

Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy

1. Forewords

Rt Hon Justine Greening, former Secretary of State for Education and Chair of the Purpose Coalition

Nick Forbes CBE, Chair of the Breaking Down Barriers Commission and former member of Keir Starmer's Shadow Cabinet

2. Executive Summary

3. Best Practice Insights

3.1 Outreach

School Outreach

Higher Education Engagement

Working in Partnership

3.2 Access

Work Experience

Internships and Apprenticeships

Student mentoring

Targeted initiatives

3.3 Recruitment

Contextualised Recruitment

Inclusive Recruitment Practices

Raising awareness and advertising

Partnership

3.4 Progression

Skills Development

Employee mentoring

Cultural attitudes

4. Recommendations

1. Forewords

Rt Hon Justine Greening, former Secretary of State for Education and Chair of the Purpose Coalition

Accountancy was the starting point for my career. For someone like me, from a northern working-class background, I was apprehensive about joining the profession. In fact it rewarded me with a host of great opportunities.

Amongst the many things I learned, it gave me an understanding of business and finance, encouraged me always to deep dive into the detail and taught me the importance of team-building. These are all skills for life, and ones I have used almost every day in my subsequent career in politics and in setting up the Purpose Coalition.

Many accountancy firms are already engaged in the hard yards of identifying and understanding the barriers that those from backgrounds like mine, or from underrepresented groups, can face in entering the profession and how the sector can attract and retain those with the potential to have rewarding and lucrative careers in it. There is still much work to be done.

This report is the result of our Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project which brought together eleven of the UK's leading accountancy firms to consider how to boost social mobility and drive opportunity within the sector. Through a series of roundtable discussions, they identified examples of best practice in four key elements - outreach, access, recruitment and progression - and where in those areas challenges still remain. It was important that a number of higher education institutions also participated in the sessions, fostering a deeper understanding of how closer collaboration can develop the accountancy talent pipeline.

Based on the examples of best practice featured, we have drawn up a set of strategic recommendations that can turbocharge the accountancy sector's ambition to attract and retain the best talent. These solutions are based on participants' experience of what works well and are designed to address the challenges that many of them felt were holding back the sector's ability to attract the brightest and best from every background, not just those with the family connections or social networks that help them get on. Critically, there is an emphasis on data and measurement which shows us where there still are gaps in opportunity and where we need to take action.

From driving growth and advocating for financial transparency to fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, accountancy is a crucial sector for the economy and integral to the country's financial system. But it must be a sector which reflects our communities, supporting authentic equal opportunity across the profession.

I hope that the project's work will serve as an important contribution to creating a more inclusive industry. I believe that it will help to ensure that good practice is implemented much more widely and support firms to drive their social impact agendas further and faster.

Nick Forbes CBE, Chair of the Breaking Down Barriers Commission and former member of Keir Starmer's Shadow Cabinet

Society increasingly expects that businesses should be a force for good and in recent times there has been an opportunity for them to redefine their role, over and above their core commercial function. The best purpose-led businesses can drive significant social impact, delivering positive results for their colleagues, clients and the communities they serve.

As a sector critical to the economy, accountancy – and professional services more generally - has an important part to play in driving this change. Offering varied and rewarding careers, accountancy is integral to our financial system but also to thousands of other businesses in different sectors up and down the country.

This project has examined in great detail how to break down the barriers that still prevent too many people from accessing the profession. The participating accountancy firms have challenged existing preconceptions and developed a wealth of best practice which is driving positive change. The solutions they have drawn up can actively shape the future of the industry.

Wider adoption of this best practice through proactive engagement will provide the sector with a talent pipeline from areas of socioeconomic disadvantage and from underrepresented groups that better reflects the communities that it serves, developing a more dynamic and diverse workforce that research shows has a wider perspective and makes better decisions as a result.

The project has demonstrated how collaborative action can drive progress – those that demonstrate the most effective social impact will attract the largest talent pool. I hope that it will also send a message that widening access to opportunity not only makes good business sense but is the right thing to do.

2. Executive Summary

The accountancy profession plays a vital role in both the UK's economy and society at large. From driving economic growth and advocating for financial transparency to fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, the sector is a cornerstone of the country's financial system.

Accountants are crucial in supporting businesses to manage their finances effectively. Providing expert advice enables businesses to responsibly manage their finances and make informed financial decisions to contribute positively to economic growth, with this expertise currently particularly valuable in supporting the UK's businesses and entrepreneurs through periods of economic turbulence.

The importance of having a financial system in the UK that not only drives forward the economy, but also inspires trust in the public, cannot be underestimated. As part of their work preparing financial reports and carrying out audits, accountants build trust through a focus on transparency and accuracy.

The accountancy sector is also fundamental in ensuring that businesses and individuals meet their tax obligations, which in turn contributes to wider society by helping to fund essential public services.

In addition to advising large, well-established companies on financial matters, accountants are invaluable in promoting entrepreneurship and new businesses in the UK. Through the provision of advice on financial matters including investment, budgeting and planning, the accountancy sector enhances financial literacy in new businesses and individuals, empowering them to make the right financial decisions that will help their company grow.

With more than 83,000 accountants currently employed in the UK, the accountancy sector is a major employer in the country's economy, providing those who choose to enter the profession with a wealth of opportunities for training and progression.

However, ensuring that opportunities within the accountancy profession are equally accessible to all remains a significant challenge for the sector. People from diverse backgrounds and groups that are traditionally underrepresented within the profession disproportionately face challenges in reaching outreach, access, recruitment and progression opportunities.

Outreach interventions to attract new talent into the accountancy sector are often not reaching social mobility cold-spots, meaning that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are unable to gain exposure and insight into the profession.

Internship and work experience opportunities are widespread at UK accountancy firms but ensuring that people from underrepresented groups can access these opportunities remains an issue. Unpaid work experience or summer internship programmes are by nature less likely to be accessed by those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds due to the financial barriers they might pose.

While many accountancy firms are increasingly adopting inclusive hiring practices to widen the diversity of their talent pool, a number of barriers remain in this area. A significant focus on educational backgrounds and credentials, rather than on the whole individual, is still prevalent among decision makers on recruitment in many firms, with unconscious biases presenting a major barrier to entering the accountancy profession for those from underrepresented groups.

Disparities in those who progress within the sector once they have entered the accountancy profession demonstrate the need for change in this area. Whether it is through a lack of access to experiencing an office culture or from facing challenges fitting into a profession which has not adapted to individuals' specific needs, such as disabilities or neurodivergence, accountancy companies have an opportunity to address factors which contribute to inequalities in progression rates.

By nature, a fast-paced and high-pressured profession, the accountancy sector faces further challenges in balancing the time constraints on its personnel with the desire to drive change that will enhance the social impact of the accountancy sector.

The Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project, chaired by Rt Hon Justine Greening, who began her career as an accountant, works with a number of the UK's top accountancy firms to identify innovative and transformational solutions to some of these barriers to opportunity that are currently so prevalent throughout the sector.

3. Best Practice Roundtable Insights

The Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project brings together eleven of the UK's leading accountancy firms, with the aim of developing strategies that will drive opportunity within the sector.

The project is chaired by Rt Hon Justine Greening, who has worked closely with the firms involved to support the accountancy sector to lead the way in driving forward social mobility and opportunity by identifying ways to ensure that best practice in individual firms is implemented more widely.

In a series of roundtable discussions, participating firms have identified areas of best practice and challenges to collaboratively find impactful solutions to the barriers to entering and progressing in the accountancy profession. The roundtables focused on four key areas - Outreach, Access, Recruitment and Progression - covering every aspect of an individual's journey to becoming an accountant.

The Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project is made up of the following firms:

- AAB
- Albert Goodman
- Crowe UK
- Dains Accountants
- Forvis Mazars
- Gerald Edelman
- HaysMac
- James Cowper Kreston
- Price Bailey
- Rouse Partners
- Saffery

Higher education institutions were also represented at the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy roundtables to foster closer collaboration between every aspect of the accountancy talent pipeline. Liverpool John Moores University, Royal Holloway, University of London, Southampton Solent University, the University of Salford, the University of Southampton and the University of the West of England's participation in the project ensures that the earliest stages of a person's route to an accountancy career are considered as part of the drive towards creating a more inclusive and equal industry.

The findings of these roundtable discussions are set out in Section 3, which gathers the insights offered by the participating firms on the barriers to achieving equality of opportunity in the accountancy sector. By identifying these challenges, the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project can target recommendations and strategies to drive impactful change.

In addition to the challenges within the profession, it is important to note the extensive good practice that is already being demonstrated by each participating accountancy firm as part of efforts to enhance their social impact. Section 3 also highlights case studies of examples of best practice in each firm, shining a light on the firms' commitment to delivering transformational change across the profession.

3.1 Outreach

Outreach is the starting point in attracting talented young people into the accountancy profession. Ensuring that early careers opportunities to gain insight into life as an accountant and receive advice on routes into the sector are accessible to all is vital in developing a diverse talent pipeline that runs through the accountancy profession as a whole.

Firms that carry out outreach interventions in their local schools, universities and communities have the opportunity to play an essential role in widening access to the accountancy profession to as diverse a talent pool as possible. By targeting this work at areas which are traditionally underrepresented within the sector, accountancy firms can reach a more diverse pool of potential candidates, which can only be of benefit to the industry at large by offering new perspectives and ideas that can drive the profession forward.

Attraction is increasingly a major challenge for accountancy firms when recruiting new graduates. Strategic outreach initiatives have the potential to break down preconceptions about the accountancy profession and therefore encourage young people from a wide range of backgrounds to consider a career in accounting.

Furthermore, by working closely with schools and higher education institutions, accountancy firms have the opportunity to actively shape the profession so that the skills and attributes firms require from the next generation of accountants can be fostered from the earliest stages of their careers.

3.1.1 School Outreach

School outreach programmes are in place at the majority of the firms participating in the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project. With a focus on providing insights into the profession and breaking down many of the negative preconceptions that are contributing to a fall in new graduates entering the accountancy sector, many of the firms involved with the project aim to inspire and encourage school students to consider a career in accountancy.

There was consensus among the participating firms that providing opportunities that offer taster moments or first-hand experience of accountancy firms and their offices are invaluable in raising aspirations and encouraging students to imagine themselves working in the sector. Many of the firms either go into local schools to talk about careers in accountancy and dispel negative perceptions or offer school pupils the opportunity to visit their offices, which for many is often the first experience they have had of exposure to an office environment.

The higher education sector also plays a part in school outreach projects. Universities participating in the project explained that they invite schools to their campuses to meet and speak with academics and representatives from firms, such as those in the accountancy sector.

Throughout the roundtable discussions, participating firms displayed a strong understanding of the importance of having the right company representatives to engage with students. A number of firms outlined the ways in which they engage their younger or more recently qualified employees in their outreach work to share their first-hand experiences of training and recruitment.

A focus on engaging employees who come from diverse backgrounds was also discussed as an impactful way of engaging young people from traditionally underrepresented groups within the accountancy sector. This is particularly important when considering how the accountancy sector must work to link up every aspect of its social mobility efforts so that those who are engaging with outreach

programmes are those who also progress through the talent pipeline to the point of reaching senior roles. By providing young people with the opportunity to speak directly with accountants from similar backgrounds to their own, students are provided with visible evidence of what they can achieve within the industry.

Mentoring is another aspect of school outreach which is an area of focus for many accountancy firms. Firms are demonstrating a strong understanding of the importance of meaningful outreach work from the earliest possible stage, with some beginning mentoring programmes twelve months before a young person begins university to support with the successful transition into their higher education accountancy studies.

Another aspect of the firms' school outreach initiatives that represents the changing dynamics within the accountancy sector is the need to attract Gen-Z students. Developing an understanding of the ways in which younger generations typically engage is vital in attracting new people to the profession, and many firms are leading the way on successfully adapting their outreach approach to the new environment. Firms involved in the roundtable discussions spoke of measures including day in the life videos, social media content and webinars so that young people can access advice and information about the accountancy profession on their own terms.

Furthermore, a number of firms have identified the importance of parental engagement in attracting young people to the accountancy profession. With parents becoming more involved in their child's higher education decisions, many firms are now delivering targeted outreach work that involves parents, for example by inviting both students and their parents to school leaver and careers events so that they too can gain an understanding of the progression routes into accountancy.

Targeting outreach work at the most disadvantaged communities is essential in widening access to the profession. Firms participating in the discussions outlined their use of local knowledge and data on Free School Meals to identify schools in which they can have the most impact in extending opportunity and access to the accountancy profession.

Firms' use of external partners and organisations to facilitate their outreach work into schools should also be highlighted. By working in partnership with schemes such as the Rise Initiative (championed by ICAEW) to utilise their expertise in school outreach, a number of participating firms are increasing their capacity to work with young people from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds.

Case Studies

Saffery, a chartered accountant and business advice firm with nine offices across the UK, hosts Earn and Learn events in its offices to inspire young people within its local communities to consider accountancy as a profession.

Pupils and their parents are invited to visit the firm's offices to meet colleagues from different levels across the business and listen to presentations about routes into a career at Saffery.

By targeting these events at pupils who are considering their post A-level options, Saffery provides outreach intervention at a critical time in a pupil's career development. These events provide the company with an opportunity to inspire and engage pupils and provide transparency about how they can enter the profession.

With offices in fourteen locations across the UK, **Forvis Mazar** is leading by example in engaging parents in their child's early career decisions.

Office open evenings are open to both students and their parents or carers to ensure that both parties can gain an understanding of the routes to progression in the accountancy profession.

By encouraging parents and carers to join their children in attending office open evenings, Forvis Mazar is fostering transparency around the accountancy profession and ensuring that young people who may not have any experience of higher education or an office environment feel confident to come into a workplace with the support of their parents.

Crowe UK is a leading accountancy firm offering a range of financial advisory services to its clients.

Recognising the limitations on many of its employees' time due to the high-pressured nature of its work, Crowe UK is a good example of how accountancy firms can utilise the expertise of external organisations to ensure that they can widen their social impact and foster opportunity for all.

For example, through its work with Rise, Crowe UK runs school workshops in its local communities, with a focus particularly on areas of socioeconomic disadvantage or where young people traditionally do not consider accountancy as a profession.

3.1.2 Higher Education Engagement

Higher education institutions must be a part of the conversation around widening opportunity within the accountancy sector.

Many firms within the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project are engaging with universities in their local communities to inspire young people from a wider range of backgrounds and support higher education institutions to prepare young people to fill and succeed in the roles they will occupy when they enter the profession.

Examples of outreach with higher education institutions currently carried out by participating firms include attending university open days and careers fairs and participating in employer events that give students the opportunity to speak directly with partners and employees within leading accountancy firms.

