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A FAIR TO REMEMBER: HOW TWINNING TRANSFORMED OUR CAREERS EVENT



ANGELINE HOLLINSHEAD ASKS WHETHER YOUR CAREERS FAIR IS WORKING HARD ENOUGH FOR YOU

The school careers fair is often a flagship event in the academic calendar. When student interactions are well managed, it allows ‘the greatest potential number of different volunteers from the greatest number of sectors to engage with young people,’ according to the CEC’s *What Works* report on careers events (Rehill, Kashfepakdel & Mann, 2017, p.21). That same report noted how students who are undecided found these events especially useful.

But let’s be honest: we’ve all seen fairs that turn into pen-collecting competitions. Groups of students wander in packs, circling the room and sticking close to their friends, missing the chance to explore their own interests. The real challenge is sparking meaningful conversations and creating the possibility for planned happenstance – the theory that encourages clients to be proactive and engage in exploratory activities, thereby increasing their likelihood of discovering unexpected career opportunities (Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz, 1999).

Introducing the twinning experiment
This year, all our careers fair exhibitors (employers, providers and universities) were invited to ‘twin’ with a school department, year group or student group. The idea was that they could lead a second event at another time in the school year, linking their area of expertise

with a specific subject or student need. I had three main aims:

- To give departments the opportunity to build working relationships with our exhibitors, and get a better understanding of the current world of work.
- To encourage staff to see how working with employers could offer opportunities to embed Gatsby Benchmark 4, rather than seeing the careers fair as separate from what they’re doing in class.
- To encourage students to engage in more meaningful conversations.

Building relationships between the school and exhibitors

Twinning was completely optional. If an exhibitor was interested, we had a chat about their availability, interests and whether they already had resources they could bring in. They often had great ideas that I would offer to specific teams in school – some were new ideas that they wanted to test, while some were projects that they’d been trying to promote to schools.

These conversations were a real highlight. They helped employers understand not just what staff and students needed, but also how schools work, the logistics and restrictions we face, and how they could make a difference. Of the exhibitors that took part, 100%

said in feedback that twinning helped them to understand the skills and experiences of young people more. In return, they gave staff up-to-date, local LMI – real insight into what employers care about right now, and information about careers and entry routes.

Supporting teaching staff and Gatsby Benchmark 4

I met with Heads of Department and once I had a sense of where and when support was needed, I could match those needs with the exhibitors. For example, our Geography

PLANNING WHO YOU WANT TO TALK TO

USE THE TWO TABLES TO CHOOSE WHO YOU MIGHT TALK TO

Look along the top of the table to find your interest, then look down that column to see who can talk to you about that. Then, look them up in the back pages of this booklet.

	All level programmes	Mixture of A level and BTEC courses	BTEC Vocational programmes	Career-specific qualifications	Careers that require a university degree	Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (Level 4-7)	Level 2 Apprenticeships (16+)	Level 3 Apprenticeships (16+)	Level 4 Apprenticeships (16+)	Level 5 Apprenticeships (16+)	Level 6-7 courses including degrees (18+)	Programmes designed for SEN/SENCP	Flexible Maths and/or English GCSE	School leaver opportunities (16+)	Traineeships/universities/long-term experience placements	Work Experience (15+) any time of school year	Work Experience for Year 12+ (July-October)	Other (entry and risk ass)
Wrotham School Sixth Form																		
A&G LLP Accountancy																		
ASK Apprenticeships																		
BAH Construction																		
Bearsted Counselling and Psychotherapy																		
Bentley																		
The British Army																		
Canterbury Christ Church University																		
The Civil Service																		
College of Experts																		
Essex Street United FC																		
The Edge Hotel School (with University of Essex)																		
H&M Engineering																		
Kent Police																		
MEP Ltd (Engineering)																		
MusKent College																		
Mount Housing																		
NHS																		
North Kent College																		
Norwich University of the Arts																		
Rob Horswell Personal Training																		
The Royal Marines																		
Social Enterprise Kent																		
The University of Essex																		
The University of Hertfordshire																		

STEP 1: Choose the post-16 and post-18 option from across the top row. STEP 2: Look down that column to find the exhibitors who can talk to you about that option.



H&MV Engineering is a leading employer in the electrical engineering sector, offering roles in project management, design, and installation. They prioritise employee development, safety, and innovation, providing opportunities for career growth and hands-on experience in large-scale infrastructure projects.

WS H&MV regularly offer work experience to our Year 12 students and have a fantastic programme.

