



A view from the top

Engaging the C-Suite in Early Careers

November 2024



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A view from the top – Engaging the C-Suite in Early Careers

The level of support for Early Careers Programmes varies by organisation driven by C-Suite's belief in the short and long-term benefit. Early Careers leaders are often under pressure to demonstrate Return on Investment for their existing programmes or to make a case for more investment.

C-Suite engagement is vital for making the case for Early Careers Programmes and securing the investment required for successful delivery. However, the level of engagement with C-Suite varies across the Early Careers sector.

Inspired by GTI Breakfast News "A View from the top" (December 2024), this document sets out the challenge and an approach for achieving effective engagement through:

- Understanding why early careers matter to the C-Suite (and could matter more in some cases)
- Recognising concerns the C-Suite have with investing in early careers
- Making the business case and developing ways to increase your visibility and influence as an Early Careers leader
- Building awareness of which stakeholders can help you and how, in your role as an Early Careers leader

We have provided a simple diagnostic and actions tool which can help early careers leaders progress their peer and C-Suite relationships and scale their impact.

If you would like support in influencing the C-Suite or making business cases, please let us know. The Cibyl team can help with a diagnostic and bring student perspectives and data to help support recommendations. Please contact hello@groupgti.com

Early Careers programmes change lives and enrich organisations

The value of Early Careers initiatives extends far beyond filling entry-level roles, making them essential for sustainable growth. C-Suite and CPO/HRDs can place value in early careers programmes for a variety of reasons:

- **Pipeline for Leadership:** Young professionals who align with a company's vision from the start are likely to advance into key roles over time.
- **Skills gaps:** Recruiters in working with business leaders to identify skills gaps and have a great opportunity to hire for skills not just now but for future skills too. Product Management (for commercial functions not just tech) and advanced analytics and AI are examples of roles or skills-in-demand trends we're seeing. Engaging with business areas ahead of the talent in-demand curve can be of great value to the C-Suite.
- **Innovation, Agility and Adaptability:** Early career employees, with digitally native, fresh and often 'challenging to the status quo' ideas, can help organisations create new ideas and remain agile in uncertain times, particularly considering disruptive forces like GenAI.
- **Diversity and Inclusion:** A lever to support EDI objectives, leading to a workforce that has a higher performance through diversity of thought. And a workforce that reflects the diverse customers and communities it serves when marketing or delivering to them. Measuring EDI improvements resulting from early careers hiring initiatives reflects positive company progress.
- **Cost Efficiency:** Recruiting and training early talent is often more cost-effective than rehiring experienced professionals.
- **Employer Branding:** Can support brand positioning as an employer of choice for all levels of hiring and existing staff retention through the positive perception of investing in the next generation. The authenticity and purposefulness of an employer are often a key part of deciding who to work for.
- **ESG:** Enhance the company's ESG profile by contributing to community education and youth employment.
- **Winning new contracts:** An employer who's able to show they can help deploy a more diverse workforce in their delivery of products and services can often be crucial factor in securing contracts – particularly in public sector where the public's interest is at heart, funded by taxpayers.
- **Reverse mentoring:** As executives progress towards C-Suite they develop deeper skills but may become increasingly disconnected with the next generation. Reverse mentoring can support internal communication, marketing and innovation perspective.
- **Connection with universities:** Colleges and universities provide research collaborations, supporting innovation. Having a hiring relationship can often help partnership working.
- **Learning & Development Programmes:** Structured L&D pathways help early career employees quickly adapt to corporate culture and develop relevant skills, driving productivity and satisfaction. Employers can benefit from both
- **Mentorship and Support Networks:** Providing guidance through mentorship fosters loyalty, builds skills, and promotes a positive work environment.
- **Educators and Career Advisers:** Play a vital role in preparing students to meet industry expectations and securing partnerships with companies to foster internships, apprenticeships, and graduate placements. Collaborative efforts between educational institutions and corporations support the transition from academia to the professional environment and build career pipelines aligned with industry demand.

