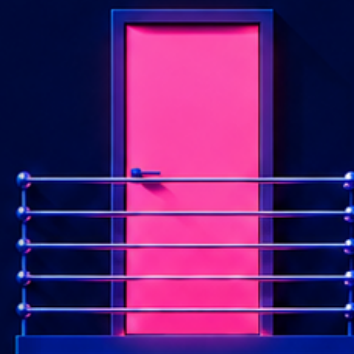


EARLY CAREERS AND SKILLS

EQUIPPING THE WORKFORCE
FOR WHAT'S NEXT

CRF's event on Wednesday 8 July 2026 explored how employers can rethink early careers strategies in response to AI, changing skills needs, labour market pressures and evolving workforce expectations. Building on **CRF's *Early Careers and Skills: Equipping the Workforce for What's Next*** research, produced in partnership with **BPP** and sponsored by **The Oxford Group**, the day combined the report's findings with perspectives from employers, education providers and labour market experts.

Together, the sessions examined the changing context for early careers, shared practical examples of organisational approaches, and considered how employers, education providers and government can work together to build stronger routes into work.

[VIEW THE **WEBINAR**](#)
[VIEW THE **DECK**](#)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Early careers remains a strategic investment.**
Despite labour market uncertainty and AI, employers continue to view early careers as critical for building future workforce capability rather than simply filling vacancies.
- **AI is changing how capability is developed, not removing the need for early careers talent.**
As routine work becomes automated, organisations need to create more deliberate opportunities for learning, judgement and professional development.
- **Human capabilities matter more than ever.**
Communication, adaptability, resilience, emotional intelligence and professional behaviours are becoming increasingly important alongside technical and AI skills.
- **Work readiness is now a shared responsibility.**
Employers are playing a growing role in helping people transition successfully into work through work experience, structured onboarding, mentoring and development.
- **Early careers should be integrated with workforce strategy.**
The most effective organisations align graduate programmes, apprenticeships and other pathways with long-term workforce planning and future skills needs.
- **Managers are central to development.**
Line managers, mentors and senior leaders play a critical role in creating learning opportunities, building confidence and helping early career talent develop professional judgement.
- **Partnerships strengthen routes into work.**
Closer collaboration between employers, education providers, government and regional networks is essential to improving access to meaningful work experience and supporting smoother transitions into employment.
- **Measuring long-term impact matters.**
Organisations are increasingly evaluating early careers success through capability, retention, progression, productivity and internal mobility rather than recruitment activity alone.

