



Transcript for S16, E7 – The vital importance of access to good work with Anna Ambrose

Intro: Welcome to the future of internal communication podcast. I'm Jen Sproul, CEO of the Institute of Internal Communication.

Since we launched this series in 2021, the world of work has been disrupted by event after event. A pandemic, geopolitics, AI, extreme weather events, remote and hybrid working, generational shifts, inclusion, diversity - the entire nature of how we work needs transformation.

This podcast explores opportunities for internal communication in the future of work. Internal comms is a critical function that helps organisations achieve lasting change, building trust and relationship between people, in pursuit of shared goals.

Please, join me, Dominic Walters and Cat Barnard as we dissect what this means for internal communication.

With relentless change the new norm, it's time to reimagine our profession.

Cat (01:02)

Hello and welcome to the final episode of Series 16 of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard, as ever joined by Jen Sproul and Dominic Walters. And today we are going to be talking about a topic that is very fresh in the UK media headlines. We're going to be talking about the vital importance of access to good work.

Most of you who are parents will probably have watched this with rising concern. The Milburn review that was published late May has revealed that the number of young people not in education, employment or training is now above a million and it is causing huge concern up and down the country.

And so what I really want to do is have a conversation today that is going to dive into that topic and look at how we as internal communicators can help our employers think more broadly about what can be done to create this fairer world of work. And with that in mind, I'm really delighted to welcome our guest today, Anna Ambrose, who is the chief executive of WorkWhile, a small charity on a mission to create a fairer world of work.

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She's been leading WorkWell's strategy and operations from its inception as a pilot project, which was originally incubated by the Institute of Public Policy Research, spinning out into its own rights in 2025. But since 2020, WorkWell has been improving the working lives of people, more than 3,000 people from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds by creating new apprenticeships and high quality work opportunities. So I think that Anna will have more depth insight than many on this topic. I'm right in thinking that Anna's entire background is working in the field of education previously, working with Education Charity Ambition Institute, supporting schools and multi-academy trusts to develop their workforce and leading the operational delivery of ambitions, sales and account management functions. So without further ado, I'm delighted to say hi, Anna, and I know that we're going to have a meaty conversation today. And you very kindly invited me to one of your events in London earlier in the year, which was just so fascinating to me, really highlighting and spotlighting the brilliant work that providing apprenticeships, offers to young adults. It was really inspiring to listen to a couple of the young adults share their experience of how they benefited from that. So I wonder if we can kick off by me asking you to explain in a bit more detail what WorkWell is doing.

Anna (04:01)

Brilliant. Thank you. And thank you for such a brilliant introduction. And so as you said, Workwell is a small charity. We have existed in that incubation phase with IPPR since 2019-20 and been independent since over a year ago now. I think explaining exactly what we do is easiest to do sort of chronologically in a way. So our pilot project was called the London Progression Collaboration. And the challenge that that set us was to see if by working with small and medium-sized businesses in particular we could create more apprenticeship opportunities in London at that time for individuals from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. So that was a two and a half year roughly pilot project and by the time we got to that, we thought, okay, we can say yes to that. We can create apprenticeships. That's great. We know what some of the challenges and barriers are for small businesses. And we know very practically on a kind of micro day-to-day level how to overcome some of those challenges. So the next question for us really was, well, how can we make those better apprenticeships than if we'd had nothing to do with them? How can we make those deliver above and beyond for the individuals who are taking up those opportunities?

And that's really where the rest of our body of work has developed from and where our kind of wider mission has emerged from, which isn't just about apprenticeships for apprenticeships sake, it's apprenticeships as one way of creating pathways for people into and to progress in really good quality work. So some of the other work that we do is around



supporting the development of line managers within small businesses, particularly those who are managing younger people in the workforce, perhaps coming into work for the first time, young apprentices, etc. jhand then we do some wider work around the quality of work that employers offer. We work across a wide range of sectors, so often very kind of frontline sectors, foundational sectors, those kind of things. So we do a lot of work with construction businesses in health and social care in early years, as well as some very different kinds of businesses like kind of digital and tech businesses and all those kinds of things. So we see SMEs and some of their challenges and some of the brilliant things that they can offer to young people across a really wide range of sectors. Our work is still mainly focused in London and the South East, although we have done work elsewhere in the country and we're really excited to be expanding one of our programmes across England in the coming months, which is very exciting. But all of our work really hinges on understanding, particularly what it is people mean by good work, what are people actually looking for in work and our work is underpinned by a definition of good work that was written for us by a group of young people. And that is our kind of cornerstone in terms of what we mean by good work. And then understanding, particularly in an SME context, because small businesses are the accessible employers in every community in the country. So understanding, like, what does good practice look like across different domains of good work? And then how can we support more employers to adopt those good practices?

