' to a 'Together' mindset—combining talents and perspectives to conquer global challenges and to do good.

3. Five Generations, One Conversation

The coexistence of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha is reshaping what 'diversity' means. Intergenerational inclusion is not a side note to ethnicity. For instance, older employees may carry memories of overt discrimination, while younger ones encounter subtler but persistent biases in hiring and progression. Both experiences matter, and both are best understood through dialogue.

Robins and Dunne write, "We are five generations at work. This is how we win together, for good." The phrase 'for good' can be read not only as permanent change but as a call to do good, to build workplaces that actively generate fairness and purpose. This depends on our ability to translate differences in language, technology, and life stage into collective strength. In practical terms, that means:

At the BLG's 2025 annual conference, participants described the moment they felt 'seen' not just as professionals but as whole people. This captures the heart of intergenerational, anti-racist practice. Another participant said, "I realised my job isn't to fix people; it's to walk alongside them..."

4. From 'Other' to 'Together'

Human interaction is where cultural intelligence grows. Robins and Dunne urge organisations to replace competition with collaboration, reminding us that "This is not a zero-sum game. Because it is not a game." In employability terms, this means understanding that progress for one group need not come at another's expense; inclusion raises everyone's ceiling.

For advisers and leaders, the shift from 'Other' to 'Together' is practical. It shows up in micro-behaviours: who we greet first in a meeting, whose ideas we build upon, who receives feedback with care and who receives it as criticism. These moments either perpetuate inequity or dismantle it.

Anti-racist interaction also recognises that ethnicity, age, gender, and class overlap. A young Black* woman entering a new field faces both gendered and racialised assumptions; an older Black* man displaced by automation, faces cultural as well as technological barriers. Meeting these individuals as equals requires humility and the willingness to adapt communication styles, not expecting others to fit a preset mould.

5. Great Interactions

Across employability and leadership settings, transformative interactions from a Black* perspective could look like this:

- Begin with belonging. Ask open questions that invite the person's story: "What would feeling at home here look like for you?" Belonging begins when people feel seen and heard before being helped.
- Name the system, not the self. Rather than "You need to blend in more," try "Let's look at how this workplace reads blending in—and whether that is fair." It shifts responsibility from the individual to the culture.
- Use strengths language. Help people articulate their value. Representation alone is insufficient if voice and agency are absent.
- Design the next small win. Co-create a tangible step that builds momentum and accountability.
- Close with advocacy. Where barriers are structural, don't send the person back to 'try harder'. Use influence to adjust the system.

These actions may sound simple, but they require emotional literacy, racial awareness, and institutional support. As the BLG's From Generation to Generation Conference Summary 2025 argues, quality interaction must be resourced as seriously as outcomes. Caseload pressures or algorithmic screening cannot replace empathy.

6. Technology and Touch

The digital transformation of Employability services has brought enormous potential for reach and personalisation. However, it risks reducing people to profiles. As one BLG event participant warned, "We must code the humanity in." Algorithms trained on biased data will replicate those biases unless designed by teams diverse in both identity and thought.

Here again, intergenerational collaboration is key. Younger professionals often bring digital fluency; older ones contribute context and caution. Together they can design systems that balance efficiency with equity. The goal is not technology instead of touch but technology that enhances touch, freeing humans to do what only humans can do: connect, interpret, and care.

7. Beyond Awareness to Structure

Solomos cautions that anti-racist initiatives often "evaporate into goodwill" unless translated into governance and accountability. In employability, that means embedding equity into commissioning, supervision, and performance frameworks. Not leaving it to champions alone.

Sustaining inclusion might include:

- Intergenerational governance, ensuring policy and service design reflect voices from every age and ethnicity.
- Brave space forums embedded into professional development where discomfort is expected, not avoided, because growth requires it.

- Reciprocal mentoring tracked and rewarded for impact, not participation.
- Equity metrics focused on access to and take up of opportunities, for example, stretch assignments, sponsorship, and progression, moving beyond performative box ticking of attendance at training.
- Racial literacy and trauma-informed practice as core competencies for practitioners.
- Reciprocal mentoring: pairing across age and ethnicity so learning flows both ways.
- Shared stories: structured opportunities to share personal experiences that build empathy, value and normalise difference.

These mechanisms would support and accelerate action towards a sustainably fair and equitable organisational culture.

8. The Quantum Leap in Human Relations

Einstein's 'quantum leap in human relations' captures exactly what the Employability sector faces. Technology is advancing exponentially; human connection must keep pace. If we are to make the most of an ethnically and generationally diverse Britain, our relational intelligence must expand just as rapidly as our digital intelligence.

That leap begins in conversation: in the adviser who reframes rejection as an opportunity to build resilience, the manager who sponsors unseen talent, the policymaker who builds time for empathy into contracts. These are acts of design as much as compassion. As Robins and Dunne conclude, "The complexity of our times demands better connected and more cohesive organisations –where difference is not only valued, but has safe spaces to debate, collaborate and co-create." That sentence could easily describe the ideal Employability service: connected, cohesive, and courageous enough to let difference drive innovation.

9. Five Commitments for Employability Leaders

- Resource human connection. Build caseload models and contracts that allow time for genuine dialogue.
- Make brave spaces routine. Create monthly forums for reflection, learning, and challenge.
- Institutionalise reciprocal mentoring. Track learning outcomes and publicise culture shifts.
- Embed anti-racism into digital design. Conduct bias audits, publish results, and invite community review.
- Model intergenerational allyship. Leaders at every level should sponsor at least one person from a different generation and ethnic background each year.

These are not add-ons. They are essentials for an inclusive labour market capable of renewal.

10. From Intent to Legacy

If Solomos reminds us that anti-racism requires sustained political will, Robins and Dunne show that collaboration across generations can generate that will. The BLG adds the practical bridge: turning awareness into action through Anti-Racist Thought and Action® (ARTA), a framework that connects belief to behaviour.

Legacy, in this context, is collective. As one BLG conference participant reflected, "Legacy is a team sport." We build it through interactions repeated daily, multiplied across thousands of conversations that make people feel seen and valued. The future of Britain will not be written by advances in science and technology alone but also by the quality of human exchanges.

To borrow the closing sentiment from Five: Generations at Work, "Our call to action is simple: spread the word, adopt those ideas which are relevant to your own context, and pioneer new ways of combining the talents and perspectives of the generations working in your own organisations."

This invitation extends to every adviser, coach, policymaker, and leader shaping Employability today.

Because anti-racism and intergenerational collaboration are complementary routes to the same destination: a fair, vibrant, and human future of work. One that endures for good and exists to do good, where all can be supported to achieve their potential and contribute to society.

NOTES

- A 'generation' is all the people born and living at about the same time, regarded collectively... It is also a synonym for birth/age cohort in demographics, marketing, and social science, where it means 'people within a delineated population who experience the same significant events within a given period of time." Wikipedia.

In popular usage, 'Generation' refers to:

- Baby Boomers: 1946-1964
- Generation X: 1965-1980
- Millennials: 1981-1996
- Generation Z: 1997-2010
- Generation Alpha: 2010-2024
- Ethnically diverse companies perform better – research continues to show that businesses with diverse teams outperform those with less diversity. Source: McKinsey & Company, Diversity Matters Even More: The Case for Holistic Impact, 3 December 2023.
- Economic potential of full representation – "The potential benefit to the UK economy from full representation of BME individuals across the labour market—through improved participation and progression—is estimated to be £24 billion a year, equivalent to 1.3% of GDP." Source: Race in the

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- Graduate outcomes and pay disparities – a majority of graduates from Black heritage groups have lower average earnings than their White peers one, three, and five years after graduation. Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS).
- Employment rate gap — employment rates for people of Black heritage are lower than for their White peers across all qualification levels. Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS).
- Racism in the workplace – 86% of young people of Black heritage have heard or witnessed racist language in the workplace. Source: YMCA, Young & Black, October 2020.

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06

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THAT?

DR JACKIE LE FÈVRE
Director
Magma Effect

A question that has followed my every move. My parents, teachers, careers advisors and peers: no one understood my choices. I had a flair for languages yet opted for sciences.

I had a flair for languages yet opted for sciences. At university I defied my Zoology professor submitting photographs of primates rather than a display of deceased worms or butterflies for the mandatory 'Collection' assignment: ... this was 1982 with scant nature conservation sensitivity and defiance cost me marks.

Inspired by the wonderful Dr Jane Goodall: after graduation, instead of taking a job I took flight to West Africa to help reintroduce chimpanzees to the wild. So began an unconventional 21 years in the not-for-profit sector including managing Employability projects for 18–24-year-olds under New Labour's New Deal learning from others failed by 'convention'.

In 2004, redundant, I started my specialist management consultancy focused on human values. On 1 March 2020, as COVID 19 spread, I enrolled on a PhD in Occupational Psychology. Three years and nine months later I held the title Doctor and empirical data showing what I had felt all along: when someone connects to their personal values then the land of uncertainty, ambiguity and hard choices can be more than just managed, it is a place where thriving can be found (Le Fèvre, Addicott & Slaski 2023).

WHAT ARE VALUES?

Ideas. Not just any old ideas but emotionally rich ideas about things that matter to us individually or collectively, matter enough to act upon (Schwartz 2012). A lovely idea such as 'generosity', for example, becomes a 'value' when it influences how you or I respond to a situation or opportunity. Our 'valuing' of that idea: treating it as more important in that moment than other possible ideas, is what brings the value to life and so we show up generously instead for example being competitive or playful.

Values are not morals, ethics, principles or standards but are often confused with them. Values are neither good nor bad: all values are equally valid. Take the example of 'Social Status/Prestige' from the Schwartz Quasi-circumplex model, the most widely cited and validated approach to values at this time. Someone with this value wants others to look up to them and will do things to try and make that happen. Let's consider two people:
Person A – junior doctor interested in heart surgery aspiring to being at the top of their field. They dream of an office with walls covered in certificates and commendations where anyone who enters is deeply impressed by their prowess and ready to trust them with incredibly difficult surgery.

Person B – watching the rise of TikTok influencers thinks 'how hard can it be?'. They dream of millions of followers and their friends boasting about knowing the celebrity behind each post and reel.

Building on a background in zoology, Jackie is a psychologist focused on harnessing values insights for meaning and motivation. She works with individuals, groups, teams and organisations, strongly refuting the suggestion that values is 'soft stuff' that cannot be usefully codified. Jackie holds a Certificate in Education, a level 7 qualification in leadership and management, and a PhD in occupational psychology from the University of Hertfordshire, where she is also a Visiting Lecturer. She is an accredited practitioner with the Minessence Values Framework, a founder of the Global Values Appliance, member of the UK Values Alliance and Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute. Her research interests include relationships between values connection and wellbeing.

Same value, different people, different actions. What we do is rarely driven by a single one of our values in isolation as our values form a dynamic system. The way we live out the most important value in a given moment is often influenced by other priority values. In the case of the doctor priority placed on being highly skilled shapes the best way to pursue status, while for the would-be influencer being liked by friends pulls in a different direction.

