Case study report
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Steps Ahead Mentoring
Supporting young jobseekers into employment: those involved share their stories

Supported by:
Nesta
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Steps Ahead Mentoring is a free mentoring programme designed to help young people in their job search. The programme is run by the CIPD, the professional body for HR and people development, with support from Nesta and the Cabinet Office via the Centre for Social Action Innovation Fund.
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Since we launched our Steps Ahead Mentoring programme as a pilot just over three years ago, CIPD members have supported hundreds of young jobseekers into work. Young people like Bathseba, who was struggling to find a job, ‘in spite of over five years of relevant experience’, or Tim, who describes how ‘when you’re unemployed for a while you feel very negative – you look at job descriptions and think about the things you can’t do and forget the things you can’. Fortunately for Tim and Bathsheba, and the other four young people who share their stories with us here, the support they received via the programme has led to them not only finding a job, but starting out in a career.

Over the last 12 months employment levels have begun to improve, but youth unemployment has been a persistent issue, a structural problem that began well before the economic downturn that followed the 2008 economic crisis. CIPD research into recruitment has uncovered some recurring themes in terms of what employers highlight as the main challenges for younger candidates. A key issue that emerges time and again is that young people often lack confidence and understanding of what employers are looking for. As Samayra explains, ‘[I] had been told that I hadn’t been selling myself well enough.’ Lots of young people are in her position; this not only hinders their chances of finding a job but also means that employers struggle to tap into the talent they need.

We believe that the CIPD and its members have a key role to play in helping jobseekers to overcome these challenges. One way to bridge that gap is to encourage those working in HR, who hold responsibility for the recruitment of new staff, to volunteer with young jobseekers to help enlighten them about what employers look for. This was the driving force behind establishing Steps Ahead Mentoring, a free programme, run by the CIPD, which draws on our membership network of 130,000 HR professionals. Young people who take part in the programme receive an average of six one-to-one mentoring sessions with a volunteer, who not only helps them with their CV, application forms and interview preparation, but in many cases helps them start out in a career, not just to find a job.

We know the programme is working. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of young people who have completed the Steps Ahead Mentoring programme have gone on to find employment or work experience. Including Louie, who is ‘now working as a copywriter at one of the top ten design agencies in the UK’, or Madia, whose mentor helped her ‘realise that I could achieve my potential – that I was bright and doing all the right things’. But it’s not just the young people involved in the programme who benefit.

A recent survey of mentors found that eight in every ten of those who took part found the experience to be a rewarding one and six of those mentors have shared their stories with us here. Not only does it feel good to help others and see the young people go on to find employment, but it also contributes to professional development by enhancing coaching and mentoring.
skills. Many mentors, including Simon, who shares his experience in this report, also describe how mentoring has helped to give ‘a far better understanding of the work challenges faced by young people’. This increased understanding amongst the profession contributes to the CIPD’s vision to champion better work and working lives, which starts with young people being able to access the labour market.

To date, over 2,200 of our members have signed up as Steps Ahead Mentors, who together have contributed thousands of hours to help tackle youth unemployment. The desire to offer their skills to young jobseekers is a major influence, and 90% of mentors we surveyed described this as being one of their main motivating factors for volunteering for the programme. And, as Barry Hoffman, a mentor and CIPD board member, explains, ‘it’s one of the few things in your working life that you do because you want to, not because you have to’.

We have also worked hard to develop links with Jobcentre Plus, currently our main referral partner, and as a result the programme now operates across all 570 Jobcentre Plus offices in England. Jobcentre Plus area representatives from the south-west of England and south London also share their perspective here, along with CIPD branch representatives who have been crucial in helping us to expand across the whole of England. Pilots of the programme are also now under way in Scotland and Wales and we have big plans for the future of the programme, which has been given an extra boost due to support from Nesta and the Cabinet Office via the Centre for Social Action Innovation Fund. Watch this space!

CIPD Learning to Work

The Learning to Work programme is led by the CIPD to promote the role of employers in reducing youth unemployment. The CIPD’s purpose is to champion better work and working lives, which starts with young people being able to access the labour market.

A key aim of the programme is to promote the business case for investing in the future workforce. We encourage HR professionals to offer a wide range of access routes into their organisations and ensure their recruitment and management practices are youth-friendly. We also promote direct contact with young people via two youth volunteering programmes, Steps Ahead Mentoring and Inspiring the Future.

cipd.co.uk/learningtowork
Many of the young people who have taken part in the Steps Ahead Mentoring programme tell us that their confidence grew as a result of being involved. Madia and Bathsheba are two young women who had previous work experience but wanted to move away from just taking any job to starting out in a career. For them, hearing from someone who has been on the other side of the recruitment process gives them unique insight that their families, friends and work coaches cannot provide.