Recognising the importance of technology in engaging young people, many firms are now using podcasts and social media to provide further insight and advice on how to enter a career as an accountant. These interventions are particularly significant for young people who may be the first in their family to attend university, providing opportunities for them to imagine themselves in a specific profession or workplace environment.

Many accountancy firms are working closely with universities to support students to successfully enter the profession. Initiatives such as mock assessment centres and running pro bono clinics are essential in opening up opportunities for students who may not otherwise have the opportunity to gain insight into the reality of the sector.

Case Studies

Partnership with local universities is an essential aspect of **James Cowper Kreston's** outreach work.

The firm has developed close relationships with its nearby universities over a number of years, attending careers fairs and running targeted events such as Q&A sessions to inspire and engage students who are aspiring to a career in accountancy.

Crowe UK's work with the 93% Club to deliver targeted outreach initiatives at the University of Bristol has worked effectively, with the firm now turning its attention to expanding this work to its other offices across the UK.

As part of its partnership with the 93% Club, Crowe UK runs in-person career roundtables, sharing advice on key areas such as application processes, corporate etiquette and a day in the life at the company, so that all students have access to valuable insights into the profession.

3.1.3 Working in Partnership

A multitude of organisations exist that have the expertise and capacity to support accountancy firms in delivering impactful outreach initiatives, while at the same time balancing the constraints on time and resources that come with the high-pressured nature of accounting work.

Firms participating in the roundtable discussions spoke of a wide range of partnerships with foundations, charities, and organisations which are supporting them to ensure that their outreach projects are targeted at the people who will benefit from them the most.

For example, organisations such as the ICAS Foundation, London Youth, IntoUniversity, the 93% Club, and 10,000 Black Interns offer valuable expertise that accountancy firms should look to benefit from in their drive to widen opportunity, diversity and social mobility within the sector.

Case Studies

Albert Goodman's partnership with the 10,000 Black Interns Foundation is delivering significant change. The Foundation aims to offer 10,000 internships to black and black heritage students and graduates across a five-year period to create greater opportunity for those from underrepresented backgrounds.

The firm hired an intern through the Foundation in 2024 and has pledged to take its work even further this year by offering an additional three internships to expand the opportunity to gain access to the accountancy profession.

As a mid-tier accountancy firm with around 180 employees, **Gerald Edelman** is conscious of the need to balance its desire to drive forward social mobility within the sector with its day-to-day accountancy work.

A long-standing partnership with London Youth provides the firm with the opportunity to deliver transformative outreach interventions to young people who traditionally experience barriers to gaining opportunity and insight into professions such as accountancy.

By holding events such as employability days and office visits, Gerald Edelman provides young people from areas of socioeconomic disadvantage with the opportunity to speak directly with those within the firm and gain insight into pathways into the profession.

AAB is an accounting and business advisory firm based in both the UK and overseas.

The firm works in partnership with the ICAS Foundation, with a strong focus on social mobility. Students who participate in the programme are provided with mentoring, support and advice on entering the accountancy profession.

As part of its efforts to ensure that its outreach interventions follow through to every aspect of the talent pipeline, AAB works with the ICAS Foundation to provide guaranteed interviews for foundation students, ensuring that young people from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds are able to access opportunity within the sector.

3.1.4 Challenges

In addition to the many impactful outreach initiatives being implemented by accountancy firms, the participating firms in the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project also highlighted the challenges they are experiencing in widening the scale of their outreach work.

One of the most frequently raised challenges to embedding outreach initiatives more widely throughout the accountancy sector was the constraints on time and resources from employees within the accountancy firms. The pressured nature of the accountancy sector and the need to deliver a high-quality of service for the firms' clients means that individuals within accountancy firms often lack the time needed to dedicate to creating opportunities for change within the profession.

While some firms are tackling this issue by providing all colleagues with dedicated volunteering days on top of their annual leave allocation, this is not a practice that is currently widespread within the industry.

All firms participating in the roundtable discussions are delivering vital outreach initiatives to local schools and universities in their communities. However, this outreach is not always targeted at underrepresented groups within the accountancy profession and some firms highlighted the challenges they experience in reaching the individuals who face greater barriers to accessing opportunity. Developing a greater understanding and strategy of how to ensure this outreach is delivered directly to those who need these opportunities most should be a significant area of focus for the accountancy profession as a whole.

The numerous partnerships between accountancy firms and external organisations to deliver impactful outreach initiatives are examples of effective outreach work that other firms should look to emulate. However, challenges around developing relationships with schools and universities were raised during the roundtable discussions. Barriers including the time constraints on educators and high turnover rates within educational establishments and recruitment departments were highlighted as obstacles in building networks within local communities that can work to deliver outreach opportunities.

3.2 Access

Ensuring that the opportunities to access the right advice and experiences and advice around the accountancy sector is an essential follow-up to outreach initiatives carried out in schools and universities. It is vital that those young people who are inspired to enter the accountancy profession

are able to access equal opportunities to gain insights that will benefit them when applying for roles at the recruitment stage.

Opportunities such as work experience programmes, internships, mentoring schemes, apprenticeships and summer schools are essential in offering students the chance to gain a greater understanding of the reality of working as an accountant and make an informed decision about whether this is the right career for them.

Accountancy firms must identify ways in which they can support students to bridge the gap between learning about a career in accountancy to deciding that they want to pursue this route. The more opportunities young people have to experience the accountancy sector before entering the recruitment stage, the better informed they can be when making these important career decisions.

3.2.1 Work Experience

Work experience is a fundamental stage in a young person making decisions about their future career pathway. The Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project's participating firms offer a wide range of work experience opportunities, providing students with the chance to gain practical, hands-on experience in areas such as shadowing meetings, completing casework and engaging with clients so that they can gain an understanding of the role of an accountant and make an informed decision about whether they want to pursue this career further.

Many of the firms participating in the roundtable discussions are balancing their company's time constraints with the desire to extend opportunity to the next generation of accountants. One of the approaches taken by many firms participating in the project is to design shorter work experience programmes that focus more heavily on equipping students with the skills and experiences they will need to succeed in the early stages of their career.

A number of participating firms also run skills workshops on areas such as CV writing and interview training as part of the work experience programmes, recognising the importance of preparing students for the recruitment process when applying for full-time positions.

Challenges exist around ensuring that these opportunities are equally distributed and accessible to all, and not only to those with family connections or contacts. Many accountancy firms are now rethinking the ways in which they advertise their work experience opportunities, for example by advertising in a diverse range of locations such as online and in their local communities so that information about experience programmes reaches a diverse talent pool.

Some firms are taking their work to ensure equality of opportunity further by working with external partners such as schools and organisations to advertise opportunities within their local communities and social mobility coldspots.

The introduction of virtual work experience programmes is a positive step in ensuring that opportunities are accessible to all. A number of firms have designed and introduced their own programmes which can be completed by students in their own time, creating the opportunity to develop essential skills and gain insight into accountancy in a way that is flexible to the individual needs of each student.

In addition, a number of firms have introduced office ambassadors within their offices. These ambassadors are responsible for promoting and encouraging participation in early careers programmes among other employees at the firm, ensuring that the drive to create impactful change by widening opportunity is embedded firmly within the company's workplace culture.

Case Studies

Albert Goodman offers the opportunity to gain insight into the accountancy progression by offering a number of week-long work experience placements to school and college students each year, in addition to year-long university placements.

The firm is conscious of its responsibility to ensure that these opportunities are accessible to students from a wide range of backgrounds, making sure that work experience students come from a variety of schools and locations.

These opportunities are proving to be successful in opening up opportunity within the accountancy profession, with many of the firm's placements resulting in students returning to the firm as employees in the future.