It is how we live out our values: the actions we take and attitudes we display driven by our values; that is subject to judgement by ourselves and by others.

WHO HAS VALUES?

Everyone. You, me and every other human. Psychology reveals that values are closely linked to sense of self and perform important functions including helping us make sense of situations, come to decisions and find our way through life. Each of us has a unique pattern of personal high priority values, which is not surprising as they are part of who we are and none of us is exactly like anyone else. Remember our values are emotionally rich ideas; more heartfelt than 'head thought'.

HOW DO VALUES INFLUENCE US?

Usually unconsciously. Our values are part of a background 'operating system' if you like, working away below our conscious awareness to enable us to evaluate situations and select between options as quickly as possible drawing on past experiences and our sense of self.

We tend to be attracted towards groups and forms of work which enable us to live out the values that matter most to us individually. When our relationships, whether inside or outside of work, align with our high priority values things feel more 'right' than wrong. While this might sound like an argument for some form of personal values to job matching algorithm, it is actually the opposite. Thinking back to our doctor and would-be influencer the way their values play out is highly contextual and shaped by a sense of what might be possible for 'someone like me'. I suggest a machine is no substitute for a conversation with a guidance professional who can share real life examples of individuals who overcame challenges, changed course successfully or found novel ways to bring experiences that mattered into their working lives. This is an argument for equipping advisers to connect through values to every individual they encounter.

Each of us has our own unique values landscape that has been the motivational engine behind the scenes that brought us to this point. That said, if a number of careers advisors undertook an inventory of their personal values and compared results, we would probably see a number of common threads or values themes emerging. This could include the importance of learning, of human dignity, or curiosity alongside relational features such as empathy and peer support. When we join with others to work on a common cause we naturally lean into those values which matter to us which also matter to those we are with, this is one of the paths to a sense of belonging within a group.

If there is a disconnect between our values and the values being practiced around us, we feel uncomfortable, cannot do our best work and become vulnerable to stress, even burnout in extreme situations (Prentice et al 2024).

WHY DRAW UPON VALUES IN GUIDANCE WORK?

Values are universal: everyone has some. Values are also a feature of our individuality: everyone has their own personal landscape of values priorities. As an internal resource that we all have, values provide somewhere to start a conversation with anyone. By exploring what matters to someone we help them feel seen and heard at a deeper level than simply taking down a 'history' or doing a review of qualifications and experience to 'match' a person to a slot. By listening carefully to vocabulary and ideas that carry feeling about how someone talks about themselves or describe what they seek, we can appreciate what may be standing in their way and offer suggestions for ways forward that inspire hope. This is not about seeking to change the values that an individual holds but rather to explore various opportunities to put those values into practice. We might, for example, ask our would-be influencer about all the things their friends admire to explore whether that provides a different way of imagining where 'status' could come from.

Researchers observe the questions that AI struggles with are those centred on 'why' and 'for what purpose' (Mazurek 2025). To me, this suggests AI cannot empathetically connect to the values held by a human nor nurture a trustworthy connection through those values. This is important as the current values of those we seek to support are playing an active part of holding them where they are. It takes a human adviser to use the language of values to show that what 'is' right now is not the same as what 'could be' and that there is a path from here to there which is possible.

Research also suggests that those individuals who work in ways that are perceived as congruent with their personal values are experienced by others as more credible, and trustworthy, than other folk who we sense may be putting on an act (Peyton et al 2023).

WHAT DOES 'DATA' SAY ABOUT CONNECTING TO VALUES?

My data (collected over three different years) suggests that typically less than 30% of the UK workforce have deliberately explored their values: so, this is something that will potentially be new to around 70% of people (Le Fevre 2023). Both experiments and school/workplace studies have shown that when individuals consciously connect to their personal values, they are better able to use those values to deliberately direct their efforts. In the short-term greater connection to values strengthens wellbeing and reduces vulnerability to stress (Luo & Willroth 2024).

Over the longer term, it appears that living a consciously values-based life may inoculate us for future setbacks by building greater capacity for self-reliance and agency. Conscious connection to values has three components. First to 'Know' what our values are, have a concrete sense of the big ideas that drive us, and help us to make sense of our world. Second to 'Hold' on to those values, especially in tough times, and thirdly to 'Live' those values, put them into practice deliberately in how we make decisions and select our actions (Le Fèvre, Addicott & Slaski 2023).

Supporting people to connect with their values is not about building dependency on the advisor for insights. It is about enabling individuals, both advisors and clients, to have a practical clarity about what matters most to them, thereby increasing consistency of decision making and providing a framework for making sense of events and options with less second guessing and more self-compassion.

Adopting consciously values based practice has the potential to be both nurturing to the advisor enabling alignment between work and sense of self, and generative for the individuals supported, as they become clearer about who they are now and who they want to be which acts as the catalyst for constructive action (Heblich et al 2023).

HOW TO START WITH VALUES?

Your choice. There is no consensus on a single best method or tool to explore values even in well-developed fields such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Barrett, O'Connor & McHugh 2019). Some tools contain lists of words and invite the individual to select a small number they feel capture the most important values in their life. Various inventory tools also exist taking either a ranking or rating approach to descriptions of values. Other approaches encourage reflecting on key questions about your life and writing down the thoughts and ideas associated with the answers. This can be as simple as asking 'what makes my heart sing' – who am I with, what am I doing, where am I, what is the outcome. Also, conversely, 'what makes my heart sink' as those are the moments when our values are absent (or worse under threat). Edinburgh University has a guide to identifying values through reflection at www.reflection.ed.ac.uk. and there are card sorting activities alongside quite a range of 'self-help' books. It should be noted that a common limitation of all these approaches is that they use predominantly conscious, language based, processes. Trying to surface ideas that are abstract in nature and exist in the unconscious in the land of emotion, no matter which approach is adopted, takes time.

My experience in this field also suggests it benefits from helping individuals notice how they feel about the ideas that they are trying to put into words (often for the first time), and this is where drawing on examples of values contained within published models can help.

In my practice, if a detailed and finely grained picture of the potential priority values for an individual or a group is required, I will tend towards using an inventory such as Hall-Tonna (Hall 1995) or Minessence (Lynn Fitzpatrick 2007). Each contains over 100 different and distinct values which have been identified through extensive exploration with adults who vary widely in age and life experience. Introducing people to new ideas, which have been found to be present in different cultures around the world, can open up the values landscape beyond the 'usual suspects' of Respect, Integrity and Family. Here is one example of what a mid-career, professional reported during my doctoral research:

Truly understanding your own values, what drives you and understanding there are no 'wrong' values is quite enlightening. This work directly influenced my decision to move into a different field of work and gave me the confidence to live more aligned to my values. This has reduced so much stress and frustration and has genuinely improved my life (p2, Le Fèvre 2023).

SO WHAT? WHY BOTHER?

My career journey was neither conventional nor linear. Advisers did their best at the time to provide guidance but there was a gap between us that could not be bridged by rationality, reason or the experience of others. There was no holistic connection.

Approaching 30 years ago Professor Mark Savickas proposed effective career counselling help individuals "to look ahead and to look around, to develop the self" with a view to choosing "suitable and viable opportunities to become the person she or he wants to be." (p257 Savickas 1997). Popular headlines like 'Jobs for life are a thing of the past' (The Guardian May 2016) arguably amplified the importance of person-centred guidance because the straight lines between one role and the next (if they ever had existed) were no more.

Add to which rising interest in the importance of meaningful work which can significantly predict happiness at work (Charles-Leija et al 2023). In my view it all points to the importance of values being a deliberate feature of guidance in the future, at any age or stage of the journey.

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07

CONTEXT MATTERS: WHY PERSONAL CONNECTION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

FOR EMPLOYABILITY PROFESSIONALS IN A WORLD OF DIGITAL 'PERSONALISATION'

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'Personalisation' – it can be a somewhat nebulous term. Tech founders frequently extol the virtues of AI in 'personalising' our experiences, from learning languages to better understanding our health data, and this almost 'human' role for technology like AI is seeping more and more into person-centred professions, from education and healthcare to our own field of Career Development and Employability.[1]

Indeed, as professionals we know both anecdotally and through survey data that many individuals are turning to AI tools as a proxy for what was once only conceivable as 'human' support, advice and guidance, with AI being commonly consulted by users for therapy, coaching, careers advice, wellbeing support and other deeply personal subjects.[2]

Users are also relying on AI more for initial information searches and answers to questions relating to the topics above, in spite of existing issues with data accuracy, bias and fabricated content that continue to plague Large Language Models like ChatGPT, Claude and Google Gemini, even as the systems continue to improve.

I have seen this first hand in my work as a Career Consultant in Higher Education but have also heard these same observations reflected by Career Development and Employability professionals working across the industry, from Secondary Education and FE to HE and adult guidance – from prospective university students asking ChatGPT what institution would suit them best (and being given incorrect advice regarding the courses that would actually be accessible to them, based on their academic performance) to international jobseekers relying on AI-generated responses to help them figure out how to convert their experience and qualifications from another country to the UK market (often resulting in muddled or incomplete advice), reaching for AI in this sort of context is now an option that many people are choosing to engage with.

While the increasing prevalence of AI tools offering 'personalised' career development and employability support has the potential to inculcate existential angst amongst professionals in our industry, I believe it also presents an opportunity for us to highlight the incalculable value we provide to our clients through genuine personal connection, empathy and holistic support.

I'm hopeful that the following two stories will illustrate this point, better than any AI summary could (and if not, perhaps I need to reconsider my future as a writer!)

STORY #1 – 'PROGRESS' AND 'SUCCESS' ARE NEVER ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

As a Careers and Employability professional working in Higher Education (HE), I work as part of a central, on-demand service for students and graduates and subsequently I don't always have the opportunity to see clients more than once. The nature of this sometimes 'one-shot' support can make it easy for clients to default to viewing our service as simply information provision and approaching us with often more transactional queries (for example, 'I need to know how

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to find a job in _____'), even if there are knottier threads behind this presenting issue that might need unpicking. For example, while many clients I see will often lead with a problem such as the one framed above (e.g. job hunting), careful exploration regularly uncovers a slew of important factors that the client may not yet have reflected on in their career thinking, for example 'Why am I particularly motivated to work in this industry area?' or 'Am I ready to start looking for work right now or am I thinking about this simply because it feels like the most obvious next move?'.

Patience, empathy and gentle challenge are all tools that Careers and Employability professionals utilise to work with the whole person, not just their presenting issues, and are what enable us to create the personal connections that can really make a difference in our clients' lives, as well as differentiating what we do from the more transactional act of information giving (which can be emulated to an extent using technology such as AI).

This process can naturally take time, but it is time well spent.