Madia

After I finished school, I started college but wasn’t able to finish my course for personal reasons. I’d been working part-time in retail until then, so I went full-time, working at the likes of Gap and Next. Pretty soon, though, I realised that just wasn’t what I wanted. I started to look around for admin jobs, but no one wanted to employ me – I just didn’t have the experience.

I signed on at the local Jobcentre and found an Apprenticeship in customer service and business administration. For a year, I was working for a services company, got some experience and the equivalent of two A-levels, but then decided I wanted to work in financial services. Naively, I left my job again, thinking it would be really easy to get another.

Five months later, I was still unemployed. It really hurt to get that same feedback again – ‘you need more experience’ – from every employer. I couldn’t get the experience without a job and I started to believe I would never get another one.

I was offered more work experience at the Jobcentre itself and that’s how I found out about Steps Ahead Mentoring. Someone handed me a leaflet and told me that I’d be mentored by HR professionals and that it could help me get a job. So of course I went for it.

My mentor was Joseph. He was everything I’d hoped for – I only wish I’d met him earlier. I realised that while advice from family and friends is good, getting it from an experienced HR professional is in a different league. Joseph got in touch by email, followed by a half-hour phone call and then we met over a period of three months.

The main thing I took from Joseph was confidence. He made me realise that I could achieve my potential – that I was bright and doing all the right things. I’d been through a lot, but he reminded me that that didn’t have to affect my future. I told him I wanted to get into financial services – and insurance specifically. So we created an action plan together and he told me to research my dream job and the steps I needed to get there.

I saw that I needed to go and speak to employers and not just write to them. So Joseph started to take me to networking events and speak to people about what I wanted to do, including some directors from the financial sector. That really helped my confidence and now any chance I get to go to events, I’ll be the first one there. We also worked on interviewing skills – I don’t think people realise how important that is. I now have a job which is helping me get vital skills and experience at work and I feel that my plan of action will work. And when I’m older I hope I can help someone in the way Joseph helped me.

I

‘Getting advice from an experienced HR professional is in a different league.’

Madia, Campaign Co-ordinator, Talent and Skills, Business in the Community
Bathsheba

In spite of over five years of relevant experience, I had been really struggling to get work. My work coach said that I should apply for jobs that required the university degree I had. I did that, but I just wasn’t getting any success. So I also applied for all sorts of other jobs – including factory, admin and cleaning roles – but I kept getting told that I was overqualified. I’d also done plenty of admin work in the past but this wasn’t paid and I was also being told that I just didn’t have the necessary experience. I felt very down about it all.

I was told about Steps Ahead Mentoring by my work coach in June. Ultimately, I had very little to lose, so I bit the bullet and gave it a go. About a week later I was assigned my mentor, a lady called Sally. She’d worked in HR and now had her own recruitment business. It was a real privilege to work with her. When we spoke, I noticed that she didn’t start by asking me about the specifics of my situation – instead she just asked about me as a person. She saw very early that the biggest challenge to my getting a job was probably my self-confidence. She wanted to know firstly how I felt in myself and, although we were talking for the first time, her approach felt very human. Sally helped me to feel supported when I really needed it. It’s not that I wasn’t supported by others – I was – but this was support that could make a difference.

We had about four or five really important phone conversations. Firstly, we looked at my CV. Sally said that although she found it difficult to understand why I hadn’t been more successful, I did have a tendency to downplay my achievements. For example, I had written very little about my communication skills, so she probed this in depth. I remembered that I’d worked on a film crew around an event, which had involved communicating with lots of other people to keep the project on track. Sally reminded me that while I may downplay my achievements, those who also wanted the jobs I wanted would be doing the opposite.

Sally then asked me to let her know about any upcoming interviews, so that she could guide me through the process. In fact, I had a job interview scheduled in three days’ time, so we had to get down to working on this straight away. I had two interviews by mid-July, the second of which resulted in my current job here in a factory. This time it’s paid work and a solid building block for me. In fact, I’ve just been given a pay rise, so things are starting to look a lot better.

’Sally helped me to feel supported, just when I needed it.’

Bathsheba, Administrative Assistant and Factory Worker, Sun Cottage Wholefoods
The story of Sara and the young person she mentored, Samayra, highlights the mutual benefits to be gained as a result of the Steps Ahead Mentoring programme. While Samayra gained a valuable work placement, Sara, who looks at hard-to-fill vacancies as part of her job, found the experience helped broaden her understanding of the key issues facing many young people as they start out looking for work. Although the initial mentoring period has finished, Sara has chosen to continue to support Samayra remotely as she takes her next steps into permanent employment.

