The butterfly effect



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Georgiana Head examines how education is the key to diversity and explains how your firm can play its part in reaching out

Over the last few months I've been thinking about diversity in the tax market and how we can improve on it. Ask yourself how you started your career in tax? Did you apply as a graduate? Did you do the Civil Service Milkround? Did you know someone who worked as an accountant? When did you first know about tax as a discipline? Did you, like me, subliminally absorb the names of large accountancy firms by seeing them on the sides of the pens and pencils in a parent's office?

How do we get a more diverse population at an entry level to the tax profession? How do we raise social mobility? I think the key is education, explaining to children

in schools what tax is and how tax can be a potential career path.

There is already a framework in place to do this. In UK secondary schools, all children from 11 years old onwards are supposed to have access to careers guidance that falls in line with Gatsby Benchmark 8. These benchmarks tie into the Ofsted framework and are one of the areas that are taken into consideration during an Ofsted inspection.

In this article, I explore how tax can be promoted as an option using three of these benchmarks.

Gatsby Benchmark 4: Linking curriculum learning to careers

HMRC has developed an award-winning tax education programme for secondary school pupils aged 14 to 17. ‘Tax Facts’ was named ‘Best Free Educational Product of the Year’ in the 2016 Education Resources Awards. It is video based and the four videos can be found on You Tube. There is also a supporting teacher’s pack which can be found on the Times Educational Supplement website (see www.tes.com).

HMRC provides a similar video based programme at primary school level called ‘Junior Tax Facts’, including lesson plans and interactive exercises. These packages teach children about what tax is and why we pay it, e.g. to provide essential services such as schools, the fire service, etc. They also explain National Insurance, VAT, environmental taxes and benefits such as pensions and tax credits, and fit in to a range of subjects and lessons including maths and citizenship.

The ATT and CIOT have used HMRC’s packs as the basis of their own work on educating school children. I talked to Emma Rawson Technical Officer at ATT about her experience of using the ‘Junior Tax Facts’ in a primary school setting. Along with fellow Technical Officer Helen Thornley, she had taken them into local schools and they have developed two lesson plans around them (for details see www.att.org.uk/hmrcs-junior-tax-facts).

Even the teachers admitted that they never knew how income tax worked before, and the children were fascinated by the book of legislation that Helen and Emma brought in as a prop.

The ATT and CIOT’s work in this area has been halted by Covid-19 but the resources are available online and the plan is to develop more resources and increase contacts

with schools. As educational charities, the ATT and CIOT's objectives include promoting public education in tax.

Gatsby Benchmark 5: Encounters with employee and employers

This benchmark says that every pupil should have multiple opportunities to learn from employers about work, employment and the skills valued in work. Ideally from the age of 11, pupils should participate in at least one 'meaningful' encounter with an employer every year. Traditionally, schools would offer pupils a week of work experience in year 10 or 11 (or what I still think of as the fourth and fifth form).

When I became a school governor for a multi-educational trust in Calderdale, I discovered that many state schools don't have the ability to offer work placements, particularly if they are in areas where there is an issue with absenteeism or poor parental engagement. It makes much more sense to fulfil this benchmark by bringing employers into schools (or via Zoom during the time of Covid-19) to talk about their careers in assemblies or at careers days. To make these events more useful, schools can tie them into the curriculum. If children learn how to write a CV in their English class, they can also consider the sort of career they are interested in and then have the chance to be interviewed by someone from their chosen career area.

I've been working with the schools to broaden the range of employers that they have access to. At the school where I am now chair, the cohort comes from some of the lowest 3% of poverty in the UK, with a high percentage of Romany, Asian and poor white British (often from several generations of unemployment). Yet despite this, in 2019 it was the most transformed academy school in Britain. The staff are completely dedicated to being aspirational for the children in their care and the school employs two part-time careers consultants to help the children navigate their way to a career or further education. One of the things that limits their Careers Offering is having access to different types of employers.