In 2023, I led a pilot coaching programme for recent graduates at the institution where I work, entitled Graduate Boost, that was designed for graduates who were one year on from finishing their studies and either unemployed, underemployed or looking to make a career pivot. The programme involved six one-hour sessions with a Careers and Employability professional, in addition to providing optional group workshops and a suite of relevant online resources.

While the group sessions and on-demand resources were only used sparingly by the graduate cohort who signed up to the programme, the one-to-one coaching was extremely popular and the graduates' reflections from engaging in this more in-depth, personalised support, provides a clear indication of the difference the personal touch can make and why context matters so much in our work.

For starters, graduates are not a homogenous group – in our cohort for the programme, our team worked with everyone from 21-year-old graduates who had found themselves stuck in low-paid, precarious work unconnected to their degree studies or career interests, to experienced professionals in areas like healthcare and education who were seeking a career pivot to benefit their lives, relationships and personal wellbeing, both within and outside of work. Throw in the raft of recent challenges facing graduates, from the fluctuations of the post-Covid labour market to the impact of Generative AI and a national cost-of-living crisis, and it's easy to see why context matters in this sort of coaching, as indeed it does in all Careers and Employability work.

Having additional time to get to know our coachees and establish clearly the holistic aims they had for their time on the coaching programme – for example, building confidence, testing out career ideas and exploring ways to meet other professionals, not simply securing employment – allowed us to better personalise and scaffold the support we provided to graduates across the six sessions, presenting us with a different perspective on what 'successful outcomes' from this activity could look like, in comparison to how this presents in one-off support sessions, where there is often a time pressure in which to help people move forward, or clients feel they must leave the appointment with something immediately tangible.

For our Graduate Boost cohort, this varied from individuals gaining career clarity around options they had been considering for some time, building confidence in how they spoke about themselves professionally and sometimes simply taking initial small steps towards rediscovering a passion or moving away from a toxic workplace, that had previously felt out of reach.

As Careers and Employability professionals, these sort of 'outcomes' are why we do what we do, and arguably why a personal approach and a deep understanding of a client's individual context are timeless qualities for professionals working in this field.

STORY #2 – CONTEXT MATTERS, WHATEVER WE ARE DOING

As much as the work of Careers and Employability professionals is more than simply providing information to clients, there are of course occasions when we will do just that, either because an individual has specifically requested this or because we may have recommendations that we feel could unlock a client's thinking.

However, even in these scenarios, context matters.

Recently, I delivered a lecture to Computer Science students in the 2nd year of their studies at the institution where I work. At the end of the talk, I was approached by a number of younger students with questions regarding upcoming careers events, job opportunities and how to access support from our Placements team, all of which were relatively straightforward examples of information provision.

And then I met C, a mature student who had recently switched to an IT degree, following a 10+ year career in another field. C was extremely keen to gain experience in the field of Web Design during their studies but with a partner who was also studying and family commitments restricting their time, they were in a very different position to many 18-21 year-old students when it came to potentially undertaking a full-time, year-long industry placement.

Through discussion of their background and what they ideally wanted to get from their time studying the degree (essentially, building on their existing knowledge of web and app development and getting a 'foot in the door' in this industry), we were able to identify the options and sources of information that might be most useful for them, including how they might discuss their situation with our Placements team and uncover alternative opportunities to gain experience, build their network and work on

related projects by engaging with our Enterprise team or volunteering part-time on short term web projects with charities via a local organisation.

Information provision may have been the output of our conversation but it was the context that truly mattered – ensuring C felt heard, seen and understood as an individual, not just a '2nd year IT student' was what helped us establish a personal connection and ensure that the information I was eventually able to provide was relevant, practical and genuinely useful for their situation.

CONCLUSION

As Career Development Institute Chief Executive, David Morgan, recently wrote in a piece for FE News[4], Careers and Employability work is about establishing a cohesive, connected ecosystem of support for individuals, not just a 'one-shot' interaction that attempts to provide simple solutions or easy answers.

While the increasing capabilities of AI in undertaking various aspects of our day-to-day work[5] and the growing presence of AI tools within the Careers and Employability space[6] are undoubtedly developments of which Careers and Employability professionals need to be cognisant, it is also crucial that we recognise and emphasise the value that we offer when it comes to understanding our clients' contexts and what 'personalised' support might mean to them.

Knowledge is power, they say, but working with the whole person, not just their presenting issues, is a vital aspect of Careers and Employability work and something where, as professionals, our humanity, empathy and personal connection can make all the difference.

08

HUMAN INTERACTION: THE ENGINE OF EMPLOYABILITY

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Employability programmes succeed not through systems or shortcuts, but through conversations that change people.

Drawing from Imperial Health charity's Volunteer Employability Programme at Imperial Health Charity, this article argues that human interaction is the engine of Employability, powering three stages: co-design with jobseekers, employers and communities; co-delivery with partners; and co-journeying with participants. Human interaction lays the foundations of sustainable employment. If Employability were a software, the core engine would be conversation; everything else is a plug-in.

Do we really need all the bells and whistles? Or do outcomes still rise and fall on one thing: a transformational conversation held at the right time, by the right person, in the right tone? Strip away the portals, dashboards, and AI prompts, and Employability boils down to a single force: a transformational conversation between two humans.

That philosophy shaped every aspect of the Volunteer Employability Programme (VEP), a structured 10-week pathway into NHS employment. By combining hands-on volunteering placements, role-specific training, and personalised Employability support, the VEP creates the conditions for those transformational conversations to happen. Since its launch in September 2023, over 60% of participants have progressed into work. These results did not come from systems or shortcuts.

They came from people.

Conversations with employers, jobseekers, colleagues, and community networks shaped every decision we made from the programme curriculum to the volunteering roles, mentoring sessions, and career conversations that underpin it. No platform or system could have done that.

Human interaction isn't a nice to have; it's the engine of Employability. And it powers three vital stages: co-design, co-delivery, and co-journeying.

CO-DESIGN WITH JOBSEEKERS, EMPLOYERS, AND COMMUNITIES

Effective Employability programmes are never designed in a vacuum. They are most impactful when co-created with the people they serve, the employers who will benefit, and the community networks that understand the lived realities on the ground.

When I began shaping the VEP in May 2023, my first step was not writing a plan, but talking to people. I visited local charities and libraries, observed how people used these spaces, and listened. I spoke with volunteers on the wards and the staff they worked alongside. I spent time with colleagues who managed nearly 900 volunteers across the five hospitals within Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust.

Maryam Bello-Tukur is an EMCC-accredited Global Practitioner Coach and strategic Employability professional specialising in human-centred pathways into work.
Her work focuses on developing coaching-informed Employability models that combine inclusion, operational rigour, and sustainable career progression. She designed and leads Imperial Health Charity's Volunteer Employability Programme (VEP), a structured pathway supporting participants into roles across health and life sciences, including NHS careers.
With a background spanning business economics, coaching, and social enterprise, Maryam brings a systems-level perspective to Employability practice, with particular interest in strengthening professional judgement, embedding wellbeing into Employability support, and supporting jobseekers to engage with digital and AI tools ethically and confidently.

Each of these conversations gave me a better understanding of the community and its needs.

When designing the curriculum, I looked at the gaps faced by the people most likely to enrol. I built relationships with hiring managers and recruiters, asked them to review the course content, and worked with lead nurses and matrons to understand the challenges new staff faced when settling in. Hospital staff helped us shape volunteering roles and arrange mentoring and shadowing sessions, ensuring the programme reflected real workplace expectations.

Crucially, I continue to learn from our own participants. Conversations with VEP alumni provide invaluable insight into what helped them progress and what could be improved. Many tell us that the career conversations arranged with NHS staff and alumni, alongside the one-to-one coaching sessions, were instrumental in building their confidence and progressing into employment.

No dataset or survey could have provided this depth of understanding. It was conversations with jobseekers, employers, community groups, and colleagues that shaped the programme. That is the irreplaceable power of human interaction.

CO-DELIVERY WITH STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERS

If design is about asking the right questions, delivery is about building the right relationships. Successful implementation requires more than project plans; it requires trust, rapport, and collaboration.

Human interaction is what turns stakeholders into partners. It is through conversations that employers, NHS staff, and community organisations commit not just to 'supporting a programme', but to actively co-delivering it.

In the VEP, this meant NHS staff delivering workshops, running shadowing opportunities, and even providing resilience training alongside their clinical roles. Those contributions were not mandated. They came from relationships, from practitioners feeling invested in a shared mission.

One example was the resilience workshops delivered by NHS counsellors. They didn't just share generic wellbeing advice; they shaped sessions around what they had heard directly from volunteers about their anxieties and barriers. That responsiveness, born from dialogue, made the sessions resonate.

Technology can facilitate communication, but it cannot replace the credibility, nuance, and warmth of a conversation where people feel heard. Delivery succeeds when people believe in one another.

CO-JOURNEYING WITH PARTICIPANTS

The clearest example of the power of human interaction is on the frontline. People who have been long-term unemployed often describe a profound sense of isolation. According to the Community Life Survey 2023/24 (Office for National Statistics), 7% of adults in England, around 3.1 million people, reported feeling lonely often or always. Among young adults aged 16–24, that figure rose to 10%. For those facing unemployment or underemployment, the risk is even higher.

Isolation erodes social skills and confidence. The antidote is not a portal or a chatbot; it is being seen, heard, and supported by another person.

In the VEP, participants build this connection not only through coaching conversations, but also through volunteering itself. On the wards they are supporting staff, engaging with patients, offering companionship, and networking with potential employers and co-workers. Each of these interactions builds Employability: strengthening communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, while restoring a sense of purpose and belonging. Crucially, it combats the isolation that so often sits at the root of long-term unemployment. I've seen the stark difference the level of human interaction makes.

According to research published by Cambridge University Press, consistent and personalised interaction is more likely to build the self-belief critical to employment progression (Social Policy and Society, 2024). Volunteering accelerates that shift by offering multiple layers of interaction with patients, staff, and peers in real-world settings. It does more to build confidence and transferable skills than any classroom-based course could.

One-to-one coaching is central to this. At its core, coaching is simply a series of transformational conversations: structured, intentional interactions that help participants reframe challenges, see possibilities, and commit to action. It is here that trust is built and sparks of hope are ignited. Participants often tell us that their coaching sessions are pivotal, giving them the belief to keep going when their own confidence falters.

This is also where resilience and job sustainability take root. Through these interactions, participants develop the mental fortitude and emotional resilience needed for self-management, the very qualities that help them not just secure work but sustain it.

CO-JOURNEYING WITH PARTICIPANTS

Human interaction isn't a nice to have; it's the engine of Employability. But let's not forget that those engines are people: frontline practitioners who give so much of themselves, often carrying the weight of others' hopes, setbacks, and emotional offloading. If we want transformational conversations to continue, we must build their capacity, resilience, and belonging just as intentionally as we do for the participants they serve.

Transformational conversations are the foundation of Employability. Practitioners need to be continuously trained and supported

in having the right conversations that surface barriers, identify needs, and then signpost participants to the right human interaction opportunities; whether that's volunteering, mentoring, alumni groups, or community support.

