



Bringing Business
+ Graduates together

The Graduate Recruitment Market In Post Pandemic Britain

INTRODUCTION AND CONTENTS

Building on the success of our 2019 report, our latest insight into the behaviours and attitudes of graduates was delayed by the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020. Since restrictions lifted in the summer of 2021 and the impacts of Brexit started to be felt, we wanted to understand what students' and graduates' expectations and fears were. It's been a unique experience for this generation, many experiencing 2 years of disruption to their studies be that before or during university. With a record number of jobs available and a lack of skills, it's more important than ever for employers to stand out. There are several annual surveys which are put together by organisations representing the larger employers which make up less than 80% of the graduate jobs market. We hope our findings will support and inform Talent Acquisition strategies and offer an alternative viewpoint putting the student experience at the centre of the conversation.

03

About This Report

04

Key Findings

05

Graduate Application Process

07

Graduate Hopes & Fears

11

Engagement with University Services

12

Graduate Attraction and Retention

14

Impact of Covid

15

Conclusion

ABOUT STEP

Step exists to facilitate access to a diverse range of skills and opportunities in an inclusive manner through quality, project-based, outcome-focused internships and placements, and graduate jobs across a range of industries, all year round. We are the friendly recruiter of choice for students and graduates of all backgrounds and support businesses to achieve succession planning. We focus on individual skills and aspirations to provide a quality recruitment service. With a heritage dating back to the 1980's, we are committed to adding value to the graduate recruitment market by sharing our experiences with businesses, university employability teams and graduates embarking on their career journeys.

NOTES ON CHARTS USED

To avoid fractions, percentages in charts have been rounded up or down and therefore do not always add up exactly to 100. Where respondents were asked to choose more than one answer, the total percentages always exceeds 100.

ABOUT THE DATA

The data was collected using a MS Office Form which was shared on Step's social media channels (Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn) and sent out to the Step database. During July, August and September 2021, approximately 14182 applicants registered on the Step database, were sent the survey.

DEMOGRAPHIC

For the individual student and graduate respondents, we asked them about gender, age, geographic location, course and place of study and year of graduation. This information meant we could compare responses across groups of individuals to enable us to identify trends.



Tamsin Millns, Owner & Director Tamsin became the Director of Step following a management buyout in 2017, having been an integral part of the management team since 2013. She is a law graduate who has a varied career in recruitment as well as having experience in a University employability team. Having updated her skills with CIPD study in 2016, she is passionate about ensuring that interns gain valuable skills whilst being paid what they are worth.

KEY FINDINGS



- The number of graduates/students expecting to earn less than £21,000 has halved since 2020
- 71% of graduates/students said that a low salary was their biggest fear, expected pay of £21k-£25k.
- Career progression and access to career development are more important than salary to graduates/students.



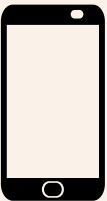
- This generation of students do not expect to commit to companies for the long term; over two-thirds of respondents expect to stay in their graduate role for only 2 or fewer years.
- Students with higher salary expectations are more likely to return this investment, with loyalty (36% of graduates/students expecting to stay at their grad role for 4+ years expect to earn £30,001+)



- A large majority of students don't engage with their careers teams frequently.
- Graduates/students entering the job market in 2021/22 could be suffering from a lack of advice and therefore entering the job market with unrealistic expectations.
- Students who engage with their University employability team, are more likely to be employed, only 6% of these students had never spoken to their employment team.



- Graduates/students entering the job market in 2021/22 are fearful of their employer's expectations.
- Over 1/3 of graduates/students are worried about not being good enough.
- This generation is becoming weary of long and complicated application processes with almost half of graduates/students expecting to spend 25 minutes or less on a job application. 85% of graduates/students expect a simpler recruitment process of between 1 and a maximum of 3 stages.

