



The business case for SMEs to increase social mobility:
What companies are doing and why.

July 2025

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Project brief

Project objectives:

- + **Provide actionable advice and best practice models for SMEs**, to encourage delivery of strong social impact as well as positive business returns.
- + **Examine sector-specific detail of social mobility activity**, to highlight the business benefits as well as social value impact.

Methodology

- + Primary qualitative research with organisations in North West England
- + Off-line analysis of desk research related to social mobility, building on the recent [Demos & Co-op report](#).



Working to broaden adoption of workplace social mobility activity

The definition and scope of social mobility to be used in this report extends beyond Free School Meals students, to encompass a wider catchment of people improving their income and quality of life.

The following are reasons why employers work with EY Foundation to drive social mobility activities:

- + Build a sustainable talent pipeline
- + Bring greater diversity of thought into your organisation
- + Position your organisation as an attractive, purpose-led employer
- + Meet your goals of investing in your people and community
- + Access evidence of your social impact to share with stakeholders
- + Boost the skills and experiences of your employees, giving them the opportunity to mentor, support young people and give back to the community
- + Become a sector leader in demonstrating your commitment to drive social mobility
- + Benefit from evidence-based insights into what matters to young people

There are a number of resources available that demonstrate the gap in life success attainment between privileged and lower socio-economic groups.

There are also resources that demonstrate what employers, educators and policy-makers could do, to help people to overcome this life success gap via social mobility initiatives in the workplace, society and education.

What appears to be missing, however, is a strong motivating reason why companies should tackle social mobility.

The Demos Report shows why in terms of the benefit to the UK economy. We want to further investigate and articulate the 'why' for an individual company.

By highlighting examples of social mobility in action among a small number of highly effective work contexts, this report aims to **demonstrate the clear business benefits of social mobility activity for individual businesses and their owners.**



Executive Summary

This report explores the urgent need for UK small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to address social mobility as both a moral imperative and a strategic business opportunity.

Drawing on qualitative research with North West England companies, it outlines the economic risks of inaction, identifies barriers to engagement, and shares proven business benefits and practical steps taken by socially conscious companies.

Context and Challenges

By 2035, the UK faces a perfect storm: a shrinking workforce, worsening education outcomes, and widening regional and skills inequalities. These trends are set to disproportionately affect rural and lower-income communities, where access to qualifications and career opportunities is already limited. Employers who fail to adapt may struggle to recruit and retain skilled workers.

Barriers to Action

Despite recognising the issue, many SMEs feel ill-equipped to respond due to time pressures, uncertainty around how to engage, and sector norms that discourage non-traditional recruitment. There is also a perception that social mobility initiatives are charitable rather than commercially viable.

The Business Case

Companies interviewed demonstrated that inclusive recruitment and support for local, disadvantaged talent lead to a number of benefits (see case studies summary on next page).



Case studies summary

Organisation	Sector	What they did	Why they did it – All motivated to generate local social benefit	What was the impact – The business case
TP Financial Solutions	Financial services	Deliberate siting of business premises in an area in need of regeneration Regular financial literacy talks in schools	Central to business purpose – democratise financial information and social opportunity	Improved brand reputation and customer trust and contributed to an increase in turnover-reporting 109% growth.
Citizens Advice North Lancashire	Charity	Actively recruited people with lived experience of issues relevant to service users Re-designed recruitment processes to focus on skills of candidates, rather than formal qualifications	Lived experience insight essential to quality of service, as provider of support and advice Provide job opportunities for people transitioning back into work	Stronger alignment between staff and client backgrounds
The Alchemist	Hospitality	Developed recruitment, onboarding and leadership training content which embedded social mobility activity as standard business practice	Strong social values behind the brand Keen to support communities surrounding each new branch, as the company scales	Increased staff loyalty, reduced attrition, and lower recruitment costs, saving up to 20% of annual salary in recruitment costs Opportunities for other team members to step up as role models and internal supervisors – encouraging broadened leadership thinking
Teleplan Forsberg	Engineering	Provided work-based challenge and learning opportunities, to build sense of achievement, resilience and confidence	Re-balance skills base of organisation, to incorporate practical knowledge and experience as well as academic learning	Enhanced innovation through diverse thinking Additional capabilities leading to new revenue streams
Electech Cluster	Engineering	Collaborated as a place-based cluster of companies, to develop a local talent pipeline	Provide career opportunities for local talent	Combatting a local skills gap
Brabners	Law	Developed social mobility working group which supported designing recruitment & career progression practices to attract a wider talent pool	Deliberate move to create opportunities for talent often excluded from legal profession and to mirror the lives and experience of client base	An expanded talent pool and enhanced client relationships

Reflections and recommendations

- + Company size is not a reliable predictor of best practices in social mobility. Whilst SMEs may face barriers due to resource, some of the smallest companies involved in this research demonstrated the strongest engagement in social mobility activities.
- + While various motivations for driving social mobility were identified, a common theme emerged: the organisational culture and values championed by senior leaders. Their commitment is crucial for fostering social mobility.
- + The case studies in this report illustrate that the perceived business benefits are based on employers' perspectives, showing a correlation between their actions and the resulting impact. To establish causal links, however, more evidence is needed, which can only be achieved through improved data collection and long-term monitoring of social mobility initiatives.

- + Whilst some UK companies have invested large amounts of time and money into social mobility activity, our case studies demonstrate that it does not have to take much time or money to generate impactful action.

The report puts forward simple suggestions for what to do now – whatever your team size.



Context

By 2035, the UK faces a structural labour market crisis driven by an ageing population, worsening education outcomes, and deepening regional inequalities.

Without urgent intervention, talent shortages could undermine economic growth, social mobility, and the country's transition to a green and digital economy.

