

First jobs, new barriers

How can technology support young people without degrees through the transition into work?

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Summary

The youth labour market is worsening. Just over 16 per cent of 16-24-year-olds cannot find work, the highest rate in more than a decade, and the number not in education, employment or training has passed 1 million. And when a difficult transition tips into a long spell out of work, the resultant scarring effect can depress a young person's prospects for years. The stakes for getting this transition right are high, and highest for the young people with the least to fall back on.

The social investment team at the Resolution Foundation (known as Resolution Ventures) was established to invest in technology tools and platforms that serve frequently overlooked segments of working-age people in the UK. This includes low-paid, hourly and frontline workers, and those struggling with the transition into work. What we can see is that not only are young people without university degrees facing the steep end of an already difficult transition into work, but that they are also the least well served by the tools being built for it. Most job-search platforms, mentoring services and career tools are aimed at graduates, who already carry a degree, and often also a professional network and an earnings premium to cushion an early stumble. This mismatch between where the need is greatest and where the technology is being built is alarming and is what this briefing sets out to address.

To understand both where the transition to work fails for young people, and where the opportunities are for tech to improve their chances of faring well within it, we combined a review of existing research – including Resolution Foundation analysis, the government-commissioned Milburn Review, and studies that record young people's own accounts – with a roundtable of researchers, investors, founders and frontline practitioners. We found that the transition to good work is not a single step: it is a series of decisions and hurdles. In this note, we describe the transition through four elements, each a question a young person has to answer on the way into good work: whether they know their options and can reach the right one; whether they can signal what they are capable of and get past screening; whether the first job fits and lasts; and whether they are well and confident enough to see the transition through.

We found points of failure across all four elements. Careers guidance concentrates inside school and thins out later, and the training routes that should offer an alternative to university are the hardest to navigate, with around 70 per cent of higher-level, levy-funded apprenticeship starts over the past decade going to workers aged 25 and above. Without a degree to serve as a signal of ability, non-graduates are filtered out by automated recruitment systems that screen on the credentials they lack: 71 per cent of UK firms now use an applicant tracking system (a vast majority of which include some

form of automation), and more than a third of those use it to screen candidates out. Poor matching at the point of hiring, often mistaken for a lack of motivation on the part of young people, drives early exit from first jobs. And mental health compounds all of the problems throughout the process, with 76 per cent of young people in one survey saying their well-being affects their ability to look for work.

We also found a constraint running through almost every opportunity we identified: whether employers will adopt a tool and change their practice, which determines who ultimately pays for a product whose main beneficiary is a young person who cannot. Encouragingly, employers have not turned away from young people; the share taking on someone fresh from education has held broadly steady, at 33 per cent in 2024 against 31 per cent a decade earlier.

Our aim in this report is to give founders, technologists and investors an in-depth look at where this transition fails for young people, and where a well-designed product could credibly make a difference. Each point of failure is a gap that WorkerTech founders could build into. Some of the barriers within this transition are structural, relational or a matter of policy, and poorly designed technology can entrench them as easily as ease them. With that in mind, we set out where those opportunities are strongest, the design principles that separate tools that reach young people from tools that lose them, and the approaches that are likely to fail, however well they are built.

Chief among the opportunities are job-rehearsal tools that let a young person sample a role before committing to a career. These can support exploration, help young people start to build a signal an employer can read, correct the mismatched expectations that drive early exit, and let a young person rehearse the interactions that anxiety makes hardest. Alongside them sit feedback systems that turn a rejection into something a candidate can act on, skills-translation tools that put informal experience into terms employers recognise, role-model discovery that makes vocational routes visible, and peer-support spaces that counter the isolation of the search.

Design also matters just as much as the underlying technology: the tools that best reach this group are mobile-native, low-barrier, and built to work alongside a trusted person. Lastly, underlying all of this is the constraint set out above: that employers' willingness to pay is a crucial question most tools or platforms in this space must answer, as this determines viability.