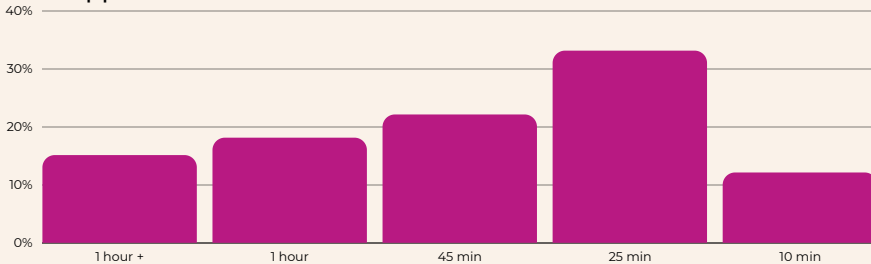


- LinkedIn was the most used platform for graduates/students, the second year running with almost 4/5 using LinkedIn actively.
- More than half of graduates/students are not influenced by a company's social media presence when applying for a role.
- Graduates/students use social media to check companies' ethical views and their work environment.

GRADUATE APPLICATION PROCESSES

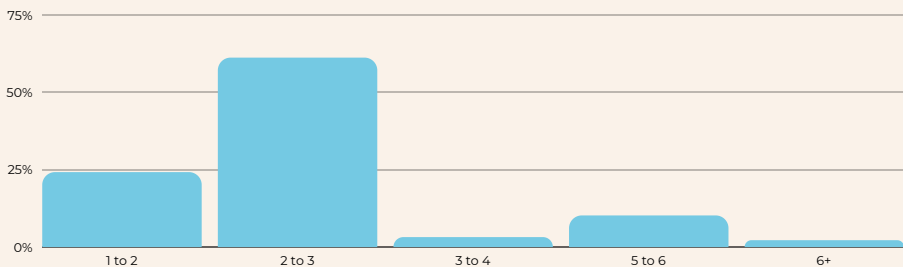
Is your application process effective in attracting the right candidates? Do graduates fully understand what they need to do and why they need to do it? This chapter tries to unpick this from a candidate perspective.

We asked Students and Graduates how long they expected to spend on each application.



A **third** expected to spend an hour or more but almost **half** only expected to spend 25 minutes or less on an application

We also asked about how many stages students and graduates expect to go through before being offered a graduate level role.



We found that the **vast majority** of students (**85%**) would expect between 1 and 3 stages to a recruitment process.

Increasingly graduate applications include layers of the different processes including initial expression of interest, submission of a CV, completion of online application forms, testing, telephone interviews, assessment centres and at least one or two face to face interviews. This takes a huge amount of resources for the businesses involved and is often necessary to whittle down large amounts of applications. But in an era where there are more job vacancies than ever before and talent is in high demand, recruitment processes must be considered part of an employer's EVP.

We found that **over half (56%)** of students and graduates had been put off applying for a job by the recruitment process. For **60%** of respondents who had been put off, the length was the reason they did not go ahead with the application. But we also identified a worrying trend of misunderstanding and even mistrust of the recruitment processes.



As recruiters, we all understand the need to gather data to measure our processes, but it seems that in some cases social mobility questions may be confusing/offending some applicants. One respondent said they were put off applying due to "The length of the application and the need to ask irrelevant questions such as my parent's education and pay". While another said, "I can do an application in 10 minutes, having one that is an hour-long is not time effective unless the job is something fantastic".

Whilst a couple of students actually suggested they would appreciate a gamified approach, anecdotally, respondents are growing weary of the automatic screening processes which require a relatively high level of commitment from them before any kind of human interaction.

Too lengthy an application, seemingly moderated by an algorithm and rejection without any accompanying reason.

Too many stages and not personal enough

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the same way as product managers and UX professionals are encouraged to consider the customer experience at each stage of the journey, as recruiters we must consider the applicant experience. Is the information we are asking for entirely necessary? Could the information be collected in a less repetitive way? Are we as recruiters using all the information we collect? Could we be doing more to explain why the information is needed and explain why it is beneficial to the applicant to provide the information?