Educational underachievement

As of 2023, one in three pupils leaves school in England without five good GCSEs, a figure projected to rise to nearly 50% by the late 2020s due to pandemic-related disruption (source: Centre for Social Justice, EDSK).

Disadvantaged pupils are twice as likely to fall behind. Many never catch up, leading to a “missing middle” of working-age adults with neither high-level qualifications nor basic employment resilience. This trend signals a serious threat to workforce sustainability, particularly in lower-income and rural areas where skills gaps are already entrenched.

Demographic pressures

The working-age population will see limited growth, while the number of people over state pension age will increase by 28%—from 12.2 million to 15.6 million by 2035.

This shift will worsen the dependency ratio, with fewer earners supporting more non-working citizens.

Skills Inequality and Regional Disparities

London is on track for 71% of working-age adults to hold degrees by 2035; Hull and East Yorkshire are forecast to sit around 29%.

A widening "skills chasm" will deepen productivity gaps between the South East and post-industrial regions.

Source: Office of National Statistics
population data projections



Barriers to business engagement in social mobility

Business-owner level

- + Time constraints, especially for small businesses
- + Fear of getting initiatives wrong or appearing disingenuous
- + Lack of natural understanding of how to approach social mobility
- + Absence of clear guidance or frameworks for engagement - particularly for smaller employers
- + Extent to which social mobility aligns with the goals / values of business leadership

Sector level

- + Certain industries are not traditionally strong on social mobility e.g. Technology sector*
- + Lack of discussion about social mobility as an issue e.g. in sector publications or industry conferences, so advocates for social mobility become lone voices
- + Strong talent pipeline already in existence
- + High knowledge barriers to career entry
- + Capacity and appetite for internal programme development is focused on other areas of higher priority for that sector

* only 9% are from a lower socioeconomic background compared to 39% of the UK population:
<https://www.techtalentcharter.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/diversity-in-tech-report-2024.pdf>



Challenges and, opportunities

- + Social mobility initiatives take time and resource. 'Someone' needs to detect what each new candidate is good at
 - + Talent doesn't always come with academic qualifications and a polished CV
 - + Social mobility can be perceived as charity, rather than good business sense
 - + Providing opportunity doesn't mean people are 'ready' for that opportunity – internal blockers may remain, and employers must be prepared for that
 - + Benefits tend to accrue over time and may appear more qualitative than quantitative
 - + Early adopters already recognise the value of social mobility, but the early majority will need more proof
- Social mobility initiatives are a bridge to access talent in your local area
 - You don't have to fix the whole system or the whole person, to enable social progress
 - Place-based social mobility creates a ripple effect of positive benefits for the whole community
 - Required time and resource can be shared, if Cluster collaboration happens
 - We have Lived Experience of what works
 - We can plot the consequences of NOT doing this – for individuals and for our companies, sectors and society – and avoid them, if we act now



“Look beyond, into the wider community because there are people out there - just because they didn't have that chance doesn't mean they won't be twice as good as the person that you thought would have been great, because they got a Master's degree.”

Lee Sessions, Project Athena (business owner)



Each career ladder step requires a leap of faith

Young people can be held back by:

- Lack of understanding of unwritten workplace rules
- Limited social networks for support
- Reduced access to capital and opportunities

ACCESS TO TOP JOBS

“People like me got that job, so I can too”

- To step onto a career ladder, young people need to be able to see what happens at the next rung up
- One level at a time, they can build career aspiration for themselves with employer support
- Each step up requires knowledge of ‘rules of the game’ – what do people expect?
- These rules need to be made clear, with time for a learning curve to take hold
- If they fail to move up a rung, encouraging them to re-assess and try again will build personal resilience

HELPING PEOPLE INTO WORK



“I was first in my family to go to university. I had never even met a lawyer before I decided to be one. I had no kind of guidance in terms of what life was like in a law firm. So, I saw it as quite difficult.

“My parents worked for the local council, had never done a panel interview or anything like that. So, there were almost silent challenges to get into the profession.

“It wasn't a sense that the profession had outwardly said, we only recruit the children or associates of previous generations of lawyers. It wasn't that clear, just in the processes – which seem perfectly usual to them because everyone has been through them for generations.”

Leanne Instrall, Partner, Brabners



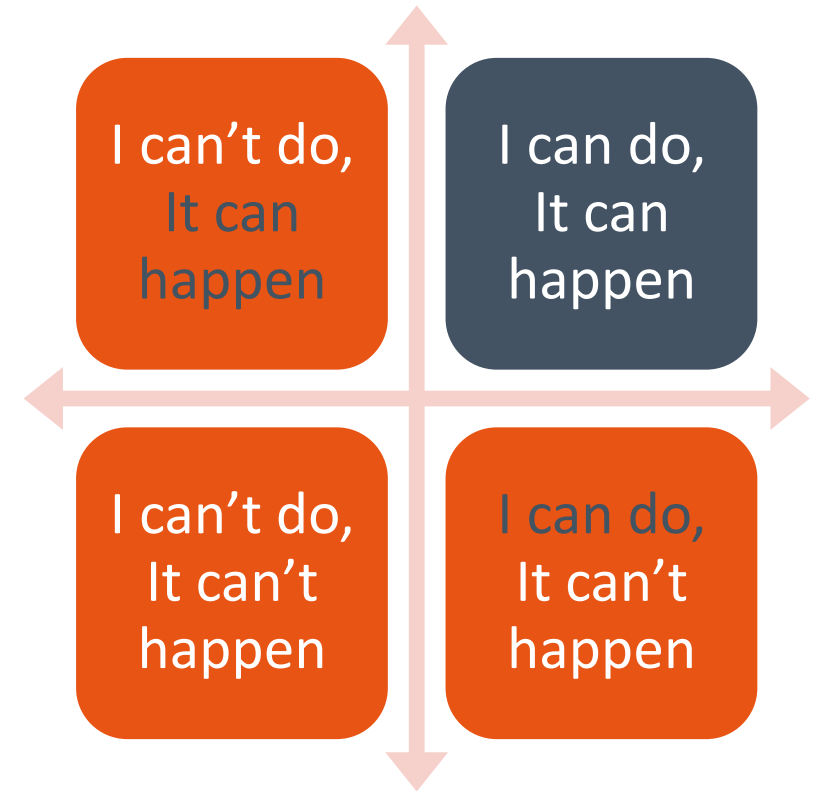
It's difficult to leap, if you don't feel confident