Structured work experience programmes are used effectively at **HaysMac** to allow individuals to experience a range of areas of the business. Participants are allocated a sponsor who organises their time at the firm to ensure that they spend time in a mix of fee and non-fee earning departments, offering a comprehensive experience that enables young people to gain a greater understanding of the aspect of the business they might wish to pursue.

Forvis Mazar's virtual work experience programme is an example of how accountancy firms can offer students access to the sector without the need to place additional pressures on the workloads of its employees.

The company has designed the programme to reflect the skills and experiences it believes are necessary for a new recruit to the accountancy sector to succeed in their role.

Open to students of any age, Forvis Mazar's work experience programme is an innovative way of providing access to the accountancy profession without posing any additional financial or accessibility barriers.

Work experience and placement students at **Price Bailey** are provided with up to £50 to pay for their travel expenses, helping to break down financial and geographical barriers to accessing insight opportunities. Travel expenses are also paid for during the recruitment process, with assessment centre attendees also eligible for financial support to enable them to access these opportunities.

3.2.2 Internships and Apprenticeships

Accountancy firms are increasingly recognising the need to ensure that their internship and apprenticeship programmes lead to further opportunity within the accountancy profession.

Many of the firms participating in in the roundtable discussions are successfully utilising their internship programmes as a way to bring new talent into the company, with internships often leading to further opportunities or full-time roles further along the line. For example, some firms highlighted

their summer internship programmes which offer an automatic final interview at the end of the programme.

Many firms identify the importance of staying in contact with students who have completed their internship programmes so that they can make them aware of any new opportunities that arise within the company. This is an area that accountancy firms should look to prioritise, allowing them to ensure that their early careers work follows through into further opportunities at the recruitment and progression stage of an individual's career.

Although demand for internship and apprenticeship opportunities is high, a number of firms are now providing detailed feedback to unsuccessful candidates, so that even those who are not accepted onto a programme can identify areas for development that will support their career progression. This is an approach that should be adopted across all the firms to ensure a high universal standard of feedback to applicants.

Programmes that offer insight into every area of the business were identified as being more beneficial for the overall development of a student. A number of firms highlighted their decision to provide a more rounded experience of several aspects of their business so that students are not funnelled into a particular aspect of the accountancy career too soon, and are instead equipped with a range of experiences that can help them make an informed decision about the right pathway for them.

Case studies

Rouse Partner's summer internship programme is an example of how firms can use their access programmes to invest in and develop talent.

The firm has introduced a six-to-eight-week summer internship programme, working in partnership with universities to recruit students to participate in the scheme. The programme is paid, eliminating financial barriers to participation for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The programme provides participants with the opportunity to gain insight into the accountancy profession while learning essential skills such as CV writing, interview skills and assessment centre preparation so that they feel supported to take the next steps in applying for full-time accountancy positions.

Working in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council, **AAB's** foundation apprenticeship in accounting scheme is proving successful in raising awareness of different routes into the accountancy profession.

As part of this programme, students are invited to visit the firm's offices to speak directly with employees and gain an understanding of pathways into a career in accountancy.

Crowe UK is leading by example in rethinking the ways in which accountancy firms advertise their work experience and internship opportunities.

A strong focus on using clear and informative language in adverts and the use of external networks to promote early careers opportunities in a wide range of locations are proving to be successful in making sure that early careers opportunities within the firm are accessible to those from underrepresented backgrounds within the profession.

3.2.3 Student mentoring

Mentoring provides a valuable way in which accountancy firms and personnel can share their expertise with students at a critical point in their career development.

As students are faced with making choices that will establish the course of their future careers, a number of accountancy firms are making use of mentoring as a means of supporting those who may not have access to the advice that family members or contacts who have first-hand experience of university or the accountancy profession can offer.

3.2.4 Targeted Initiatives

The Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project's participating firms highlighted the need to ensure that their work experience initiatives are reaching those in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage or who come from underrepresented groups within the sector.

Firms are now working closely with local schools and universities to target adverts for their access opportunities to a more diverse pool of candidates.

The introduction of travel and lunch allowances for work experience and internship programmes that are competitively paid are positive steps being taken by many accountancy firms to eliminate financial barriers to participating in opportunities within the accountancy sector.

3.2.5 Challenges

Firms participating in the roundtable discussions identified a number of challenges they are facing in their efforts to widen access to the accountancy sector.

While opportunities to gain insight into the accountancy profession are widespread at the participating firms, many feel that there is a lack of awareness among young people about the opportunities that they can access. Working with schools to ensure that appropriate career advice is available for those interested in pursuing a career in accountancy and rethinking the ways in which opportunities are advertised so that they are visible to Gen-Z students are essential to making sure that aspiring accountants can make the most of these opportunities.

Summer internship programmes offer invaluable opportunities to gain firsthand experience into the accountancy profession. However, many of these programmes are run at a time when students from more financially disadvantaged backgrounds may need to work, meaning that students from less advantaged backgrounds are often prevented from accessing these opportunities due to financial factors.

All too often work experience and internship opportunities within accountancy firms are taken by young people who are the children of employees or clients. There was consensus among the firms that there is a need to challenge nepotism within these initiatives by finding ways to ensure that there is greater quality of opportunity in this area.

Time capacity remains a challenge when delivering work experience and internship programmes. Firms raised the significant time commitment needed to train and support new students to integrate into the company, which leads to a lack of engagement and buy-in by many colleagues on widening access initiatives.

The announcement of potential restrictions of the use of levy funding for Level 7 apprenticeships was highlighted as a further concern which could limit accountancy firms' ability to widen access and opportunity through apprenticeship programmes. Firms agreed that the proposed changes would mean that Level 7 apprenticeships, which combine studies with on-the-job work experience, would become financially unviable.

Degree apprenticeships are highly valued by many employers as a way in which they can invest in the talent that will enable their firm to grow and thrive, and the removal of such an important element of the talent pipeline is a concern for many firms within the accountancy profession.

3.3 Recruitment

Ensuring that there is diversity and equality of opportunity when hiring new employees in accountancy firms is impossible without first implementing fair and transparent recruitment processes.

As the accountancy sector increasingly looks to enhance its social impact, firms have a responsibility to make sure that their workforces are representative of the UK's diverse society. Recruitment practices that ensure that roles are accessible to all candidates regardless of their background will not only foster greater diversity within the profession but will also be of long-term benefit to accountancy firms by bringing diverse perspectives and innovative outlooks.

There is also greater recognition within the accountancy sector of the need for recruitment practices that are strength-based and consider the whole individual, rather than focusing solely on academic credentials.

Advertising is key to achieving greater equality of opportunity when recruiting for roles within the accountancy sector. Many firms are becoming more mindful of the need to make sure that opportunities within their organisations are visible in a range of locations, with the aim of attracting talent from as diverse a talent pool as possible.

While the conversation around recruitment practices is often focused on early careers recruitment, accountancy firms have the opportunity to implement reforms on recruitment of experienced hires at a more advanced stage of their careers by making sure that inclusive practices are implemented throughout the entire recruitment process.

3.3.1 Contextualised Recruitment

In the roundtable discussions focusing on recruitment, accountancy firms demonstrated a desire to rethink the ways in which recruitment is carried out within the sector. Among the inclusive hiring practices that participating firms are looking to introduce to widen and promote inclusivity and diversity within the sector is contextualised recruitment.