Cat (06:59)

There's such a lot there. And one of the things that I was thinking about as you were describing your work was it feels to me that we have fallen into this kind of rabbit hole, this media-fuelled rabbit hole of creating tropes about generations, which started with what think we could probably call now millennial bashing. It's almost gone in step with the evolution of the internet that, here has been a trend to describe millennials as this or obviously now Gen Z as that, which I don't think as a Gen X we ever experienced. And I imagine that that was because the internet didn't exist when we, our generation started out in work. But one of the things that I find fascinating, alarming, horrifying, disappointing, is that there is this media trope about all young people are like this or all young people are like that. And I remember being so impressed by the young adults that were on your panel at the event that I attended earlier in this year, because it's categorically, they dispelled all those tropes. And I think I've heard anecdotally from HR directors as well over the course of the past year, that there is a nervousness about training new members of the workforce because it is felt that they are more challenging and more questioning and more demanding existing members of the workforce who might be required to train them don't know how to



deal with that. And actually in one of the conversations that I had, my HRD contact pushed back at the person that had raised all of these issues and said, well, perhaps it's a communication development exercise for all of us.

But I wonder whether you experience or see or notice any of that perceived friction, which clearly is, as I say, it's media-fuelled, but it's not helpful, is it, in the reality of trying to get people on their pathways?

Anna (09:19)

Definitely, it's something we come across a lot. And I think we hear it on two levels from the small businesses that we work with. And one of those is very much that media-fuelled, stereotyped view of young people nowadays, as we might say. And the typical things you hear about, well everybody wants to work remotely, they just want to sit with their headphones on all day and be glued to a phone, people don't want to turn up to work on time and then concerns around sort of resilience, everybody thinks they've got some condition or other, all those kinds of things.

So yes we absolutely do hear those and that is very much fuelled by that kind of media narrative that we hear a lot of. We also hear from some employers who have had bad experiences of people where either there's been a performance issue or there's been friction and it's quite difficult sometimes to unpick which of those might be more or less true. But no, think the flip side is from particularly smaller employers who actually feel very vulnerable. They want to do the right thing. They want to take on a young person who might have experienced a challenging education, might have come from a background where they've not been particularly supported, whatever those circumstances. And actually as a small business, they want to know that they can support that person, but they don't quite know how they might do it or where they might turn if things get a bit more difficult than they feel that they can handle on their own. So I think as well as that kind of media fueled narrative for which fires some businesses up and turns them off employing young people for others, it creates a real sense of vulnerability that well, we want to do the right thing. We want to offer someone an opportunity, but what if there are challenges that we can't handle? If that person has a mental health need, we don't know how to support, where do we turn if that person turns out to have neurodiversity challenges in the workplace, where do we turn for support? So I think it works in both those ways, both of which can be quite challenging to overcome. But I think you're quite right, when you get employers, and this has absolutely been our experience at events like the one you attended and others in a room with a group of young people, not to have a job interview, not to talk about a specific



role, but just to talk about their perceptions of work to explore some of those issues and challenges.

That is a really transformational experience for a lot of employers and I don't think at the event that you came to but another one last year, we know that there were young people who ended up securing work because they'd spoken on a panel for us. They shared really passionately what they cared about and how driven they were to make a difference in some way, shape or form in the world. And there were employers in that room who thought, wow, that's not what I thought young people were like, that's the kind of person I want working for me. So, we also know that those stereotypes are not reality and if you can just bring people into contact with each other to have some more constructive conversations, so much of that can be overcome. And I think, the definition of good work that young people wrote for us, **we heard so much about how they want to find purpose in work.** And for different people, that meant really different things. It might be seeing the contribution you're making to a team and the difference you're making. It could be wanting to change the world in some way, and it can be anywhere between those things. But we spoke to young people they felt really strongly that they didn't just want to turn up and go home, they wanted to know what they were contributing in some way. And we heard lots about **young people wanting a voice**, which I think perhaps does play into some of the things you were mentioning earlier about perhaps being more challenging, perhaps speaking up in a slightly different way than we might have been used to. But so much that comes down to culture and comes down to management. It's not about being a big business and having huge amounts of budget to throw work to doing the things that young people need.

