

3 Essential career conversations to have with your new graduate recruits

The transition from student life to a professional environment can be a bewildering journey for recent graduates. They are suddenly immersed in a world where expectations are markedly different, the stakes are higher, and the rules of engagement are complex.

Fostering a welcoming environment for these new employees is key. So, what type of conversations should you be having with your new graduate recruits?

1. “Understanding the Big Picture”

How well does your graduate recruit grasp the broader vision of your organisation? Can they articulate your business’s mission, its purpose, and how their role fits within that framework? These are questions you need to ask yourself before initiating this conversation.

Begin by clearly articulating your business’s mission and vision. Explain how their role contributes to this bigger picture and why their work is essential. This conversation can help establish a sense of belonging and purpose, two critical aspects that drive employee engagement and productivity.

I remember one new recruit I coached, an exceptional young woman brimming with talent. However, she struggled to understand how her role as a software engineer could impact the broader objectives of her company. Through ongoing conversations, her manager helped her visualise how her work was vital in shaping the company's innovative products. She blossomed, contributing to key projects and later earning a leadership position within her team.

2. "Setting and Managing Expectations"

A significant cause of early career stress is unrealistic or unclarified expectations. Define expectations clearly, including the specifics of their role, performance metrics, and goals. Beyond this, discuss expectations related to professional conduct, communication, and decision-making. One graduate I know, who was initially overwhelmed by his new job, found stability and success once his manager took the time to outline explicit expectations.

It's important to manage expectations around career development too. One of the challenges you may face is that your graduate recruits may be looking for a clear career path. They may be looking for the career equivalent of a satnav. They may be looking to follow a path that someone else designed, with pre-programmed routes and destinations. After all, that is what they are used to. Until now, their development has been in the education system where there is a clear path. In school, every year there are some clear milestones (exams). If they pass them, they get 'promoted' by moving up to a higher class. At university the same pattern follows. They pass exams at the end of the year; they go up a year. When they pass their exams at the end of the final year, they get their degree – a clear sign of progress and achievement accompanied by a new status with letters after their name.

In many organisations, that is not the way careers progress. These days, organisation structures are flatter and there are fewer opportunities for promotion. The ladder, if it's still there, may be harder to see and tougher to climb. In today's world, where organisations are constantly changing, career paths are more agile. Career development these days is much more like orienteering. It's about the employee taking the lead on deciding where they want to go and how they're going to get there.

Encourage your graduate recruit to think about career development as a journey rather than a ladder. To assist with this shift in thinking, I encourage you to stop defining career progression in terms of job titles, grades and promotions. Instead, focus on increasing their employability and enjoyability. Employability is their capabilities, skills, knowledge, experiences, achievements and personal attributes. Enjoyability is their personal experience of their working life and how much satisfaction they gain from that.

3. "Planning for Career Growth"

Every company I know promotes itself as offering 'great career progression.' This may help you to hire rock stars, but if the experience of those rock stars is a lack of growth, keeping them proves to be difficult. Make a point to discuss growth and development early and regularly. Some areas to discuss include:

Where they're at. How do they feel about their new job and career situation? What are they happy with? What would they like to change?

What's important to them in their career. What skills do they hope to acquire? What kind of activities do they enjoy most? What are their values in relation to work? What kind of work environment do they prefer? What kind of people do they enjoy working with?

What success looks like for them. What kind of activities would they like to be doing on a day-to-day basis? Where would they be working in terms of geography or location? What kinds of responsibilities would they have? What kinds of outcomes and deliverables would they be producing? Who would they be working with and for?

According to LinkedIn's 2018 Workforce Learning Report, 94% of employees would stay at a company longer if it invested in their career. One of my mentees, a promising consultant, nearly left her job before a discussion on career growth with her director. Following this, she felt valued, engaged, and began delivering some of her best work.

Finally, remember these conversations are not one-offs but should be revisited over time. As leaders, it's your responsibility to foster a climate where your graduate recruits feel they can express their thoughts, hopes, and concerns openly. Through these conversations, you'll be investing not only in their future but the future of your organisation.

After all, who knows which of these new graduate recruits will come to shape the next great wave of business innovation?

Antoinette Oglethorpe is author of *Confident Career Conversations: Empower Your Employees for Career Growth and Retention* published by Rethink Press.

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