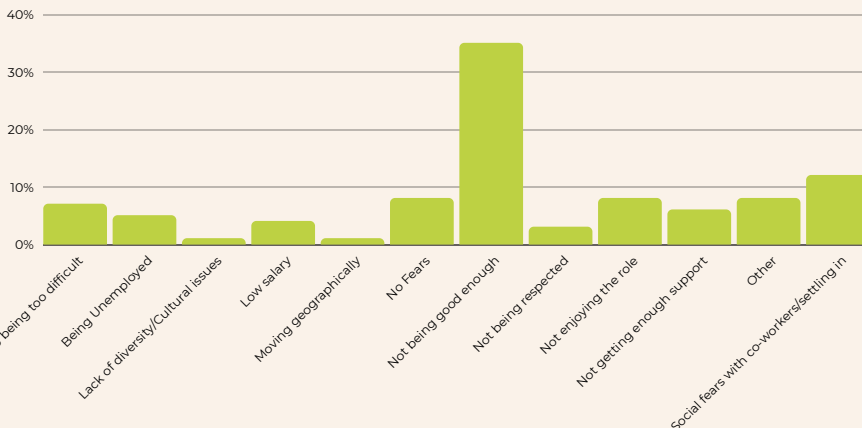
Above all, we need to remember that receiving a constant rejection, whilst inevitable, is still not easy for a job seeker to accept and remain motivated to carry on job searching. We spend a lot of time, money and resource in generating interest and applications. It's important that we maximise this important resource, keep the right applicants engaged and extend the courtesy of explaining the process and acknowledging their time investment.

GRADUATE HOPES & FEARS

What is important to students and graduates when they are looking for graduate-level work? Is salary the be-all and end-all? In this chapter, we explore what graduates are hoping for as they enter the job market and what is worrying them.

Graduates Fears

We asked: What are your biggest fears as a graduate starting your first job?



We allowed a free text response rather than assuming what the responses may be. It was challenging to categorise the data but upon reading the responses, some clear themes emerged.

There were a **bold 7%** of respondents who either did not respond or clearly stated that they had no fears entering the jobs market. But unfortunately, the optimism stopped there. The responses ranged from rational fears over how difficult the role itself would be and whether it would meet the expectations that the graduate themselves held, to practical fears about living on a graduate salary and moving somewhere new.

The **vast majority** of respondents expressed genuine anxieties about entering the workplace. Overwhelmingly, **over a third** of students' and graduates' biggest fear was not being good enough. Specific responses ranged from simply "capability", "imposter syndrome" and "failure" to "afraid of doing a bad job" and even more starkly "I'm afraid I won't do it well".



"I don't think workplaces understand how a bad work environment can contribute to bad mental health."

"Firstly to make errors which might lead my colleagues and boss to perceive me negatively or not favour me as an employee. Also, to realise that this job or industry is not something I want to be a part of, however, I have a commitment to uphold. Another would be if my genuine enthusiasm is not received well or doesn't align with company values. Lastly to be asked to leave because I am struggling to do the work."



Another 12% of responses centred around genuine fears about settling into the workplace and with co-workers. Some respondents expressly voiced concerns about being bullied or excluded or colleagues being "horrible" or "mean". With another 3% also worried about not being respected, taken advantage of or not taken seriously in the workplace, we found that half of the respondents were approaching the workplace with genuine fear and anxieties.

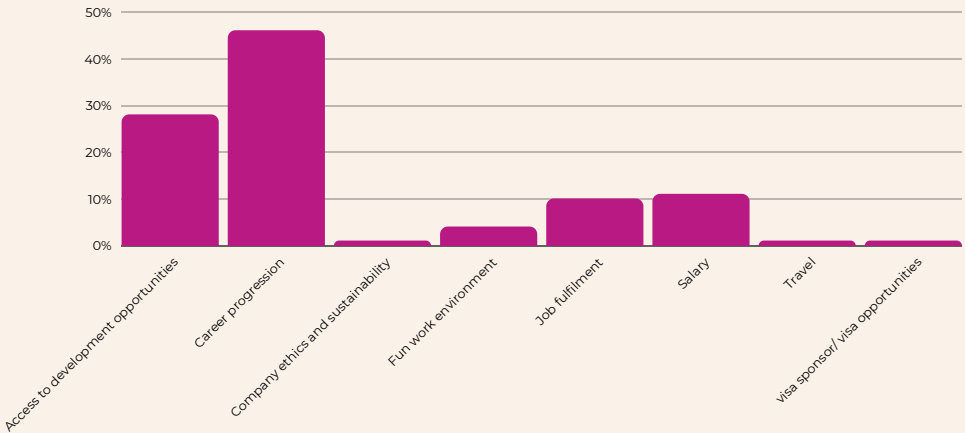
10% of respondents were concerned that they might not enjoy the role. In some cases, this went further in that the fear that the role would not meet the expectations that the student or graduate had built up during their time at university. Whilst there were not many marked differences between the genders in this section, we did observe that females were far more concerned about not enjoying the role than males (17% of females, compared with 5% of males). We also noted that Males were more worried about settling in with their co-workers than females (13% compared to 9%).