Human connection isn't an optional extra; it is the core professional competency of Employability Practice, and it cannot be replaced by AI. If Employability were a software, the core engine would be conversation; everything else is a plug-in. Technology may scale processes, but only people scale potential.

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09

THE VALUE OF HUMAN INTERACTION IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION AND SKILLS (FES) AND APPRENTICESHIP SECTOR

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Digital platforms, Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven guidance tools, and self-service Employability portals are now prominent across the Further Education and Skills (FES), Higher Education (HE), and Apprenticeship sectors.

Such AI and digitally driven platforms and tools offer scale, efficiency, and consistency. and they are seemingly here to stay with increased power and presence.

However, a comprehensive body of evidence, including sector-specific studies, meta-analyses and national frameworks, is unequivocal: digital and AI tools can support, but they cannot replace the depth, nuance and developmental impact of sustained human relationships in education, learning and skills, or in the development of Employability and Apprenticeship provision.

Across our sectors, the professional relationship between learners and their practitioners, tutors, lecturers, skills coaches, mentors, assessors, careers advisers and workplace supervisors remains the most powerful determinant of attendance, retention and programme completion, personal development, including confidence, resilience and self-efficacy, career readiness, leading to appropriate pathways and long-term employability, safeguarding, health, well-being and early identification of risk and individual needs including neurodivergent and positive progression to sustained work and/or further training.

This article supports the recent, authoritative evidence demonstrating that human interaction is indispensable. It also outlines the risks of over-reliance on digital/AI-only models, risks and proposes potential recommendations for provider leaders, governance advisory boards and policy stakeholders.

THE BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The FE and Skills sector is undergoing a rapid digital transformation through the advent of wide-ranging AI-powered learning systems, automated skills assessments, algorithmic CV builders, digital career platforms, and employer-matching tools entering our sector. While these tools offer value, they are often promoted in ways that imply human guidance can be reduced or replaced. This is not the case!

At the same time, apprenticeship withdrawal rates remain a national concern; disparities in digital literacy persist; and employers report increasing gaps in learners' human skills of resilience, communication, relationship-building, and problem-solving, which are shaped through interpersonal interaction. New learners entering their programme of learning and skills development often do not demonstrate these skills because they rely more on automated, digital, and AI-generated tools in their education and social life.

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The question is therefore not whether digital and AI tools should be used - they do have their place, but how to deploy them without diminishing the essential human dimensions of Employability support and Apprenticeship success.

WHY HUMAN INTERACTION STILL MATTERS MOST!CAREERS GUIDANCE AND EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT

There is robust, consistent evidence that one-to-one personal guidance improves a wide range of outcomes. The Careers & Enterprise Company's Personal Guidance: What Works? Publication identifies 'good evidence', including RCTs, longitudinal studies, and meta-analyses, shows that structured one-to-one guidance with qualified practitioners leads to: improved personal effectiveness, self-awareness, self-esteem and confidence building, enhanced career readiness, decision-making, planning, motivation and preparedness and improved educational outcomes, including attendance, retention, achievement and positive progression into next steps.

The above occurs because of the depth, trust and responsiveness of human dialogue and the range of factors that digital systems cannot replicate. Careerpilot's evaluation of its hybrid model further demonstrates that digital information tools are most effective when combined with human guidance, particularly for learners requiring individualised, tailored support to meet their specific needs.

APPRENTICESHIP ENGAGEMENT, ATTENDANCE, RETENTION, ACHIEVEMENT AND WORKPLACE SUCCESS

Evidence shows apprentices withdraw when they do not feel heard, barriers and issues to completing their apprenticeship are not identified early, or employers lack the capacity to provide pastoral support, and no trusted relationship exists with a practitioner. Digital systems do not pick up subtle changes in behaviour, emotional cues, or early signals of disengagement. This can all lead to a failure in learners' ability to build their personal and interpersonal skills. Confidence, resilience, communication and self-efficacy are strengthened through the lived human interaction and experience, not just via automated interfaces, tools and technology. Digital and AI tools cannot identify safeguarding risks that may be embedded in behaviour, tone, relationships, family circumstances or emotional presentation and when working online using IT.

Human relationships are even more critical in apprenticeships, where learners must navigate both on-the-job and off-the-job training and their employer workplace contexts and job roles. Effective employer line manager mentoring, on-the-job coaching and support help to improve an apprentice's chance of achievement and full completion of their apprenticeship. TUC/Unionlearn's research on apprenticeship mentoring found that employers introduced mentoring primarily to improve retention and completion, and that completion rates improved where mentoring was embedded. Mentors gave apprentices a trusted voice, enhancing their confidence and helping them address issues early.

The St Martin's Group (2024) reinforces these findings, identifying employer/provider support as one of the strongest predictors of apprentice achievement and success. Apprentice withdrawals often correlate with insufficient relational support, not technical difficulty. Mentoring and coaching is found to improve long-term employability.

The Youth Futures Foundation's network meta-analysis found that professional guidance, plus mentoring/coaching and life skills training, yields significant gains in psychosocial outcomes, including resilience, self-efficacy, problem-solving, and confidence-building.

All of these capabilities underpin sustained employment and long-term career progression, outcomes of which AI systems cannot deliver independently.

POLICY AND FRAMEWORK REQUIREMENTS

Sector frameworks remain firmly anchored in human interaction, including the updated Gatsby Foundation Benchmarks (2024), which require one-to-one personal guidance delivered by Level 6 and above advisers. The Gatsby Benchmarks emphasise tailored support, inclusion and responsiveness, qualities that depend on human practitioner conversations with learners and their resulting judgements. The matrix Standard for Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) supports the human interaction approach of living and working in an inclusive, equal and equitable society where there is equality of opportunity for all. The Ofsted 2025 Inspection Toolkit looks for good practice as the expected standard in both IAG and Careers, Advice and guidance (CEIAG), to support learners' learning journey and positive progression into a destination of their choice.

GUIDANCE FOR APPRENTICESHIP PROVIDERS (CEC, 2024)

The guidance recommends embedding careers guidance into everyday delivery and quality processes, emphasising human-led support alongside any digital tools. The frameworks mentioned in the above section are pretty clear: digital provision can be used as a complementary tool, not a substitute or replacement.

THE RISKS OF OVER-RELIANCE ON AI AND DIGITAL-ONLY MODELS ARE EXCLUSION AND INEQUALITY

Large numbers of learners lack confidence, access, or competence in using digital tools and applying technology. Digital-only models disproportionately disadvantage learners with SEND, needing additional learning support and those with neurodivergent needs, or who are facing socio-economic barriers to life and work. Adults returning to employment and or education, often with low prior

achievement and lack of self-esteem, rely on human reassurance to build their confidence, resilience and develop the appropriate range of workplace knowledge, skills and behaviours. This helps an individual to better perform in their job role and also make an active contribution to their employer's business and growth.

WHAT EFFECTIVE PROVISION LOOKS LIKE: A BLENDED HUMAN-DIGITAL MODEL

The evidence points decisively toward blended delivery. In this model, AI and digital tools support a scalable labour-market information approach, improve administrative efficiency and progress-tracking dashboards, and provide consistency in the use of resources, including bite-sized learning, reinforcement, and skills development. Human practitioners deliver professional judgement, pastoral support and mentoring, confidence-building and resilience, personalised guidance, safeguarding oversight, advocacy, accountability and challenge and relationship-based motivation. Digital systems can handle the 'what' of information. Human practitioners deliver the 'why', 'so what', and 'what next.'

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROVIDERS, GOVERNANCE BOARDS AND POLICYMAKERS

Protect the time and capacity of skills coaches, tutors, advisers and mentors and ensure apprentice caseloads for staff are realistic and allow for sustained relationships.

Consider mandating Blended Models in Strategy and Quality Frameworks.

Use digital tools to supplement, not replace, structured guidance and mentoring and embed personal guidance and mentoring into quality, retention, achievement, health, well-being and safeguarding processes.

Work on strengthening Employer Engagement and Support, ensuring that employers understand their critical co-responsibility for pastoral support.

Focus on building employer capability to provide effective workplace mentoring and early intervention.

MEASURE WHAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

Include resilience, confidence, self-efficacy, workplace behaviours and how to measure a sense of belonging and engagement in soft skills, KPIs and performance reporting. These outcomes help to drive long-term learner success, yet are often neglected in digital systems.

INVEST IN CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD)

Ensure that your practitioners are equipped through CPD to deliver high-quality mentoring.

Integrate AI tools appropriately, recognise and respond to early signs of disengagement and support diverse learners effectively.

Apply an Equity Lens to all digital strategy decisions and engage all of your workforce, learners and employees in making best-fit choices.

CONCLUSION

Digital and AI tools offer genuine advantages to the FES/HE and apprenticeship sectors. However, they cannot currently model or replicate the trust, empathy, judgement and responsive expertise that underpin learner success. The evidence is unequivocal that human interaction remains the most potent driver of retention, progression, resilience and long-term achievement in apprenticeships and employability provision.

AI and digital tools should be viewed as essential enhancers, not the primary source of information, nor substitutes, for the professional relationship at the heart of effective learning and work-based development. Providers and policymakers who get this balance right will deliver not only higher achievement and full programme completion rates, but also genuinely transformative positive outcomes for learners, employers, and local communities and meet regional/local workforce development and Employability priorities.

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10

HOW SOCIAL PRESCRIBING CAN BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN HEALTHCARE AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

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We all know that there are many health-related factors that can affect people's ability to find and stay in fulfilling work. People may struggle to apply for jobs or to remain in them because of their mental health or chronic pain, for example, and conditions at their workplace may exacerbate these issues.

So how should the health system work with employers and wider communities to support people at work, and help them live the best lives they can?

There have recently been criticisms of GPs for too often giving people 'sick notes' rather than finding ways to help them stay in work. This criticism seems unfair on GPs, who have limited options in 10-minute appointments and who are looking to do the best thing for the health of the patient in front of them. However, there is clearly a need to improve the current system.

One important way of doing this is through social prescribing.

The internationally agreed definition of social prescribing is that it is 'a means for trusted individuals in clinical and community settings to identify that a person has non-medical, health-related social needs and to subsequently connect them to non-clinical supports and services within the community by co-producing a social prescription –a non-medical prescription, to improve health and well-being and to strengthen community connections.'[1]

In England, what this means in practice is that GPs (and other health and care professionals) can refer patients to a Social Prescribing Link Worker. Link workers are usually employed with NHS funding and are typically either based in GP practices or in voluntary sector organisations. They have time to get to know patients, understand their circumstances and preferences, and then connect people to non-medical support that can benefit their health and wellbeing.

For example, if someone with breathing difficulties is living in a flat with mould growing up their walls, a link worker might help them speak to the right person at the local housing authority or connect them to Citizens Advice. If someone has become isolated after a bereavement, a link worker could help them to join a local community group, so that they can do an activity they enjoy in a place where they can potentially meet new people.