The transition from school into work can be steep and punctuated by compounding barriers; when it goes poorly, there are lifelong impacts

In the first quarter of 2026, the number of 16-24-year-olds not in employment, education or training (NEET) in the UK surpassed one million. More broadly among all young people, latest figures from the Office of National Statistics show that over 16 per cent of young people who are active in the labour market cannot find work – the highest figure in over a decade.¹ These are worrying statistics: being without a job in the first years of working life can have scarring impacts on young people, with unemployment during this crucial stage of life being linked with a higher likelihood of joblessness a decade later, and lower overall earnings over the course of their lifetime.²

In July, Alan Milburn released the first part of his Government-commissioned report on the young people aged 16-24 who are NEET, setting out the extent of the issue in the UK and the multiple causes (with his suggested solutions due to follow this autumn). The report found that at least six out of ten young people who are NEET in the UK have never had a single job. But we shouldn't think that just landing any job is a quick fix: instead, the quality of that first job matters. Young people who enter low-paid, insecure work with limited training follow wage paths that are barely distinguishable from those who spent another year not in work.³

Milburn's team spoke directly to young people and drew on evidence from charities and frontline practitioners who work with young people. The report says that most young people (84 per cent) who are NEET want to find a job or pursue training or education that helps them attain employment but find that the transition from education into employment has multiple barriers.⁴ This is a finding consistent with testimonies seen in a simultaneous nationwide listening exercise led by Shuab Gamote and Peter Hyman. This project, called "Inside the Mind of a Young NEET", spoke to 400 young people – school leavers, young carers and graduates – who described the transition into employment as one riddled with too many 'snakes' (i.e. unnecessary barriers and ineffective support systems) and not enough 'ladders' (i.e. lack of clear pathways or opportunities).⁵

For young people without degrees, the transition into work is the steepest, and the least supported by the tools on offer

The NEETs population is a broad one. It includes university graduates, and recent coverage of this issue features graduates with degrees such as business management

1 Office for National Statistics, Labour market statistics time series (LMS), Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgwy/lms>, accessed 17 August 2026.

2 A Clegg et al., Lost in transition: An examination of why the UK NEET rate is high and rising, Resolution Foundation, April 2026, <https://doi.org/10.63492/cxo2244>

3 Timewise, *Work that Works for the Next Generation*, 2026.

4 A Milburn, *Young people and work: interim report*, Chapter 2, Department for Work & Pensions, May 2026.

5 S Gamote & P Hyman, *Inside the Mind of a Young NEET*, One Million Futures, May 2026

and computer science who – despite being much less likely to be NEET compared to those with GCSEs or below qualifications⁶ – report applying to over 500 roles since graduating to no avail.⁷ And there are numerous startups and online job-search platforms that are specifically targeted towards helping young graduates find jobs. These include platforms like Give a Grad a Go, BrighterBox and Milkround, all of which combine keyword matching and targeted filters to help university graduates start their careers post-graduation.

In fact, many of the job search platforms that meet with our investment team at Resolution Ventures tend to be targeted towards providing graduate career guidance, mentor matching and personalised recruitment services.

But a graduate who stumbles early still carries a degree, and often a professional network and an earnings premium that cushions the fall: by age 30, median earnings for male graduates run around 20 per cent higher than for their non-graduate peers, and for women the gap is wider still.⁸

In our review of research and technology in this space, one group is often missing: those young people not on a university pathway who are struggling to find jobs. They face the steepest transition into work – youth unemployment for those qualified to GCSE or below runs at triple that for graduates – and they're the least well served by the tools being built. For this group, a difficult or failed transition can set them onto a trajectory that is difficult to climb out of. Economists refer to this as scarring, defined as the tendency for early spells of joblessness or poor work to depress a person's prospects for work for years to follow.⁹

As investors, issues within the transition represent points of friction that technology could address. Existing companies (mainly aimed at graduates) demonstrate that there is an investable market of young people who need tools that work for them at this critical phase in their lives.

We want technologists, founders, and investors to better understand where this transition fails for young people and build better tools for support and guidance to help them navigate it. This briefing note therefore analyses those barriers in more detail and identifies where technology could make a credible difference for young people in need of support.

⁶ J Diniz & L Murphy, False Starts: What the UK's growing NEETs problem really looks like, and how to fix it, Resolution Foundation, October 2025, <https://doi.org/10.63492/kvz546>.

⁷ BBC, 'I've applied for 500 jobs in two months since graduating', 18 March 2026, accessed 22 July 2026.