Sara

My business involves using technology to tackle hard-to-fill vacancies and I also work as an HR consultant. I went on to the CIPD website earlier this year, read about Steps Ahead Mentoring and I really wanted to do something to help. Given my background in both recruitment and HR, I felt well placed – and I’d also trained as both a mentor and a coach.

I had a few reservations at first. I would have to mentor remotely and wondered whether this would work effectively. My first mentee was Sam and she was based in Manchester. We decided to use Skype and as it turned out it worked brilliantly for us. We could at least see each other, something which proved very important later on.

When Sam went for the interview, I texted her to wish her good luck – and told her ‘You can do it!’ When she found out she’d got the placement, she phoned me up, screaming with excitement! The happiness Sam felt at that moment made it all worthwhile for me.

Sam’s placement has finished now and even though I’m now also mentoring someone else, I’m still mentoring her too because I want to. The experience has really put me in touch with what it’s like to be young and unemployed today. It’s broadened my understanding – I can see a disconnect between the worlds of education and employment. I think part of the answer is to get businesses into schools earlier and give young people a better insight into the world of work when they do get opportunities for experience.

Mutual benefits

The story of Sara and the young person she mentored, Samayra, highlights the mutual benefits to be gained as a result of the Steps Ahead Mentoring programme. While Samayra gained a valuable work placement, Sara, who looks at hard-to-fill vacancies as part of her job, found the experience helped broaden her understanding of the key issues facing many young people as they start out looking for work. Although the initial mentoring period has finished, Sara has chosen to continue to support Samayra remotely as she takes her next steps into permanent employment.

I wanted to be very clear with Sam about what we were trying to achieve. I told her that I would help her get a job, because it was really important to give her confidence. I can see how you can lose confidence if you can’t find work – it’s a really difficult situation for any young person to be in. So I wanted to be positive about what could be done, while remaining objective about how it could be achieved.
Like many other young people, I hadn’t had much experience of employment. I had found it difficult to get a job – I didn’t have enough experience and had also been told that I hadn’t been selling myself well enough. I was a part-time student applying originally for jobs in retail, but I don’t think I had the passion for it. What I really wanted though was to get a job as an HR administrator. But I found it very difficult to get any opportunities, so I did voluntary work to pick up skills and experiences and to help me feel more confident in dealing with different types of people.

My jobs work coach suggested I look at Steps Ahead Mentoring. I already knew all about the CIPD from my research into HR, so I went straight to their website and applied. My mentor was Sara – and it turned out that she not only had her own business in recruitment but also worked as an HR consultant. She was exactly the person I needed to speak to – I felt that being put in touch with her was just meant to be.

We had our first conversation at the beginning of June. We got to know each other a little and made a plan. She started to help me with my CV, developed my interview skills and generally encouraged me to be positive and apply for some relevant roles. She said I never knew what might happen.

Very quickly, I had an interview for a two-month placement in Stockport as an HR administrator. I’d applied for it on a Thursday and then was called for an interview scheduled for the following Monday. So Sara quickly helped me on all the questions I could get asked – and even what I should wear. A couple of days after the interview, I got a voicemail from their headquarters. I thought it would just be feedback to help me for the future, but they had rung to offer me the placement. This was a big achievement for me and when I phoned Sara, I went crazy with joy.

I can say that Steps Ahead Mentoring turned my life around. It gave me my first role as an HR administrator. I was sad when the placement had to come to an end, but knew that I had got so much valuable experience out of it that it would really help me in the months ahead.

Now I realise that you need to build up your skills to get a job. Sara is still mentoring me now and I’m really happy she’s on my side.

‘[Sara] was exactly the person I needed to speak to – I felt that being put in touch with her was just meant to be.’

Samayra
Simon

My professional role is to develop a pipeline of young talent. This fits very well with the purpose of Steps Ahead Mentoring, but I also have a very strong personal motivation. When I graduated, I was unemployed for nine months. At the time, I had no clear advice on what to do about my situation. I would have benefited from someone giving me informal help back then, so as soon as I found out about the programme, I jumped at the chance to get involved.

Before my work with Steps Ahead Mentoring began, I wondered whether I would see strong enough motivation in the young mentees coming my way. But the programme is voluntary and it quickly became obvious that there was no shortage of enthusiasm. I’ve had six mentees through the programme so far. I prefer to meet them in person as it helps to break down barriers.

I reassure mentees at the start that I’m a little bit nervous too and that while I can’t ‘magic’ them up a job, I can help them to get a better level of understanding and confidence around how to go about it.