The approach is based on what matters to each person. Despite the use of the word 'prescribing', it is not about telling people what to do, so much as listening to what matters to them and then co-producing a personalised plan.

Social prescribing has been practiced in some areas for decades, but became universally available after the NHS Long Term Plan in 2019. Currently (September 2025), there are around 3,300 link workers employed across England, and more than a million referrals to them per year by GPs.[2]

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The evidence base is now strong. A recent national evaluation[3], funded by NIHR, showed than Social Prescribing Link Workers improved a range of outcomes in primary care – helping people with mental health problems and long-term conditions to feel more supported, and ensuring people had better connections to local community services.

An evaluation of the cross-Government Green Social Prescribing programme[4] showed statistically significant improvements in the mental health of participants. And a wide range of smaller scale studies show benefits for wellbeing and mental health, as well as a positive impact on people living with a range of long-term conditions.[5]

While social prescribing usually relies on GPs referring people to link workers, many Primary Care Networks also take a more proactive approach, using data to identify and support patients who may be most in need of support. For example, they might identify patients living with multiple long-term conditions in more deprived areas who have not recently had health checks, and reach out to them. In some cases, this has involved using data about who has received sick notes to identify people who could most benefit from social prescribing to improve their health and, where appropriate, potentially return to work.

We worked with the National Association of Primary Care to analyse data from NHS Primary Care Networks. In one area, as you might expect, this data suggested that people who had frequently received fit notes had significantly higher physical and mental health needs than the general population. They were also more likely to live in deprived areas, had greater social need, and tended to have worse diets. They were far more likely to experience chronic pain, depression and high blood pressure.

This data suggested that the reasons people were absent from work were complex and multifaceted.

Most people cited a single reason, but there were often multiple, interconnected physical, mental and social factors at play.

Results from another practice show the potential impact of proactively supporting people[6]. The 630 people who were supported by Social Prescribing Link Workers saw 53% fewer sick notes, 50% less chronic pain, and 82% fewer cases of anxiety or depression, while a control group saw increases in all of these. Some improvements may have happened naturally, but the large differences suggest social prescribing is making a real impact.

In its 10-year plan for the NHS, the Government has committed to opening Neighbourhood Health Centres, which would bring together GP services with other forms of support, including employment advice. Social Prescribing Link Workers can play a key role in these neighbourhood health teams, taking a holistic approach and forming a bridge between the health system and other services, including those that help people get back to work. While there are already some excellent examples of services that combine healthcare with advice and information – for example at the Bromley by Bow Centre in London – the new 10-year plan presents an opportunity to improve connections and clarify pathways.

We have been working with the Department of Work and Pensions to look at how social prescribing can work alongside services supporting people back to work.

The recent Britain Get Working review highlighted the role of employers in supporting the health of employees and proposed a new model of workplace health provision. New models will be tested through Vanguard sites, but we welcomed the report's focus on building on existing services, including those provided by Social Prescribing Link Workers.

Through intelligent use of NHS data, there is also an opportunity to identify people who are more often signed off work and provide a combination of medical and non-medical support to help them live the best lives they can.

The aim of social prescribing is to improve people's health and wellbeing, not to reduce unemployment, and clearly there are many reasons why people may not be able to work. However, if social prescribing can help people to overcome practical and emotional challenges that limit what they can do, and to live happier and healthier lives, this can only be a good thing.

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FROM SHARED STRUGGLES TO SHARED SUCCESS: THE POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTION IN EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT

RICHARD STRAUSS AIEP
Development Director
Offploy CIC

Employability is often measured in numbers: job starts, sustainment rates, or contract targets. Yet, each statistic reflects a person navigating fear, stigma, and hope.

At Offploy, we believe that true success is rooted in the quality of human connection. It is this trust, built through empathy and shared experience, that turns Employability from a transactional process into a life-changing journey.

Across the UK, thousands of people each year seek support to rebuild their lives after challenges such as imprisonment, homelessness, addiction, or long-term unemployment. While prioritising compliance and robust data collection is vital for accountability and effective delivery, it should not overshadow the importance of authentic, empathetic human support.

Finding the right balance means understanding that compliance provides a robust foundation, both from an operational perspective and in meeting the expectations of commissioners. Effective compliance processes ensure services are delivered consistently, safely, and to the required standards, thereby instilling confidence in both those who deliver and those who commission the service.

However, maintaining the human touch remains essential for meeting people's needs and enabling lasting change. Service models should therefore be designed to uphold accountability and transparency, whilst also fostering opportunities for empathy, trust-building, and shared experience.

By embedding relational approaches at the core of our work, we ensure individuals feel genuinely seen and supported, transforming Employability interventions from mere processes into meaningful journeys.

SHARED EXPERIENCE AS FOUNDATION

Offploy was founded on a simple belief: those who have walked the path are best placed to guide others along it. More than 70% of our team has lived experience of the criminal justice system. This is not an incidental fact but the foundation of our practice. When someone sits across from a mentor who has faced similar barriers, the dynamic shifts. The conversation becomes honest, vulnerable, and transformative.

Our colleagues know the weight of shame, stigma, and fear. They have lived through them. That shared understanding creates instant rapport, which can lead to breaking down barriers quicker than traditional models, which often take longer to build trust and connection. For someone who has spent years feeling judged, the realisation that their mentor truly 'gets it' can be the first step towards rebuilding self-belief.

Lived experience at Offploy goes beyond justice. Many of our colleagues and participants have encountered mental ill health,

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addiction, debt, or homelessness. These experiences shape how we connect, listen, and build trust. They allow us to meet people not as caseworkers, but as fellow human beings with stories of survival and resilience.

Practitioner takeaway: Draw on lived or learned experience. You don't need to share a conviction to connect — sharing any meaningful challenge can create trust.

MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

We work with individuals furthest from the labour market, those often deemed 'hardest to reach'. Our approach begins not with paperwork, but with presence. We start by listening; asking what success looks like for each participant and why it matters. This initial act of attention sets a tone of respect and partnership.

From the outset, we help each person discover their big why: the deeper motivation behind change and support them in shaping a personal vision of success. For some, this means reconnecting with family. For others, it is securing a stable income or simply rebuilding confidence. These aspirations may seem modest, yet they are deeply personal and can mark pivotal turning points in a participant's journey.

Our model is designed to respect autonomy. We do not impose rigid definitions of success but work collaboratively to design journeys that matter. This approach creates stronger engagement, sustained motivation, and longer-term progress.

Our approach is underpinned by a conscious choice. We recognise the responsibility we hold in shaping the experiences and futures of those we support. We choose to act with compassion, and respect, ensuring that each individual is seen as a person first.

This stance is embedded in every aspect of our work: from the language we use, to the way we structure our support, and the values we model as a team.

Flexibility is built into support, allowing goals to evolve as individuals grow and their circumstances change. By meeting people where they are, we foster a sense of ownership and trust that underpins meaningful, lasting transformation. Our ethical commitment guides us to continually reflect on our practice, seek feedback, and adapt, ensuring that our actions always align with the principle of doing right by those we serve.

In making these ethical choices, we affirm that effective support is not simply a matter of compliance or process, but a responsibility to honour the potential in every individual. This principle is at the heart of our service and is reflected in the positive, sustained outcomes we help to achieve.

Practitioner takeaway: Start with presence, not paperwork. Listening first helps individuals feel seen and builds motivation that lasts.

REAL IMPACT, REAL PEOPLE

Since its inception, Offploy has supported more than 5,000 individuals. But statistics alone cannot capture the depth of human change. Consider three stories:

- A young man facing rejection. Years of stigma had eroded his confidence. What he needed wasn't just a job, it was someone who understood. With Offploy's support and an inclusive employer, he found work and reclaimed self-worth.
- A woman carrying silence. She had never spoken openly about her conviction. In a safe, non-judgemental space, she disclosed her past for the first time. That moment of honesty became a turning point for her future.
- A mentor transformed. Once nervous and newly released, he now leads workshops, inspiring others. His journey shows that lived experience is not a barrier.

Ultimately, it is the power of genuine human connection, built on empathy, trust, and shared experience, that lies at the heart of each success story. It is through meaningful interaction that these individuals were empowered to realise their potential.

Practitioner takeaway: Create safe spaces where dialogue is possible. Vulnerability can become the catalyst for transformation.

HUMANISING RECRUITMENT

Human connection extends beyond participants to employers. We work with organisations to challenge stigma and encourage inclusive hiring. By encouraging employers to see individuals in their entirety rather than focusing solely on their conviction, we help them to recognise true potential and build a more resilient workforce.

The CIPD Trust Guide to Recruiting People with Convictions (2023) highlights that inclusive recruitment benefits both society and business. For employers, hiring someone with lived experience often results in increased loyalty, reduced turnover, and richer workplace diversity. We have seen countless examples of candidates thriving in roles once employers were supported to see past stereotypes.

Employer engagement is proactive. We do not wait for stigma to surface, we address it directly. Through training sessions, workshops, and one-to-one coaching, we help employers understand risk fairly, comply with legislation, and move beyond outdated assumptions. The result is safer, stronger workplaces where people are judged on their skills, potential and character rather than past mistakes.

Practitioner takeaway: Humanise employers too. Supporting organisations to see the person, not the conviction, makes inclusive hiring sustainable.

CONNECTION OVER CORRECTION

All too often, Employability is viewed through the lens of fixing deficits; addressing behaviours, bridging gaps, or ensuring compliance. Our approach gently prioritises connection over correction. Employability extends far beyond securing a job; it is equally about nurturing dignity, fostering identity, and cultivating a genuine sense of belonging.

This perspective gently emphasises the importance of human connection, inviting both policymakers and practitioners to look beyond measures like job starts and short-term placements. Lasting change emerges not just from focusing on compliance, but from nurturing relationships that build trust and commitment. By valuing meaningful engagement, a relational approach quietly transforms lives and, in turn, supports the outcomes sought by commissioners.

When human connection is placed at the heart of practice, improved results naturally follow; delivering both on targets and on the promise of real, lasting impact.