Traditionally accountancy firms have placed a strong focus on academic credentials when hiring new employees. The need to ensure that candidates are capable of successfully completing the notoriously difficult accountancy exams is paramount. However, a number of firms highlighted their use of contextual recruitment to enable them to take into account a candidate's individual circumstances.

Partnering with Rare Recruitment is enabling many firms to introduce this practice into their recruitment processes. Rare offers firms the opportunity to increase their understanding of an

applicant's experiences and background, for example by allowing candidates to add social mobility flags to their application. Balancing academic requirements with a consideration of the barriers to opportunity that a candidate may have experienced is a positive step in achieving greater equality of opportunity within the accountancy profession.

Additionally, many firms participating in the roundtable discussions agreed on the need to consider a candidate's wider experiences, extracurricular activities and behaviours and competencies, rather than focusing solely on academic qualifications and CVs.

Progress is also being made by many firms in becoming more mindful of an individual's needs and circumstances throughout the recruitment process. Reasonable adjustment processes are pivotal in ensuring that recruitment is done in an inclusive and accessible way, with participating firms highlighting how they offer candidates the opportunity to discuss their needs prior to an interview or test and provide adjustments, including scribes, readers or different coloured or printed materials.

Case studies

AAB is an example of an accountancy firm which is working with Rare Recruitment to embed inclusivity more firmly within its recruitment processes.

Rare offers candidates applying for early careers roles within AAB the opportunity to provide relevant information about their background, for example details on free school meal eligibility, if they are a carer or an asylum seeker, to create a more balanced view of the candidate's attributes and experiences.

AAB has worked with Rare Recruitment for a number of years and receives positive feedback from the company's recruitment team, who report finding the tool beneficial in supporting them to make more informed recruitment decisions.

3.3.2 Inclusive Recruitment Practices

The Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project's participants highlighted a wide range of examples of best practice on implementing inclusive recruitment practices. Firms are becoming increasingly conscious of their responsibility to widen opportunity within the sector and recruitment provides a valuable means of achieving this change.

There was consensus in the discussions about the need for transparent, fair and inclusive recruitment processes to ensure that every candidate has equal opportunity to being hired by an accountancy firm. However, many firms acknowledged that historically the accountancy sector has taken a traditional approach to recruitment, placing a strong emphasis on academic credentials and educational background, which needs to be challenged if opportunity within the sector is to become more widespread.

For example, while blind recruitment was recognised as a positive measure that can support firms to eliminate unconscious bias when recruiting, it is clear from many firms' input in the discussions that there is still much work to do to educate decision makers within accountancy firms on the advantages of these inclusive practices.

A desire to move to a more strength-based application process, which focuses on behavioural testing and the strengths displayed by a candidate throughout the process, was evident among the

participating firms. Some companies are using external companies such as Neurosite to conduct strength-based online assessments so that recruitment decisions are made on the basis of merit.

Firms displayed a commitment to implementing clear recruitment policies with the aim of ensuring that decisions are taken with consistency and without room for unconscious biases. A number of firms outlined the recruitment practices that they have introduced to all of their UK offices to make sure that there is consistency in the questions asked and the case studies used to assess applicants.

Recruitment processes that provide weighted scores for each stage of the process are proving to be effective in ensuring that opportunity is distributed based on merit.

Recognising that interviews often leave too much room for an interviewer's personal opinions or biases, a number of Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy firms are taking steps to make sure interviews are conducted fairly and consistently. Firms highlighted how they require all interviewers to take regular training and refresher courses and are provided with questions that are used consistently for each candidate. The importance of ensuring that interviewing panels are well-balanced with regards to gender and diversity was also highlighted as an essential step in creating a more inclusive recruitment process.

Firms recognise the opportunity that providing unsuccessful candidates with feedback offers in developing the talent pipeline. By providing personalised feedback reports highlighting areas for development, accountancy firms can support unsuccessful candidates' career and skills development so that they can feel better prepared when facing future recruitment processes.

Case studies

Fair recruitment is an area of significant focus for **Forvis Mazars**. The company uses blind assessments and does not ask candidates for CVs with the aim of avoiding unconscious bias when making recruitment decisions. The company also recognises a lack of female applications and has redesigned its job adverts and descriptions to use more simplified and gender-neutral language to tackle this worrying trend.

Unconscious biases are also eliminated at the interview stage, with all interviewers in the firm required to complete training annually. The company regularly reviews its interview panels to ensure that there is equal representation of genders and ethnic backgrounds.

Furthermore, Forvis Mazars takes seriously its responsibility to support all candidates through the recruitment process, regardless of their individual needs. The company has introduced a dedicated email inbox which candidates can use to raise individual needs one-on-one ahead of the application process. This measure helps the firm identify ways in which it can provide adjustments to support accessibility in its recruitment process, for example by providing extra time, alternative prints or permitting the use of a scribe or reader.

3.3.3 Raising awareness and advertising

The importance of advertising in widening access to opportunity within the accountancy sector should not be overlooked. Where and how roles are advertised can determine who applies for positions in accountancy firms. Rethinking the way in which roles are advertised will provide accountancy firms with a valuable opportunity to reach a wider and more diverse talent pool.

Positive steps are being taken by the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy firms to ensure that their vacant positions are accessible and visible to a wide range of candidates. Many firms are now looking more closely at the language they use in their job adverts to examine whether the language used to provide details on a job is inaccessible, detail-heavy or off-putting to certain demographics.

Firms identified a concerning trend with regards to applications from female candidates, with a number of accountancy firms reporting a decline in the number of women applying for roles. Some firms outlined the steps they are taking to examine whether the language used in their job adverts is more masculine or feminine by using gender decoder tools to make this language more gender-neutral.

Targeting adverts in social mobility coldspots is essential to reach underrepresented demographics within the accountancy sector. In the roundtable discussions, many firms outlined the work they are doing to target and advertise their roles in schools, academies and universities within their local communities, with the aim of widening the diversity of their potential pool of candidates.

Participating firms agreed on the need to adapt their approach to advertising towards the needs of younger generations. Utilising social media and online content to advertise roles will make them more visible to Gen-Z candidates, who are often more receptive to content that they can access on demand and flexibly.

Case studies

James Cowper Kreston is an example of how accountancy firms can effectively advertise roles to reach a more diverse audience.

In addition to advertising roles through careers websites, the firm works with its local universities to ensure that new graduates are aware of the opportunities available to them. This work also extends to the apprenticeship positions, with the firm partnering with local schools to share details of their apprenticeship programmes.

This collaborative approach is particularly important in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage or which are underrepresented within the accountancy sector, providing firms with the opportunity to ensure their vacancies are visible to hard-to-reach demographics.

Price Bailey uses advertising strategically to encourage applications from female applicants, in response to a notable decline across the accountancy sector. In addition to ensuring that women are featured in careers videos, images and case studies across the firm's website, Price Bailey also uses a gender decoder tool to challenge the use of male-orientated language.

A 'Women in Finance' series of videos has also been produced by Price Bailey's marketing team. This content is promoted on the firm's social media platforms, with the aim of reaching as wide and diverse an audience as possible.

3.3.4 Partnership

Partnerships with external organisations and educational providers are a critical part of the drive to widen access to opportunity within the accountancy profession. Firms should not be reluctant to utilise outside expertise to support them in their social mobility efforts, with community groups and organisations often an excellent source of local knowledge about the people within their communities.

During the roundtable discussions, a number of firms reported on the work they are doing with local colleges and universities to prepare students for entering the workforce. In addition to being able to advertise vacancies and early careers opportunities to university students, accountancy firms have a valuable opportunity to shape the industry and the skills students are being taught by working closely with educators to advise them of the qualities they will be looking for in a graduate when recruiting for new positions.