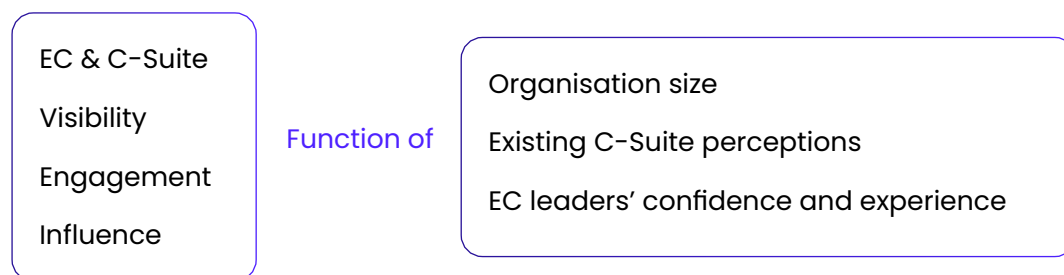
So, what is the state of the relationship between C-Suite and Early Careers leaders?

This question was posed in April 2024, at the National Graduate Recruitment Awards and prompted us at Group GTI to bring this problem, barrier and opportunity into the public domain via Breakfast News in November 2024.

Our recent survey was conducted across October 2024 in partnership with the ISE, yielding responses from just over one hundred early careers leaders across a number of organisations hiring large volumes of early careers talent. We asked them to describe their relationship with the C-Suite and the results were mixed. We saw popular answers include the words *supportive* and *collaborative*, but also *distant* and *challenging*.

There's a difference in visibility, engagement and influence between early careers and the C-Suite. We also must appreciate that different sized organisations, existing perceptions, sector trends and early careers leader's own experience and confidence level can play a part in why there's a contrast across the industry.

Strength of relationship between EC & The C-Suite



The early careers leaders survey showed several interesting findings.

- **Visibility:** 60% of early careers leaders felt they were visible amongst the C-Suite
- **Understanding:** Early careers leaders felt C-Suite were not understanding of the challenges and changes that impact early careers strategies, operations and delivery, with only just over 20% of respondents feeling understood by C-Suite
- **Confidence:** 53% of early careers leaders felt confident in communicating and influencing into the C-Suite/Board
- **Importance:** 38% of early careers leaders felt their function was deemed less important than their counterparts delivering experienced and executive recruitment.

And don't forget to assess your network's C Suite influencing power – we've included an outline of potential stakeholder groups, plus what's important to them. It may help you to collaborate and collectively influence upwards by syncing up on your strategies and operations.

Function/Role	Areas of interest
EDI	Strategy, goals and align Budget, thought leadership, PR Set and track EDI goals Diversify talent pipelines Eliminate bias in hiring Develop underrepresented groups Collaborate with external orgs Retention strategies D&I training
Talent Acquisition Director	Talent pipelines Employer branding and marketing Candidate experience (CX) Technology and tools Optimise time to hire and other metrics Manage TA team Fosters collaboration across depts Works closely with EDI, HRD, SLT
ESG / CSR	Sustainable strategies and supply chain EDI metrics and initiatives Community engagement and impact Collaboration with business units, HR, Finance, EDI, Marketing
Procurement	Strategic sourcing and selection Cost efficiencies Budget alignment Supplier relationships and performance Streamlining, integrations, supplier collaboration Spend analysis, market research CRS/ESG and finance relationship
Talent / L&D Director	Talent strategy Develop and implement training programmes Curriculum design and delivery Develop future leaders Mentoring programmes Work with business unit and skills SMEs Close ties to procurement, recruitment, HR, sustainability
COO / CFO / CMO	Operational efficiencies Digital transformation, integration and innovation Customer insights, brand management, digital marketing Cross-department collaboration

C-Suite can have a range of concerns about investing in early careers

Let’s look at what may put C-Suite off investing into early talent and some ideas on how to address them.

We’ve provided a simple diagnostic tool that you can use to assess your own organisation’s situation in a systematic and objective way, using data as much as possible. This tool uses a flexible framework that that can be customised to best match your business context.

As a result of working through the tool, you can assess the results, determine priorities and consequently define the “asks” or investment required that you would need C Suite “buy in” to secure. See also our section on how to engage strategically with C Suite for further ideas. An example of how to address one area – Cost Benefit Analysis – is provided below along with ideas for further areas to consider.

