



GUIDE

Opening Doors: Creating Pathways to Work for Untapped Talent

Supporting employers to create pathways that help untapped talent develop skills and experiences.

Opening Doors: Creating Pathways to Work for Untapped Talent

Supporting employers to create pathways that help untapped talent develop skills and experiences needed for work.

As part of the 2026 update to the [Opening Doors Framework](#), Business in the Community (BITC) has introduced a new action recognising the important role employers can play in creating pathways that help untapped talent build the skills, experience and confidence needed to access and progress in employment.

Many people face barriers to employment long before they apply for a job. These can include limited access to work experience and professional networks, gaps in confidence, caring responsibilities, health conditions, career breaks, and limited awareness of available opportunities and pathways.

Sutton Trust research illustrates how recruitment practices and unequal access to networks can shape early career opportunities: only 11% of internships were secured through an open advertisement, down from 15% in 2018, while 20% were obtained through family or friends with an organisational contact and a further 9%

through a work colleague.ⁱ Employers can help address these barriers by creating opportunities that develop skills, experience and confidence before and during entry into work.

For employers, well-designed pathways into work are a practical investment in workforce capability: they widen access to talent, help people develop skills aligned with business needs and strengthen the pipeline of candidates ready to contribute and progress.

The action:

1b – Provide pathways into work that help untapped talent develop the skills, experience and confidence needed to access and progress in employment.

This guide helps employers implement the new action by:

- Clarifying what the action means in practice
- Setting out minimum expectations and leading practice
- Providing practical steps and examples
- Signposting further guidance

This guide is for HR, Talent Acquisition, Early Careers, Skills, Social Impact, Community Engagement and EDI teams

Opening Doors Framework: Creating Pathways into Work for Untapped Talent

seeking to widen access to employment opportunities and strengthen future talent pipelines.

Key Definitions

- **Untapped talent:**
People who face barriers to entering or progressing in employment, including barriers that arise before recruitment begins.
- **Pathway into work:**
A structured route that helps people develop the skills, experience, confidence and networks needed to access and progress in employment.
- **Work experience:**
Any planned opportunities to gain insight, experience and skills in a workplace environment.
- **Essential skills:**
Transferable skills needed for almost any job, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity and leadership.
- **Returner programme:**
A structured programme supporting people returning to employment following a career break, such as caring responsibilities, illness, military service or retirement.

Why This Matters

Many people are excluded from employment opportunities long before they reach a recruitment process. For some, the challenge is a lack of work experience. For others, it may be confidence, skills, access to networks, caring responsibilities, health conditions or a lack of awareness of available opportunities.

Youth labour market challenges remain stubbornly persistent. The Youth Futures Foundation reports that young people have continued to experience substantially lower employment rates than other working-age adults, with a gap of around 20 percentage points since 2015. Parents and carers returning after a period away from work, as well as veterans seeking to transfer their skills into a new context, can also face barriers to employment.

Evidence suggests that successful transitions into employment depend not only on the availability of jobs, but also on the pathways that help people access them. Drawing on international comparisons, the Youth Futures Foundation highlights the importance of strong employer partnerships, vocational pathways and high-quality skills opportunities in supporting people to move into, and progress in, work.ⁱⁱ

Opening Doors Framework: Creating Pathways into Work for Untapped Talent

Employer investment in workforce training has declined over recent decades, yet employers continue to report skills shortages and difficulty finding candidates with the experience they need. Even roles described as entry-level now require previous workplace experience, creating barriers for people seeking to enter or re-enter employment. Providing pathways into work helps bridge this experience gap. It recognises that employers can be active partners in developing the skills, experience and confidence people need to succeed, while also building the workforce their businesses need for the future.

Employers seeking to develop the skills people need for work may focus on a wide range of untapped talent groups, including:

- Young people
- People with disabilities
- People returning from long-term sickness
- Care-experienced people
- Parents returning to work
- Older workers re-entering employment
- People from ethnically diverse backgrounds
- Veterans
- Individuals who have spent time outside the labour market

Employers can reduce exclusion by creating pathways before candidates reach a formal recruitment process. Pathways can help individuals build skills, confidence and employability while also helping employers access broader talent pools and future talent pipelines.

Employers should focus not only on providing experience, but also on helping participants develop the confidence, skills and understanding they need to succeed. Pathways can still be valuable when an immediate job is not guaranteed, provided that participants receive meaningful development opportunities and a clear explanation of the programme’s intended outcomes.

The New Action at a Glance

Action	Core Aim	Starting	Fully embedded
1b	Pathway into work for untapped talent	Provide structured opportunities that develop skills, experience and confidence	Build inclusive pathways that reach under-represented groups, provide holistic support and demonstrate measurable progression outcomes

Opening Doors Framework: Creating Pathways into Work for Untapped Talent

What this means

Employers can play an active role in helping people overcome barriers to employment by providing opportunities that build capability before and during entry into work.