You cannot assume that mentees are aware of how to get the information they need to help them in their job search. And they also need help to understand what it is that a hiring manager is looking for. I mentored one graduate and spent several weeks helping him build his CV, before beginning a mock telephone interview. He then suddenly started telling me – for the first time – about his highly successful period of entrepreneurship as a student, during which he’d manufactured and supplied t-shirts to a couple of well-known high street brands. I stopped him mid-interview and said: ‘This is news to me – why didn’t you tell me this before?’ He hadn’t really understood how important and relevant this could be for an employer. It’s so easy for young people to understate their own successes – you have to remember that their self-esteem has been badly damaged by their experience of not being able to get the job. So a mentor has a crucial role in rebuilding confidence.

Mentoring gives me a far better understanding of the work challenges faced by young people. It’s also taught me a lot about the potential of all young talent – we have to make sure that those who don’t get jobs immediately are helped as much as possible to realise theirs.

Youth unemployment ultimately affects us all. Young people need our help – and HR is in a great position to give it.

‘Young people need our help – and HR is in a great position to give it.’

Simon Collins, Future Talent Development Manager, Caterpillar
Katie

I’d done a fair amount of mentoring in the past – although mostly within the HR profession – and I’d also benefited in recent years from being mentored. When I heard about Steps Ahead Mentoring and its emphasis on helping young people, I felt very passionate about getting involved. With little guidance, I’d had to work very hard to gain a foothold in education and work earlier in my life – and I feel we can sometimes make it very difficult for young people to make the transition into employment.

My first mentee, Sophie, had studied art at the University of West England (UWE) in Bristol. She’d finished her degree a year ago and had been drifting between jobs in cafes and bars since. She wanted to work in arts-related events management but wasn’t sure how to move this forward.

What did Sophie need? The first thing was for her to ‘hold the mirror up’ – she is a really bright young lady who needed to be reminded how good she is. Doing this enabled her to think about all the things she’d done in three very busy years at university and since. Our early sessions looked at pulling together a CV that better reflected this. She had helped to set up a successful exhibition, for example, something that hadn’t come through at all on paper. By beginning to think about what she had already done, she started the process of rebuilding her confidence.

I asked her to research her dream job – this might not be the next job she went for but would help her see which skills were missing and keep her moving forward. It’s worth emphasising that Sophie was doing all the hard work here – she went away and thought quite deeply about what she was trying to do. My role was simply to give her tools to help her, with a few prompts along the way.

We also discussed relevant volunteering that she could do to gain some of that missing experience and develop new skills. Then one day Sophie told me she had an interview coming up. So I did a mock phone interview with her and got to ask her those horrible interview questions HR professionals know all about! More seriously, it allowed her a safe environment to experiment with the ways to answer them while bringing out her key strengths.

Following a successful interview, at the end of September, Sophie started volunteering at Hamilton House, a creative space for exhibitions, art and music in the local community. The message I had from her recently was that her experience there was really starting to pay off and we have a final session coming up soon. She seems to be well embedded there so it’s just a question now of checking in on her progress.

I did wonder whether meeting younger people, with little background knowledge on them beforehand, would be really difficult. Would there be a generation gap for instance? In fact, I found that helping her also really helped me in my understanding – and it’s incredibly rewarding watching somebody blossom in front of you. I’m proud to have been a witness to her development.
Helping graduates

Although the programme is open and available to young jobseekers with a range of educational backgrounds, one of the surprising results of Steps Ahead Mentoring has been the number of young jobseekers who come on to the programme after graduating from university. Despite their academic success, insufficient careers advice and a lack of awareness about how to talk about their experience in job applications and interviews mean that too many young people face unemployment after leaving university. This was the experience of Louie and Tim, who, with support from their mentors, are both now in employment.

Both of these examples also highlight how specific sector experience is not an essential aspect to the mentoring relationship. Both Louie and Tim had a clear idea of the field of work they wanted to go into when they started the programme and were initially sceptical about what an HR professional, who did not work in their chosen sectors, could offer them. However, in both cases their mentors were able to help them translate their experience onto paper and raise their confidence so they were better prepared for the recruitment process for jobs in their chosen fields.

Louie

I graduated last year from Lancaster University with a degree in English and creative writing. To start with, things were looking good for me. I got an internship in copywriting, design and advertising. And after that, I found other bits and pieces of work. I moved to London to find more opportunities – but pretty soon found myself signing on instead. I applied for jobs, but hardly ever got feedback. I was on every job site, going for unpaid internships, but everything I tried seemed to be trailing off into nothingness.

I spent about six months at the Jobcentre in total. After the first three, I was told about Steps Ahead Mentoring. To be honest, I was pretty sceptical, but I had plenty of free time and it was voluntary. In the end I thought: ‘I’ve just got to get out of this rut. What have I got to lose?’ At the Jobcentre, I’d been seeing a different person every week. The first thing that I noticed though about Steps Ahead Mentoring was the benefit of seeing my mentor, Hayley, on a regular basis. We had about eight to ten sessions and at the start I felt I did most of the talking. Looking back, I realise I was venting a lot of the frustration I felt.