A number of the universities represented in the roundtables outlined initiatives they have implemented to prepare students for the recruitment process. For example, universities conduct mock interviews on campus for their students so that they can gain a greater understanding of the accountancy recruitment process. Accountancy firms have an opportunity to work with universities on such initiatives so that participating students can receive guidance and advice that aligns with the needs and reality of recruitment in the sector.

Case studies

Gerald Edelman demonstrates how partnership with external providers can effectively promote greater diversity within the recruitment process.

The firm works with City Grad, a graduate recruitment agency, when recruiting for early careers roles. City Grad works with the Access Project, a charity that works with sixth form students from disadvantaged backgrounds and supports them in gaining a university place through mentoring.

By ensuring that students involved with the Access Project are informed about opportunities within Gerald Edelman, City Grad supports the firm to foster greater visibility and diversity throughout its recruitment practices.

3.3.5 Challenges

A significant change of mindset around recruitment is needed within the accountancy sector if equality of opportunity is to be achieved. Many firms raised concerns in the roundtable discussions about pushback from some within the sector who are reluctant to change the way in which recruitment has traditionally been done.

Challenges exist in encouraging decision-makers on recruitment matters to adopt more inclusive recruitment practices, for example blind recruitment processes. Accountancy firms must move away from the traditional focus on an individual's background and university, with persistent education needed to embed the understanding for recruitment processes that reduce preconceptions and biases within those making recruitment decisions.

Although there was consensus among participating firms about their desire to create a more inclusive and fair recruitment system with accountancy, the majority of firms expressed concerns about how this is implemented in practice. Accountancy exams are notoriously difficult, and firms must be confident that the recruits they bring into the company are capable of succeeding. Consequently, many accountancy firms represented in the discussions agreed that academic credentials must remain an integral part of the recruitment process, with firms outlining the responsibility they have to an individual's mental health by only recruiting those they are confident are capable of passing their exams. Striking the right balance between promoting diversity and social mobility with the need to

recruit those who are capable of gaining their qualifications will remain an area that accountancy firms should continue to consider.

Furthermore, university educators spoke of the challenge that many of their students face in being recruited to accountancy firms without the necessary academic results. Universities are conscious of the fact that many aspiring accountants face significant barriers in finding accountancy roles after graduating because of insufficient school results, regardless of their performance and success in their university years. As a result, students who may have faced challenges throughout their school years are often unable to find a full-time role in the accountancy profession.

Another significant challenge regarding recruitment is the attraction of female candidates to roles within accountancy firms. The firms have noticed a concerning trend in the number of female applicants they are receiving for their vacancies, with a notable decline particularly within the past two years. Measures designed to encourage women to apply to accountancy roles such as through adverts specifically targeted at women are being trialled in many firms to try to tackle this issue.

The overall attraction of the accountancy profession is also declining. An attractiveness rate of only 8% among students demonstrates the need for accountancy firms to challenge preconceptions around the profession at an earlier stage in the talent pipeline, such as through work with schools and universities. By challenging these misconceptions, accountancy firms can work to promote the profession to a range of demographics that will only serve to bring new ideas and diverse viewpoints to the industry as a whole.

3.4 Progression

Supporting a diverse range of backgrounds and demographics to enter the accountancy profession is only part of the drive towards ensuring greater social mobility within this sector. Accountancy firms must also ensure that opportunities to progress into senior positions are accessible for people from underrepresented groups, so that every individual has equal opportunity to achieve their career goals.

Accountancy firms must consider how they can play their part in encouraging diverse talent to come through the entire system, from early career opportunities to more senior roles. The question of how to support people to progress within the profession as themselves, without the need to fit into social norms, is a crucial question for the sector as a whole to address.

Transparency around routes to progression is essential. Individuals must have access to transparent information about the values and behaviours needed to progress to the next level so that there can be confidence that the system is fair and that opportunities are equitably distributed.

3.4.1 Skills Development

Colleagues who are not equipped with the skills necessary for success within the accountancy profession, particularly with regards to soft skills, can face significant barriers to progressing and accessing opportunities. The Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy firms outlined the ways in which they are looking to provide greater support to their employees by investing more heavily in their skills development and progression.

The majority of the participating firms agreed that soft skills are an area in which many new recruits to the accountancy profession are lacking. Rather than needing greater support with technical, sector specific abilities, firms agreed that it is skills such as networking, negotiating and communication that most early careers recruits need to develop further.

To tackle this issue, some firms have launched internal training platforms, which compile modules on essential skills including communication. This ensures that every individual has access to the same information and that those who do not have any family connections or contacts within the accountancy sector are not at a disadvantage when seeking out advice. Other firms reported that they provide their new recruits with the opportunity to complete trainee development programmes which focus on the information and skills they need to be successful in the first years of their career. Areas such as using Microsoft, making a phone call and organising a meeting have all been identified as vital areas to develop a new recruit so that they are not held back due to a lack of these skills.

Furthermore, accountancy firms agreed upon the need for transparency around career progression, with setting out clear expectations and career pathways viewed as an essential element of promoting greater access to opportunity within the sector. Many firms provide more tailored skills development and support to their employees through appraisals and personal development plans, so that colleagues can identify the abilities they need to develop in order to reach more senior positions.

Insight or learning at work weeks are held in some firms, which give employees the opportunity to speak to a wide range of people within the company on areas on which they need further guidance or information. These initiatives are essential in facilitating employees to seek out advice, particularly for those who are reluctant to come forward and ask for help.

Case studies

Supporting its colleagues to develop soft and professional skills is a priority for **Dains**. The firm's Learning Management System, Dains Learning, offers over 600 micro-learnings in a variety of formats designed to enhance key skills areas including interpersonal skills, communication, teamwork, Excel skills and leadership abilities.

By making these development resources accessible to every colleague, Dains is contributing positively to the progression of its colleagues from underrepresented or lower socioeconomic backgrounds, providing them with the tools needed to thrive in a professional setting to level the playing field.

Rouse Partners actively supports its colleagues to develop vital skills that will serve them well throughout their entire career. The firm has introduced an ICAEW-developed leadership programme to offer all colleagues in management positions to develop their skills in areas such as leadership and communication.

Colleagues in management roles are all automatically enrolled into the programme, ensuring that all colleagues have access to the same opportunities to develop leadership skills that will support their career progression.

HaysMac's new learning platform, Bridge, compiles training programmes and resources, including digital modules, videos and in-person workshops on topics ranging from interview skills and time management to coaching, delegation and giving effective feedback.

Bridge enables HaysMac's colleagues to actively participate in professional development and learning opportunities that will support them to grow, progress and achieve their career goals. Colleagues also have access to the firm's TALK performance management framework, which further supports conversations around progression and goal setting.

3.4.2 Employee mentoring

Mentoring provides a valuable opportunity to give employees tailored advice and support, particularly to those from underrepresented groups within the accountancy sector who may not have access to industry contacts. A number of accountancy firms represented at the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy roundtables have mentoring programmes in place in which employees can choose a mentor who they feel best fits with their career goals and development needs.

Recognising the need to provide a wide range of mentors who can match an individual's specific needs, many of the firms engage employees from across their entire business in their mentoring programmes, including those in more senior positions or partnership roles. To ensure that mentees receive the highest quality of support from their mentor, several firms are now requiring all of their mentors to take training on mentoring and coaching, which makes sure that every employee is adequately supported.