⁸ J Britton et al., New Estimates of the Impact of Undergraduate Degrees on Lifetime Earnings, Institute for Fiscal Studies, June 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1920/re.ifs.2026.0033>

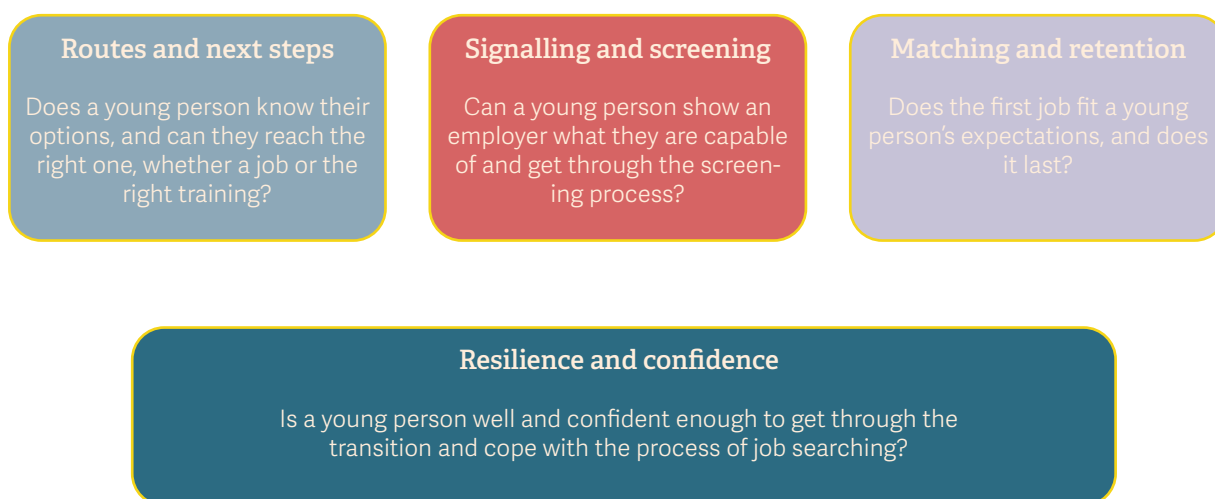
⁹ A Baloch, Closing the Youth Jobs Gap: How to ensure the Youth Guarantee reaches young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, Impetus, July 2026.

Young people can be failed by the transition into employment across four different elements

To understand where this transition fails, we combined a review of existing research with direct input and testimonies from the people closest to it. We drew on Resolution Foundation analysis, Government-commissioned research such as the Milburn Review, and studies that record young people's own accounts of moving from education into work. In May 2026 we convened our own roundtable of researchers, investors, startups and frontline practitioners to test what we were finding, and throughout we have heard from employers and read testimony of young people gathered in recent reviews and research.

We have conceptualised the transition as featuring four elements, each containing a question that a young person has to answer on the way into good work.

FIGURE 1: **The journey into good work**



These are not questions that a young person necessarily answers chronologically; they may be experienced simultaneously, and they also interact with each other. For example, a young person who can't put their skills into words may struggle to get past screening; one who has had little real careers guidance is more likely than their peer to land in a job that doesn't fit them well; and a long run of silent rejections wears down the confidence needed to keep trying.

In exploring each of these elements, the central question we are trying to answer is where technology can credibly help. But we acknowledge that a technological intervention may not always be the answer, or the best answer, to some of the barriers faced by young people navigating this transition. Many of these barriers are structural,

relational or a matter of policy; when poorly designed, there is even a risk that tech can entrench them (as seen in the case of AI use in recruitment). We discuss this more towards the end of the paper.

In the rest of this note, we break down each of these four elements and then set out the role technologists can play in addressing them.

Careers guidance withdraws once a young person leaves school, just when the choice about what comes next matters most

Element 1: Routes and next steps

A good starting point is to think about how young people receive advice on moving into work.

This begins when young people are at school, where a formal careers system does exist, at least on paper. Schools and colleges in England are required to secure careers guidance for their pupils, and their provision is measured against the Gatsby Benchmarks, a framework that defines what good careers education should cover.¹⁰ The Careers and Enterprise Company, which oversees the system, judges that provision has strengthened in quality, scale and consistency over the past decade, but that gaps persist, and they fall hardest on the young people who face the most barriers.¹¹

But participants at our roundtable described how for those who do not continue to university, the period immediately after leaving school is when the most consequential decisions about first jobs or onward training are made. And this is the period least served by structured advice: the duty and the benchmarks described above only apply while young people remain in education; neither follows them past the point of leaving.¹² Participants also emphasised that, beyond schools, there is no single or obvious institution responsible for a young person's route into work. As a result, accountability and funding scatter across bodies, and support tends to reappear only at the point of crisis, once a young person is already NEET or when they are in contact with the benefits system.