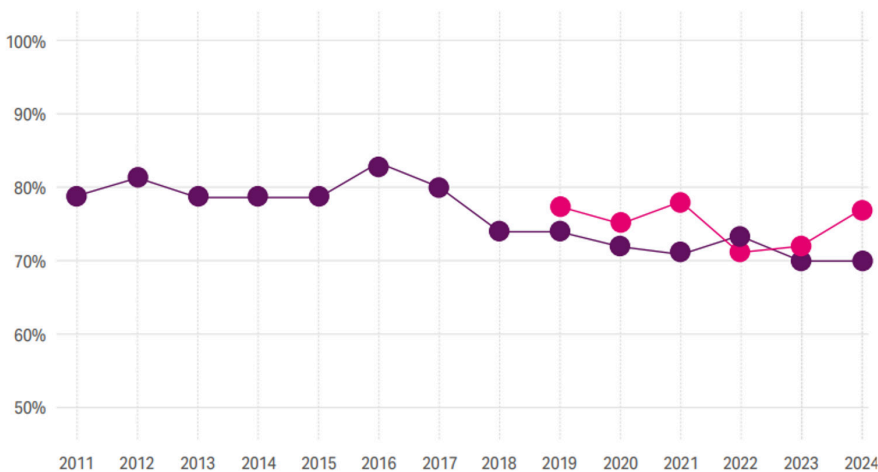
C Suite area of Accountability	Issue	C Suite considerations	Importance and C Suite actions
Return on Investment and Cost - Effectiveness	Cost benefit Analysis	Immediate & long-term costs associated with recruiting, training and developing EC talent	High priority – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build data set for last 5 years’ programmes – include details of recruitment costs, L&D expenditure • Build data set for similar timescale that covers EC programme participants performance data & retention • Present Data-Driven Metrics: Use metrics such as retention rates, speed to productivity, engagement scores, and diversity improvements among early career hires to demonstrate the tangible impact of these programmes. • Determine best method for presenting data to C Suite and/or individual C Suite colleagues
Further areas – for example: Alignment with Business Goals and Strategy Time and Resource Commitment Quality and Readiness of Early Career Talent			

Return on Investment (ROI) and Cost-Effectiveness

- **Cost-Benefit Analysis:** C-Suite may be concerned about the immediate and long-term costs associated with recruiting, training, and developing early-career talent. There may be questions about whether these investments will yield sufficient returns, especially compared to hiring experienced professionals.
- **Greater development needs:** New early talent to the business has been reported by the ISE members as being less work-ready than years before and their perception of what some skills are in the workplace (e.g. communication skills) are leaving employers having to 'pick up the pieces' it seems a part of onboarding and development more than ever before.
- **Productivity Lag:** Many early career hires require time and resources to reach optimal productivity. The C-Suite may question how quickly early-career talent can contribute meaningfully and whether the ramp-up time justifies the investment.
- **Retention Rates:** Retention of early-career talent is often lower, as young professionals frequently explore multiple opportunities early in their careers. The C-Suite may be hesitant to invest if they perceive a risk of high turnover or if past programmes have shown limited retention success. The Institute of Student Employers Student Development Survey 2024 shows a decline since 2016 of retaining graduates at the three-year mark. Once 83% and now at an all-time low of 70%. However, it should be noted that apprentice retention rate has been stable of the time of the survey.