21% of disadvantaged high attainers believe "people like me don't have much of a chance in life"*

According to the Children's Commissioner data, approximately **18% of school leavers in England** leave education without achieving Level 2 qualifications, which include five GCSEs at grades A* to C (or grades 4 and above) or equivalent technical qualifications.

This means that after 12 years of school, many young people may not feel confident when compared to people who have achieved high grades.

If a fifth of each year's talent pool don't feel they 'can do' certain things, and they don't feel that personal success 'can happen' for people like them, they are likely to find it difficult to present as confident, capable people when trying to get a job.



How Confidence Works: The New Science of Self-Belief, Why Some People Learn It and Others Don't

Ian Robertson, Professor of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin.

*Data sources: Covid Social Mobility and Opportunities study, 13,000 young people surveyed;
Children's Commissioner for England

Localised employment opportunities are of critical importance

- + People without formal qualifications tend to stay close to home, when seeking employment. Not everyone has access to a car or predictable public transport.
- + We can't be what we can't see – talent needs a variety of roles to aspire to, that are visible in the local community.
- + Benefits of local employment:
 - Reduced commuting stress and transport costs
 - Stronger community connections
 - Better work-life balance
 - Enhanced employee loyalty
- + Creating progression paths within local contexts builds in hope and purpose, for future generations

Source: State of the Nation Report, 2023

“When you're in a room full of people who are senior leaders in hospitality, the room is quite different to a room full of people you might meet in other sectors.

You've got people who have come through the bar or who've come through the restaurant floor, who haven't necessarily done well at school.

You have people who have been socially mobile, so they understand the difference access to opportunity makes. Hospitality is an important sector in that respect.”

Vic Stewart, *The Alchemist*



Findings



Employers of all sizes, are engaging with social mobility activity

Employers across the North West provided us with positive examples of social mobility activity across sectors – hospitality, manufacturing and engineering, financial & legal services, charity sector.

For some, the focus is on talent leaving school, for others it is on talent that is re-skilling to move sector.

Companies who are widening their recruitment criteria are not necessarily talking about it – their focus is on finding the right talent, rather than on promoting themselves as having a social conscience.

Among the companies taking part in this report, company size was not a good predictive factor in surfacing examples of best practice.

Some of the smallest companies we spoke with, were the strongest practitioners of social mobility activity.

Social mobility activity is becoming an active part of recruitment, driven by skills shortages.

UK Hospitality was identified as a crucial sector-level advocate, because pro-social mobility recruitment and progression practices are already embedded across much of the industry.



Over and above practical considerations, people encouraging social mobility in their local communities and in their industry sectors, appear to be doing so because of civic pride but also because of a sense that ‘if I do well, those around me should do well too’.

Socially mobile entrepreneurs tend to generate a company culture where social mobility activity is expected. Business leaders and senior professionals who have benefited from opportunities created by others, are likely to pay this forward as continuing social opportunity provision for new talent entering the workforce.

This can present itself for example, as a willingness to share knowledge about career hurdles and how these can be overcome.

People who are first in their family within a particular career path, are powerful social mobility agents who (in a high-trust business culture) will actively share their experience and knowledge of career progression barriers and how to overcome them.

“A rising tide floats all boats.
If I do well, my community should also do well.”

Tarnia Elsworth, TP Financial Solutions



Business owners see clear benefits

Companies interviewed for this report, mentioned the following as business benefits of a widened recruitment strategy:

- + Enhanced brand reputation and public awareness
- + Employee base mirrors background and life experience of customer base – building trust and shared understanding
- + Businesses have gained new capabilities and subsequent in-house revenue streams
- + Increased innovation through diverse perspectives and approaches, particularly when the business culture encouraged idea sharing
- + Mixed skill mentoring, across a range of backgrounds, generates leadership opportunities and improves employee engagement
- + Employee retention leads to reduced recruitment and training costs, saving up to 20% of annual salary in recruitment fees

“In removing those barriers, you widen your talent pool and your lived experiences within the firm. We act for a range of different businesses from a range of backgrounds.

People buy advice from people they trust. It builds confidence if they see someone like them is also advising them.”

Leanne Instrall, Partner, Brabners

“We were outsourcing mechanical engineering, until our new hire asked for the chance to train up to do it in-house. That gave us new revenue - our sales team started selling those services as a value-add for clients.”

Chris Mayne,
Teleplan Forsberg



It's good business sense

Being clear about your values and demonstrating those to your target market, tends to mean you become a distinctive brand that stands out from the competition.

It also attracts customers whose values align with **how you do business.**



“We're up for another award and in the interview for that, we talked about success not just being about the turnover or being rich. We're doing well for ourselves, but we're also lifting those around us. And then in turn, the business grows.

Businesses that ignore this are going to be the ones that fail over the long term, because most people you speak to want to work with people who are doing stuff to help build their local community.

Our turnover's gone up. I think it was 109% growth last year. And that has to be linked with people saying -I'd rather put my money with these people who are doing something to help. And it's not just our business trying to do that. We only work with businesses who approach things in the same way.”