Research by the Resolution Foundation published in 2024 found that young people on non-university pathways approximately 21 per cent are less likely to receive careers information or advice than their peers who wish to attend university.¹³

¹⁰ The Gatsby Charitable Foundation, [Gatsby Benchmarks](#), accessed 22 July 2026

¹¹ The Careers & Enterprise Company, [Careers education in England 2024/25](#), March, 2026

¹² The Careers & Enterprise Company, [Careers education in England 2024/25](#), March, 2026

¹³ C. McCurdy & L. Murphy, We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment, Resolution Foundation, February 2024

Testimony collected directly from young people also describes a cliff edge. A young person in Belfast, having left school without the GCSEs she needed and ruled out her local college, was “never told what to do next. So, I kind of just stayed in the house, and I was like, right, well, this is just the end”.¹⁴

“There’s this kind of expectation that when you’re 16 years old, you know what you want to do forever. That’s not necessarily the case.”

(Representative from an organisation that runs support programmes for young people looking for jobs at our roundtable)

The Work and Pensions Committee found the careers service funding model “broken”. The current model budgets for roughly one meeting a year and pays up to £230 to advise someone in a priority group, such as an 18-to-24-year-old NEET, against £67 for anyone outside one, and only about one third of people know the service exists.¹⁵ Access to apprenticeships, perhaps the highest-profile option, has skewed away from the young people who would gain the most. Higher and degree apprenticeships go disproportionately to older, incumbent workers: just under 70 per cent of higher-level, levy-funded starts over the past decade were taken by people aged 25 and over, and in 2023, 79 per cent of apprentices aged 25-plus already worked for their employer before starting.¹⁶

The Government has recognised these problems and has announced new efforts to rebuild employment support for young people in recent months. Its July 2026 reforms merge the National Careers Service into Jobcentre Plus from October 2026 and direct careers advice towards young people facing the greatest barriers.

It is, of course, important to note that the right next step for every young person isn’t always a job – for a substantial share of young people, particularly those with lower qualifications, it’s training or further education. Yet, careers guidance for young people treats immediate paid work as the only success, leaving the large variety of training and vocational routes poorly signposted. This matters more than it might appear, because the key reason behind the UK’s NEETs problem may lie in its education and training routes: Resolution Foundation analysis finds that the main reason other developed economies have far lower NEET rates than the UK is that they have far more young people in education, particularly vocational pathways that combine work and study.¹⁷ So, widening the definition of a good outcome is a good starting point. Mental Health UK argues for

¹⁴ S Gamote & P Hyman, *Inside the Mind of a Young NEET*, One Million Futures, May 2026

¹⁵ Work and Pensions Committee, *‘Broken’ careers service funding model to be reformed*, Government confirms, November 2025.

¹⁶ N Cominetti et al., Take a chance on me: How can employers be incentivised to employ NEETs?, Resolution Foundation, June 2026, <https://doi.org/10.63492/ugii1652>.

¹⁷ N Cominetti et al., Take a chance on me: How can employers be incentivised to employ NEETs?, Resolution Foundation, June 2026, <https://doi.org/10.63492/ugii1652>.

recognising education, training, volunteering and gradual re-engagement as legitimate outcomes rather than measuring young people against paid work alone.¹⁸ The same argument ran through our roundtable: the outcome of career exploration should answer “what training is right for me” as readily as “what job”.

The failure that is most immediately obvious to us lies in navigating available training routes. Unlike the university route, the further education and vocational training has no single admissions system and no clear way for a young person to compare the quality or likely outcomes of the options in front of them.¹⁹ Research suggests that, where guidance is absent, young people default to the options they can see rather than the full set of options available; and tend to underestimate the pay and prospects of technical and vocational routes, and to overestimate the returns to more visible pathways.²⁰ This in turn shapes the choices they make. For example, Resolution Ventures’ portfolio company TaskHer found that young women often caring qualifications over trades qualifications because they lacked both accurate information on earnings, and guidance toward those routes²¹. Box 1 provides more insight into why TaskHer founders Paul and Anna built the platform.

A young person who commits to a course or pathway without a clear view of where it leads is also more likely to disengage; the testimony gathered for the Milburn review describes this pattern directly: young people choosing courses more or less at random and making early exit soon after.²²

BOX 1: Not being encouraged to explore vocational routes can lead to some women losing out on nearly £600,000 of lifetime earnings

TaskHer is a Resolution Ventures portfolio company which has built a platform which helps women find and enter careers in the skilled trades. It pairs resources for aspiring tradeswomen with a mentorship network that connects trainees with experienced tradeswomen.