Figure 7.4

Proportion of the cohort retained at three years from 2011 to 2024



Graduates

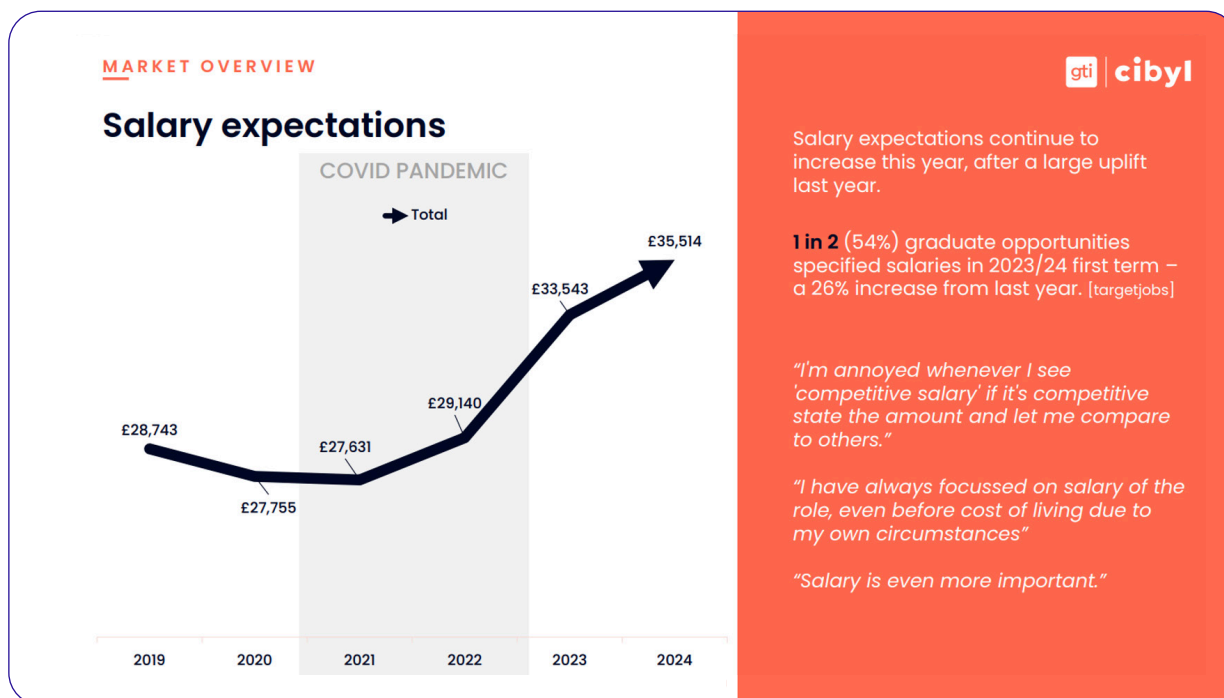
2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
79%	81%	79%	79%	79%	83%	80%	74%	74%	72%	71%	72%	70%	70%

School and college leavers

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
								77%	75%	78%	71%	71%	77%

¹² Department for Education (2023). Graduate labour market statistics. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/graduate-labour-markets>

- **Rising salaries:** Salary expectations have been on the rise in recent years with the cost-of-living crisis plus the cost of studying. After a 15% jump in 2023, salary expectations have remained stable (and high) in 2024, as reported in our Cibyl Graduate Survey 2024.



Low growth, high interest rates, uncertainty (especially in the US currently) puts pressure on all long-term planning and decision. Exacerbating the early careers ROI question. – here's Declan Curry's (a leading broadcaster) [take on the UK and global economic situation](#) and how this informs our thinking.

Alignment with Business Goals and Strategy

- **Talent Pipeline Relevance:** C-Suite want reassurance that early careers programmes are aligned with long-term business goals. Concerns can arise if there isn't a clear connection between the skills of early-career hires and the company's future needs.
- **Skill Gaps and Future Needs:** C-Suite leaders may worry that early career programmes are not focused enough on filling specific skill gaps critical to future growth. The C-Suite is more likely to support programmes that address areas like digital skills, data science, and innovation that are essential to the business.
- **Growth of AI:** The exponential growth in all things digital and particularly AI in recent years has meant organisations have been debating the value of the skills early talent arrive with (the ability to automate entry-level tasks), compared to more experienced hires that can be recruited instead.
- **Adaptability of Early-Career Talent:** C-Suite may question whether early-career hires have the adaptability to keep up with a rapidly changing business environment, especially if significant industry changes are anticipated which require detailed market knowledge.

Time and Resource Commitment

- **Demand on Current Staff:** Developing early-career talent requires significant involvement from existing employees, particularly in mentoring, onboarding, and skill development. This can place additional pressure on mid-level and senior staff, which may raise concerns about resource allocation.
- **Impact on Productivity:** The C-Suite may worry that the time and resources spent on training and onboarding early-career employees could temporarily reduce productivity. Leaders may prefer solutions that deliver more immediate results or minimise disruptions.

Quality and Readiness of Early-Career Talent

- **Skills and Experience Gaps:** Early-career candidates often enter with limited professional experience. Senior leaders may be concerned about the skill gap and question whether early-career talent will require extensive training and handholding before becoming effective contributors.
- **Maturity and Professionalism:** Some senior leaders may be cautious about the maturity level of early-career talent, especially when hiring for roles that demand a high degree of responsibility, decision-making, or client interaction.

Retention and Talent Mobility

- **Risk of Talent Loss to Competitors:** There's a valid concern that early-career talent, once trained, might leave for other opportunities, potentially advantaging competitors. C-Suite wants to see evidence that the programme is designed to retain talent and foster loyalty, minimising the risk of attrition.
- **Career Path and Advancement Uncertainty:** C-suite leaders may worry about how early-career programmes align with internal career paths and promotion opportunities. Concerns arise if there isn't a clear plan for advancing early-career employees internally, leading to potential dissatisfaction and turnover.