This is where your own employer's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) budget comes in. Most firms allow staff to volunteer in work time for several days a year. As long as you are happy to go through a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check and follow the school's safeguarding procedure, you can volunteer.

One firm that has really used its CSR budget to help children in disadvantaged areas is Grant Thornton. Donna Smith, a strategic business partner for Tax, People and

Culture, discussed a scheme they have been involved in: ‘At Grant Thornton, we’re a founding signatory of Access Accountancy, a profession-wide initiative to improve access to accountancy through the provision of work experience to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

We’re proud to have supported over 200 students with work placements since April 2014, and 38 of those students have since gone on to secure trainee position with us. Our approach has always been to work with schools in disadvantaged areas to target high potential sixth form students, engaging talent who just wouldn’t be aware of the opportunities available within the tax profession. By doing this, we want to lead the way in opening the door to anyone who has the talent and desire to succeed, regardless of their background.’

If you are considering volunteering and want to make a bigger impact, you can join a school’s governing board and become a link careers governor. This means that you will be tasked with helping to assess the school’s careers offering.

A good starting point for volunteering is the National Governance Association (see www.nga.org.uk). This is also a great way of gaining management experience, so I would suggest it to younger team members as a way of learning how boards and governance works.

Gatsby Benchmark 6: Experiences of work places

While I will caveat that it is harder for schools that have high absenteeism and poor parental engagement to offer work experience to pupils, there are still opportunities for children to interact with workplaces.

One firm that is doing brilliant things taking careers outside the provision of schools is AMS Accountants Group. Their MD Ebrahim Sidat explained their programme working with youth workers through Blackburn Youth Zones (part of the Onside Network).

‘The objective behind the outreach programme is to give children at a pivotal age an opportunity that they may not otherwise have. Our outreach extends way beyond the standard “careers centres” in schools. Youngsters in the Youth Zones are not likely to have thought about their career and are focused on anything other than finding a career, falling into the “self-fulfilling prophecy” of many in poor disadvantaged areas of our society.

In reality, many of these children will possess some of the key skills to make a successful career as an “adviser” due to their ability to fend for themselves with little parent engagement in those very disadvantaged communities.

‘AMS Group’s vision is to try and re-engineer the trajectory for these children, helping them to focus on a career and giving them the confidence to succeed. As an organisation, we feel that we should make a greater impact on social mobility.

‘I sit on the board at Blackburn Youth Zone, where we work to help children to unlock their potential. That could be through helping them to progress a career as an adviser in professional services or encouraging them to cultivate their entrepreneurial spirit. We support and mentor them through the process and help them to stay on course with our programme. Our graduates are extremely appreciative of the opportunity they may not have otherwise been given. This also has a knock-on effect where they have given back to their communities in which they grew up, setting in motion the positive butterfly effect.’

Another firm which has really thought about the way to increase the diversity of its intake is EY. Sally Bucknell, Director of Diversity and Inclusiveness Director at EY, told me about the work of the EY Foundation, which covers the whole gamut from education at primary school level through to work placements. She explained:

‘The EY Foundation is an independent charity, which helps young people in poverty to unlock their potential in the workplace. EY tackles this challenge through a combination of high impact programmes and its business connections – achieving transformational change by bringing young people and employers together. It aims to create a brighter future for young people facing barriers to success by building aspiration, confidence and a greater sense of purpose. It provides the knowledge, skills and experience they need to thrive in the workplace.

‘The Foundation operates across the country and our support is long term, from inspiring primary age children to ensuring young people succeed after joining the world of work. Its professional, insight-based approach directly benefits employers, helping them to work with local talent, build a more diverse workforce and increase staff engagement. The combination of six years of programme delivery, in-depth knowledge of the labour market and collaboration expertise means they can take a holistic, adaptable approach to a complex and fast-evolving issue.’

The reality is that you can start small. You don’t need to offer a full work placement, and during the restrictions of Covid-19 you could offer a virtual tour of an office to show how it works. You can only aspire to work in taxation if you know that the profession exists. Education is about broadening a child’s horizons and experience to enable them access to greater opportunities.