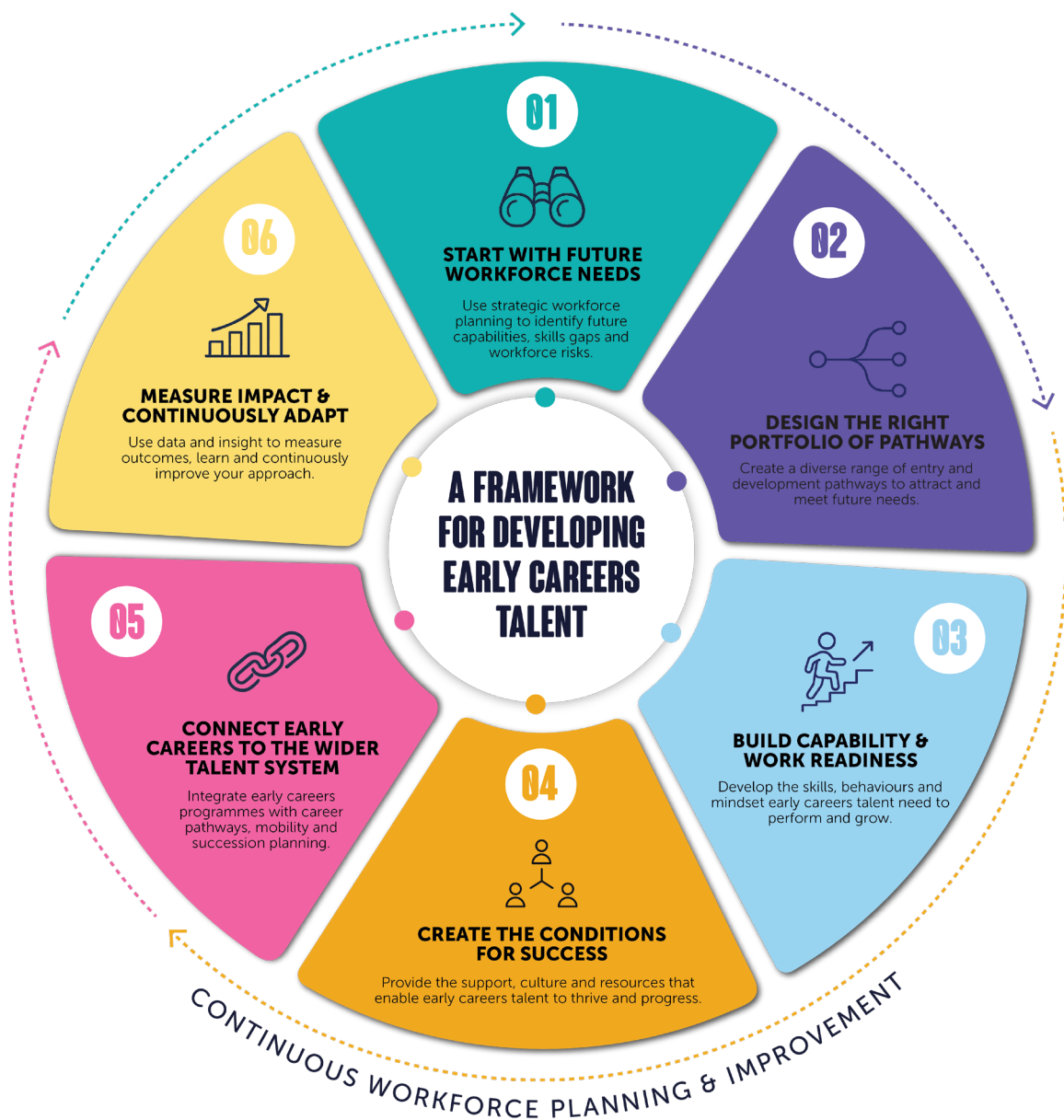
RESEARCH INSIGHTS: BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE EARLY CAREERS SYSTEM



Gillian Pillans
Research Director,
Corporate Research Forum

in LINKEDIN

Gillian Pillans presented CRF's research *Early Careers and Skills: Equipping the Workforce for What's Next*. At its centre is CRF's practical framework which emphasises that organisations should treat early careers as an integrated talent system designed to build the capabilities they will need over the longer term. The framework comprises six interconnected elements:



Further detail on the framework, supporting evidence and practical recommendations can be found in the full [*Early Careers and Skills: Equipping the Workforce for What's Next*](#) report.

THE CONTEXT FOR EARLY CAREERS



Nichola Hay MBE,
Director of Apprenticeship
Strategy and Policy, BPP

in LINKEDIN



Emma Pollard, Principal
Research Fellow, Institute
for Employment Studies

in LINKEDIN

Gillian Pillans chaired a discussion on the changing context for early careers. Drawing on policy, labour market research and practical experience, the discussion considered the barriers affecting young people's transition into work, the changing policy landscape and the role employers can play in strengthening routes into employment.

Q: What is the biggest challenge facing young people as they move from education into employment?

The transition between education and work has become significantly weaker. Fewer young people gain workplace experience before entering employment, while safeguarding requirements and changing labour market conditions have reduced opportunities for informal work exposure. As a result, many arrive with strong academic knowledge but less confidence in workplace behaviours, communication, resilience and professional expectations.

Young people are also facing wider pressures including mental health, neurodiversity, intense competition for jobs and limited professional networks. These factors are contributing to growing uncertainty about how to access employment and demonstrate the capabilities employers increasingly value.

Q: How should employers rethink their early careers strategies?

Employers should move beyond viewing graduate programmes or apprenticeships as separate initiatives and instead develop a broader portfolio of pathways aligned with future workforce needs. Alongside graduate and apprenticeship routes, employers should consider shorter work-based learning opportunities, modular learning and flexible entry routes that reflect changing skills requirements.

Apprenticeships, the Growth and Skills Levy and wider government support should be treated as strategic workforce planning tools rather than standalone funding mechanisms. The focus should remain on building future capability through a joined-up approach to workforce planning, learning and early careers.

Q: What practical role can employers play in strengthening routes into work?

Employers have an increasingly important role in rebuilding the connection between education and employment. This includes offering a wider range of work experience opportunities, developing stronger partnerships with schools, colleges and universities, and reaching young people who face additional barriers to employment.