Kent Police offers various jobs, apprenticeships and graduate roles including policing, IT, and administration, providing hands-on training and career progression opportunities. They prioritise personal development, diversity, and community safety, supporting employees in building a rewarding career in law enforcement.

WS Kent Police have supported our sixth form Criminology students - one of their Detective Chief Inspectors came in to help them revise their learning of police procedures on crime scenes.

mep offers apprenticeships and graduate roles in mechanical and electrical engineering, providing hands-on training and career development opportunities. As an employer, they focus on skill-building, innovation, and safety, supporting employees in gaining practical experience and progressing in the engineering sector.

WS MEP Ltd run an annual engineering competition with our Year 7 students and regularly offer work experience to our Year 12 students.

disability confident

Employers, Apprenticeships and Work Experience

WHAT CAN I TALK TO EMPLOYERS ABOUT?

- All of these employers are here because they want to give you advice
- They can tell you about what their jobs are like, and the different types of jobs in their sector.
- Employers might offer apprenticeships (from 16+ or 18+).
- Employers might also talk to you about graduate training programmes that you do after getting a degree.
- Employers can also give you advice about interviews, CVs and about what subjects might help you if you worked for them.

department twinned with a local football club. Staff were teaching climate change and corporate responsibility, and they also wanted to promote Geography GCSE. Together, they have designed a project where Year 9s plan how to reduce the environmental impact of fans' travel to the team's away matches. At the fair, students interested in environmental careers could not only talk to the club, but also be much more open-minded, asking other employers about sustainability.

Feedback from staff involved was positive. Not only did twinned events give them valuable CPD (especially around apprenticeships and industry updates – a requirement in the new statutory guidance for careers education), it also encouraged them to start using a 'careers lens' when encountering topics in class. Even better, those teachers now have direct contacts to use in the future, which will be expanded when they get the chance to work with someone different for next year's fair.

Building student confidence and driving meaningful conversations

It's crucial that the careers fair is useful for all students, especially those with additional needs. In our current educational system, students with SEND are still expected to make transitions at the same time as their peers, so it is important that they are supported. To make the fair more inclusive, I introduced a quiet session specifically for students with sensory or mobility needs. I also invited a neighbouring SEND school that isn't able to host its own event.

Working with their careers leader, Abigail Rodreigo, underscored the importance of familiarity for students with ASC and ADHD. In focus groups conducted before the fair, several of our students with SEND shared that

in previous years, they had only approached stalls with which they were familiar – even when those options didn't align with their aspirations. I revisited last year's feedback and found that this pattern was evident across other student groups too, though to a lesser extent. This reinforced the importance of giving students earlier, softer introductions to employers.

Familiarity gave more students the confidence to start one conversation, which could then lead to further interactions with other exhibitors. Secondly, they used their time at the fair more effectively because knowing some of the exhibitors prior to the fair allowed them to ask more focused, purposeful questions. In our evaluation, we asked all exhibitors eight key questions. Among those who didn't twin, 82% agreed or strongly agreed that students were engaged. Among those who did twin, that number rose to 97%.

Reducing impact of low attendance

Like many schools, we're seeing the impact of low attendance. It can often mean that, even when you put time, energy and resources into a careers event, 15% of a year group might miss it. Twinning meant that any students who missed the fair would still have the opportunity for at least one meaningful interaction. It also reduced the impact of an exhibitor having to drop out on the day due to unforeseen circumstances.

Conclusion

I'll definitely take this approach again next year. The careers fair takes a lot of investment, so I want it to work as hard as possible for our students and staff.

My next steps?

- Build buy-in from more departments
- Involve parents and carers more directly

This year, parents received a guide to all exhibitors, including:

- Sectors each exhibitor could speak about
- Post-16 and post-18 options covered
- Whether the exhibitor was disability confident

Next time, I want to go further – perhaps by gathering parent feedback in advance and tailoring resources to what they'd find most useful. Twinning helped us build real relationships with employers, offer richer experiences to students, and make the most of the resources we already have.

It's a simple idea, but one that I believe can reshape how schools approach careers fairs – and make them not just memorable, but meaningful.

Reference

Mitchell, K.E., Levin, A.S. and Krumboltz, J.D. (1999). Planned happenstance: Constructing unexpected career opportunities. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 77(2): 115–124.

Rehill, J., Kashefpakdel, E. T., & Mann, A. (2017). *Careers Events. What Works?* London: The

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