Actually it's about doing the leadership and the cultural things that make an employer what a young person needs, particularly for those who've experienced more challenges.

Jen Sproul (07:23)

And that's so fascinating. Thank you. And it's wonderful to hear that you have those events that dispel those myths. And I couldn't agree more if we just had more actual human to human conversations. So many myths could be dispelled in this world. And I'm also an SME employer. So some of that really resonates with me as well as an employer, as well as being somebody that runs an institute. And therefore, as well, trying to look at how I protect a profession or how we for internal communication, **how do we attract a talent pipeline of the future that goes to where we want it to be.** But also I think, and I will say this as an institute at the moment, that is **seeing and experiencing a real de-investment or de-prioritisation of education and skills**, the legacy traditional ways of how we educate, bring



people on, train them up through whether that's qualifications, skills, programmes. But I also know from our work that a lot of the people, there's all the things that you say, but they just want to know where's the path? How do I get there? What does that look like? But, we also do a lot of work in outreach. So we'll go and speak to undergraduates, school leavers, to try and position internal communication as a career of choice. But then we have this issue where there's the, we can get them excited, but we can't find them the opportunity. So there feels to me as well another narrative in business that's playing out and perhaps I hear this more in the larger corporate sector than perhaps the SME sector is that let's just hold back on those new entry roles and what they look like because we don't really know what we want the workflow and the roles to look like. Really know how to do things and actually all we don't really know how to give them the right programmes or the right education or the right upskilling or the right entry points. So let's just freeze it while we figure it all out, which I don't think, adds to that. And that's where I sit it from my point of view, is I feel like there's this real freeze to kind of let that access to good work is diminishing it, where the opportunities actually exist, where there is talent and we can't seem to connect talent and opportunity in a future driven, right environment, pathway driven, skills driven. That's just my view, another view of it, I guess. What do you think of some of those contributing factors that are limiting that access? We can get you excited, but we can't find you the access. How do we forge that bit?

Anna (15:38)

Yeah, it's really interesting and it resonates. I was at a conference with Business in the Community last week around some of their place-based work and there were lots of larger employers in that room and one of the conversations we were having there was about connecting things and lots of employers doing great work around work experience type things, those kind of things and reaching a talent pool that is not your typical average graduate, people who have experienced greater challenges in their education, etc. and from more disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds, and yet that bearing absolutely no relation to who is then applying for those entry-level roles and lots of thinking going on about, if we're doing that work, where does it ultimately lead if we're not then ultimately hiring some of those people?

And really thinking about what those pathways are. So I think you're absolutely right. I think some sectors are probably undoubtedly more affected than others in terms of that kind of holding back that you mentioned. We definitely see it and definitely not just restricted to sort of tech sector jobs but I think in a lot of sectors where there are very rapid developments in AI, etc. We see that and I've had some really interesting conversations with



business leaders who are thinking, this is all very well, but we need the mid-level people in a few years. So where are they going to come from if we're not hiring the right talent at the earliest stage? Where do we expect these fully formed mid-career people to come from if we're not at this point investing upfront? So I think there's a real issue there for businesses to be dealing with. But then I think on the flip side of that, there are some sectors, I mentioned we do a lot of work with early years employers, so childcare employers, we do a lot of work with adult social care employers where there is no shortage of entry-level roles, but again there's a kind of disconnect and a pathway challenge in terms of making sure those roles are reaching the young people who need them and are structured in a way in terms of job design etc that they do constitute good work and that they are meeting the needs of young people and are not just a job but are a footstep, a first rung on the ladder of what can be a great career, etc. So I think there's a lot of differences by sector and many different factors driving some of that as well. I think other things that contribute, there are some really good government policy changes at the moment, particularly around apprenticeship hiring subsidies for smaller businesses, much more of a push towards the level 2 and 3 level apprenticeships all this kind of thing which is absolutely in the right direction but I think also there's a lot of policy turn and things change very quickly in terms of businesses making decisions and all of that makes people hold back as well so I think I think there are so many things that kind of play into that decision making aren't there.

Jen Sproul (18:33)

Totally, and I think it's really interesting what you say, and I go back to that we're trying to use a legacy way of doing something where we have whole new challenges that we need to solve, and they actually, we're kind doing a bit of a square peg round hole sometimes is how it feels to me.