This means moving beyond individual relationships towards more sustainable collaboration through regional partnerships, intermediary organisations and long-term engagement with education providers. Creating better routes into work is as a shared responsibility requiring employers, education providers and government to work together more systematically.

WHAT EMPLOYERS ARE REPORTING



Claire Tyler

Head of Insights and Research,
Institute of Student Employers (ISE)

in LINKEDIN

Drawing on ISE's latest employer research, Claire Tyler explored how organisations are experiencing the current early careers market in practice.

COMPETITION FOR EARLY CAREERS CONTINUES TO INTENSIFY.

Competition for graduate roles remains at record levels, with employers receiving around 140 applications per vacancy and increasing competition across apprenticeships and school leaver routes. Graduate vacancies have fallen modestly rather than collapsed, while growing numbers of graduates are also applying for non-graduate entry routes, further increasing competition.

AI IS CHANGING THE NATURE OF ENTRY-LEVEL WORK.

While 87% of employers expect AI to change entry-level roles over the next few years, they increasingly see it as reshaping tasks rather than eliminating opportunities, with administrative work declining while judgement, adaptability and the ability to work effectively alongside AI become more important. At the same time, employers continue to identify adaptability and other human capabilities as some of the biggest gaps among new entrants.

SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS INTO WORK IS BECOMING MORE IMPORTANT.

Employers reported growing concerns about workplace readiness, including professional behaviours, adaptability and the challenge of assessing genuine capability in an AI-enabled recruitment process. In response, organisations are placing renewed emphasis on face-to-face learning, on-the-job development and line manager support, with only around 8% of employers rating online learning as highly impactful for early careers development. There is also increasing concern around the wellbeing of early career employees: while around three-quarters of employers provide mental health support, far fewer are confident those interventions are truly effective.

THE EXPECTATION GAP



Emma O'Dell

Skills and Capability Director,
BPP

[in LINKEDIN](#)

Emma O'Dell explored the growing mismatch between what organisations need early-career talent to be capable of doing and the real opportunities people have had to build those capabilities before and just after entering work. Driven by AI, rising standards, and shrinking development pathways, this has become a strategic workforce and AI-adoption risk that undermines productivity, weakens talent pipelines, and threatens long-term competitiveness.

AI IS 'SENIORISING' ENTRY-LEVEL ROLES.

As automation reduces routine work, employers increasingly expect early career talent to demonstrate judgement, problem-solving, communication and the ability to work effectively alongside AI from the outset. In practice, this means organisations are increasingly expecting 22-year-olds to perform at levels once associated with 30 to 35-year-olds.

TRADITIONAL TALENT SIGNALS ARE BECOMING LESS RELIABLE.

Grade inflation and changing patterns of early work experience mean employers can no longer rely on qualifications or previous shortcuts to identify workplace-ready talent. The result is a "phantom pipeline": although the talent pool appears strong on paper, organisations continue to struggle to find candidates with the capabilities needed for increasingly complex entry-level roles.

STRATEGY SHOULD DRIVE INVESTMENT, NOT FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES.

Government incentives and external funding can support early careers, but organisations should first identify the capabilities they need to build and then determine the most effective mix of state-funded and commercially funded pathways. The question should therefore be *"What capabilities do we need, and how should we build them?"* rather than *"What can we fund?"*

REASSESSING THE EARLY CAREERS STRATEGY



Nicola Luke

Director of Early Careers,
BT

[in LINKEDIN](#)

In conversation with Gillian Pillans, Nicola Luke shared how BT is rethinking its early careers strategy and the practical challenges of designing an integrated approach within a large, complex organisation while maintaining flexibility across different business units.

Q: How is BT redesigning workforce planning to prepare for the future?

BT is moving workforce planning beyond annual planning cycles towards a three to ten-year horizon, bringing together workforce demographics, retirement risk, internal mobility, AI and future skills demand into a single strategic view. Rather than treating AI as a separate technology initiative, it is used to inform decisions about future workforce requirements, capability development and the role early careers will play in meeting them.

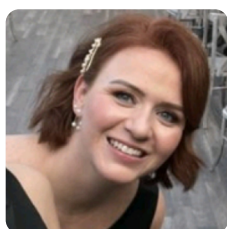
Q: What role do leaders play in developing future capability?