Hayley had no experience of my sector, but she knew so much about presentation skills. This was really important for me – in copywriting you have to have the confidence to present your own work, but it was something I’d never done. To have a mock interview was tough but more helpful than I could have imagined. Hayley told me I was doing lots of little things, like fidgeting with my pen, that were distracting her from what I was trying to get across.

We looked over my CV. Hayley was very vocal on what makes a good one – she said that 70% of it was good, but it was the other 30% that I needed to work on to get me to the top of the pile. To help me, she asked me those open-ended ‘could you expand on that placement, Louie?’ and ‘What are you most proud of?’ questions. This meant putting down more about the skills and value I had brought to projects. I had a good body of work under my belt – and now I needed to make sure that employers knew all about it.

I began to feel more confident in talking about myself and when I applied for one vacancy, my newfound skills gave me an edge. I’m now working as a copywriter at one of the top ten design agencies in the UK – and I only recently discovered that I’d been up against 50–60 others for the position. After a trial period there, I also found out in the last few days that I’ve been taken on permanently.

My job is to help clients find a consistent voice. In the same way, I think I’ve now found my own.

‘To have a mock interview was tough, but more helpful than I could have imagined.’

Louie, Junior Copywriter, Moving Brands
I left the University of Kent back in 2012 and wanted to get a job in theatre production. I thought it would be easy, but it wasn’t. I was unemployed for nine months, followed by a year in an NHS admin role. Finally, I got an internship in a theatre company for six months. That was great, but when it came to an end, I had a second spell on the dole. This time it felt far worse, because I’d already had a taste of what I wanted to do. I was at rock bottom and ready to give up on my dream.

At this point, the Jobcentre introduced me to Steps Ahead Mentoring. I initially had a slight doubt about it – my mentor, Keeley, was a project manager at a major bank, a sector about as far removed from my world as it’s possible to get. I couldn’t have been more wrong though: Keeley’s distance from the world of theatre proved a major advantage, because she could be completely objective in a way that others in my profession arguably wouldn’t have been.

Keeley created a very relaxed atmosphere from the off. We met and got to know each other. She talked about her background first, which put me at ease straight away, before asking me about mine. Later on, Keeley told me that she’d noticed straight away that I was lacking confidence – and made working on this with me her major challenge. She also brought out strengths in me that I’d forgotten I had. For example, I’d previously been director of my own theatre company – it hadn’t really made money but we had done professional shows in London. Keeley was really surprised, not least because my CV suggested I’d been an employee there, rather than the entrepreneur!

When you’re unemployed for a while you feel very negative – you look at job descriptions and think about the things you can’t do and forget the things you can. The most important thing Keeley did for me therefore was to change my mindset. This showed in the way I got my current job as an artistic programmer in Llandudno. I initially felt the role was a bit ‘above me’ but, with Keeley’s encouragement, I applied and focused on what I could bring.

My application was followed quickly by an interview panel and a presentation. When I came out, I felt that if I didn’t get the job I would still be happy – I’d given a cracking interview and presentation and couldn’t have done anything more. As it turned out, they phoned me within half an hour of my interview to offer me the job! And even now, Keeley has invited me to keep in touch on the new challenges I face as I embark on my initial six-month probation period. She’s been so helpful and supportive.

‘Keeley brought out strengths in me I’d forgotten I had.’

Tim, Artistic Programmer, Venue Cymru
In many respects, the simplicity of the Steps Ahead Mentoring programme is what makes it so effective. By sharing the insight and knowledge they have gained via their professional training and HR experience, CIPD members are able to turn around the lives of many young people in a short space of time. Nathaniel is one such example; his mentor Charlotte helped him transform his CV and prepare for interviews, which resulted in him getting a job after being unemployed for eight months. As Barry Hoffman, a mentor in London and CIPD board member, explains, often it is these simple pointers that can make all the difference.

Nathaniel
I left school once I’d completed my GCSEs and then went to college for a further three years. After that, I started looking around for opportunities. I found a work placement and then other temporary work. But once that ended, I was unemployed for eight months.

That period was a really hard slog. My work coach at Jobcentre Plus was very kind and kept me motivated, but in truth I wasn’t really moving forwards. I knew I needed in-depth employment advice – it had become my number one priority.

Fortunately, Steps Ahead Mentoring entered my life at that time. The work coach mentioned it amongst several other programmes and I sensed it could be the right thing for me. I had no misgivings about doing it, more a feeling of excitement that I could get some really great help. I was particularly keen when I heard that the mentors were all experienced in HR and recruitment.

My mentor was Charlotte. She lived in Reading and I lived in Swindon. That was quite a distance for me to travel and, although it would have been good to meet up, it didn’t prove necessary in our case. Instead, we had lots of email and phone conversations. These were both informal and incredibly helpful. For example, on covering letters for jobs, it felt great that Charlotte was there as a person I could call on for advice when I needed her.