And what I mean by that, example, myself and Cat wrote an event the other week for the Institute for the Future of Work. And in that event, of course, AI was being parroted as an economic opportunity. Understand all of that.

But the narrative was that this then makes way for more human work, more leadership work, more new things that we can now do and develop. Doctors can spend more time with patients. We can get people into jobs that do more human relationship-focused work, that do this type of work. But at the same time, I'm not seeing how we're changing roles in organisations to enable that and how we're career. And also I say this as an education provider as well, so I have a bias towards that. And it worries me that we are not giving



people foundational learning when they're coming into new roles that then will give them that basis to which to navigate different operating environments that we're now in.

So I wonder sometimes from an educational point of view, how we stand back from that, but I also, I absolutely see the value and the good things that are going on as you talk about apprenticeships. But when I ask the question around, particularly on policy, what are we doing to help all skills development and encourage investments in skills development? And then also thinking, well, what are those skills that people need that young people can bring? Is that just something we need to step back from and try and refix in a new light?

Because I agree, think this middle manager issue, it's going to have a knock on in years to come. And how are we helping? Do you think that there are particular programmes or education that young people are particularly thinking, that's what I need, that's what I'd love to see designed into how I enter the workforce?

Anna (20:36)

That's a really good question and I think connectivity between education and employment, comes through in the Milburn Review to some extent, doesn't it, in terms of, whether young people through our exam system, through our education system are ultimately being supported to gain the skills that they need for the workplace now, let alone the workplace in another five years, another 10 years. And I think you hit on something really important in that it is what we might have termed soft skills, human skills, those things which are more difficult to measure. And so we tend to ignore them because they don't fit neatly in nice little subject boxes. It is those things which are ultimately going to be whatever direction some of the current labour market takes, it is those that are going to be really important for young people coming into work, whether it's now, whether it's in five, ten years, and yet which are somewhat missing.

I think we get stuck in conversation and as Cat mentioned in the introduction, I've worked a lot with schools, with academy trusts, I'm a chair of governors, so I absolutely don't go in for kind of teacher bashing or school bashing to any extent. But I think we get lost in a conversation about is the purpose of education to prepare people for work? Is it about its intrinsic value? We get into the same conversations when we talk about higher education and the purpose of degrees and all that kind of thing. And I think we get a bit lost in that and forget that actually ultimately it's about preparing young people for what their future will look like in as much as any of us can know that and thinking really carefully what young people need and in an unknown future and I think that's the bit that's sort of missing and



gets so easily lost because we end up in these kind of quite binary conversations I think don't we.

Jen Sproul (22:27)

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. I'll pass to Dom now I think.

Dom (22:30)

Yeah, thanks so much Anna, thank you. Anna I'd love to know more about your work around defining good work because I don't think some people go through their whole careers not necessarily finding that and I know you've done a lot of work with young people around it so you've mentioned I think purpose, you've mentioned people say I feel as though I'm contributing. What else would go towards helping us to define good work and to what degree has that been shaped by what you've learned from young people?

Well, two questions in one there.

Anna (23:00)

Brilliant. I might just start to answer that by reading you the definition that they wrote for us actually, if that's okay. Because I think it, you can unpick it from there, but I think it tells quite a lot. **So the definition they wrote for us says that good work means feeling valued, fulfilled and supported. It means being respected and treated fairly in a workplace that's diverse and inclusive, where there's open and honest communication and decent pay.**

Everyone should have a voice. Good work is done to a high standard and gives you a sense of achievement. It happens in a place where you can make change happen. Good work protects your health and wellbeing. You're excited to tell your friends and family about good work, not because they ask, but because you're proud of it.

That's what young people told us. There is so much in there that we can unpack, isn't there? But I think, people want to feel proud of what they're doing. They want to go home and want to tell people about like what employer wouldn't want that ultimately, for somebody to go home and tell their friends and family about what they've been doing because they're excited about it. And you know, I think that sense of purpose and making change happen



and having a voice, all those things come through so strongly and the conversation about pay is an interesting one, isn't it? And we heard really strongly from the young people that we spoke to that pay is important because they need to live just like anybody else. Not every 18 year old can carry on living at home. Not every 18 year old can have others available to support them. So for those very straightforward reasons, pay is important. But they also felt really strongly that it's a sign of respect. It's a sign of being valued and beyond that sense of, let's pay somebody so they can live and that takes the issue off the table. The other thing that was important is actually, what does it say about how my employer thinks about me and my value to them?

