

“Accelerate Graduate Programme”: Making The Most Of Talent And Opportunity

Finishing university can be daunting. For many graduates, knowing what you want to do as a career is difficult enough; making it happen can feel almost impossible. Student debt, high living costs and the constant uncertainties about Brexit and the worldwide economy mean that the buzz from finishing university can quickly be replaced by something very different.

However, well-structured graduate schemes can often provide an effective and long-term solution to these problems. Businesses are able to introduce fresh and enthusiastic graduates into the workplace, whilst simultaneously enabling graduates to discover their strengths and passions as their training progresses. Both parties benefit from stability, security and an investment in the future; not something to be sniffed at in the current economic climate. So, with the right planning and support, it is important to stress that even the smallest of businesses could benefit from such programmes.

Having recently graduated myself, I know how common it is for talented graduates to find themselves scrolling through endless job sites as their dream role increasingly morphs and shrinks. Attaining a place on a good graduate scheme, for me, was the best possible result. I wanted an environment where I could learn new skills and discover different career options; to get an insight into how an entire business operates, before committing to any particular specialism. Now, having been in my graduate role since September, I am taking the opportunity to reflect on what I have learnt so far.

Finding Talent:

Last year, my company introduced its second cohort of graduates into the business. After the success of the “Accelerate Graduate Programme” in 2016, the intake was more than doubled in 2017 to eighteen graduates across four locations. With the help of an outsourced recruitment agency we attracted over 1200 applications globally, which were then filtered via various telephone

interviews, psychometric assessments and, finally, a day of panel interviews at an onsite assessment day.

We believe the graduate programme will significantly strengthen the internal talent pool, underscoring the culture change of the business by creating a more diverse workforce with a breadth of experience.

In my experience, the process was thorough and unhurried. My experience of the job application process, by this point, had been fairly unpleasant; in most cases I wouldn't hear anything for weeks and it was extremely rare to be given any sort of feedback. With the graduate scheme, however, it felt different. The recruiter always remained in close contact with each applicant and gave me sufficient time to prepare and reflect before each stage of the process. Having discussed this experience with the other graduates in my cohort, there is a clear consensus that receiving such consideration gave us the confidence that we

needed to succeed. Job searching for anyone, especially graduates, can be incredibly competitive and often disheartening; a little consideration goes a long way.

So, finding and streamlining the best possible talent, for any business, thus requires strong values and forward thinking.

Still, above all else, our recruitment process was most benefitted by its refusal to accept the myth that relevant work experience equals talent. By definition, talent denotes a natural aptitude or flare for something; it is instinctual. So, when you're looking for the best graduates for the job, sometimes you need to look beyond employment history and prioritise potential. As well as helping to settle nerves and facilitate confidence, having a structured and staged graduate recruitment programme allows candidates to make their talents and personal attributes more evident. By appealing to various skills and by scheduling different stages of the recruitment process and graduate scheme, We recognise the fact that talent is usually something to be discovered; talent is not necessarily visible at first glance.

So, of the eighteen graduates that joined in 2017, it should be unsurprising that there is no consistency in our degree discipline, work experience or cultural background. We are diverse. Each of us were hired for our specific skills and experiences, so that our individual talents and potential might unfold as the programme continues. Encouraging diversity and facilitating candidate success should therefore be viewed as a relevant and valuable strength. By considerately managing and supporting a graduate intake into the business, Our business has had an influx of enthusiastic and capable employees enter the workforce. As graduates, we feel lucky to be on the programme, whilst the company has a responsibility and vested interest in making the most of the talent and energy that we have bought with us.

Creating Opportunity:

Towards the beginning of my programme, a member of our Senior Leadership Team told me that you are bound to get things wrong as a graduate; the most important thing is having a resilient and enthusiastic attitude.

Now, having certainly gotten a few things wrong so far, I can fully appreciate the gravity of their advice.

I suppose, once a business has recruited new graduates and found new talent, it might be easy to assume that the main work is done. Your graduates successfully made it through the recruitment process, so surely they'll hit the ground running. Right? No: I still maintain that my first week at my desk was one of the hardest weeks to date. It's very difficult to impress anyone when you're fumbling around with printers, figuring out how Outlook works and forgetting everyone's name almost immediately after being introduced. Wait, how do I put meetings into my calendar again? Sorry, what was your name? How do I do this? No, it doesn't matter how much your graduates managed to impress you at interview stage, you definitely need to facilitate talent by sorting out the basics.

Our business got ahead of this by ensuring that all graduates had scheduled and relevant training in place. I may have found myself getting cross with the printer and incredibly frustrated with the phone system, but we were quickly encouraged to complete numerous competency and compliance modules online. For me, the best thing about being enrolled on a graduate scheme is our exposure to the bigger picture. Meeting with the Global and Senior Leadership Teams and being given a thorough insight into our "2020 Strategy" has put myself and other graduates in a position where we can better appreciate the importance of our roles in relation to long term goals. We can see how our day-to-day tasks, across all departments, are building towards something bigger. Through the structure and commitment of a two-year graduate scheme, we have been given the opportunity to plan our personal development in relation to the future success of the company. We can theorise what strategies will best secure future prosperity for the company, whilst simultaneously considering how our own skills might become useful in the process.

Creating opportunities for graduates consequently relies upon the creation of a productive and supportive environment. With the provision of appropriate training and regular moments for reflection, I have been able to retain knowledge easily and regularly assess my own productivity. In monthly catch-ups with my mentor, for example, I have discussed any difficulties or concerns of mine openly and have always been met with the attitude that there is always something more I can do. Help is there. In the book *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive*, given to all graduates when they join the company, Patrick Lencioni opens by saying that "all successful organisations share two qualities:

they are smart and they are healthy". Creating opportunities for graduates is not just about providing training programmes, setting deadlines and outlining expectations. Making the most of an opportunity, in my experience, requires a supportive and healthy environment. As I mentioned earlier, the best advice I have received as a graduate is to have a resilient and enthusiastic attitude. This only works if you are employed in an environment that allows you to fail.

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Facilitating Success:

Essentially, if thinking outside the box and getting things wrong is regarded more highly than playing it safe and getting things right, then an opportunistic and enthusiastic mindset is much more likely to follow.

For our business, making the most of talent and opportunity through the "Accelerate

Graduate Programme" has been a successful and rewarding experience for all. As the first cohort of graduates approach the beginning of their final rotation and the second cohort grow more confident in the latter part of their first, it is clear to see just how much each graduate has developed since joining the business. Talent has been nurtured and opportunities have been presented so that, as a result, each graduate has established a clearer idea of the permanent role they might want to assume in the future.

Personally, my first rotation has been more challenging and enlightening than I ever anticipated. I've been pushed harder than I expected, but have always been supported along the way. My fellow graduates are brilliant for sharing any experiences and advice with; whilst senior managers and HR have continually provided a receptive and supportive sounding board for new ideas. It's not for me to judge talent, but I can definitely recognise the wealth of opportunities I've been given.

So, although finishing university can be daunting, it is sometimes best not to know what you want to do straight away. Student debt, high living costs and pessimistic Brexit coverage will continue to add to the pressures already faced by graduates; however, it is still important for both graduates and businesses to remain open. The buzz from finishing university will certainly be replaced by something different, but this doesn't necessarily need to be a bad thing.

When businesses make the most of talented graduates, graduates will make the most of the opportunity.



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Accelerate Graduate Programme 2017.
First Rotation: UK Marketing Executive,
Santa Fe Relocation.

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