Impact on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

- **Diversity Goals vs. Hiring Objectives:** While early careers programmes often aim to increase diversity, some senior leaders may worry that an overemphasis on EDI targets could inadvertently overshadow other priorities, such as specific technical or business skills. Or that EDI priorities in terms of which groups are in focus regularly change.
- **Equitable Experience:** C-Suite leaders may want to ensure that early-career programmes foster an equitable experience, so that all participants—regardless of background—receive equal training, resources, and advancement opportunities.

Programme Scalability and Consistency

- **Consistency Across Locations or Divisions:** In larger organisations, the C-Suite may be concerned about programme scalability and consistency. For example, they may question whether early-career programmes can be implemented uniformly across geographies, divisions, or functional areas
- **More offshoring:** The cost of hiring for skills and functions has caused some employers to think about off shoring their workforce at more junior levels. Particularly with home or hybrid working – if people aren't in the office, what benefit is there on hiring 'on shore'.
- **Cost of Scaling:** Scaling a successful early careers programme can be costly, particularly if it involves expanding globally. The C-Suite may want assurances that a scaled programme will still provide high quality and deliver results without excessively increasing operational costs.

Programme Monitoring and Accountability

- **Measuring Success:** C-Suite may be concerned about the programme's accountability and how its success will be measured over time. They want to ensure that there are clear KPIs, milestones, and metrics to assess performance and outcomes.
- **Programme Oversight and Governance:** Without clear governance structures, C-suite leaders may worry that early-career programmes could lack direction or consistency, leading to variable outcomes across departments or regions.

Given these issues, early careers leaders must often develop their relationship with C-Suite, make the business case and address C-Suite concerns

With so many reservations in mind, it can be easy for C-Suite to dismiss the value early careers could bring, especially if visibility of that value has been limited or created a previous perception.

The GTI, ISE survey showed that around 60% of early careers leaders felt they were visible to the C-Suite, with nearly a fifth stating they were not visible. Employers we work with have shared how being prepared with a story to tell, an update to show or a success to share, can help to provide confidence in the early careers leaders but also build trust from the C-Suite who are often time poor.

The view from the top – how the C-Suite measure success

In a recent survey with early careers leaders, we asked about what early careers leaders thought their C-Suite were most interested in when it came to measuring success.

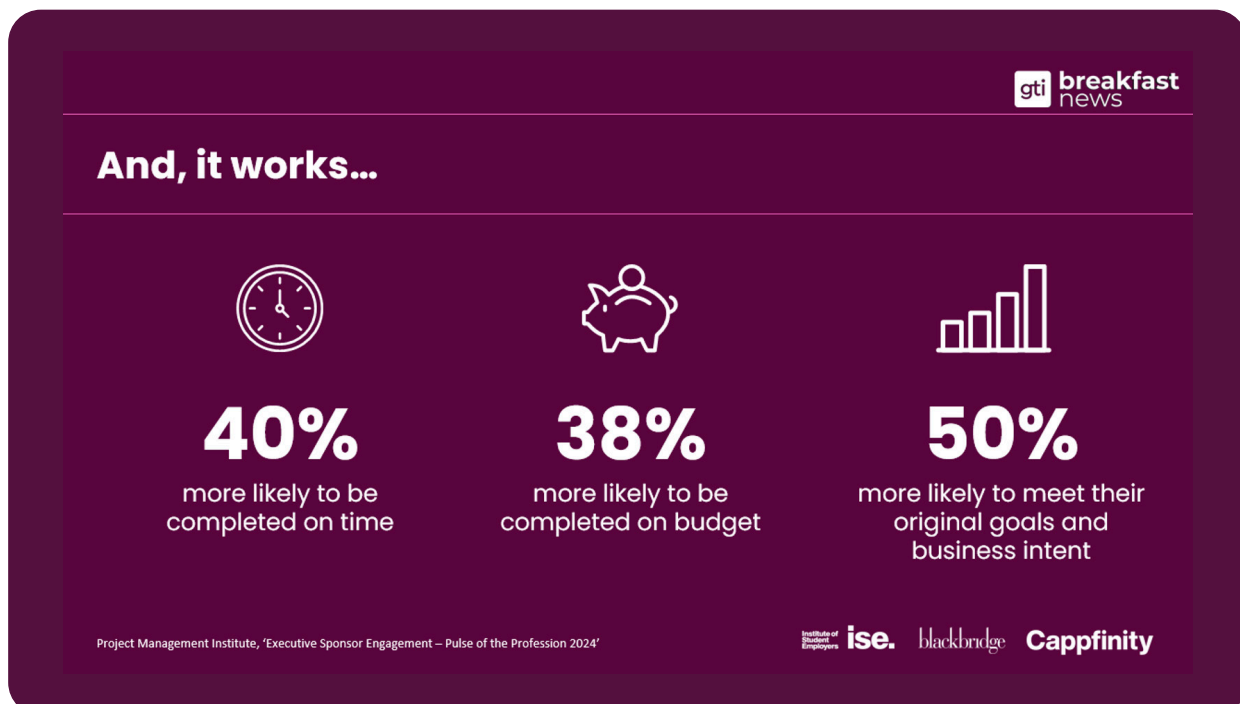
Retention, Performance and EDI goals were the most important but interestingly at our recent Breakfast News event, Paul Livingston, Lockheed Martin's UK CEO, suggested his most important metric was Employee Engagement, as that in fact this was the gateway to Performance and Retention if the employee was happy and fulfilled.