Dom (24:48)

Definitely. And thinking about this from an internal communication point of view, we talk a lot on this podcast about the future of internal communication. And one of the things I think we also discuss is our role as communicators in promoting conversation and connecting people together. And we talk about how we can show value so that the premise of the IOIC is that great communication unlocks organisational success.

What that means is that as communicators, we have a wider role than sending out messages and making sure that they're well produced. And that's been the case for forever, but it's even more important now. And I think what you're saying has really set off a light bulb in my head, which is if we're to help organisations attract the talent they need to prepare for the future, to get that pipeline of talent going, we need to create the circumstances to create good work or great work.

And that, among other things, means making sure people are treated with respect and listened to and have a voice. And that may seem obvious, but I think we sometimes struggle to do it. And I think, if we're honest as communicators, we sometimes struggle to make the case to people who make decisions about that. And I think what you've given us is more evidence to back that up.

Anna (25:54)

I think if I can just jump in, I think it's also something, no matter what the size of organisation, that needs to run through at every level. So the experience somebody has, there's so much evidence around how that is ultimately fuelled first and foremost by their experience of their line manager. So you can have whatever policies you like, you can have leadership putting out great messages, but if that is not actually lived and breathed by the



person who is line managing, a young person coming into work or whoever we might be talking about, that won't be their experience day to day. And so that sense of those commitments and that culture being reflected by your line managers first and foremost, I think is absolutely critical to that.

Dom (26:42)

Yeah, absolutely, I totally agree with you and I think for many people in an organisation, their manager is the organisation, that's the person they have most contact with. And I guess without being too general about it, for many people who start their careers, that's even more the case because they have less access to more senior people probably, less access to other channels. So that line manager can make or break someone's perception. To some degree, I've seen that with my own daughter's experience at work, how significant and important the line manager is for their comfort at work, but also how much they want to stay at places as well, I think. So that's crucial. That's something else that we can help us in terms of communicators. I'd love to just switch the lens a little bit because we've talked about what makes great work and we've touched on this as well but I just had to talk more about how do young people equip themselves to be good employees. Now we know that they're not going to come equipped with many of the skills that Jen has just been talking about and there's a responsibility on institutes and organisations to help supply that but when you're working with young people and guess for some from the backgrounds you discussed they may not have the role models to help them understand what good work looks, what good employees look like. So how do we help, how do you as an organisation, how do we as communicators help young people to equip themselves to be good employees?

Anna (27:58)

I think communication is right at the heart of this because I think there are so many workplace norms that we take for granted. We think that everybody walking through the door is going to understand the importance of timekeeping, is going to realise that there are professional expectations about how we speak to each other at work or how we might speak to clients or customers, depending on the role. And I think it's very easy to forget that if you come from a household perhaps where your parents haven't worked or where your parents have been in lots of different part-time temporary unstable work and probably not come home and told you a great story about what the world of work is like you're not going to know that those are the expectations and the norms so I think I think the onus is on



employers to think really carefully about how to communicate those expectations without layering on assumptions. We have young people that we really want to get into work who come from several generations of a household where nobody has been, well very few people might have been in work, but nobody's been in really good quality work. So actually we shouldn't have those expectations in the same way that we might have somebody who's been in a house of two parents in professional occupations. That background is just very different and I think the more we can communicate clearly and as objectively as possible about what expectations are, the more we can equip line managers to not to shy away from having a conversation if there's a behaviour that isn't appropriate or an expectation isn't being met. All of those things equip young people wherever possible to go on that steep learning curve if that's what needs to happen.

Dom (29:36)

Yes, and you've sparked another light bulb there, which is about helping line managers ask the right sort of questions. Because, as you say, it's very easy to assume that someone behave in a certain way or doesn't know a certain thing or if they behave in a different way from what you expect it's easy to assume why that might be. And I think what you've just reminded me is it's important that we help line managers ask the right questions and ask them to seek to understand and be curious rather than in a cross-examinatory way I think. So yeah there's a lot we can do I think as communicators to help line managers create an environment in which people can have the best chance of developing.