RECOMMENDATIONS / KEY LEARNINGS

On first reading of these results, it could appear that graduates of the early 2020s are fearful and anxious. But it's important to remember that we did expressly ask them what they feared. This does not mean that we should dismiss their fears. We should ask ourselves why so many new graduates fear that they won't be good enough and/or that the workplace may be hostile? Could it be that we have elevated the status of both graduates and graduate jobs to such a level as to intimidate the average graduate? And when it comes to the enjoyment factor, could we do more to demystify careers and offer opportunities to experience the workplace sooner so that graduates aren't entering the workplace blindly.

What's Important to Graduates

We asked: Which of the following options would you consider the most important when entering a graduate role?



We based the selection on responses from previous surveys. We also considered features that are often prevalent in graduate attraction campaigns (such as the opportunity to travel and a fun working environment). We found, perhaps unsurprisingly that the opportunity for career progression and training & development opportunities were by far the most important factors for graduates.

Higher salaries are often widely promoted and advertised and in some markets, it almost seems like a bidding war is taking place for the best graduates. However, this was only 3rd on our list with **less than 11%** of students saying that salary was the most important factor. This was closely followed by job fulfilment.

The opportunity to travel, a fun working environment and company ethics and sustainability were only important to a combined total of **6%** of respondents. There was a difference in the genders here though. Whilst an **even percentage** of males and females valued Salary and job fulfilment, it was **only females** who valued ethics and sustainability highly, and mainly females who were attracted to a fun working environment.

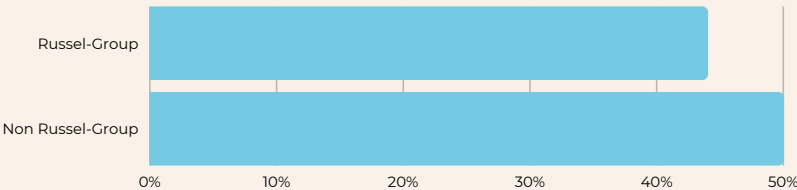
Additional FACT:

88% of all Accounting & Finance students, think that career progression is the most important aspect of a graduate job.

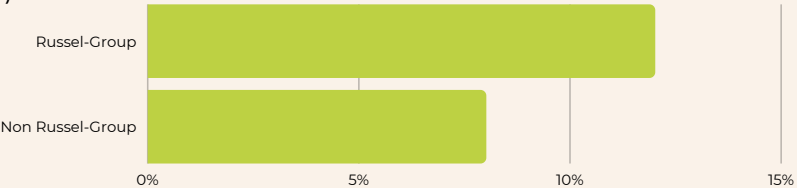
Bringing Business
+ Graduates together

We also observed a further difference in priorities when comparing Russell Group and Non-Russell Group attendees.

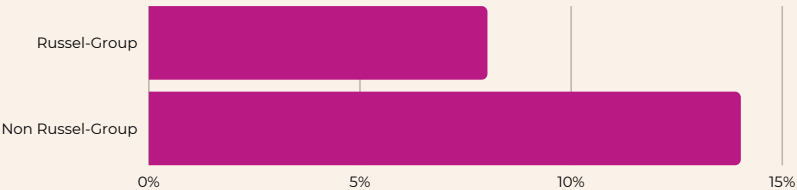
Career progression was more important to non-Russell Group attendees (50% compared to 44%)



Salary was more important to those graduating from the Russell Group (12% compared to 8%).