Tarnia Elsworth, TP Financial Solutions

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Improve retention, cut recruitment costs

Helping people to understand what they are capable of is a gift that repays over time.

First comes confidence and an expanding skills base that is directly valuable for the team.

Then comes loyalty, leading to employee retention and reduced recruitment costs.

“We know what skills we’re looking for – and what’s most important to us is the team dynamic and people’s ability to work well with other people.

What we see is that people come in energised by the opportunity, then they stay because the role has given them a sense of value in themselves – shown them what they’re good at, and that we value them.

Most brands in our industry have a real problem keeping people. We don’t”

Vic Stewart, The Alchemist

Cost Model Hypothesis: *Employee Retention vs. Attrition*

Scenario A:

One Lawyer Retained for 10 Years

Recruitment cost: **£0** (after initial hire)

Training/onboarding: **£10,000** (once)

Salary: assume average £52,000/year
£520,000 over 10 years

Total: **£530,000**

Scenario B:

One New Hire Every Year (10% Attrition)

Recruitment: **10 hires** × **£25,000** = £250,000

Assuming 20% of annual salary as recruitment fee,
plus the cost of lost productivity and learning curve
gains, onboarding & training

Salary: average across different experience levels:
c.£50,000/year (assuming consistent FTE value)

Salary: £50,000 × 10 years = £500,000

Total: **£750,000**



Mixing skills builds competitive advantage

People will use a whole range of skills at work, if we let them.

Relying on talent from only one generation, or only one set of technical skills, gives competitors an edge.

“We have one employee who graduated from Oxbridge, another who knows what it’s like to live in poverty. Getting them to work as peers has been hugely beneficial for their learning, our organisational learning and capability building.”

Joanna Young, Citizens Advice NL

New talent helps your team develop as leaders

Mentoring incoming talent that is not yet familiar with workplace 'rules of the game', can make employees aware of how much progress they have made themselves.

This in turn, builds confidence and mutual trust between levels of experience within the company.

“What I find is that every single member of staff that’s helped and mentored and coached and supported people has progressed brilliantly in the business. Some of them have gone on to become managers or leaders in other areas of the business.

“One person was with us for nine years in the company and he would say things like - **“I’m getting frustrated because people aren’t pulling their weight.”** He used to tackle this directly within his team, in a really positive way. That subtle ‘living the values’ rubs off on others. These are **culture architects** - people that can shape the company from within.”

Chris Mayne, Teleplan Forsberg



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Recommendations



Organisations interviewed for this report, highlighted actions that SMEs (from Micro upwards) can take, to get started with social mobility activity:

Rethink 'standard' recruitment practices

- + Remove unnecessary qualification requirements – be clear what skills and aptitudes are essential e.g. communication, problem-solving, empathy.
- + Like CANL and Teleplan Forsberg, prioritise attitude and aptitude over academic qualifications.
- + Re-word questions so candidates can use non-work examples:

“Tell me about a time when you supported someone to solve a problem”

“Describe a situation where you had to learn something new, quickly”

- + Introduce practical tasks that mirror everyday activities e.g. handle a client query.
- + Provide pre-interview briefing – help people to understand the process and what they will be asked.
- + Offer interview alternatives (e.g. task-based trials, informal chats).

Communicate to your team, the changes you are making

- + Use learning and leadership training modules to equip managers to expect and support social mobility.



Connect with schools in your area with high take-up of Free School Meals

- + Offer careers talks or mentoring sessions in-school.
- + Share information about job roles in your sector and the skills needed to start a career.

Collaborate across sectors

- + Join or build a local skills cluster (like Electech) to share resources, build training routes, and develop place-based solutions.

Sponsor talent through progression

- + Adopt Brabners-style mentoring and internal progression structures to retain and grow your workforce inclusively.
- + Invite people to attend and speak at industry events.

Lead (your community and sector) by example

- + Share your story. Leaders who talk about having benefitted from social mobility, normalise the practice.
- + Tell people in your sector what you are doing, what works and what doesn't. Sharing learning creates a ripple effect.



Small changes can make a big difference

Companies may already be involved in some form of career education activity in local schools.

Turning this into social mobility activity can be as simple as agreeing to **talk about your industry or job role in a school with high uptake of Free School Meals.**

You can find this out here:

<https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables>

<https://www.suttontrust.com/school-admissions-dashboard/>

“Most young people who have undertaken work experience will do so because of personal networks, either their parents or because of people that they know.

“That is a really clear example of where young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are being disadvantaged by the current system. It’s about poverty of thought as well as poverty of access to the system.”

“The companies we work with are pushing against this, to level the playing field for everyone.”

Emma Woan,
Education Business Partnership
North West

You don't have to spend money to do this

Encouraging social mobility doesn't have to mean recruiting someone new, if you haven't got the time and resources to train them.

Any form of activity that **opens people's thinking about job roles and the skills they require; or connects them to people outside their current network**, is valid.

“We're too small to take anyone else on right now. But I don't see that as an obstacle to building aspiration in our local area.”

Tarnia Elsworth, TP Financial Solutions

“What does real sponsorship look like? An invitation to a dinner perhaps.

“Or when there's someone who's championing you in the room that you're not even in. Putting you forward for things with your support and consent.”

Leanne Instrall, Partner, Brabners

Recruit for attitude and aptitude, set a career path that fits your context

Any new hire is a risk.

Not every new recruit is a good fit that adds value to your organisation.

Widening the scope on who is considered for recruitment, means risk factors will be different but not necessarily higher.

Running through the costs, risks and pros and cons list for each potential type of new hire might generate results that challenge accepted thinking.