BT views capability development as a shared organisational responsibility rather than the remit of HR or Learning alone. Senior leaders are expected to champion future skills and talent development, while programmes increasingly focus on building resilience, curiosity and peer learning through communities and networks rather than assuming graduates arrive work-ready or can develop through formal training alone.

Q: How is BT rethinking early careers pathways?

Rather than treating graduate programmes, apprenticeships and other entry routes as separate initiatives, BT is developing a group-wide talent framework built around shared principles while allowing individual business units the flexibility to tailor programmes to their own needs. The organisation is also moving away from the assumption that future leaders will primarily come through graduate schemes, recognising that leadership and specialist talent can emerge through multiple entry routes.

EARLY CAREERS: CONNECTING WORKFORCE PLANNING AND SOCIAL IMPACT



Kellie Emery

Head of Early Careers and Employability,
Severn Trent Water

in LINKEDIN

Kellie Emery shared how Severn Trent has embedded early careers within both its long-term workforce strategy and wider social impact ambitions. Faced with significant engineering skills shortages, an ageing workforce and increasing demand for specialist capability, the organisation has taken a long-term approach to developing talent while widening access to careers across the communities it serves. Practical lessons include:

1. DESIGN EARLY CAREERS AROUND FUTURE BUSINESS RISKS, NOT CURRENT VACANCIES.

Severn Trent begins with long-term business planning and anticipated skills shortages before designing its early careers pathways. This enables the organisation to decide where capability can be recruited externally and where it must be built internally, ensuring investment directly addresses future workforce risks rather than short-term hiring needs.

2. USE EARLY CAREERS AS A DRIVER OF SOCIAL IMPACT, NOT JUST TALENT ACQUISITION.

Early careers programmes are deliberately aligned with Severn Trent's wider social impact strategy, including creating apprenticeship opportunities in areas of high deprivation and supporting young people who have experienced the care system. Treating social value and workforce capability as complementary objectives has helped strengthen both community impact and long-term talent pipelines.

3. BUILD THE TALENT MARKET WHEN IT DOESN'T ALREADY EXIST.

Severn Trent has worked with partners to develop new apprenticeship standards and training routes for specialist roles where established pipelines were unavailable. This shifts the focus from competing for scarce talent to creating future capability for the organisation and the wider sector.

4. ENGAGE WITH FUTURE TALENT EARLIER THAN TRADITIONAL RECRUITMENT ALLOWS.

Waiting until work experience or post-16 education is often too late to influence career choices. Instead, it has created a ladder of engagement through school partnerships, discovery days, workplace visits and volunteering, helping young people build awareness and confidence well before they are ready to apply for jobs.

ADAPTING TO CHANGING SKILLS DEMANDS



Laura Seiler

Director of Talent and Reward,
Norton Rose Fulbright

in LINKEDIN

In conversation with Gillian Pillans, Laura Seiler outlined how the firm is redefining the skills it values, preparing junior lawyers for evolving ways of working and embedding learning more intentionally throughout the early careers journey.

Q: How has Norton Rose Fulbright reviewed the skills needed for the future?

The firm has undertaken a comprehensive review of the capabilities needed across the business, informed by extensive consultation with partners and business services teams. While many of the core skills remain familiar, AI fluency has emerged as an increasingly important capability. Rather than creating a separate skills agenda, these capabilities have been embedded throughout learning, development and talent processes to create greater consistency across the organisation.

Q: How is AI changing the work of junior lawyers?

AI is currently transforming individual legal tasks, with wider workflow transformation expected over time. Rather than reducing the need for early careers talent, this is shifting the focus of entry-level work towards higher-value activities. Routine tasks may increasingly be supported by AI, creating greater opportunities for junior lawyers to contribute through judgement, commercial thinking and problem-solving much earlier in their careers.

Q: How are learning and development programmes evolving?

Greater emphasis is being placed on structured learning rather than assuming people will simply learn through observation or experience alone. Simulations, practical exercises such as verifying AI outputs and opportunities to test judgement are becoming increasingly important as ways to recreate learning experiences that may previously have developed naturally through routine work.

Q: How do you build support for changes to recruitment and assessment?

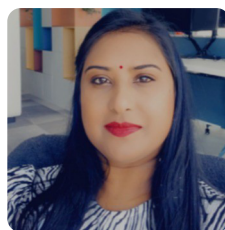
Introducing new assessment approaches, such as a gamified assessment, has required close engagement with partners and clear use of evidence. Sharing data on candidate performance and explaining how different assessment methods relate to future capability requirements has helped build confidence in changes to the recruitment processes.