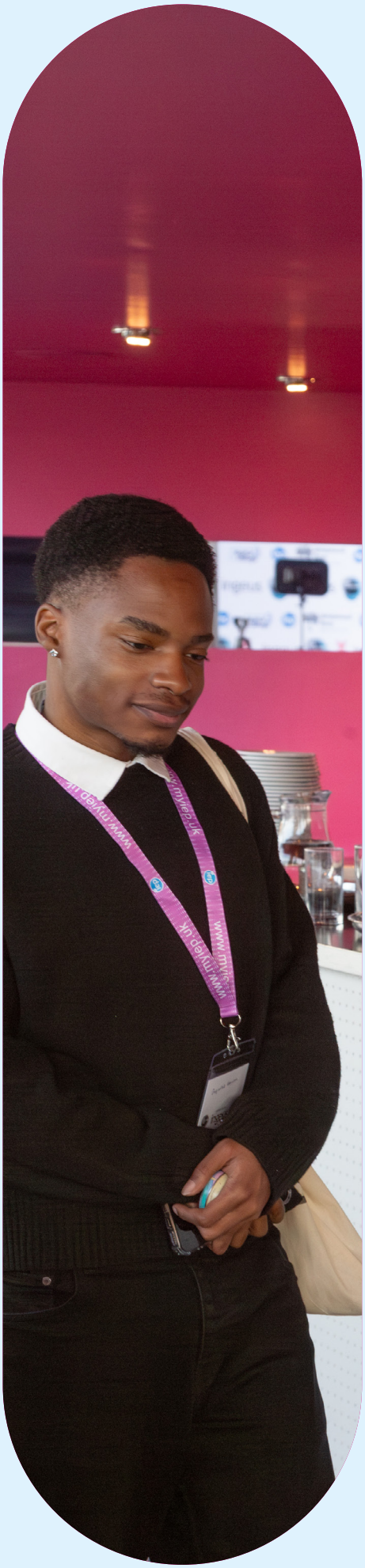
Every professional interaction is an opportunity to model hope. When we lead with empathy, listen with intention, and walk beside rather than ahead, we don't just change employment outcomes, we change lives. For some participants, that may mean their first step into work in years. For others, it is the confidence to attend a job interview, reconnect with a family member, or volunteer in their community. All are milestones of dignity and belonging.

Practitioner takeaway: Every conversation matters. Each interaction can show that change and belonging are possible.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Human interaction is not simply a soft skill; it is a strategic intervention with the power to transform both individuals and systems. When genuine connection is prioritised, Employability professionals move beyond facilitating work; they become catalysts for hope, growth, and belonging.

The challenge for our sector is clear: embed human connection at the core of every intervention. As practitioners, we hold both the privilege and responsibility of shaping journeys not only towards employment, but also towards dignity and self-worth. To everyone working in this field, the invitation is simple: begin with connection. From there, lasting change will follow.



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THE POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTION IN EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT

ADAM GREEN FIEP
Chief Executive Officer
YES Manchester

In Employability and IAG work, the most profound changes often happen not through systems or processes, but through people. It is in the quiet moments when an advisor listens without judgement, celebrates a customer's small win, or gently challenges a self-limiting belief that life trajectories shift.

These interactions are not incidental; they are the foundation of effective Employability Practice.

MORE THAN TRANSACTIONS: RELATIONSHIPS THAT TRANSFORM

Advisors do far more than provide job search tips or CV support. They function as trusted partners, helping individuals navigate uncertainty, overcome barriers, and envision a future they may have stopped believing was possible. For many customers and service users, especially those facing disadvantage, the relationship with their advisor may be the first supportive professional relationship they have experienced.

Research supports this relational approach. Lindsay, Pearson, Batty and colleagues (2021) found that person-centred, trust-based interactions in a UK pilot for lone parents improved engagement and empowerment compared with more transactional models. While this evidence is from a specific population, it suggests that supportive relationships can be critical for groups experiencing disadvantage or long-term worklessness.

Early work by the Centre for Employability Excellence (CfEE) also highlights, through its research repository and practitioner guidance, that empathy and emotional support are consistently cited as key factors in customer motivation and resilience, even if comprehensive quantitative data is still emerging.

'THOSE MOMENTS' THAT MATTER

Employability practitioners frequently describe 'those moments' when a breakthrough happens:

- A single parent who, after months of self-doubt, realises she can retrain and provide for her children.
- A veteran who, encouraged to frame his military experience differently, secures a civilian role that values his skills.
- A young man who, after finally being listened to rather than judged, commits to turning his life around.

These turning points are rarely about a perfectly formatted CV or a well-timed job posting, they are about human interaction, the subtle but powerful exchange of empathy, encouragement, and belief. In many cases, the practitioner becomes a temporary but essential anchor, holding hope steady while the customer finds their footing.

APPROACHES AND TECHNIQUES THAT SUPPORT CHANGE

- **Person-Centred Guidance**
  Drawing on Carl Rogers' (1951) person-centred therapy principles, this approach positions the customer as the expert in their own life. Advisors create a

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non-judgemental, empathetic environment where individuals feel safe to explore options and make their own decisions. The aim is not to impose solutions but to empower the customer to identify strengths and aspirations.

- **Motivational Interviewing (MI)**
  Widely used in employment and welfare services, MI is a collaborative, goal-oriented method that elicits and strengthens motivation for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Advisors use reflective listening and open questions to help customers resolve ambivalence and move toward positive action, for example, exploring a customer's own reasons for seeking work, rather than offering prescriptive advice.

- **Strengths-Based Practice**
  Strengths-based approaches focus on identifying and amplifying existing skills and achievements rather than deficits. As Saleebey (2012) notes, recognising strengths builds confidence and shifts the narrative from 'what's wrong' to 'what's possible'. In Employability settings, this can include reframing gaps in employment as periods of skill development or demonstrations of resilience.

- **Trauma-Informed Support**
  Many customers have experienced trauma, through redundancy, long-term unemployment, or tragic personal circumstances. Trauma-informed practice encourages advisors to consider emotional impacts, avoid re-traumatisation, and prioritise safety and trust (SAMHSA, 2014). Even a simple act, acknowledging a customer's anxiety about interviews, can significantly reduce barriers to engagement.

- **Peer and Community Involvement**
  Encouraging peer support, carefully constructed group workshops that account for individual needs and learning styles, or community networks can create belonging and accountability. Broader social capital research suggests (Lindsay et al., 2021) that networks play a meaningful role in job search success and well-being. Advisors play a role not only as guides, but as connectors to wider communities and networks.

THE ADVISOR AS A CHANGE AGENT

Advisors are often unsung change agents - they do not simply match CVs to vacancies. They help customers make some of the most important decisions of their lives: choosing a career path, returning to work after illness, balancing work with family responsibilities, or retraining in mid-life. These decisions carry profound emotional weight for them, and their families.

The relationship is built on rapport, values, and trust. An advisor's genuine interest in a customer's well-being can reignite self-belief in someone who has been repeatedly told, by systems or circumstances, that they are not enough. By showing genuine interest –taking time to listen attentively, remembering personal goals, and acknowledging achievements – advisors demonstrate that they value the person beyond their employment status. This authentic attention helps rebuild confidence in those who have previously felt unsupported or overlooked.

Moreover, advisors navigate a delicate balance: offering encouragement without creating dependency, challenging assumptions while respecting autonomy, and providing expertise without undermining self-determination. This requires values-driven judgement, skilled communication, and evidence-informed practice. The most effective advisors promote collaboration rather than control, helping customers strengthen their confidence, motivation, and sense of control over their employment journey.

THE VALUE OF LISTENING

Listening is perhaps the most powerful tool in an advisor's arsenal. In busy services under pressure to meet targets, it can be tempting to focus on ticking boxes. Yet active, empathetic listening communicates respect and validation, signalling to customers that their experiences and aspirations are valued. Evidence from employment guidance research supports this: Imber and Booth (2012) note that attentive listening fosters engagement and motivation, while Bimrose et al. (2004) highlight that customers who feel heard are more likely to take ownership of their career decisions and sustain employment. Self-determination theory also underlines the importance of autonomy-supportive interactions, showing that encouragement and attentive listening can create intrinsic motivation for action (Stone, Deci & Ryan, 2009).

ADAPTING TO A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

While technology has transformed Employability services, enabling virtual appointments, digital CV tools, and online job boards, human interaction remains irreplaceable. Digital solutions are valuable, but they cannot replicate the nuanced understanding, encouragement, and adaptability that a skilled practitioner offers. As hybrid delivery models expand, the challenge is to maintain the depth of personal connection that drives life-changing outcomes. Blending technology with meaningful human engagement offers the best of both worlds: efficiency and reach, without sacrificing empathy.

Technology can increase efficiency, provide access to resources, and support remote interactions, while human engagement offers nuanced understanding, empathy, and personalised guidance. Effective hybrid models combine digital tools - such as online job boards, virtual workshops, and CV platforms – with face-to-face or live mentoring interactions.

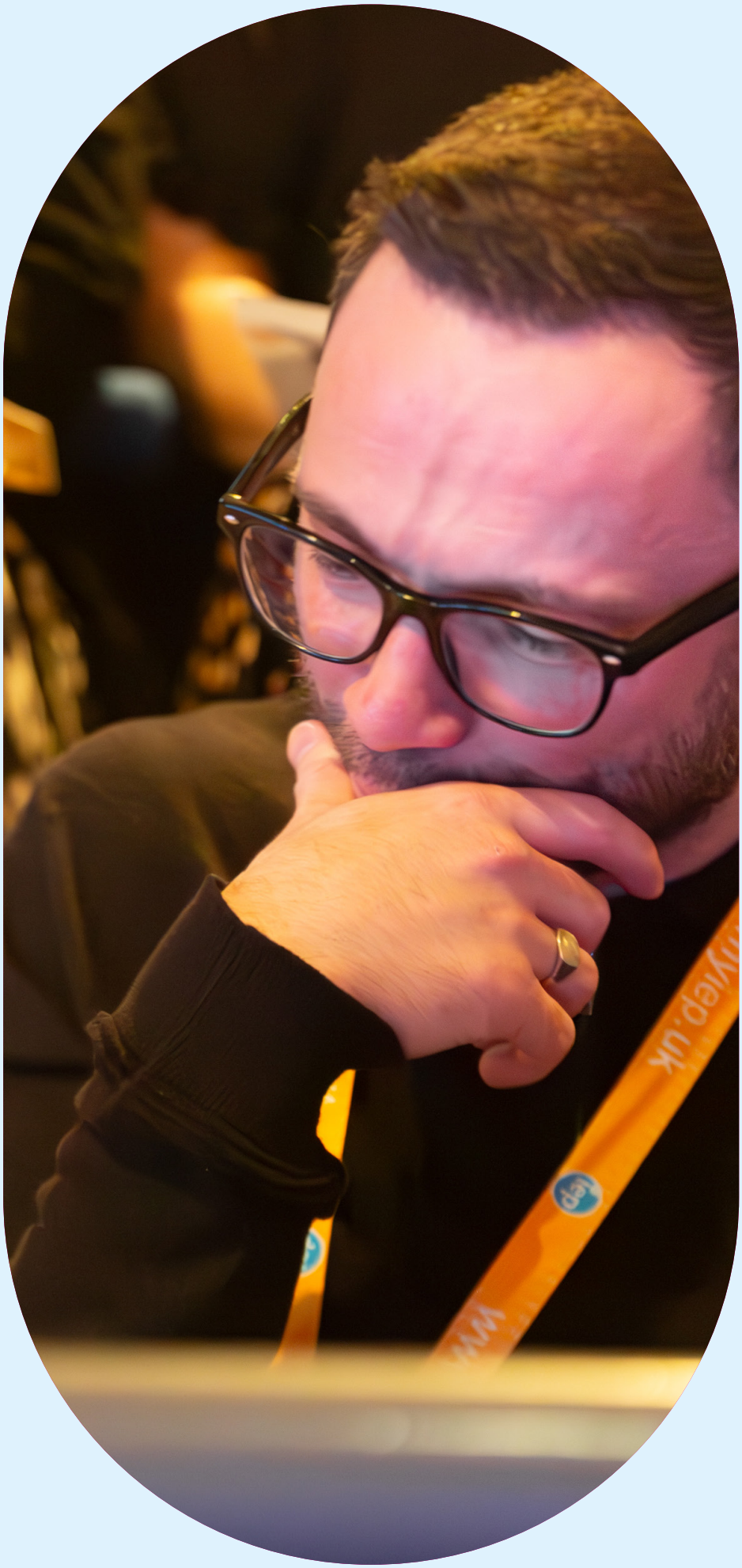
This blend allows for broader reach without sacrificing the relational depth that drives motivation, confidence, and sustainable employment outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In employability and IAG, success is rarely about the mechanics of job searching alone. It is about

people helping people, about trust, encouragement, and those small but significant moments when an advisor's support ignites a customer's confidence. The available research suggests that relational approaches can improve engagement, confidence, and outcomes, especially for customers facing disadvantage. But beyond the evidence, advisors know this intuitively. They see, every day, how a supportive conversation or a well-timed challenge can change a life.