Anouska Ramsay, LGPS Central CPO talked about just how important early careers can be regarding winning and delivering the work that your customers have trusted you to with doing. To watch Paul and Anouska's panel session, click [here](#).

Successful C-Suite engagement presents significant challenges but will deliver important benefits

There's an appreciation that early careers leaders may at different stages of career, seniority and tenure – which could affect their confidence and ability to influence upwards. However, if you see everyone in your organisation as a future CEO or C-Suite, this can become useful when meeting them in another capacity.

According to a recent article by the Project Management Institute, 'Executive Sponsor Engagement – Pulse of the Profession 2024', gaining C-Suite buy-in can have the following impact on projects and delivery by employees:



C-Suite engagement requires a strategic approach

Communicating with influence and purpose is central to the success of C-Suite engagement. Aim to establish early careers value, alignment with business objectives and present clear, quantifiable outcomes.

There's a variety of tactics for elevating the visibility of early careers to the C-Suite – here's an outline supported with video links to early careers leaders who share their insights and experiences.

Quantify and Showcase ROI

- **Present Data-Driven Metrics:** Use metrics such as retention rates, speed to productivity, engagement scores, and diversity improvements among early career hires to demonstrate the tangible impact of these programmes.
- **Cost-Benefit Analysis:** Highlight the cost savings associated with hiring and promoting from within rather than rehiring externally. For example, show the costs saved by reducing turnover or upskilling early career talent instead of hiring mid-level professionals.
- **Measure Impact on Key Business Objectives:** Link early career outcomes directly to corporate objectives, such as innovation, market expansion, or improved customer service. Demonstrating how these programmes support business priorities emphasises their strategic relevance.

Francesca Brookes, Graduate Attraction Lead, Accenture, shared with us some great tips on how you can manage time poor C-Suite by getting straight to the point. Find out more [here](#).

Understanding how to present the data, how it's going to be best understood, and it can often differ between sectors is so important. Hannah Rolph, Head of Talent Acquisition at Knight Frank explains a little more [here](#).

Align Early Careers with Organisational Goals

- **Map Programmes to Business Strategy:** Ensure early careers programmes explicitly support the organisation's long-term goals, such as innovation, sustainability, or diversity and inclusion. This alignment can be reinforced by showing how the programme meets current workforce needs or future skills gaps.
- **Link to Future Leadership:** Highlight that early careers programmes are a critical talent pipeline for future leaders. Demonstrating that these programmes produce high-performing, promotable employees can secure greater senior leadership interest.
- **Support ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) Goals:** If ESG goals are a company priority, show how early career hiring supports social goals by creating job opportunities for young people and supporting community education and employment initiatives.

Kevin Basmadji, Head of TA, KPMG, recently shared with us how C-Suite will want to make sure you've really understood the business challenge and you can be trusted and empowered to then progress with your plans. You can listen to Kevin, [here](#).