ACCELERATING THE GROWTH OF EARLY CAREERS TALENT



Michelle Bury
Global Head of Learning and Development,
Keyloop

[in LINKEDIN](#)



Desarai Govender-Deokumar
Learning and Development Manager, Keyloop

[in LINKEDIN](#)

Michelle Bury and Desarai Govender-Deokumar shared how Keyloop has developed its High-Potential Programme to accelerate the growth of early career talent. The programme aims to identify individuals with strong potential early in their careers and provide the experiences, support and exposure needed to prepare them for future leadership and specialist roles. Practical lessons include:

1. DESIGN DEVELOPMENT AROUND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE, NOT TRAINING CONTENT.

Keyloop's programme is built around stretch assignments, structured reflection, executive exposure and real business challenges over a 24-month journey, rather than a series of training modules. This creates sustained changes in confidence, ownership and contribution rather than simply transferring knowledge.

2. TEACH PEOPLE HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE MENTEES, NOT JUST ASSIGN MENTORS.

Keyloop explicitly develops participants' ability to build and manage mentoring relationships by helping them identify their development needs and seek support proactively. This strengthens individual ownership of development while increasing the long-term value of mentoring.

3. MAKE MANAGERS CO-OWNERS OF DEVELOPMENT.

Managers play an active role in identifying high-potential talent, embedding development into day-to-day work and advocating for participants throughout the programme.

4. BUILD STRETCH AND EXECUTIVE VISIBILITY INTO THE PROGRAMME BY DESIGN.

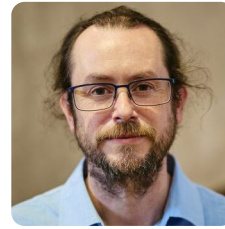
Participants regularly work on real business challenges, present ideas to senior leaders and conclude the programme by sharing their development journey with the executive team. These high-profile experiences both accelerate development and provide meaningful evidence of readiness for future progression.

BUILDING BETTER ROUTES INTO WORK



Emma Pollard
Principal Research Fellow,
Institute for
Employment Studies

[in LINKEDIN](#)



James Robson, Oxford
University Centre on
Skills, Knowledge and
Organisational Performance

[in LINKEDIN](#)

The closing panel brought together perspectives from research, policy and employer practice to explore how stronger routes into work can be created for young people.

Q: What role should employers play in the wider skills system?

Employers need to move beyond being passive consumers of talent and become active partners in developing future workforce capability. This means working with schools, colleges, universities and regional skills networks to shape pathways into work rather than simply recruiting from them once individuals are job-ready.

Q: How should organisations rethink the early careers recruitment experience?

Recruitment should be viewed as part of the development journey rather than simply a selection process. Timely communication, constructive feedback and using technology to create a more human experience for candidates, particularly in high-volume recruitment where many young people receive little or no response.

Q: How can employers help young people make better career decisions?

Employers should see themselves as guides as well as recruiters, helping young people understand career pathways, workplace expectations and the realities of different occupations before they apply. Providing meaningful work experience, earlier engagement and clearer information enable individuals to make better-informed choices while improving the quality of future talent pipelines.

UPCOMING EVENTS

FUTURE-READY TALENT MANAGEMENT: ADAPTING APPROACHES TO A NEW REALITY

This three-day online programme explores how organisations can redesign talent strategies for a changing business environment, equipping participants with practical tools to align talent, workforce planning and AI with long-term business priorities.

DATES: 17–19 November 2026 (online), plus a six-month follow-on session

TIME: 9:00–12:30 GMT each day

WHO IT'S FOR: Heads of Talent, Talent Partners, Talent Consultants, Senior HR Business Partners and senior HR professionals working at a strategic level

TOPICS INCLUDE: Strategic workforce planning, AI and the future of talent, skills-based approaches, talent mobility, workforce flexibility, future careers and action planning

FACILITATOR: Prof. Nick Kemsley, Associate, Corporate Research Forum

COST: £1,750 + VAT (CRF members) | £2,625 + VAT (non-members)

[Find out more or register your interest.](#)

FURTHER READING

Early Careers and Skills: Equipping the Workforce for What's Next
CRF Research Report (2026)

Future-Ready Talent Management
CRF Research Report (2025)