Employability professionals are not just facilitators of meaningful employment - they are partners in transformation. The value of their human interaction cannot be overstated, and its impact is written in the stories of the people whose lives they help to reshape.



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AI AND AN ETHICS OF CARE

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It's always essential to clearly outline your terms. How will we approach ethics in this context? Well, we could think about ethics in terms of duties, which are the behaviours that delivery involves in line with codes of conduct.

Or in terms of consequences, do we think the outcomes of these systems are ethical? These frames would make us ask what 'duties' AI systems carry out or what the consequences of these are.

What impact would AI completing action plans or acting as a triage mechanism to 'screen' clients before seeing an advisor have on practice? How would we feel about AI sanctioning benefit claimants for not attending an appointment? Can a system which has never attended a job interview prepare a client at risk of depression towards attending an interview? Though AI may have merits, I think the humanistic traditions in counselling, education and public services more generally point towards more relational ethics.

Relational ethics makes central the human orientation towards compassion and care, which is viewed positively across histories and cultures. It looks at ethics as something which occurs between people when the right qualities of a relationship exist. Carol Gilligan (1982) discusses a care-based approach to ethics, which focuses on relationships and responsibilities, particularly with a focus on responding to each other's needs, which is central to ethics.

Nel Noddings (2012) makes similar points, arguing for a relational approach to care which involves 'engrossment' (giving attention to the other) and 'motivational displacement' (the carer's motives move toward the other's needs).

These theories ground ethics as coming out of relationships that develop in professional contexts. They very much align with the humanistic traditions developed by Rogers (1979) and in the careers sector by writers such as Savikcas (2013) and Cochran (1997). Rather than just picking an ethical tradition that I prefer, I believe a focus on a relational ethics of care actually fits better inside the career guidance tradition and fits better with existing ethical frameworks.

For the rest of this piece, I am going to use the ideas found in an ethics of care (as described above) to ask if AI can deliver services in line with the Career Development Institute's (CDI's) ethical standards (https://www.thecdi.net/about-us/cdi-code-of-ethics). Using this approach focuses on whether AI is capable of developing the sorts of relationships contained in the CDI code of ethics.

As well as referring to ethical frameworks commonly used in the sector this also looks at how ethical issues are currently regulated and what issues are commonly understood from the wider career guidance community (which the CDI represents).

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TRANSPARENCY AND BUILDING TRUST

Central to an ethics of care is being open and building trust; relationships are built on transparency. Rogers, for example, talked about being congruent in one-to-one work, avoiding having hidden agendas or hiding your ways of work. In contrast, many AI systems operate as 'black boxes' where even developers can't fully explain why a particular recommendation was made. The CDI standard requires gaining trust through openness about approach and methodology – but if the AI itself can't explain its reasoning in human terms, this becomes problematic.

COMPETENCE AND PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

AI doesn't have training, qualifications, or expertise in the traditional sense. It can't engage in reflective practice or recognise when it's operating outside its competence. This is similarly central to an open and honest relationship. The system also can't make judgments about when a client needs to be referred to another professional (like a mental health counsellor) in the nuanced way a human practitioner can. Especially when this is driven by a desire to seek the best for someone, which can stop you from giving advice or support that you are not confident in. AI, in actuality, is never confident or unconfident in its views; it is ambivalent towards them just as it is ultimately ambivalent to the client it is seeking to support. This means it won't approach complex situations with the same relational commitments as a trained professional will.

DUTY OF CARE AND CLIENT-CENTRED APPROACH

True client-centred work requires empathy, emotional intelligence, and the ability to adapt to individual circumstances in real-time. It is this nuance that underpins relational care, working through the specifics of the relationship you have developed with your client. A recent investigation by the BBC has shown that AI will happily share health misinformation or even advise clients how to commit suicide (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp3x71pv1qno).

Now, AI models should be able to be trained not to do this in the future, but this partly reveals that a system like AI, that is ambivalent, cannot be 'trained' to care; it can only be designed to mimic caring. This means it will always be limited in how it relates to humans. It will not have the same approach to duty of care as a professional. AI might miss subtle cues about a client's emotional state, mental health concerns, or unstated needs. Even if it can learn to recognise patterns it will not be able to draw on its own lived emotional experiences and empathise with humans. It also can't take moral responsibility for advice given – there's an accountability gap when things go wrong, which we will discuss below.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Who is accountable when AI gives poor or harmful advice? The developer? Is the organisation deploying it? The AI itself (which has no legal personhood)? The CDI's standard requires practitioners to 'submit themselves to appropriate scrutiny' – but AI systems can't defend their decisions or learn from complaints in the way humans can. This again points towards AI's relational ambivalence: to care must also mean to be accountable. It means to recognise you have moral responsibilities and that you have a social contract where you recognise you might have to stand by your actions. AI is ambivalent and so unsurprisingly is not personally accountable in the way that a person is.

CONCLUSION

I have argued in this piece that an ethics of care, and by extension the CDI's code of ethics, requires the perseverance of person-to-person career guidance as the core of our delivery. This is ultimately about the sorts of relationships people want and deserve to have with services and what it means to be professional in evolving situations.

This does not mean that AI can have no place, but we need to hold onto the ethical imperative of putting care central to career work.

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14

CONNECTED FUTURES: BUILDING NETWORKS THAT HELP APPRENTICES THRIVE

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Association of Apprentices

When we talk about career progression, we often focus on the visible factors: qualifications, skills, experience, ambition. But there's another, quieter force that shapes success just as profoundly: Networks.

Lindsay has been a passionate advocate for apprenticeships throughout her 20-year career in the sector. Beginning her own journey as an apprentice, she has since gone on to lead national organisations with a focus on impacting policy to benefit apprentices, widening participation, and creating real parity of esteem between technical and academic pathways.

Networks are the connective tissue of professional life. They provide access to opportunity, guidance, and support, the unspoken 'infrastructure' behind many career stories. We see this in countless ways: alumni connections that open doors, professional associations that nurture confidence, and mentors who help people navigate change.

But while these structures are well-established in some parts of the workforce, access to them is uneven, particularly for those entering employment outside large organisations or traditional graduate pathways.

Small to medium sized organisations employ c40% of all apprentices and in these smaller organisations, opportunities for peer cohorts, alumni networks, or structured mentoring are far less likely to exist.

For apprentices, the 700,000 people currently on programme, who are combining real work with real learning, networks can be the missing link between potential and progression.

If we want to create a truly inclusive and high-performing system, we need to give apprentices the same opportunity to connect, belong, and thrive.

NETWORKS: THE HIDDEN INGREDIENT OF EMPLOYABILITY

In Employability, we often talk about skills gaps and qualifications. But the 'network gap' can be just as significant.

Networks matter because Employability is not simply about getting a job, but about sustaining and progressing within one. Access to peers, mentors, and professional communities helps individuals navigate the informal aspects of working life: understanding expectations, interpreting feedback, building confidence, and learning how to advocate for themselves.

For many people, these insights are acquired implicitly through social or educational networks. For others, particularly those entering work through apprenticeships, they are far less visible. Without access to people who can sense-check decisions, share lived experience, or model progression routes, individuals are more likely to feel uncertain, isolated, or stuck. Over time, this can affect performance, confidence, and ultimately retention.

Sociologists call it social capital: the value we gain from relationships, shared experiences, and community. Research, such as the CIPD Learning at Work (2023) Survey, highlights the importance, and resurgence, of networks. A widely reported estimate suggests that around three quarters of jobs

are filled through personal or professional connections and LinkedIn's Opportunity Index found that more than 70% of professionals are hired at companies where they already have a connection .

For graduates, much of that capital comes built in, through university networks, alumni groups, and professional societies. For employees in large organisations, it often develops organically through internal mentoring or cross-team collaboration.

But for apprentices, particularly those in small or mid-sized businesses, those networks can be incredibly limited. They may be the only apprentice in their organisation, juggling full-time work with study, without the social structures or professional communities that others take for granted.

That lack of connection doesn't reflect a lack of drive or capability; it's a design gap in the system.

I know that feeling well.

I began my own career as an apprentice and often felt like an outsider in professional spaces. I didn't have the same shorthand or shared experiences as my university-educated colleagues, and it took time to build confidence and find my footing. That shorthand covered everything from how to navigate meetings and professional language, to an implicit understanding of workplace expectations and career pathways. Without access to peers who shared similar starting points, I often felt I was learning these rules by trial and error rather than through guidance or support.

Years later, my network is one of my greatest assets. It's helped me navigate career change, step into senior leadership, and open doors that once felt closed. But that took years, and quite a bit of luck, to build.

For many apprentices, that journey could be much easier if networks were designed in, rather than left to chance.

WHY NETWORKS MATTER FOR APPRENTICESHIPS

A strong network gives apprentices more than professional advantage; it gives them belonging.

When apprentices connect with others at similar stages, they gain:

- **Peer support** that sustains motivation and resilience.
- **Role models** who show what success looks like in their field.
- **Mentors** who help them translate learning into career decisions.
- **Opportunities** to collaborate, learn, and grow beyond their immediate environment.

These aren't soft outcomes, they translate directly into performance, retention, and long-term Employability. These are real concerns for employers looking to realise the return on their investment. National completion rates have improved – rising to 60.5% in 2023–24, up from 54.3% the previous year, as recorded by the Department for Education , but still fall short of the Government's 67% target. Understanding the apprentice experience, and addressing the relational factors that influence whether individuals complete their apprenticeship or choose to leave before they achieve, is central to improving those outcomes.