What stood out for me was that Charlotte had all sorts of knowledge and experience. The advice she gave on my CV was amazing and, it proved, very necessary. What really surprised me was how much Charlotte was able to improve it: I had a one-page CV that somehow she helped me to convert into a much better two-pager. She suggested I took out some parts completely and instead focus on particular experiences and how they benefited me in a way that employers could understand. She also gave me a clear insight into the sorts of things they needed to know about at an interview.

Last October, I managed to get a job locally at Morrisons. The Jobcentre Plus gave me a leaflet about the opportunities available there and so I filled out the application form. The next thing I knew I was doing a group exercise along with other candidates, followed by a formal interview, then an induction period and further training.

‘I knew I needed in-depth employment advice – it had become my number one priority.’
Nathaniel, Shop Assistant, Morrisons
Barry

I’ve always had good experiences of being mentored during my career. I never relied on one single person for advice, but looked for people who could help me in specific areas. I decided I really wanted to give something back and volunteered for Steps Ahead Mentoring after hearing Boris Johnson talking about it at a recent CIPD event.

I’m on my second mentee now. The first, Michael, had applied for lots of roles but wasn’t really properly prepared for the interviews he faced. We started by chatting about what he liked doing – it turned out he was a very good musician. So I asked him how he approached gigs. He told me how he and his band took a lot of time to rehearse properly and how he liked to adopt a persona when performing on stage. By talking about it in this way, Michael then had a ‘light bulb moment’ on applying this to interviews. Although we could have talked again, we didn’t actually need to, because after that he got an interview, quickly followed by a job!

I’m currently working with Mustafa. I’ve met him once so far and we’ll probably meet a few more times. He’s a very bright young man who wants my help with his employability, and in turn I’ve learned something very valuable from him. He happens to be a devout Muslim and talking to him has brought home to me how HR needs to handle diversity issues with the greatest sensitivity to help promising young people like Mustafa achieve their potential.

My experiences to date also tell me that mentoring doesn’t need to mean an intense relationship. It requires relatively small but significant injections of expertise and guidance to help a mentee get a clear perspective on the way ahead. I did have a few worries around this beforehand. I spend a lot of my time working abroad and wondered whether mentoring would fit with this, but it’s actually a fairly small investment of your time, as well as being a great way to share your experience and develop your own understanding.

Think about it another way: it’s one of the few things in your working life that you do because you want to, not because you have to. Much of what we all do is part of a routine or for compliance reasons. Mentoring is different – it means helping someone establish themselves on their career and life path. You have a chance to make a real contribution and difference to someone and that is immensely rewarding.

‘Mentoring requires relatively small but significant injections of expertise and guidance.’

Barry Hoffman, Group HR Director, Computacenter, and CIPD board member
As the main referral partner for Steps Ahead Mentoring, the programme would not have had the success it has had to date without the support of Jobcentre Plus. We have worked with a national network of 39 lead contacts who have helped to roll out and promote the programme across all 570 Jobcentre Plus offices in England. The key selling point for Jobcentre Plus officials and the work coaches who work face to face with young jobseekers is that the programme gives young people a unique opportunity to hear from those that recruit. Jobcentre Plus staff members Nicky Keast, based in the south-west of England, and Jo Gadian, working in south London, also rate the independent and voluntary nature of the programme, which they see as helping to contribute to its credibility. Jo’s support and efforts to promote Steps Ahead Mentoring to the work coaches in her area has resulted in south London being a major success story for the programme, with 150 young people supported since it launched there in June 2014.

Nicky

A key part of my job is to look at all the initiatives attempting to tackle youth unemployment. Steps Ahead Mentoring is one of these and we’re getting positive and enthusiastic feedback about it from our work coaches.

It’s really important for our team here to have a programme that’s easy to refer on to young people – and with this programme the latter can simply register voluntarily via an online portal. The thinking behind the programme has also been well received. Here at Jobcentre Plus, of course, we can help job candidates with many parts of the job-seeking process, but it is extremely helpful to be able to access the understanding, skills and experience of independent HR professionals as mentors.

Young people really need to be able to talk to someone at the forefront of recruitment to truly understand how to get that first step into the labour market. This is because for many mentees, getting a job is largely about gaining confidence. You could be the cleverest and most talented young person in the world, but if you don’t have confidence, you can’t step up and make the most of your capabilities.

Steps Ahead Mentoring, though, is not just about harnessing the skills and experience of HR professionals. The mentors themselves are also inspiring me personally with their enthusiasm – I would have loved to have had someone like them helping me in my career! And one of them recently told me she, too, is developing her skills and learning really good ways to engage with jobseekers, for example by giving the latter clear tasks and deadlines to keep the mentoring process moving on quickly.