In addition, some firms are moving towards sponsoring programmes, rather than mentoring. The benefits of a sponsoring programme are that early careers employees can be matched with a more senior employee within the firm who can advocate for them and take responsibility for their progression, ensuring that both parties are more fully engaged with the process.

Case studies

All coaches and mentors at **James Cowper Kreston** are given training on management and leadership to ensure a high-quality of mentoring is provided across the firm.

The firm combats reluctance amongst employees to take up the opportunity to be partnered with a mentor by matching every new employee with a buddy to support them as a transition into their new role within the firm. This is a positive move which aims to eliminate barriers to participation in mentoring schemes.

Gerald Edelman's mentoring scheme is one of the firm's strengths in its effort to widen equality of opportunity across the firm. Due to the fact that the firm is smaller than many of those represented at the roundtable discussions, Gerald Edelman's mentoring scheme is able to provide more tailored support and recognise the strength of each individual within the firm.

This more personalised approach is effective in allowing the firm to work closely with each individual, including those from underrepresented groups and backgrounds to ensure that they are supported to reach their full potential and achieve their career goals.

The scheme engages the firm's partners, so that participants can benefit from the expertise and experiences of people who have reached the highest positions within the firm. Participants are also offered the opportunity to change mentors so that they can take advantage of a wide range of experiences and viewpoints.

3.4.3 Cultural Attitudes

In the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy roundtables, firms offered insight into the need for a shift in the cultural norms prevalent within the accountancy sector. A number of firms raised concerns about the way in which the culture and values of the sector align with white British norms, meaning that those from minority backgrounds often lack exposure to the experiences and cultural capital needed to progress within the sector.

Networking is an area in which many participants feel new employees within the profession often lack the necessary skills to progress, particularly with those from underrepresented groups who may lack experience of and feel uncomfortable when networking. Other firms highlighted that asking for promotion or coming forward for advice is often not encouraged in certain cultures, meaning that those from underrepresented backgrounds are often not part of the discussion around promotion and progression.

Firms are increasingly looking to challenge this issue by encouraging employees to celebrate and discuss their diverse backgrounds, experiences and viewpoints. While there was acknowledgement that there is still much more work to be done, many of the firms represented in the discussions spoke of the progress they have made in creating more diverse workforces and leadership boards within their companies, which demonstrates to those from minority backgrounds that progression within the accountancy sector is possible for them.

Employees with additional needs, for example disabilities or neurodivergences, were also highlighted in the discussions. Many firms are recognising their responsibility to provide tailored support for colleagues with additional requirements by implementing changes that can facilitate each individual to do their job to the highest standard. Making reasonable adjustments is a positive way to eliminate accessibility barriers to progressing within the profession by fostering a more level playing field.

Firms are increasingly tracking the socioeconomic backgrounds of their employees to help them build a greater understanding of the progression rates of different backgrounds and groups within their business. The importance of educating colleagues on the benefits of tracking this data was stressed by many firms so that employees can have confidence that this data will be used responsibly to implement positive change. Such data is vital to demonstrate that recruitment of diverse talent then leads on to that talent progressing and thriving within the organisation.

Saffrey is using data and measurement to gain a better understanding of its colleagues' backgrounds and the diversity within the firm. The firm launched a data campaign in 2024 which invited colleagues to complete an equality questionnaire covering all nine protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010, as well as socioeconomic backgrounds and caring responsibilities.

Colleague engagement with the survey was high, with 73% to 98% of colleagues across the firm disclosing information about their socioeconomic backgrounds, significantly higher than the sector average.

This diversity survey is now also integrated into Saffrey's new applicant system, so that the collection of diversity data is embedded into every aspect of a person's journey within the firm. This enables Saffrey to build up an accurate picture of its colleagues and gain a better understanding of existing barriers to progression within the firm for individuals from different backgrounds.

HaysMac is using data and measurement to support its efforts to create a company culture in which every colleague can progress and succeed, regardless of their background.

By gathering data on race, religion and socioeconomic background from both existing staff and from new applicants during the recruitment process, HaysMac demonstrates its commitment to gaining a greater understanding of the progression rates and potential barriers facing colleagues from different groups and backgrounds.

3.4.3 Challenges

Discussions on progression as part of the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy roundtables highlighted the many challenges that exist in ensuring that opportunities to progress within the accountancy sector are equitably distributed.

A fundamental change in the culture of the accountancy profession was identified as being an essential part of the move to create a more fair and accessible industry. Although all firms agreed that progression within the profession is merit based, more recognition is needed of the inherent biases and barriers that many from underrepresented groups face so that there is greater understanding of how accountancy firms can work to remove these barriers. Although promotion is based on an individual's performance, accountancy firms must provide greater support to underrepresented groups so that individuals from all backgrounds have the equal opportunity to perform well.

Time and resources remain a significant barrier to widening opportunity to progress. There is consensus that partners and people in senior positions within accountancy firms have valuable expertise and insights to support the development of colleagues. However, balancing their day-to-day responsibilities with the ability to provide tailored and comprehensive support remains a challenge.

Furthermore, some firms raised concerns around the barriers to progression that exist for employees who are parents. The need to rethink parental leave within the accountancy sector so that maternity pay is adequate to encourage new parents to remain in the sector was highlighted, particularly in the case of those from less advantaged backgrounds who may be forced to leave the profession if they are not supported financially while taking parental leave.

4. Recommendations

The insights shared by accountancy firms during the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy roundtables have been gathered by This is Purpose to put together a range of strategic recommendations designed to support firms to drive their social impact agendas forward even further.

Recommendations covering each of the four roundtable focus areas- outreach, access, recruitment and progression - are outlined in Section 4 to provide accountancy firms with a range of impactful

measures they should consider implementing to create greater equality of opportunity within the accountancy profession.

Outreach

- Accountancy firms should build networks with schools, colleges and universities in their local communities so that they can target outreach work in areas where they can have the most social impact. By working regularly with specific schools and organisations, firms can deliver sustained outreach throughout a young person's school years, with meaningful follow-up work essential to ensure that initiatives deliver impactful change, rather than delivering one-off outreach interventions in isolation. Furthermore, accountancy firms can drive their outreach work even further by targeting their interventions at schools and colleges in social mobility cold spots to ensure that those from the most underrepresented groups are able to access early insight opportunities into the accountancy sector.
- In addition to implementing formalised outreach programmes with partner schools, colleges and universities, accountancy firms should be mindful of the need to not focus outreach efforts solely on students and new graduates. Dedicated outreach initiatives which target more experienced individuals who wish to retrain or upskill should also be considered by firms as a way of ensuring that the opportunity to access the accountancy profession is not out of reach for those who are not new graduates.
- Technology represents a valuable opportunity for accountancy firms to extend their outreach efforts to a wider and more diverse audience. Firms should consider producing online and social media content that provides young people with the ability to access information and insights into the accountancy profession whenever they wish, for example through day-in-the-life videos from the point of view of early careers employees. The use of accountancy employees in online content who are relatable and representative of younger generations can support the sector to break down misconceptions about the accountancy profession which currently deter new recruits to consider the sector. Firms should also explore ways in which they can work in partnership to create a shared pool of online or digital content as a way of tackling time and resource limitations.
- Attraction to the accountancy sector is in decline. Accountancy firms should consider working with This is Purpose to hold Purpose Lab sessions dedicated to gaining an understanding of why young people are not considering working in the profession. The Purpose Lab works with university students to shape responsible business strategies and social impact initiatives for some of the UK's largest businesses. Each Purpose Lab project focuses on delivering research and recommendations around businesses' social impact that offer tangible benefits to the participating businesses. Participation with the Purpose Lab would provide accountancy firms with the opportunity to engage with students at the earliest stages of the talent pipeline, while at the same time building up a greater understanding of the views and barriers discouraging young people from entering the profession.