Those from non-Russell Group universities valued job fulfilment more than the Russell Group (14% compared to 8%)



RECOMMENDATIONS / KEY LEARNINGS:

Many organisations are already aware of the effect of using gendered language in their advertising. But if there is a gender imbalance in your organisation and you would like to attract more female applicants, you may wish to consider focusing on the working environment and your company's ethics in your advertising. Our research suggests this will appeal to more female applicants.

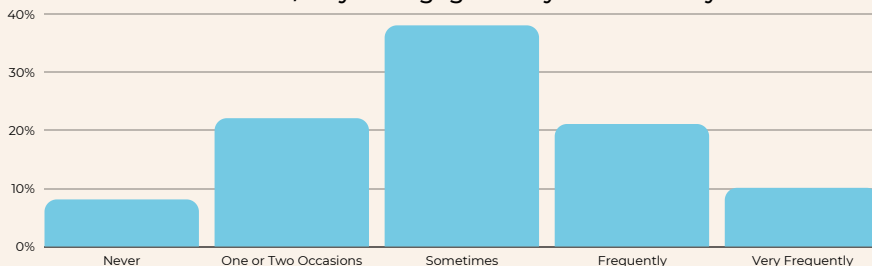
Whilst salary is important, our research suggests that explaining the progression path within your organisation and articulating the further learning & development opportunities will appeal to the majority of graduates.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Russell Group graduates are more focused on progression and salary since there is a preconception that these institutions focus more on research and traditional careers.

ENGAGEMENT WITH UNIVERSITY SERVICES

For many employers, the university careers service is the main access point when targeting students and graduates. We explored whether students are engaging with these services and how effective this has been from the students' perspective...

We asked: How often did/do you engage with your university careers team?



Some employers actively target careers teams at universities as part of their talent attraction strategies. But in the university sector, we know that this will only be effective if the students themselves actively engage with their careers teams. Our survey found that less than **30%** of respondents engaged with their careers teams Frequently or Very Frequently and that **over a quarter** of respondents rarely or never engaged with the support being offered on campus. On a positive note, almost **three quarters** of the students and graduates we asked stated that they had some kind of multiple contacts with the employability professionals on site. This is encouraging for those employers who work closely with their chosen university, suggesting that they will reach a good cross-section of talent.

However, we wanted to go further to understand how effective students found the support they were offered. Again, we were encouraged to find that the **majority** of respondents, **over 60%** found the service to be effective or very effective. **Almost 20%** however found the services to be ineffective. We invited comments which suggested that there is work to be done in offering more creative and tailored support;

The person who I saw gave me no insight as to what employers were looking for in their candidates. Additionally, they have no connections to the Law industry which was unhelpful.

Not particularly helpful except for finding you other resources to help you. Such as telling you about internet job boards etc, which once they tell you once is no longer helpful.

KEY LEARNINGS:

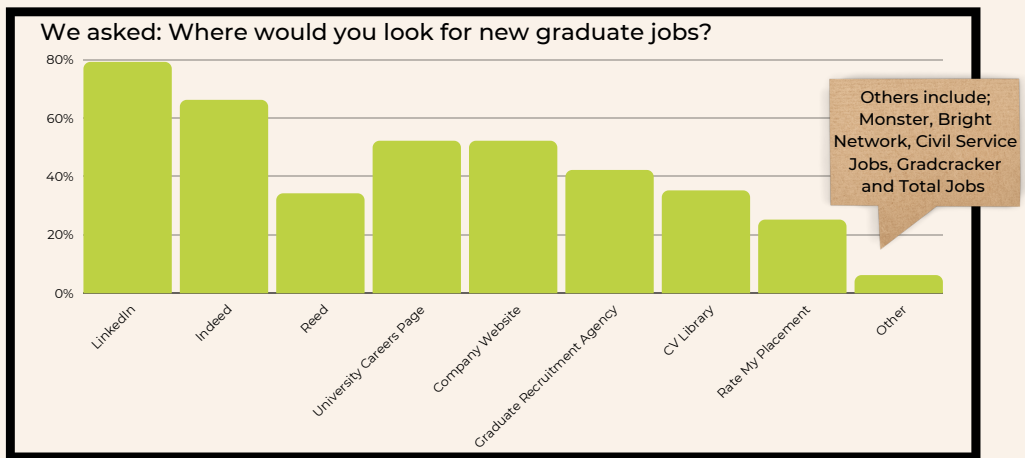
Our data shows a clear correlation between engagement and employment. Engaging students within a university setting is an acknowledged challenge. It seems like the more tailored the support, the more helpful it is perceived to be.