Pathways into work can take different forms depending on organisational size, sector and workforce needs. Examples include:

- Apprenticeships
- Internships
- Work experience placements with schools
- Insight days
- Supported employment programmes
- Sector-based work academies
- Skills bootcamps
- Traineeships and graduate programmes
- Returner programmes
- Mentoring programmes
- Supported volunteering opportunities linked to employability

The purpose is not simply to provide experience, but to help participants develop the skills, experience and confidence needed to access and progress in employment.

Starting

- Provide structured pathways that offer meaningful skills and experience development.
- Ensure opportunities are inclusive, accessible and open to a broad range of participants.
- Set clear learning objectives and outcomes for participants.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Develop both technical and essential skills.
- Communicate clearly what participants can expect from the programme.
- Ensure participants understand whether progression into a role is available or not.
- Consider how pathways can support groups facing barriers to employment.

Fully embedded

- Prioritise opportunities for groups furthest from the labour market.
- Promote opportunities publicly and widely in line Opening Doors action 2b: *Advertise your vacancies through a range of channels and trusted local organisations that can reach underrepresented groups.*
- Track participation, completion, progression and conversion into employment, and review the results

Opening Doors Framework: Creating Pathways into Work for Untapped Talent

across participant groups where appropriate.

- Provide mentors, buddies or sponsors to support participants throughout programmes.
- Work closely with local authorities, education providers, employability organisations and community partners.
- Offer wraparound support such as coaching, confidence-building and employability preparation.
- Create clear progression routes into jobs, further training or future opportunities.
- Regularly review programmes to improve reach, accessibility and effectiveness.

Leading organisations increasingly develop both technical and essential skills. They recognise that communication, teamwork, problem solving, resilience and confidence can be as important as technical capability in supporting long-term employability. Skills Builder highlights the importance of essential skills for success in employment, while Youth Employment UK emphasises the role of meaningful workplace experiences in developing skills and supporting professional growth.

The following teams can help enable effective programmes:

- IT can arrange system access, devices and digital adjustments;
- Facilities and Health and Safety can prepare safe, accessible workplaces;
- Legal and Data Protection can advise on participant status, safeguarding, consent and information handling;
- Finance and Procurement can confirm budgets, payments and partner arrangements;
- Communications can support accessible internal and external promotion.

Leading practice spotlight:

Southern Water creates pathways into work through apprenticeships, work experience and career-change opportunities

Southern Water has developed a range of pathways that help people build the skills, experience and confidence needed to access and progress in employment. Recognising that talent can come from many different backgrounds and life stages, the organisation offers work experience opportunities, apprenticeships, degree apprenticeships and graduate programmes that support school leavers, graduates, career changers and others looking to develop new skills or transition into a new sector.

Opening Doors Framework: Creating Pathways into Work for Untapped Talent

A key feature of Southern Water's approach is the combination of practical experience, structured learning and personalised support. Participants receive training, mentoring and opportunities to gain hands-on experience while developing both technical and transferable skills, helping them build confidence and prepare for future career progression.

The organisation has also sought to widen access to opportunities by recognising potential alongside experience. Its pathways support people at different stages of life, including those changing careers and entering the sector for the first time, helping ensure opportunities are available to a broader range of talent.

These investments are delivering positive outcomes. Southern Water reports that more than 88% of externally recruited apprentices have progressed into permanent roles within the business, demonstrating how structured pathways can help employers develop future talent pipelines while supporting individuals into sustainable employment.^{iv}

Partnerships can help employers deliver cohesive work experience programmes for specific groups. The Careers & Enterprise Company provides one example of how employers can work with education providers and other partners to widen

access and improve the quality of workplace experiences.

The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC)

works with employers, schools and colleges across England to help young people move successfully into work. By connecting employers with education providers and promoting evidence-based careers activities, CEC helps organisations widen access to opportunity, strengthen future talent pipelines and increase the availability of meaningful workplace experiences.

Three programmes provide useful examples of how employers can strengthen pathways into work:

Employer Standards: A practical framework that helps employers assess and improve the quality of their engagement with young people. It supports organisations to design careers activities that are inclusive, impactful and aligned with business objectives, while helping young people better understand careers and workplace expectations.

equalex: A structured approach to work experience that links activities to clear learning outcomes. Rather than relying on a single placement, the framework supports a series of experiences that help young people develop confidence, skills and employability over time.

Opening Doors Framework: Creating Pathways into Work for Untapped Talent

Aspiring Pathways: Focused on young people in Alternative Provision settings, this programme brings together employers, Careers Hubs and education partners to expand access to high-quality work-related experiences for those facing significant barriers to employment.

Collectively, these initiatives show how employers can move beyond one-off engagement activities to create structured, inclusive pathways that help young people build skills, gain experience and progress towards sustainable employment.