“If you can get someone to believe in themselves, they'll take off under their own trajectory. That's exactly what I did.

“Help them to build confidence and belief in themselves first and then start letting them be inquisitive. ‘You say you like destroying things. So, okay, here's a radio. Here's no build instructions. I want you to rip it to pieces as carefully as you can and reconstruct it.’

“Foster creativity, foster questioning, and foster that creative problem solving. How do I overcome a problem? Think what could be a solution. Now what could be another solution? Let people know they don't need to be afraid to not know something”

Lee Sessions, Project Athena

Interviews don't have to be a barrier

Encouraging people in from disadvantaged backgrounds can be as simple as changing the way we interview them.

Standard recruitment methods can intimidate people and show up their relative weaknesses, rather than their strengths.

Helping people to talk about what drives them, without being put off by their accent, dress sense or communication style can pay dividends.



“I ran that interview - I remember it because one of the first things that he said was, I don't have the qualifications, but I'm really interested in this topic.

And I said, well talk me through something you're passionate about. And he started talking about stuff that he's passionate about and you could just tell.

I was looking for someone that was passionate and showed some creativity in their past because I knew that they're mouldable into a role.

How is this person progressing? Are they picking up new tasks? Are they wanting to take ownership? Are they pushing the boundaries a little bit? That's what I was looking for.”

Chris Mayne, Teleplan Forsberg

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Daily workplace achievements can rebuild confidence

Moving out of a school environment can provide learning opportunities that show people what they 'are' capable of, rather than what they aren't.

Small successes build, so that people start to thrive and relevant talents rise to the surface.

“The easier route for us is through the technician role within the business because you can bring someone in to start off following a job instruction and then build them up.

“It's almost like an appreciation. They've been given a chance. So then you've got this instant motivation boost from somebody within the team.

“And as long as we held up our side of the deal and keep providing learning opportunities, that motivation builds and slowly they're helping shape the work ethic.”

Chris Mayne, Teleplan Forsberg

Grow your own talent – as part of a cluster

Skills shortages have reached such low levels in some sectors, that companies have begun to team up with others in their local area to work on possible solutions.

Whilst this can take time to build trust, collaborating across private, public and Higher Education organisations can bring through results that are purpose-built where time costs are shared across multiple partners.



“Cutting through the barriers people face. It's difficult to do that as a company of 50 people, which is why we've channelled a lot of our activities through the Electech cluster. This is going to benefit us, but it must benefit everybody in the cluster.

“We want to build up a talent pool and it shouldn't matter where that talent pool comes from - we should be supporting people to get in. If we all do that together, then we'll all benefit because we'll have an area full of skilled people.

“We want people to have training options - from school all the way through to postgraduate if they want to. But aligned with what our industry needs now and into the future.”

Chris Mayne, Teleplan Forsberg

groundswell

Show them their possible future selves

Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises make up over 99% of UK's employer base.

Within that, less than half have formal business management qualifications.

Not everyone has achieved the title of business owner by gaining top school grades and higher education.

This means we have a generation of powerful role models, whose life experience could be helping to shape the future workforce.

“We actively employ people who might think, “I'd never get a job there.” Or that you need qualifications or a wealth of experience. It's quite interesting that some hospitality businesses still recruit based on degrees because it's not necessary and is a barrier”

“We do a face-to-face chat for an entry-level job. And then for the next rung of the ladder, even if someone's applying for a job internally, we make sure it's done properly.

“There's a cover letter; there's a CV because that's teaching someone about what is expected outside of The Alchemist.”

Hannah Plumb, The Alchemist

“What I found really powerful to those who aren't quite convinced social mobility stuff is necessary - people assume I've come from a similar background to them because I've ended up in a similar place. Sharing stories about how I got here – making people aware of the difference in my background – can be just the thing they need to think again.

“Having people around who ‘look and sound’ like a broader range of our clients is really important”

Leanne Instrall, Partner, Brabners



Case Studies:

This report shares the views and collective experience of a cross-section of micro to large employers based in the North West, who are actively engaged in workplace social mobility activity.



Summary

Organisation	Sector	What they did	Why they did it – All motivated to generate local social benefit
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TP Financial Solutions

TP Financial Solutions deliver financial literacy sessions in all local schools despite small team size of 3 people

Their company offices are deliberately located in an area of their home district, that is in need of regeneration.

All team members are active role-models for career paths open to talent in the local area – by looking and acting different to industry stereotypes

This is particularly important as only 16% of UK financial advisors are female

The company focuses on authentic community engagement – taking an active part in several local civic initiatives.

Percentage of children eligible for free school meals in local area –
Morecambe Bay Academy 37.7% and Bay Leadership Academy 48.8%



Driver	Central to business purpose – democratise financial information and social opportunity	<p>“In a recent interview we talked about the fact that success is not just about the turnover and it's not just about being rich. We're doing well for ourselves, but we're also lifting those around us. And then in turn, the business grows.</p> <p>“Businesses that ignore this are going to be the ones that fail over the long term, because most people you speak to want to work with people who are doing the social mobility stuff. And we said that in our Red Rose interview. It's almost like the money is a by-product of just being a nice person. Like, because we do that, our turnover's gone up. I think it was 109% growth last year.”</p>
Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberate siting of business premises in an area in need of regeneration • Regular financial literacy talks in local schools, which all have high take-up of Free School Meals 	
Results	<p>109% business growth over the past 12 months</p> <p>Finalist in multiple Professional Services Awards</p>	<p>“It's bad business sense not to engage with social mobility. You can apply that across the board in business, that if you're just sticking to the old way of doing it and not picking up on these trends and differences, you're left behind.</p> <p>“And it happens so quickly, doesn't it? If people aren't looking at your business and going, yes, I want to come to them, there will be somebody else that they do look at. It's not just our business trying to do that. We only work with businesses who approach things in the same way.”</p> <p>“Our success has to be intrinsically linked with people seeing who we are as people and saying yes, actually rather than going to Mr./Mrs. Advisor down the road who doesn't do anything in the community and just drives a Porsche, I'd rather put my money with these people who are doing something to help.”</p>

Citizens Advice North Lancashire

As an independent charity with no statutory funding source, it is imperative for Citizens Advice North Lancashire to operate strategically and cost-efficiently.