Anna (30:11)

Absolutely, so our developmental programme, which is our training programme for line managers who are line managing a young apprentice in SMEs, a lot of the focus of that is around, setting clear objectives, setting clear expectations, having those trickier conversations and building those coaching skills, someone who's probably, what happens, you're an apprentice, you get a full time role. You're promoted and suddenly you're line managing an apprentice and nobody's giving you the skills or the knowledge with which to do that beyond perhaps telling you how to how to manage holiday, how to manage sickness, that's what you tend to get isn't it when you're first a line manager? So actually helping people to build those coaching skills that means that they can ask those questions in a sensitive way and in an inclusive way but as you say seeking to understand rather than layering on their own assumptions about well I'm seeing this behaviour so this must be what's happening. We don't know that, we have to ask, as you say.



Cat (31:04)

Gosh, we're covering a lot of ground and the one thing that I'm reflecting on is the problems that assumption creates. I was thinking about, again, another kind of media frenzy around the extent to which the arrival of large language models, generative AI, AI, et cetera, has stymied entry level opportunity. And I wanted to have a bit of a conversation about the extent to which we think that is correct or whether there are other factors. I was also then going back over some key data points that the BBC published in the wake of the Milburn Review. And one of the points that was reported was that the Milburn Review had referred to or cited another separate government report detailing that apprenticeships starts amongst young people have fallen 35 % since 2017. We know that the large language models, the technology that everybody's going a bit crazy about at the moment didn't launch until 22, 23. So there's a five, six year period that is kind of unaccounted for there isn't there and I just wonder again, media fueled sensationalist headlines. Whether it is it artificial intelligence singularly or whether there are other factors and I think what you've described in terms of some of the conversations that you've had with small to medium-sized businesses about their anxieties their concerns, not necessarily knowing how to welcome a young person into the workplace, not necessarily feeling equipped to deal with a broader range of issues that might go from, kind of pastoral care really through to how do I effectively transfer skills when I've never done it before, all of those things. But going back to a bit more of a headline.

Do you think it's singularly AI that is impacting the traditional apprenticeship model or is it a range of factors? And if it's more broad than the lazy media trope, what are some of the other factors, Anna?

Anna (33:31)

So I think you're absolutely right in pinpointing the timing of that drop in apprenticeships, particularly level two and three. There's a bit of it, I think of it as a bit of a Venn diagram. So there's been a fall in apprenticeships at levels two and three, which are typically those entry level roles. There's been a fall in apprenticeships accessed by young people. Well, clearly there's a big overlap in those two circles in terms of the Venn diagram. And then the third bit of that, the third circle on that Venn diagram, if you like, which I think is a bit more ignored is that there's been a huge drop in SMEs offering apprenticeships over that time as well. The Fabian Society launched a report last summer which calculated the contributory role of the drop in SMEs offering apprenticeships and it was 80-90 percent. So a huge



amount of that can be accounted for by small businesses no longer offering apprenticeships and as I said earlier we think that's so important because they are the accessible employer in every community, no matter where you are, there are some small businesses. So the fact that market of apprenticeship opportunities for people to get into work in their local area I think is really, really important.

The timing of that, so particularly around 2017, was when there were also a lot of changes in apprenticeship policy. So for larger employers, the apprenticeship levy came in, they began to pay a percentage into the apprenticeship levy which they could then use to fund their own apprenticeships and what happened within large employers is that there was typically a pull towards spending as much of that levy funding as possible and therefore that funding going on more expensive apprenticeships which were at higher levels and were typically benefiting existing employees who were already better qualified and already typically older and better paid. So we had a real skew in the system from what had been kind of what we think of as an apprenticeship which is about young people getting into work and taking those first steps towards much more of a kind professional qualification sort of landscape and some of that was intentional because the UK has a history of low employer investment in skills training throughout the kind of employee life cycle. So to some extent, the apprenticeship system was deliberately made to be part of the answer to that. So to be used for upskilling and re-skilling throughout an employee's kind of working life. But I think that's happened much more than we ever expected. But on the flip side, the system for smaller employers who don't pay into the apprenticeship levy became a lot more complicated to find their way around. Now, that was driven by good intentions to make the quality of apprenticeships better and to ultimately make the outcomes for people who are on those apprenticeships better. But that complexity comes at a cost, particularly if you are a small business, where you don't have an apprenticeship manager, you don't necessarily have a head of HR, you probably have an operations person who does all of those things, that might have to find their way around a more complicated system, even if that's there for the best reasons is really limited and so we lose people through that. The levy also meant that for training providers who deliver the training part of an apprenticeship all of the motivation was to go after large businesses. So the amount to which they were going to put into kind of cultivating a pipeline of small businesses to offer apprenticeships, that kind of went as well. So lots and lots of things in the apprenticeship system itself that have meant that those level two and three apprenticeships for young people have fallen away. And then we have a landscape where what's happened over that period since 2017, we've had a pandemic, we've had Brexit, we've had such kind of turmoil that all of those things have contributed to that kind of fall in entry level apprenticeship hiring. Employers not wanting to make a commitment for the duration of apprenticeship, which might be 18 months, two