GRADUATE ATTRACTION AND RETENTION

How important is social media in the graduate attraction strategy? And to what extent are graduates consuming the information provided by employers on the web? Is the investment employers are making in advertising campaigns effective in securing long term commitment from graduates? This chapter explores attraction and retention further.

Where do Graduates look for work?

We asked our audience where they would usually look for graduate-level jobs and suggested a variety of social media, job boards, recruitment agencies, company websites and university services. We also allowed participants to suggest alternative methods. The majority of respondents selected multiple sources.



Almost **fourth fifths** of graduate-level job seekers are now actively using LinkedIn to look for work. This was the most popular search method quickly followed by Indeed with two-thirds of jobseekers choosing this method.

Anecdotally, however, whilst LinkedIn appears to be a popular choice, its search function does not operate as a job board and therefore it can be frustrating to uncover the right roles:

“

As someone who does not like to use LinkedIn but feels they have to, I hope that employers do not favour one site compared with another. Indeed has an excellent system and interface which I enjoy finding jobs, LinkedIn is filled with so much that the filters do not work and therefore I am stuck trailing through jobs not suited to me to find the one that is.

”

We also suggested other generic job boards such as CV Library and Reed but these were only used by **one-third** of job seekers.

Half of those looking at graduate-level jobs and placements visit company websites and the same proportion continue to utilise the university careers page.

Two-fifths of student job seekers are open to working with Specialist Graduate Recruitment Agencies (more than those using generic job boards and more than the **25%** using the specialist Rate My Placement website).

To what extent does social media presence influence a student's application?



A website poll conducted at www.step.org.uk asked which social media sites (outside of linked in) students were using for their job search. **Half** of the students stated that they do not use any social media platforms for job searching, **a quarter** suggested they might visit Facebook and a **fifth** would use Instagram for their job search.

In our survey, we asked to what extent a business' presence on social media might influence their decision to apply to work with a company. **Over half (56%)** said that social media did not influence their decision to apply for the company. In fact, only **one third (34%)** said that social media influenced them when applying. Once again, the responses were cynical about the motivations of companies using social media to promote their work environment:

"It gives the impression that they're trying to polish their image with the public"

"A lot of the time things that companies post can come off as performative (e.g. posting just to elicit a response)"

"I am more interested in the work/ reputation of the company rather than their marketing abilities"

Those who do engage with the social media presence of a business agree that it is a good way to gauge a company's culture and suggest that it means the company is "up to date".

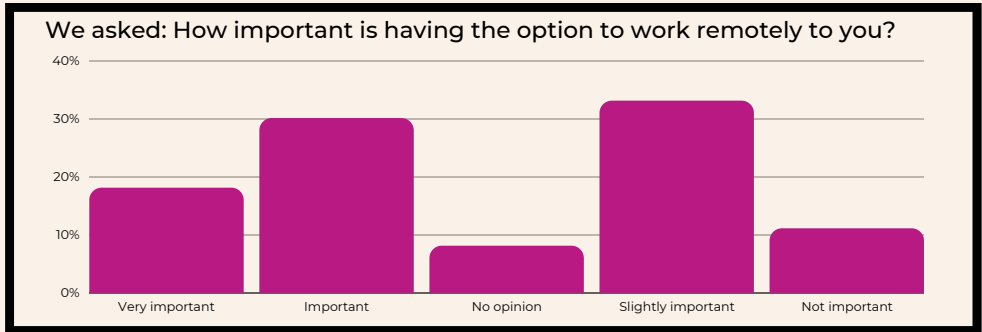
RECOMMENDATIONS / KEY LEARNINGS:

Given the rise in Social advertising and the investment that many companies are making in using social media to promote their job opportunities, the data suggests that employers should be cautious about devoting disproportionate energy to social media. This generation of graduate-level job seekers are not easily impressed and are savvy when it comes to understanding companies' motivations for putting out positive stories.