This has led to the deliberate strategy of employing and developing talent from within their local community.

Recruitment practices have been altered to encourage a breadth of skills and experience to enter their team so that as an organisation, they have a fundamental understanding of how best to impact the lives of service users across their community.

In turn, this builds competitive competence that improves their ability to compete for Public Sector contracts.



Driver	<p>Lived experience insight essential to quality of service, as provider of support and advice</p> <p>Provide job opportunities for people transitioning back into work</p>	<p>“It’s hugely important that we have people in our team with lived experience of the issues our clients are facing. How could we possibly think through all the nuances of the help they need otherwise?”</p> <p>“We know that people living on benefits – often with ongoing physical and mental health conditions – are fearful of taking up a job, in case their symptoms prevent them from holding on to that paid position. There is too much of a time lag between being made redundant and being re-assessed for benefits. It puts people into debt. What we can do, is bring people in as volunteers. Then they can test how many days a week they can manage and build up their confidence from there. We get to know them and what they are good at, then we can think about what role they might be suited to, when new things open up.”</p>
Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively recruited people with lived experience of issues relevant to service users • Re-designed recruitment processes to focus on skills of candidates, rather than formal qualifications • Set up internal teams to create opportunities for people with mixed skills and qualifications to learn from each other, peer to peer 	
Results	<p>Service provision that more fully caters to the complex needs of clients</p> <p>High-performing teams</p> <p>Strong positive culture and high levels of trust</p>	<p>“We have one employee who graduated from Oxbridge, another who knows what it’s like to live in poverty. Getting them to work as peers has been hugely beneficial for their learning, our organisational learning and capability building.”</p> <p>“The more we understand people’s needs, the better we can design and deliver services. That makes us more able to bid for service contracts with local agencies such as NHS, Councils and larger Charities.</p> <p>“Last year, we dealt with just under 30,000 issues. On average, 3.9 per client. The direct financial impact of our work for clients was £13,090,187 - money that goes directly back into the local economy. For every pound invested by Lancaster City Council in our core grant, £58.70 is returned to the community in direct financial outcomes for clients.”</p>

The Alchemist

The Alchemist bar chain operate 23 sites across the UK and employ around 1000 people. The company have successfully partnered with Pure Innovations and Only A Pavement Away to hire disadvantaged workers, achieving **10**, **5**, and **3** year retention rates.

The HR team have created specific learning and development modules about social mobility – for those coming into the business and for team leaders who are recruiting new talent. They are currently investigating ways to communicate this information to customers.

Over the past 5 years, the company has ringfenced Director-level resource to ensure social mobility activity is established properly within the business, to benefit employees and the company itself.

Whilst rising operating costs in recent years have put pressure on profits, social mobility activity has progressed throughout.

“Even in a lean year, we don't want to do nothing. That's kind of not us.”



Driver	<p>Strong social values behind the brand</p> <p>Keen to support communities surrounding each new branch, as the company scales</p>	<p>“For people who might experience bias during their onboarding or during recruitment. We cut that out – I require teams to interview specific candidates, even when their CV might not necessarily be what we’re used to seeing. They might not even have a CV, for example. We’re using our learning and development platform to create a module which discusses all of this. Only A Pavement Away did that for us - they provide extra support – so it's not just on my managers to do that. They will link in with people once a week. Both charities that I've mentioned do that.”</p> <p>“When you're in a room full of people who are senior leaders in hospitality, the room is quite different to a room full of people who you might meet in other sectors. You’ve got people who have come through the bar, who've come through the floor, who haven't done well at school. You’ve got people in that room who have been socially mobile and so I think it’s quite an important sector in that respect. It’s obviously easier to just hire the person who's got loads of experience. But you have to take a leap of faith now and again.”</p>
Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed recruitment, onboarding and leadership training content which embedded social mobility activity as standard business practice - “The way that we train is also really kind of considered in terms of accessibility, for people who maybe didn't excel at school or who struggle with certain types of learning.” Worked with Only A Pavement Away and Pure Innovations to provide additional support and ensure smooth recruitment 	
Results	<p>Above average sector growth at 7.2% year on year</p> <p>Expansion from 4 original sites to 23, UK and Europe, from Manchester base</p>	<p>“One person we took on, he wouldn't look me in the eye on his first day and he's now such a superstar in the venues. The managers see that. We have a good community amongst our managers anyway, so they talk to each other about it. With word of mouth, it takes off. You have to talk about it all the time. And use your own internal case studies. I tend to do that a lot.”</p> <p>“What we see is that people come in energised by the opportunity, then they stay because the role has given them a sense of value in themselves – shown them what they’re good at, and that we value them.”</p> <p>“We don't lead with any of this stuff from a consumer perspective, but I think we score really highly on brand authenticity when we do benchmarking. And I wonder if part of our authenticity is that this is the fabric that runs through a lot of things we do.”</p>

Teleplan Forsberg

Founder member of [Electech Cluster](#), the group formed to foster electrical engineering skills in North Lancashire and South Cumbria, Teleplan Forsberg have also chosen to embed social mobility within their recruitment planning.