years, three years, depending on that apprenticeship, actually, just because of instability, wanting to hire more short term, kind of lower level roles, all those kinds of things playing into that. And now we have the AI challenges for entry level hiring that are compounding that issue. I don't think AI is a red herring in terms of its impact on entry level hiring or entry level apprenticeships. But I think it's come on top of, as you say, nearly a decade of other things also affecting that.

Cat (37:55)

Wow, I think it just goes to show like just reflecting back Jen said earlier that we attended a conference in London a couple of weeks ago, which was which was on artificial intelligence in the future of work, but the reality is that none of these landscapes are simple. They are highly complex and nuanced and the way in which you have just explained the apprenticeship landscape, I was kind of vaguely aware that the apprenticeship levy hasn't worked or hasn't done what had been hoped for it. But you have just explained it in a very comprehensible way. And bluntly, it makes me think that there's a lot of people who are influencing policy who don't understand the complexity of this landscape. And there's a lot of fiddling, but it's not for the best because it feels to me and I, again, I don't want to point fingers at anybody, but it feels like it's surface level fiddling, treating problems as though they're complicated and can therefore be remedied when in fact our problems are now very complex.

Anna (39:14)

I think it points us back to the Milburn Review, doesn't it to kind of put us back almost where we started and that conclusion that, this isn't about let's launch another project. This isn't about let's add another intervention here or there. Actually, what's needed is not even departmental if we think in government terms, it's really systemic change that's needed. And so, tweaking around the edges of the apprenticeship system. Yes, policy is going in a direction which I think, broadly speaking, in the service of young people rather than those older, more experienced learners now, which is positive but that tweaking is not going to be enough to solve some of the problems that we have currently.



Jen Sproul (39:56)

And just to jump in as well, I think as well as Cat articulately described in a way that really makes, you know, to really see it, is that interconnectedness and the interdependency of the issues that we have. And if you try and deal with one thing without seeing how it has a domino effect to X, Y and so on, you're just going to be keep moving problems from bucket to bucket rather than trying to see how that interconnectedness can solve or needs to be taken a step back from and looked at with a fresh perspective and sees how one decision impacts another. Does that make sense to you, Anna?

Anna (40:35)

Yeah, absolutely. I was just going to say, and that's without touching on some we know that there are increasing levels of mental health challenges across all generations, but particularly affecting young people who aren't currently in work. We haven't even really touched on the sort of implications as far as health system and as far as the benefit systems concerned, how we can make that all more of that more preventative, more supportive of people getting into work. So yeah, huge, huge amounts of interconnectedness.

Jen Sproul (41:02)

Then you add on the employment rights bill changes, increase in employee and insurance contributions, particularly on SME markets where they don't necessarily, and I think I say this as an SME employer as well, I don't have anybody that could run, I don't have the resource to pay for someone that could run an apprenticeship or could take on all those extra things that think it's really important. Your fear and cash and business and all those things that keep people up at night. But I think the other thing that before I go off on one down, my God, it's so hard to run an SME in this market, which is not what we're about here today. It's not my group therapy session. I get that. But the thing that as well that strikes me in listening to the conversations and looking at it from the internal communication perspective as well and the interdependencies that we talk about is that what are pathways, what are upskilling? That's one whole issue and how we, I guess as internal communicators can work with, larger, sorry employees than SME employees because that's where we largely exist. But I do think there is a greater opportunity for us to be more embedded with our stakeholders, particularly on how we help communicate pathways and progression and upskilling by working with our cousins, friends in L&D and HR and so on and so forth. I think there's a consideration for us as a profession ourselves, and I say that as IOIC, to think about



what roles look like, what does job design look like of the future and how we go about that. Then the other interdependencies and many that you talked about with Dom as well was around this issue of environment, this issue of how we create this, I think that we haven't again got to the interconnected systemic issue that exists there, where managers who are bringing or helping to sort of train up and show and role model behaviour of what good communication and good environment and good purpose and good voice looks like, we're not designing that upskilling from entry point, if you like, to understand what good communication as a line manager and good environment looks like with the reflected complexities that we have more generations, we have more personal traits, we have more issues, all the things that you've talked about. And I always have thought that there's an opportunity to work with looking at how we help design kind of or support. There's a lot of future leader programs in organisations.