Access

- Accountancy firms should consider introducing a standardised application process for their work experience and internship programmes. A transparent application process that provides equal access to these programmes and distributes opportunities based on merit will provide firms with an effective means of tackling challenges around nepotism within the profession.
- Rethinking the way in which work experience and internship programmes are structured could support accountancy firms to enhance the insights and learning opportunities they offer students. Programmes which allow students to rotate around the business, spending time in each department and working alongside people with a range of roles and experiences, will require a smaller time commitment from each individual employee, while also ensuring that students are not pushed into a particular career branch too soon so that opportunities are closed off to them at an early stage in their career.
- Additionally, accountancy firms should explore introducing virtual work experience programmes which will enable them to provide accessible insight opportunities to a larger talent pool. On-demand learning resources could be a positive step in ensuring that young people with jobs or other responsibilities can access the same opportunities and experiences as their more advantaged peers.
- Accountancy firms should embed social impact work more firmly into their company culture by recognising participation in outreach and access programmes as part of an employee's career progression and professional development. Employees who take the time to actively drive forward equality of opportunity within the accountancy profession should be recognised for their commitment and expertise in this area.
- To reduce barriers to participation in summer internship programmes for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or who have summer jobs, accountancy firms should consider running these programmes at a different time of the year. For example, programmes which begin in the Autumn term when students have fewer exams could break down the perception that students are free in the summer and consequently open up participation to a more diverse talent pool.
- Accountancy firms should introduce measures which encourage and facilitate participation in access opportunities to underrepresented groups. Introducing a ring-fenced funding pot to support those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with associated costs such as travel, accommodation, food and office clothing or ensuring that internship programmes are competitively paid would prove effective in breaking down financial barriers to accessing these opportunities.

Recruitment

- Accountancy firms should explore working in partnership to create a transparent, unified application process for early careers roles. This would support graduates to understand and identify the skills and behaviours they are required to demonstrate to be successful in the recruitment process, facilitating access to the profession.
- The widespread introduction of inclusive recruitment practices, such as contextualised or blind recruitment, should be considered by accountancy firms to firmly embed the drive to creating a more diverse workforce by making sure that roles are distributed on the basis of merit. Persistent training and educating of recruitment decision makers within firms to

showcase the benefits of inclusive recruitment practices should be prioritised to ensure company-wide engagement and buy-in.

- Firms should establish links with local colleges and universities to advertise early careers roles in a wide range of visible locations that target underrepresented areas. Continuing to work with schools and colleges involved in a firm's outreach initiatives by advertising job opportunities could provide a valuable opportunity to ensure that opportunity flows through the entire talent pipeline.
- Accountancy firms should make tackling the decline in applications from female candidates a priority. Exploring ways in which job advertisements can be made more accessible and attractive to female candidates, for example by utilising resources to identify and remove gender-biased language, should be explored by firms. Furthermore, accountancy firms should consider working further with This is Purpose to run Purpose Lab sessions focused on working with female students to identify and address potential causes of the decline in female applications.
- Accountancy firms should also consider implementing measurement tools to track the efficacy of their social impact work. Firms could measure the socioeconomic background of their recruits and candidates and introduce an annual socioeconomic target for their recruitment, allowing them to understand whether their outreach efforts to widen access to opportunity are translating into concrete applications and recruitments and identify ways to take this work further.

Progression

- Mentoring programmes are an invaluable way in which accountancy firms can develop their talent pipelines and invest in their employees. Firms which do not already do so should explore introducing mentoring programmes within their business which engage employees from across the entire breadth of the company, meaning that mentees can access a wide range of experiences and expertise when choosing a mentor. Firms should also ensure that mentors come from a wide range of backgrounds so that they are representative of employees at the start of their careers. Furthermore, accountancy firms should provide training on coaching and mentoring to all mentors and partners as this will ensure that both mentors and mentees achieve the best possible outcomes. Engagement with the mentoring programme should also be considered as part of a colleague's professional development to encourage partners and more senior employees to participate and share their expertise.
- Accountancy firms should prioritise developing the skills of its early years recruits by introducing internal training resources which employees can access freely and flexibly. Online modules covering a range of topics including networking, communication and soft skills will ensure that all employees have access to the information they need to be successful in the first years of their career and will help to bridge the gap between those without family or first-hand experience of office environments and their more advantaged peers.
- Accountancy firms should implement company-wide socioeconomic data tracking for all of its employees so that they can build a greater understanding of the diversity of their workforce and the progression rates within each group. Working with the Purpose Coalition to utilise its Social Scopes results measurement framework will support accountancy firms to holistically measure the impact of their efforts to widen opportunity.

Key Considerations for Policymakers

Level 7 Apprenticeships

The potential introduction of restrictions of the use of levy funding for Level 7 apprenticeships poses a significant obstacle for the accountancy profession. Restrictions on these apprenticeships, which provide employers with a valuable means of investing in talent through skills development and upskilling, would severely hinder accountancy firms' ability to provide alternative routes into the profession.

The proposed changes to Level 7 apprenticeships were highlighted by accountancy firms participating in the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project. A number of firms stated that the changes would make them less likely to offer apprenticeship programmes in the future, resulting in a lack of training routes to address skills gaps that can be carried out while working to ensure a steady pipeline of skilled workers. This would also result in fewer opportunities for those who do not have the resources to study at Level 7 full-time to receive a high-level of education and training.

Policymakers should reconsider the potential introduction of these changes, in favour of working towards creating greater flexibility within the rules that would give employers more rather than less freedom on investing the apprenticeship levy. Maintaining Level 7 apprenticeships are essential to developing skills and widening access to opportunity within the accountancy profession and more widely.

AI

AI has the potential to drive significant economic growth by improving efficiency and creating innovation across businesses and organisations. While accountancy firms are conscious of the need to embrace and explore ways in which AI can support them to enhance their service and processes, policymakers should consider ways in which they can support firms to foster innovation and stay competitive in the rapidly evolving market.

By offering a combination of funding, education, infrastructure, regulatory clarity, and collaboration, policymakers can support businesses, including accountancy firms, to not only adopt AI but also drive its responsible and impactful use across the profession.

Next Steps

- Accountancy firms participating in the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy project should now consider which of the recommendations proposed in this report they intend to prioritise and implement throughout their business. While the aim is to work towards the widespread introduction of all the recommendations across the sector, firms may wish to initially focus on implementing a selection of the proposals to demonstrate best practice in specific areas.

- Firms should also identify recommendations which they feel would be best implemented through cross-sector partnership. Establishing links with other Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy firms to collaboratively share resources will facilitate the introduction of many of the recommendations.
- Establishing ways in which firms can work further with The Purpose Coalition to work towards the introduction of the project's recommendations and ensure equality of opportunity across the accountancy sector is an important next step. Through further dialogue with The Purpose Coalition, firms should explore implementing the Three Scopes measurement model or participating in Purpose Lab sessions which focus on topics that are relevant to the challenges the accountancy profession is facing.
- Furthermore, accountancy firms could consider contacting their professional service bodies, including ICAS, CIMA, ICAEW and AAT, to explore ways in which they can support the more widespread implementation of the Breaking Down Barriers to Accountancy recommendations across the sector.

Bottom of back page

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