This deliberate move was taken after company leadership saw that the following factors were likely to be standing in the way of local talent:

- + Geographic limitations – access to reliable public transport
- + Technology awareness gaps
- + Language and accent biases were creating barriers for some candidates
- + Industry sector ‘norms’ relied heavily on formal qualifications as proof of technical capability



Driver	Re-balance skills base of organisation, to incorporate practical knowledge and experience as well as academic learning	<p>"Our purpose statement in the business is 'Empowering Progress'. We tackle that in four quadrants – for the customer, for the employees, our supply chain and then the community. That last one is where we build up our local talent pool, our local skill sets and facilities and resources in the area."</p> <p>"We want people to have the options through the colleges and then through degrees or degree apprenticeships and then all the way through to postgraduate if they want to. And how do they do that aligned with industry, say with career stops on the way or career changes on the way. Giving people flexible career pathways, that's what we're trying to do."</p> <p>"I do put a lot of value on degrees. I think it's highly important obviously. But underpinning that I think the most crucial thing is the softer skills that people have and their approach and their traits towards business and how they go about things. The easier route for us is through the technician role within the business because you can bring someone into the business to start off following a job instruction and then build them up."</p>
Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively recruited local talent without formal engineering qualifications, as part of wider talent strategy Re-worked existing interview and recruitment processes to enable interviewees to talk about relevant skills and experience Provided work-based challenge and learning opportunities, to build sense of achievement, resilience and confidence 	
Results	<p>Bringing current and future skills gap</p> <p>Diverse thinking bringing new revenue streams and innovation</p>	<p>"Finding good people that fit our values, it doesn't really matter what their background is we're actually trying to focus on is that drive."</p> <p>"Every single member of staff that's helped and mentored and coached and supported people has progressed brilliantly in the business. Some of them have gone on to become managers and some of them have gone on to be leaders in other areas of the business.'</p> <p>"Lee's a good example because of this – he got good at mechanical engineering when he first started. All of a sudden that gave us new revenue - our sales team started talking about that to clients, it was a real positive."</p>

“It carved me out as a person. They took a a rough piece of rock, and they've managed to chisel it to a point where I was able to take over the chisel myself and then carry on defining who I am.

“I couldn't have [started my own business] without Forsberg. I would've just sat around believing that I'm not good enough and not really trying to achieve anything because, you know, when you place yourself in a mental cage, you stay in that mental cage, don't you?”

Lee Sessions, Project Athena

Talking about their time as an employee at Teleplan Forsberg

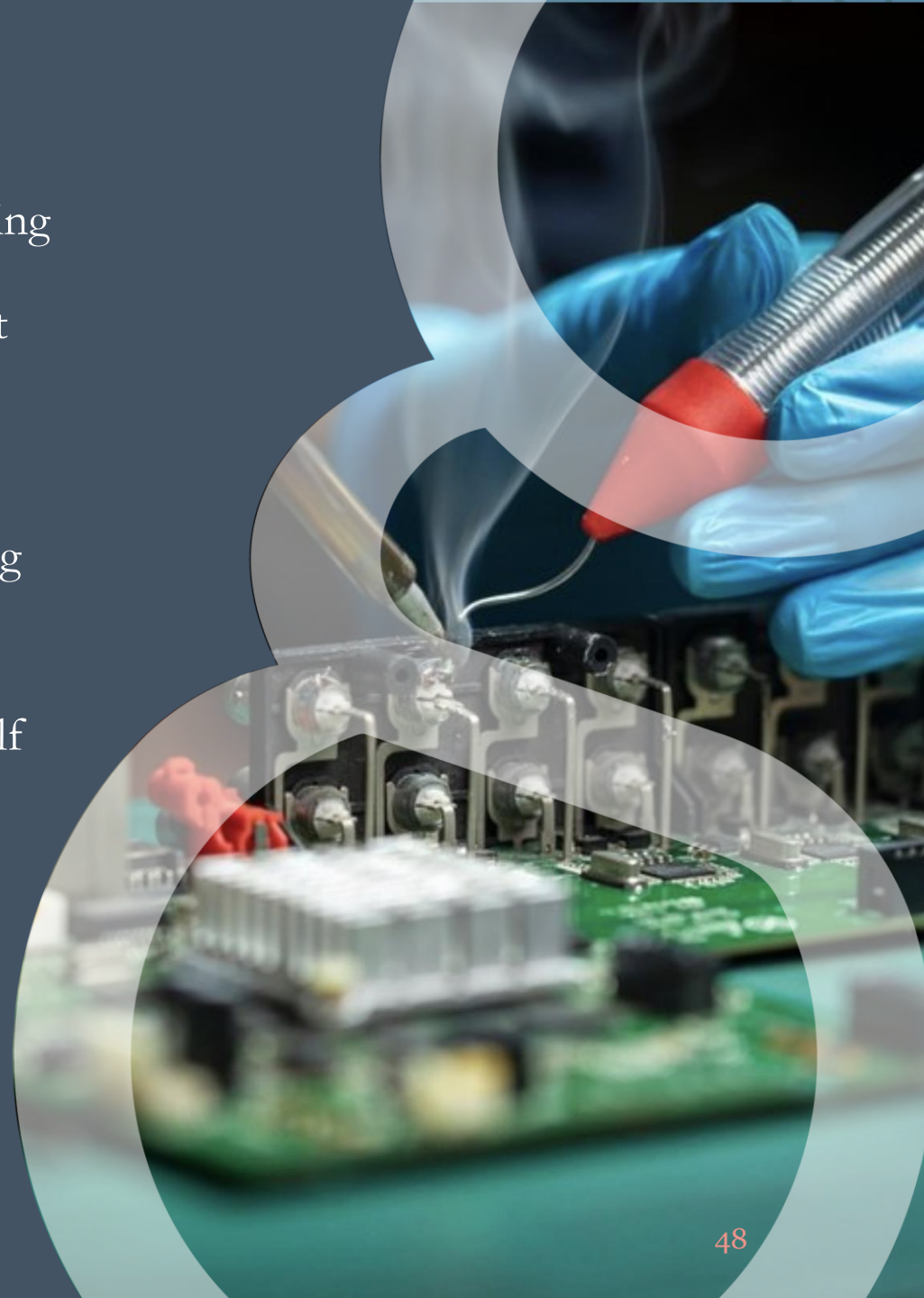
Electech Innovation Cluster

“The Electech Innovation Cluster is a business led cluster providing an empowering collective voice. We are uniquely placed to bridge the gap between industry, research and development, government and education.