Building a strong employer brand and EVP is as important as ever. Remain authentic to your brand, use and/or create a career section on your website. But if you are a smaller business, don't think that you need to compete at the same level as a larger brand. If your content is relevant, consistent and portrays your brand honestly, this will be more effective than contrived marketing which may do more harm than good.

IMPACT OF COVID

Spend any time on LinkedIn at the moment and you will see numerous polls about working from home. Couple this with devastating stories about empty town centres and offices, we wanted to understand how important working from home is to graduates. In this section, we also consider the wider mental health aspects of graduating in a pandemic.



During the summer of 2021, we had just come to the end of lockdown. It was perhaps surprising that for **over half** of our respondents, the option to work from home was of negligible to no importance to them. And **less than a fifth** of respondents rated working from home as very important. The mass exodus away from an office/work environment clearly isn't as important to graduates as it is for those already in the workplace.

Responses ranged from a strong aversion to working from home: "I really dislike remote working and would be put off if a large number of co-workers worked remotely" to apathy: "If working remotely is part of the job being advertised, then I will capitalise on it, but if not I don't care".

We have already seen how this generation of graduates are genuinely fearful of entering the workplace, and working from home is an added anxiety: "...everyone's perspective and level of confidence are different. One may be comfortable working in their work environment, one may uncertain, and one may lack the confidence to return to a 'normal' working environment".

Ultimately though, working from home is a distraction from the very real anxiety of being unemployed as one respondent explains: "I don't really have any concerns outside of getting and keeping a job".

"With the pandemic, I am worried that someone with a degree that is a year older with no relevant experience will be overlooked for a fresh graduate who still has all of their knowledge fresh in their minds. Essentially leaving my degree to expire... I am stuck in employment limbo"

RECOMMENDATIONS / KEY LEARNINGS:

Whilst for employers who have worked through this pandemic, working from home is a hot topic, for many graduates, the prospect of finding, keeping and retaining a challenging graduate-level opportunity, is far more important. We have all had to adapt, but when rethinking workplace policies, it's important to adapt for new graduates who are inexperienced in workplace practices. We should not assume that home working will be desirable to all applicants.

CONCLUSION

It would be impossible to write a report in 2021 without mentioning the Covid-19 pandemic. We have identified a trend amongst the cohort of students and graduates entering the jobs market, post-pandemic, of genuine concerns and worries.

This is a generation of people who are worried about finding, securing, and maintaining meaningful job opportunities.

They are less likely to commit for the long term and are savvy, even sceptical about companies' social media presence. Often lacking in guidance and support, perhaps due to the inaccessibility of careers support during the pandemic, many graduates are hesitant about entering into lengthy and onerous recruitment processes, having little faith that they will be one of the chosen few to land their dream job.

But they still have dreams and aspirations to carry out meaningful work that makes a difference. Unsurprisingly, personal growth and career development is important, as is being compensated fairly for their efforts.

Employers need to focus on developing a realistic proposition where they are able to commit the time and resources to offer graduates their support and work with them to achieve their goals.

The way graduate recruitment is done hasn't really changed in a generation. The milkround which started in the 1960s where large companies skim off the cream of the crop, leaving the majority behind is still at the centre of many graduate attraction strategies. With unemployment much lower than anticipated following the pandemic, the number of available jobs at an all-time high and a genuine skills shortage caused in part by Brexit, graduates have genuine choice. They are sceptical of recruitment methods and worn down by rejection. To stand out in this context employers are going to have to work harder and smarter than ever before.



Bringing Business
+ Graduates together



@stepplacements



Step Recruitment



@stepplacements



enquires@step.org.uk



0115 871 8740

Bringing Business + Graduates together

Written by Tamsin Millns
Director and Owner of Step Recruitment
December 2021

www.step.org.uk