It is fair to say that there’s a whole raft of employment initiatives that we could refer on to those looking for a job. It’s very easy for many programmes to fall by the wayside if they don’t quickly prove their worth. In this respect as well, Steps Ahead Mentoring is good because it provides weekly feedback on stats such as the number of people starting the programmes, along with the good news stories that you need to keep up interest and momentum in any programme.

It’s great to see mentors coming forward for Steps Ahead Mentoring. Those that do will get something back from it beyond a great sense of pride. It also helps them understand what it’s like to be a young person looking for work – and so perhaps how to shape their own youth recruitment policies as a result. It’s a great chance to have a positive impact on a young person’s life and career.

‘Young people really need to be able to talk to those at the forefront of recruitment.’

Nicky Keast, Devon, Cornwall and Somerset District Youth Contract Co-ordinator, Jobcentre Plus
Over the past couple of years, the number of unemployed 18–24-year-olds has dropped significantly and we have been working really hard with young people to help them into the world of work. Steps Ahead Mentoring has been particularly helpful to young jobseekers who have A-levels or who are graduates and have specific barriers to securing a job.

Even those with degrees or great A-level results are often unable to get into work as quickly as they hoped. There can be a variety of reasons for this: sometimes they need extra help with their interview skills, with tailoring their applications for different types of employers or in managing their expectations of their career and what is involved in gaining a good job.

Our work coaches have used a lot of different ways to support young people into work in the last few years and it is easy for many of the programmes and initiatives available to be overlooked. One thing that has made Steps Ahead Mentoring stand out for us is its credibility. The mentors are far more than decent people who want to help out – they are HR professionals who know first-hand what it is that their organisations look for when recruiting young people.

This has tremendous kudos and clout: it really helps work coaches have confidence that the Steps Ahead mentors give ‘real-life’ advice to young people in a way that perhaps their parents or tutors cannot. The mentors can help in lots of ways but, in my experience, they probably help jobseekers most through the development of their interview skills. There are plenty of formulaic programmes and courses for interview skills, but to have an HR professional giving a young jobseeker a personalised mock interview is immensely powerful.

Steps Ahead Mentoring has been phenomenally successful in south London and we think it is a great partnership between mentors and our work coaches. The jobseekers really benefit, not least from a more mature partnership with somebody in a professional position. It’s also a voluntary process that gives young people a measure of control around the timing, frequency and nature of how this dialogue takes place and therefore encourages them to take responsibility for their own progression.

For mentors, Steps Ahead Mentoring is a fantastic opportunity to make a positive impact on a young person in a way that they might not be able to achieve within their own organisation. It is also a great chance for development in another way: the higher up the management ladder a mentor climbs, the more important it becomes to stay in touch with the employment challenges facing those entering the world of work for the first time.

‘One thing that has made Steps Ahead Mentoring stand out for us is its credibility.’

Jo Gadian, Employer Engagement Manager, South London District, DWP
The CIPD network of 54 regional branches adds an important dimension to the programme and in a number of areas the support of local branch representatives has been invaluable in helping us to increase the reach and popularity of Steps Ahead Mentoring amongst CIPD members. When the programme was extended across England in 2014 we were able to join forces with a number of branches to host regional launch events in Manchester, Newcastle, Northampton, Bristol and Plymouth. We also had the backing of all seven London branch chairs, who helped us launch Steps Ahead with Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, at a fantastic event held at City Hall in June 2014.

As we look to the next stage of the programme and expansion across the rest of the UK, the support of branch representatives such as Keith Watson, Chair of the South East Scotland Branch, is crucial. Keith helped to support the launch of the Scotland pilot in October 2014, and in less than four months mentors have supported dozens of young jobseekers. Keith believes the programme is a great way for HR professionals to connect with what is going on in the current job market, a view shared by Elouise Leonard-Cross, Chair of the North East of England Branch. Elouise, like a number of our volunteers, is able to balance her role as a mentor alongside her branch committee responsibilities and has already supported three young people, all of whom demonstrated a positive attitude and a desire to work.
Keith Watson, Chair, CIPD South East Scotland Branch, and responsible for Employment and HR Regulatory Affairs at the Royal Bank of Scotland

Most of our CIPD branch members are really busy people. For example, I wear several hats in my working life: I work in financial services on employment and HR regulatory issues; I’m a part-time CIPD tutor; and I’m a member of a Scottish employment tribunal. So when time is short, it’s really important to be clear with our members how any new initiative would work. Therefore, the big appeal to us of Steps Ahead Mentoring was that it gave us a ready-packaged, simple and clear way to help a community of young people.

