Usage guidelines

Ensuring the future workforce has the skills it needs to thrive

With A-Level results day now behind us, many students are getting ready for their next education challenge at university. However, for others it is now time to start looking for their first job, and to test the skills and knowledge learned in school in the workplace. Results and qualifications are what future employers can learn about the applicant on paper, but more often than not what they are looking for goes way beyond. Soft skills, the willingness to keep learning on the job and the ability to adapt are becoming more and more a factor hiring organisations are looking for.

From an employer's perspective, qualifications provide a benchmark of attainment. There are a range of ways that individuals can work through programmes which not only provide desirable qualifications but are also aligned with industry requirements. For example, there are programmes which include placement and authentic work opportunities, apprenticeship programmes and increasingly academic programmes are being written in collaboration with industry practitioners and relevant professional bodies. Therefore, contemporary courses can be appealing because they are not only focused on academic theory and perspectives but are integrating industry knowledge and skills through the design and content of the curriculum as well as module assessments.

Arguably, many softer skills can be 'measured' through opportunities which are increasingly available in contemporary programmes. For example, passion for a subject or role can be identified through the levels of engagement of individuals, whether this is through applications and interviews for course entry or professional roles. Similarly, work ethic can be identified and acknowledged through the tenacity and resilience that learners and employees show.

Professional stories are a way of capturing these elements of ourselves. By reflecting on passions we have for a subject area and/or role, the ways in which we have continued to strive in challenging times and situations and how we have worked through situations and found strategies to help us to be successful, however that looks in particular situations, is a powerful way in which we are increasingly articulating these skills.

We see these professional development 'stories' all around us in blog posts, testimonials and through the achievement of awards. We also see these professional storytelling opportunities through reflective elements of programmes whereby individuals consider not only what they have learnt, but also how this learning has taken place and what the implications may be going forward, either in terms of their personal and/or professional goals and aspirations.

The labour market is changing at a rapid speed. Whilst subject knowledge and the ability to demonstrate a range of skills continues to be important, there are other aspects of professional competencies and attitudes which are increasingly relevant for today's volatile, unpredictable and uncertain environment.

Looking ahead, there are questions about what the labour market will look like, including the types of roles available and the knowledge and skills required for those roles and individuals and organisations need to be able to respond to those uncertainties by thinking about and being open to not only what subject knowledge and skills they have, but also their attitudes and willingness to adapt to a range of scenarios, whether this is location and patterns of work, technological enhancements in their daily roles, for instance.

There are increasing trajectories into work for people at all stages of their lives. For school leavers and students this may be being more informed about continuing in full-time education, the availability of apprenticeships or shorter professional courses aligned to specific roles, for instance. There are also those individuals who have a significant amount of work experience in one sector or industry and want to change their trajectory. Here, we are talking about lifelong learning, and that learning might happen in different ways, not only through a degree, but a range of other learning opportunities.

This is part of a bigger conversation about how we inform people about what is meant by learning and considering for what purpose we are learning and how that learning looks. Are we learning knowledge to enable us to perform a particular job? Are we developing skills and knowledge to enable us to better understand or undertake aspects of our work? Are we developing ourselves, through a subject area, to enable us to be more professionally agile?

The past few years have been significant in terms of the notion of 'work' and what motivates people to work and learn. We are seeing organisations experiment with different working weeks and carefully considering the benefits they provide to employees. However, through the pandemic we were also seeing examples of societal softer skills whereby individuals and organisations were discussing and commenting on the importance of enabling human connection, kindness and balance of work and other aspects of our lives.

There is a danger that as we learn to live with Covid-19, we ignore those discussions. The question of how organisations can become more appealing as place to learn and work, is not an easy one to answer as there isn't a single checklist which will suit all organisations. Rather, this is the skill of critical and contemplative thought, whereby different organisations can reflect back on what is being learnt as a result of their experiences of working through the issues of the past few years and consider what their core values are as an organisation, and how this translates into aspects of the culture, environment and employer packages.

Far from being an easy solution, this approach requires organisations to be reflective, open to genuine communication and discussion about what would make their organisation a more appealing place for their current employees to learn and work, as well as attracting employees in the future.