Our aim is to maximise potential and drive inclusive growth and employment of regional electronics technology SMEs in the ‘LA’ postcode by tackling the challenges and opportunities of changing markets, skills, representation, innovation and facilities.

Our objective is to build the region’s reputation as a centre of excellence for Electech. This is a sector which naturally lends itself to higher value-added activity, improving economic output and creating high value jobs.

We aim to develop a deep local talent pool achieving our recruitment needs, by creating targeted training programs in collaboration with local educational institutions to address specific Electech skills gaps.”



Brabners & [True North](#)

Brabners' comprehensive social mobility programme had its roots in initiatives that the firm introduced in 2018, focusing on early career access and long-term progression. The programme includes structured work experience, insights days and an annual bursary fund that comes with mentoring on topics like interview prep & professional networking. Placements include sessions across business functions as well as legal departments, to raise awareness of different career paths.

Graduate recruitment data shows a steady increase in the number of candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds. The company benefits from an expanded talent pool and enhanced client relationships, because their team more accurately mirrors the life experience of their client base.

Brabners' Leadership Team provided strategic direction and grassroots implementation support - integrating time spent on the programme into promotion criteria. Social mobility is one of five workstreams from the company's total EDI framework.

To do this, Brabners collaborated with [Sutton Trust on Pathways To Law](#) programme. They have since been recognised in [Making The Leap](#) social mobility awards.

“The feedback that we’ve had is we’re quite ahead of the pack, which is lovely to hear - but definitely shows there is more work to do for the wider legal industry”

TrueNorth

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Driver	<p>Deliberate move to create opportunities for talent often excluded from legal profession and to mirror the lives and experience of client base</p> <p>“We act for a range of different businesses from a range of different backgrounds. People buy advice from people they trust, people they have confidence in, people they like. I think going to a lawyer might have been quite intimidating for a lot of people. We don’t want that for our clients.”</p> <p>“It's very difficult to argue with what I would call basic fairness. All we're saying is, let’s provide equality of opportunity, isn't it? Everyone has the opportunity. It's what you do with it – that’s how you get on.”</p> <p>“The graduate pool still have been to university, have got certain grades, etc. That starts from a very early age. We’ve been trying to look earlier, to raise aspirations before people are even thinking about what they're going to do after school and college. We’re trying to connect with young people who perhaps don't know anyone in university, who may not know a lot of people in the working world.”</p>
Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up social mobility working group • Designed recruitment & career progression practices to attract a wider talent pool • Programme includes: work experience; funding; interview preparation – “funding makes so much difference to people on the ground. It doesn't need to be a lot of money just to make their lives more open to opportunity” • https://www.brabners.com/insights/company-news/breaking-down-barriers-the-vital-importance-of-apprenticeships
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduate recruitment data - candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds now at 38%, with high disadvantage candidates rising to 20% • Recognised in Social Mobility Awards • Enhanced client relationships (mirrors life experience of client base)



Thank you





Appendices:

Additional resources and further reading

Organisation	Document link
EY Foundation	Breaking barriers report - https://www.eyfoundation.com/en_uk/news/ey-foundation-gm-report#:~:text=New%20report%20says%20action%20across%20a%20range%20of,Barriers%20report%20is%20now%20available%20to%20download%20here
Sutton Trust	Sector-specific action plans: https://pathwaysprogrammes.suttontrust.com/career-pathways Opportunity Index www.suttontrust.com/our-research/the-opportunity-index Social Mobility Toolkit for Employers 2020/1 https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Social-Mobility-Toolkit-18-10-21-update.pdf
Demos / Co-op report	https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Co-op_Report_2024_Oct.pdf https://demos.co.uk/research/the-opportunity-effect-how-social-mobility-can-help-drive-business-and-the-economy-forward/
Co-op Social Mobility report	https://www.coop.co.uk/social-mobility
The Purpose Coalition	https://www.purpose-coalition.org/impact-reports
UK Social Mobility Awards	https://www.somo.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/UK-Social-Mobility-Awards-2023-Winners-Case-Studies-Report.pdf
The Social Mobility Pledge 2025	https://www.socialmobilitypledge.org/ https://www.socialmobilitypledge.org/news/world-economic-forum-focuses-on-social-mobility 2025



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UK Government State of the Nation Report 2024	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2024-local-to-national-mapping-opportunities-for-all
Open University and British Chambers of Commerce	Business Barometer 2024
Local Government	Skills Improvement Plans e.g. Lancashire https://www.lancashirelsip.co.uk/surveys-and-reports Cumbria https://cumbriachamber.co.uk/local-skills-improvement-plan-lsip/ Greater Manchester https://www.gmlsip.co.uk/ Liverpool City Region https://www.liverpoolchamber.org.uk/local-skills-improvement-plan/ Cheshire https://cheshireandwarringtonlsip.co.uk/
World Economic Forum 2020	https://www.weforum.org/videos/social-mobility-reskilling-the-next-billion/
Dr Ian Robertson	How Confidence Works, The Winner Effect