We held a launch event in October. It gave us a chance to explain to our members, in one go, the way Steps Ahead Mentoring is organised, how it would work alongside Jobcentre Plus and, of course, how mentoring would help the young people themselves. The idea of HR helping out jobseekers beyond their own profession quickly struck a chord with those who attended the launch.

There is a tendency in HR towards an over-complication of processes with labels and jargon. You can dress up mentoring in any way you want, but, in truth, it’s really very simple. All of us have been involved in mentoring in one way with family or friends since we were young. Ultimately it comes down to a sharing of experiences for the common good: and in this case, the good of young people who can benefit from the invaluable know-how an HR professional can bring.

All those who volunteer to mentor obviously do so within their own personal time constraints. But there are very few of us who can honestly say they are so busy that they can’t spare a small handful of hours each month to do it. The CIPD vision is ‘Championing better work and working lives’ and I hope all members will see Steps Ahead Mentoring as a tremendous opportunity to do exactly that.
Elouise

As CIPD chair for our region, I had the privilege of being aware of Steps Ahead Mentoring a little earlier than most HR professionals. And it immediately struck a chord for me – parts of the north-east have the highest youth unemployment rates in the country, with multiple generations without work for some families.

‘Somebody invested in you earlier in your career. This is a great opportunity to repay the favour.’

Elouise Leonard-Cross, Chair, North East of England CIPD Branch, and Head of OD and Learning, Home Group

I knew that there would be great interest within the region – and one of our local members stepped forward to really help the programme flourish here. We held a big regional event to launch it locally and we’ve been working hard to build awareness through strong relationships with the local job centres. This has resulted in a hugely positive step-change in mentoring activity among members in the region.

On a personal level, I’d previously had plenty of experience of mentoring, but not really among those learning to work for the first time. Now I’m on to my third mentee with Steps Ahead Mentoring – and I’ve been really pleased with how responsive they’ve all been to the opportunity. We tend to hear a lot of media stereotypes about millennials, but I’ve found simply that they’re really keen to get something positive from their mentoring – and above all they’re really keen to work. What is true is that younger people do like to consider different and bigger questions about employment – they are much more thoughtful about the wider value that their role brings for society – and in itself this is probably no bad thing.

I think the great thing that Steps Ahead Mentoring is giving young people is an opportunity for a high-quality conversation and a chance for proper reflection. This is really difficult for them to get elsewhere during their job search or among their friends and family. Most of us would agree that meeting a mentee face to face is a better way for building up rapport for these sorts of discussion, but phone calls or Skype are other great ways to keep up the pace. What’s far more important is the quality of the conversations – I’ve tended to ask a few good questions of mentees but then spend most of my time listening very carefully. For some mentees, one or two conversations are all they need to set them on the right road – a chance to un-jumble and then reorganise the thoughts in their head. Others will need help on CVs, or with thinking on their feet in response to tricky interview questions.

From a branch perspective, we think it’s great that HR professionals in the region are volunteering to use their skills in a different way and with a very different audience. Mentoring also helps HR get a good look at the new generation coming into organisations. It’s really important that HR stays alert to the new recruits – remember that somebody invested in you earlier in your career. This is a great opportunity to repay the favour.'
The stories captured here help to bring to life the success of the Steps Ahead Mentoring programme to date. We are delighted that more than 2,200 of our members have already volunteered as mentors and the motivation of the HR profession to help tackle unemployment has been remarkable.

However, we don’t intend to stop there. Support from Nesta and the Cabinet Office via the Centre for Social Action Innovation Fund is allowing us to expand the programme even further. We hope to extend the number of referral partners we work with, in order to ensure that the programme is helping to support as many young jobseekers as possible. We also believe the skills our mentors are able to share could help other groups looking to access the labour market. Initial pilots for those re-entering the workplace aged 50+ and parent returners will be launched later in 2015.

Localised support from the CIPD branch network is another crucial component, and we are working with them to develop a network of Steps Ahead Mentoring ambassadors, who will help us to improve the reach of the programme by facilitating local connections. If you are a CIPD member and wish to find out more, please get in touch.

Finally, we are ambitious about increasing the number of CIPD members involved in the programme.

We know the enthusiasm is there and want to extend this to 4,000 by the end of 2015, delivering a powerful network of volunteers that can have a major impact on the lives of the people they support.

More information

If you are CIPD member interested in signing up as a mentor, you can register easily via our secure online portal at cipd.co.uk/stepsaheadmentoring

If you are a Jobcentre Plus work coach interested in finding out more about the programme and how to register one of your clients for it, please visit cipd.co.uk/registerme

If you are CIPD branch member, policy-maker or youth sector representative and would like more information, please contact the Steps Ahead Mentoring team at mentoring@cipd.co.uk

Next steps
Notes