What are we teaching of those and how are we designing those jobs? That again is a systemic piece for me as well. So I think there's a lot as internal communicators we can bring our knowledge to bear and our evidence to bear to help make the case for how we think about creating that systemic environment and line manager and communication capability in our organisation. That means that at least when people come in there's a pathway and a role model and a way that's going to help them succeed. The issue of creating opportunities is as you say also another complexity and I think there's more interesting work to think that we could educate or help skilled education as the right word but I think you picked up on is that one of the things that we've got coming out as well in a few weeks I think it's really interesting is that the workplaces are being built for extroverts not for introverts.

And we're not even understanding personality and human and how people thrive in smaller groups. And actually SMEs have a lot to teach larger corporates on how to do that, because I would say SMEs are better tight knit communities. But it is a complex, interdependent, interconnected systemic issue. But it makes me wonder as internal communicator, and I'm going to throw to Dom now, who's probably going to spend much more articulate way going, how can we think about how we make the case for the conditions for people to thrive.

Dom (44:52)

Yes, I couldn't have said it better myself Jen. How could we do that? I think as we come into land, some of the things are just dotting down what we as internal communication practitioners can do. Now, some people listen to this will be running their own SMEs. And so



they may have, although taking Jen's point about the constraints that many SMEs work in, they may have opportunities to do something more directly. Others will be, again, as Jen said, if they're internal communication managers or heads of internal communication, by definition more the M's than the S's I suppose and beyond. But I think just taking what you said, equip line managers, get them to have the right conversations, I think that's going to be important. I think be open more, be more open about our assumptions about people, again ask more questions but also understand why people may have the approach that they have. You've talked very clearly about setting up training that's not closing doors before it even starts. Sometimes I think what you're saying we build training programmes for older people, more established people with our own approach to life, we need to shift that. I think get people talking, that's something that's come through very strongly. Right away from the start when you said quite clearly that when you get respective employers talking with young people many of their prejudices are exploded and I think also create an environment in which people are listened to because we know that's what many people, particularly young people, value. So those are the key things I've taken but I'm going to ask you very unfair question now which is what are the sort of key three things that if you're a communicator with some influence within your organisation. What are the key things that an employer can do to start to encourage more young people into work, into good work?

Anna (46:29)

I think I would echo a lot of what you've just said, to be honest. I think, thinking about and communicating clearly those pathways from an employer's earliest engagement with young people, whether they're doing work with schools, whether they're doing work with universities, whatever that looks like, or whether the entry level hiring is that first interaction, but thinking and communicating really clearly, from that first engagement, what is it we're looking for? How might we expect you to be going about building those skills? What can we as an employer do to support you? How can we, ensure that our door is open and that we're not putting a few hurdles between us and you to encourage people to apply and hopefully be successful in the first place and then to know what their pathway might look like within an organisation. So I think that's very important. As you've said, equipping line managers is really vital. So I mentioned our developmental programme earlier. We have just secured an expansion of that programme to be able to offer it to SMEs across England for people who are line managing an apprentice age 24 and under with some funding from Youth Futures Foundation so if you're an SME we can help you with that but for all organisations I think that first person that somebody encounters day to day that line



manager is so vital for making sure that that is an environment where they feel they have that purpose, they have that voice, all those things we've talked about.

And then I think the other thing I would encourage employers to think about if they have entry-level roles is can that be an apprenticeship? So we know that apprenticeships have really good outcomes for young people, particularly for young people from the most disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. So if there's an entry-level role as a first thing to think about, could it be an apprenticeship? There are organisations like ourselves, but others across the country available to support smaller businesses with that, lots of brilliant case studies online, all kinds of things to kind of smooth that journey out. So I think that that piece of thinking to think well okay we've got a role, can we make it a role that has education built into it and that is going to support somebody to build the skills and be ready to progress within work is really vital too.

Dom (48:38)

And of course out of that reinforces the fact this is not about altruism. It's, well, partly is I suppose, but it's not exclusively about altruism, it's about doing what's right for the business and society as well. So I think that's a fantastic way for us to finish the session. Thank you so much for joining us and for a fascinating and wide-ranging conversation, Anna thank you.

Anna (48:57)

Thank you ever so much. It's been brilliant.