Common Risks and Pitfalls

When creating pathways into work, one of the greatest risks is assuming opportunities will automatically reach the people who need them most. Common pitfalls include:

- Relying solely on corporate websites or mainstream channels to attract participants.
- Focusing only on recruitment rather than addressing barriers that arise beforehand.
- Allowing skills gaps and barriers to employment to persist, excluding people from the labour market.
- Assuming a pathway only has value if it leads directly to a job.
- Providing experience without clear learning outcomes.
- Overlooking essential and behavioural skills development.
- Using labels that potential participants do not identify with.
- Failing to measure outcomes or participant experience.
- Not equipping managers and mentors to support participants effectively.

Getting Started: First 90 Days

Organisations can begin creating effective pathways into work by focusing on a small number of actions that clarify their purpose, build internal support and lay the foundations for inclusive, high-quality programmes.

- Be clear on the purpose – know why you are creating pathways into work and how they support business needs.
- Choose who you want to reach – identify talent groups your organisation could support better.
- Review what already exists – map current programmes and where they could be improved or expanded.
- Get the right people involved – bring together HR, managers, leaders and community partners.

Opening Doors Framework: Creating Pathways into Work for Untapped Talent

- Build the right skills – make sure programmes develop both job-specific and essential skills.
 - Reach the right people – promote opportunities through channels your target groups actually use.
 - Prepare managers to support people – give managers and mentors the tools to help participants succeed.
 - Measure what works – track participation, completion, progression and movement into jobs.
 - Learn and improve – share results and use feedback to strengthen future programmes.
- Youth Futures Foundation: [Youth Employment 2025 Outlook](#) and [Make It An Apprenticeship](#)
 - Youth Employment UK: [Good Youth Employment Benchmark National Report 2026](#)
 - Careers & Enterprise Company: [Workplace Experiences](#)
 - Skills Builder: [Universal Framework](#)
 - CIPD: [Skills Development in the Workplace](#) and [Age-inclusive recruitment toolkit](#)
 - UK Government: [Employer guidance: helping people return to work](#)
 - Career Returners: [Career Returners Indicator 2026](#)
 - Forces Employment Charity: [How to hire talent from the Armed Forces community](#)

Tools & Resources

As a starting point, we recommend the following resources:

- BITC: [Race at Work Charter Commitment One: Leaders and employers support young people's pathways into good work and enterprise](#), [Race at Work Charter Commitment One: 10 impactful ways for employers to design and evaluate work experience](#) and [Becoming an Age-Friendly Employer](#)

Join the Network and Learn More

If your organisation is not yet an Opening Doors signatory, [join our network](#) to access practical resources, tailored support and opportunities to learn from peers.

ⁱ Sutton Trust, *Unpaid and Underpaid internships: access to internship for graduates*, 2025. Available at: [https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Unpaid-and-Underpaid-Internships.pdf)

[content/uploads/2025/01/Unpaid-and-Underpaid-Internships.pdf](#).

ⁱⁱ Youth Futures Foundation, *Youth Employment 2025 Outlook*, 2025. Available at:

Opening Doors Framework: Creating Pathways into Work for Untapped Talent

<https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/publication/youth-employment-2025-outlook/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Youth Employment UK, *Good Youth Employment Benchmark National Report*, 2026. Available at:

<https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/good-youth-employment-benchmark-national-report-2026/>.

^{iv} Southern Water, *Apprentice Jobs & Opportunities*. Available at:

<https://www.southernwater.co.uk/about-us/careers/apprentice-opportunities/>. Southern Water, *Work Experience Opportunities*. Available at: <https://www.southernwater.co.uk/about-us/careers/work-experience/>. Gradcracker, *Southern Water: Early Careers*, 2026. Available at:

<https://www.gradcracker.com/hub/520/southern-water/additional-content/5471/early-careers>. Water Briefing, *Southern Water to triple early careers recruitment in 2026*, 2026. Available at:

<https://www.waterbriefing.org/home/company-news/item/25031-southern-water-to-triple-early-careers-recruitment-in-2026>. Water Magazine,

Southern Water to triple early careers recruitment in 2026, 2026. Available at:

<https://www.watermagazine.co.uk/2026/02/11/southern-water-to-triple-early-careers-recruitment-in-2026/>.



Business in the Community (BITC) champions responsible business as essential for long term economic growth and resilience. We convene, campaign, and consult with business to tackle society's most pressing challenges—from climate change and place-based regeneration to inequality, workplace wellbeing, and inclusive growth.

Founded by His Majesty King Charles III in 1982, BITC has over four decades of experience in engaging business and delivering measurable impact in both business and in communities through evidence-based interventions. As a trusted partner to business and government, BITC convenes leadership, influences policy, and accelerates action—helping shape a future-ready economy that works for everyone.

Business in the Community

137 Shepherdess Walk
London
N1 7RQ

www.bitc.org.uk

020 7566 8650

Business in the Community is a registered charity in England and Wales (297716) and Scotland (SC046226). Company limited by guarantee No. 1619253.