Share Success Stories and Case Studies

- **Highlight High-Impact Individuals:** Share stories of successful early career employees who have quickly advanced or contributed significantly to projects. Emphasise contributions that directly impact the company's bottom line, such as a young data analyst who uncovered a valuable insight or an intern who led a cost-saving initiative.
- **Create and Distribute Case Studies:** Develop case studies that detail how early careers talent solved real problems, contributed to innovative projects, or demonstrated exceptional leadership. Distribute these case studies in senior leadership presentations or at town hall meetings.
- **Leverage Employee Ambassadors:** Encourage early career employees who have experienced significant development to speak about their journey within the organisation, sharing insights and perspectives at senior leadership meetings or leadership summits.

Engage C-Suite in Early Careers Programmes

- **Invite C-Suite to Mentor:** Encourage senior figures to participate as mentors, speak at early career events, or attend onboarding sessions. When leaders see the energy and potential of early careers talent firsthand, they're more likely to support these programmes actively.
- **Organise Shadowing Opportunities:** Allow early career talent to shadow C-Suite, exposing senior leaders to the programme's benefits while also providing young employees with invaluable insights.
- **Regular Reporting to the C-Suite:** Schedule regular updates or reports about early careers programmes to the C-suite, including progress summaries, impact data, and future initiatives. Keeping these programmes on their radar maintains awareness and fosters buy-in.

Ellie Long, Global Head of Early Careers at Rolls Royce, recently shared with us how she brings the C-Suite into their early careers in person engagement and activities as part of their mantra to "Go, Look, See". It takes the away the data and metrics pressure away and is complimented by authentic and people-oriented activity. Hear Ellie elaborate [here](#).

Showcase Innovation and Fresh Perspectives from Early Career Employees

- **Leverage Projects Led by Early Career Talent:** Highlight how early career employees contribute unique perspectives, especially on technology, digital innovation, and new trends. Present examples where they've driven or contributed to innovative projects.
- **Promote Feedback Channels:** Capture and share feedback from early career talent on corporate processes, product development, or customer trends. This can illustrate to C-Suite how early career perspectives can enhance competitiveness.
- **Host Innovation Challenges:** Sponsor challenges or hackathons specifically for early careers talent. Present the best ideas to the C-Suite, underscoring the fresh thinking that early career employees bring to the organisation.

Don't assume what you're doing is always working as generational changes, alternative personas and societal factors can cause a need for review, change and action. Toby Horner, Head of Early Talent Acquisition Manager at Clifford Chance, discussed here about how they adapt to changing needs of early talent and involving data in the action that were taken with senior leadership. You can listen to Toby [here](#).

Embed Early Careers Metrics into Overall HR and Business KPIs

- **Integrate with Performance Dashboards:** Ensure early career metrics (like progression rates, diversity impact, or retention) are included in the company's broader HR or business performance dashboards. This reinforces the programmes as critical to workforce performance.
- **Highlight Long-Term Metrics:** Track and report on the long-term success of early careers hires, showing how these individuals progress over time, which can indicate the programme's effectiveness in building future leaders and reducing turnover.
- **Use Comparative Benchmarking:** Provide data on how your employer's early career performance compares to industry peers. This benchmarking can make the programme's competitive advantage clear to the C-Suite.

Regularly Communicate Wins Through C-Suite-Friendly Channels

- **Present in C-Suite Meetings:** Ensure early careers has a regular presence in C-Suite meetings, with brief, high-impact presentations focusing on ROI, business impact, and success stories.
- **Internal Newsletters and Intranet Features:** Create visibility through company-wide newsletters, intranet stories, or video updates featuring early career talent, projects, and metrics. Target content to C-Suite stakeholders to keep early careers top of mind.
- **Annual and Quarterly Reports:** Include early careers highlights in annual reports or ESG reports, emphasising how the programme supports both business and social goals.

Bringing it all together – top 5 tips for engaging the C-Suite

1. **Read the room:** Determine the key issues in your organisation that matter to the C-Suite and impact business performance.
2. **Address the issues:** Prioritise actions and investment required. Think commercially, it's important to link Early Careers to other strategic business objectives.
3. **Make it personal:** Effective engagement relies on your understanding of C-Suite colleagues and communicating in a way that resonates with each individual.
4. **Think commercially:** Demonstrate how you will measure success. Retention and performance of Early Careers hires is particularly important.
5. **Build a productive relationship:** Keep the C-Suite on the journey. Make sure you maintain momentum with regular updates on ROI and promote high impact contributions from Early Careers programme participants.

This paper was inspired by the Group GTI Breakfast News November 2024 edition, sponsored by Institute of Student Employers, Blackbridge Communications and Cappfinity.



To access all of the videos and slideware, click [here](#).



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