Networks play a critical role in this because they act as stabilisers during the most vulnerable stages of an apprentice's journey. They provide safe spaces to ask questions that may feel difficult to raise with line managers, to share challenges before they escalate, and to learn from others who are navigating similar pressures. This kind of relational support can prevent small issues from becoming reasons to leave.

From an employer perspective, this matters because early exits are rarely driven by technical competence alone. More often, they stem from uncertainty, lack of confidence, or a weak sense of belonging. Networks help address these factors by reinforcing professional identity, building resilience, and making progression pathways feel visible and achievable. In doing so, they support not just completion, but longer-term workforce stability and internal progression.

Evidence from the Association of Apprentices' latest Impact Report (2024) reinforces this: the majority of members said the AoA network helps them feel more connected, part of something bigger, and less isolated. Four in five respondents reported increased confidence in their voice being heard, and 91% said they would return to another AoA event, clear signs that structured networks make a tangible difference to belonging and engagement

Research from the St Martin's Group reinforces this point. Its Apprenticeship Outcomes and Destinations report (2022), based on a large sample of non-completers, found that 31% of apprentices who left their programme said better support from their training provider – and 27% said support from their employer, including access to mentors and peer networks – would have encouraged them to stay. Structured, relational support isn't a 'nice to have'; it is a critical driver of completion and success.

That's why networks aren't just beneficial, they're essential infrastructure for a thriving apprenticeship system.

BUILDING THE NETWORK: THE ROLE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF APPRENTICES

The **Association of Apprentices (AoA)** was created to fill that gap, to give apprentices a community that connects them across employers, sectors, and geographies.

AoA provides a free, inclusive platform where apprentices can learn from each other, access personal and professional development, and find a sense of belonging that extends beyond

their workplace. Through online and in-person events, mentoring programmes, wellbeing support, short courses, and employer-led partnerships, it helps apprentices build the social capital that underpins success.

Crucially, it's not about replicating traditional 'old boys' networks, it's about creating something better: modern, diverse, and equitable.

Today the Association supports more than 50,000 members, a third of whom come from small to medium-sized employers. Its community is also notably diverse: around 30% identify as being from an ethnic minority background, 17% report having a disability or learning condition, and half live in the most disadvantaged areas of the country. These are groups who, nationally, remain at greater risk of leaving their apprenticeship early – making access to connection, support, and belonging even more critical.

Apprentices who join often describe it as the missing piece of their experience. They find confidence, connection, and a shared identity as part of a national community of peers. Employers, too, benefit: engaged apprentices stay longer, perform better, and represent their organisations more confidently.

But the Association's reach depends on collaboration. It's free to apprentices because it's supported by partners who share its mission. For the system to truly embed network access as part of the apprenticeship experience, we need more employers, providers, and policymakers to see the value in supporting it.

A COLLECTIVE EFFORT: EMBEDDING NETWORKS INTO EMPLOYABILITY PRACTICE

The Employability profession has always recognised that success isn't only about skills, it's about relationships and opportunity. Building networks for apprentices is an extension of that principle.

So how do we make it happen?

- Employers can embed time for community participation into working hours, promote membership of professional networks, and encourage apprentices to build relationships beyond their workplace.
- Training providers can integrate peer learning and mentoring as standard practice, not an add-on.
- Policymakers and sector bodies can recognise social capital as a legitimate outcome of high-quality apprenticeship delivery, one that drives equity and mobility.

In practice, this means treating connection as part of the Employability offer, not an optional extra. It might include giving apprentices protected time to engage in peer networks, embedding mentoring into programme design, or using insights from apprentice communities to inform onboarding and line management practice.

Over time, these approaches enable organisations to move from reactive retention strategies to proactive workforce development, grounded in a deeper understanding of the lived apprentice experience.

By investing in connection, we're not just helping individuals; we're strengthening the system itself. Networks foster engagement, improve outcomes, and create the sense of belonging that sustains lifelong Employability.

CONNECTED FUTURES

The future of work is increasingly about connection, across disciplines, sectors, and experiences. Apprenticeships are already reshaping how people learn and earn; we need to reshape how they connect.

By valuing networks as a fundamental part of the apprenticeship journey, we can build a system where everyone, regardless of background or employer size, has access to the same relational advantage.

Because when people feel they belong, they stay, they grow, and they thrive.

And that's not just good for apprentices – it's good for everyone.

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BOOK REVIEW:
UNTAPPED TALENT: HOW SECOND CHANCE HIRING WORKS FOR YOUR BUSINESS AND THE COMMUNITY

BY JEFFREY D. KORZENIK | HARPERCOLLINS LEADERSHIP, 2021

Reviewed by Roger Chapman FIEP
Guest Editor: IEP Journal 16 and Head of Service Delivery, the matrix Standard

Timely Call to Action In Untapped Talent, Jeffrey D. Korzenik delivers a compelling and evidence-based case for second chance hiring, demonstrating how employing individuals with criminal records can benefit businesses and communities alike.

It's a transformative approach, and he sets out why second chance hiring is best for both businesses and communities alike.

Written by the Chief Investment Strategist of one of the United States' largest banks, the book is both pragmatic and visionary, offering a blueprint for inclusive employment that resonates far beyond American borders.

For Employability professionals, Korzenik's insights offer a rich seam of reflection and practical application, especially in light of ongoing efforts to reduce reoffending, promote social mobility, and address labour market shortages.

KEY THEMES FOR EMPLOYABILITY PROFESSIONALS

1. **Reframing the Narrative Around Criminal Records**

Korzenik challenges the stigma surrounding individuals with criminal histories, arguing that many are highly talented, reliable, and eager to work. He urges employers to look beyond the label and assess the individual's potential, not their past. For Employability professionals, this means advocating for a shift in mindset, both within organisations and among clients, towards rehabilitation and reintegration.

This goes further than initiatives such as Ban the Box (to remove criminal record question from initial applications)] and the UK Ministry of Justice's efforts to support ex-offenders into employment. He advocates employers should be actively seeking to hire from this group!

2. **The Business Case for Second Chance Hiring**

Korzenik is unapologetically commercial in his approach. He presents second chance hiring not as charity, but as a strategic advantage. In the Chapter 'Success is not Random' he presents complex data in easy-to-understand charts that demonstrate how second chance hires outperform traditional hires providing lower turnover, higher employee loyalty, and improved productivity. Case studies, from manufacturing firms to service industries, illustrate how second chance employees can become some of the most engaged and productive team members.

For Employability professionals working with employers, this is a crucial takeaway: second chance hiring is not just socially responsible – it's economically smart. Framing

it this way can help overcome resistance and open doors to new partnerships.

3. **Infrastructure and Support Systems**

Korzenik emphasises that successful second chance hiring requires robust internal support and collaboration with external agencies. This includes onboarding strategies, coaching, and access to mental health and addiction services. He is realistic about the challenges, noting that not every candidate with a criminal record is ready for employment, and some may need additional support to succeed.

Employability professionals should reflect on how well their programmes support sustained employment, not just job placement. Are all the necessary wraparound services in place? Is there ongoing mentoring? These questions are central to the book's ethos.

4. **Understanding the Criminal Justice Context**

Korzenik provides a primer on the US criminal justice system to help employers understand the barriers faced by second chance candidates. While the specifics differ, the principle holds true in the UK and elsewhere that Employability professionals must advocate for ex-offenders understanding the psychological impact of imprisonment, release, and the surrounding conditions.

Incorporating justice literacy into staff training and client engagement can empower Employability professionals to navigate complex cases with confidence and compassion.

5. **Ethical Leadership and Social Impact**

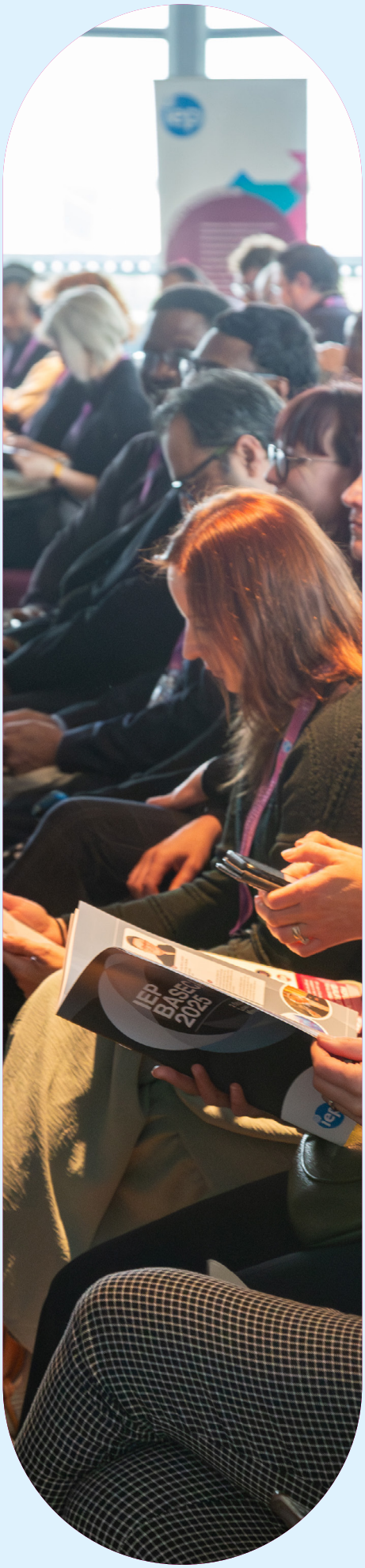
Perhaps most powerfully, Korzenik positions second chance hiring as a moral imperative. He argues that businesses have a role to play in addressing systemic injustice, reducing reoffending, and breaking cycles of poverty. This is not just about giving someone a job; it's about restoring dignity and opportunity.

For Employability professionals, this theme invites deeper reflection. How does our work contribute to a fairer society? Are we challenging inequality or perpetuating it? Korzenik's book is a reminder that Employability is not just a technical field, it's a profoundly ethical one.

CONCLUSION: A MUST-READ FOR THOSE THAT WANT TO CHANGE BUSINESS AND SOCIETY

Untapped Talent is a persuasive, practical, and deeply human book. It offers a path for second chance hiring that is as relevant to Manchester as it is to Milwaukee. I haven't come across any direct criticism of Korzenik's work, which will reassure many, including me. The book is clearly aimed at influencing business leaders and embraces an unapologetically optimistic, glass-half-full perspective, which means readers seeking a more adversarial or sceptical take on second chance hiring may find somewhat one-sided. That said, when you focus on the breadth of evidence presented, you may find yourself like me compelled to embrace this optimistic viewpoint. So, for Institute for Employability Professionals, I advocate Korzenik's work as required reading, not only for its insights, but for its challenge to do better.

Employability professionals are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between identifying talent and employment opportunities, embracing the principles outlined in this book, you can help build a labour market that is inclusive, more resilient, innovative, and just!



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THANK YOU

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Sincerely,
Head of the Centre for Employability Excellence

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