TaskHer’s own research finds that women can miss out on around £600,000 in lifetime earnings by not pursuing a trade. In higher-wage areas such as London, the figure can reach £1 million.

TaskHer’s founders trace the problem back to careers guidance. As co-

¹⁸ Mental Health UK, [Supporting young people: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions](#), May 2026.

¹⁹ Social Mobility Commission, [Vocational Training: Improving Life Chances for Non-Graduates](#), May 2016

²⁰ The Sutton Trust, [Where Next? What Influences the Choices of Would-Be Apprentices](#), July 2023

²¹ TaskHer, [What’s the problem?](#), accessed August 18 2026

²² S Gamote & P Hyman, [Inside the Mind of a Young NEET](#), One Million Futures, May 2026

founder Anna Hernandez puts it: “Access to a career shouldn’t depend on whether anyone thought to mention it exists. Right now, young women hear about university and a handful of soft options, and the skilled trades barely get a look in, despite offering better pay and real independence. Widening that picture, showing every route as legitimate, is how we stop closing doors before girls even know they’re there.”

Co-founder Paul Moynihan points to an underlying bias: “Careers guidance still treats university as the default and everything else as a fallback. It’s a bias baked into the system, supported by parents, and it’s costing young people real opportunities. Skilled trades should be presented with the same weight, the same detail, and the same enthusiasm as any degree route, because for a lot of people they’re the better path, not the backup one.”

In some of these areas, reforms are actively moving policy in the right direction. The Starmer Government agreed to bring careers advice in England in-house and end the old, incentivised model, and the new Prime Minister has announced his support for more technical education pathways from age 14 that combine academic study with employer placements, an Ofsted regime that recognises the quality of technical education, and an aim to deliver 50,000 more youth apprenticeships.²³

But the issue is by no means solved, and the consequences of getting this element of the transition wrong have knock-on effects. A young person with good guidance enters the next stage with a realistic view of the options and a pathway suited to them. One without it is more likely to choose poorly, to enter a role or course that does not fit, and to leave early. That outcome feeds the matching and retention problems examined later in Element 3, and it reinforces a signalling problem we explore next in Element 2, where a young person struggles to build evidence toward a career they were never shown.

Letting young people sample a variety of jobs can be more effective than recommendations, but there are no obvious payers for the tools that facilitate this.

Our roundtable agreed that, rather than building another career advisory service (which is arguably the job of government), the stronger intervention opportunity is in experiences that help young people try out a job or career path. Letting young people sample a variety of jobs can be more effective than recommendations, but there are no obvious payers for the tools that facilitate this. So low-stakes ways to explore work – and, in particular, to sample it before committing – through virtual work experience and short placements can let a young person test a route, rather than be directed toward one. For example, Springpod lets young people experience what it is like to work with a wide

²³ Prime Minister’s Office & A Burnham, PM: ‘From today Britain will value the hard hat as much as the graduation cap’, July 2026.

range of employers through immersive virtual reality.²⁴ And Not Impossible connects 16–25-year-olds to employers through free micro-placements, where young people can spend an hour to a day with an employer to get insights on careers that they are curious about.²⁵ These sorts of direct exposure can generate interest and motivation that a recommendation cannot, and it keeps the choice with the young person.

By contrast, the more common, but weaker, model that we have seen in the market takes a profile and returns a recommended career. Predictive tools of this kind replace the young person's judgement with an algorithm and can strip out the discovery that drives engagement. They may help young people explore and navigate career paths or jobs in the absence of any other careers guidance, but this is most likely to be valuable where the tool widens the options a young person considers, instead of narrowing them down to a single recommendation.

Instead of predictive and overly prescriptive tools, the route into work needs a genuine equivalent to the university admissions system, as described in the Social Mobility Commission's work earlier in this section: a single place to see the options open to a young person and, critically, the progression and earnings each is likely to lead to. A navigation layer of this kind could answer "what job" and "what training" through the same interface.

Role-model discovery has a place alongside it, making trades and vocational routes more visible, and Resolution Ventures portfolio companies such as TaskHer are already working toward this.

Our roundtable also highlighted a structural constraint sits beneath all of this: that there is no obvious payer. The direct beneficiary is a young person who cannot pay; employers are only incentivised to pay if this means a talent pipeline for them, and colleges are not (currently) measured on the employment outcomes of those they advise. The most plausible route to a paying customer is the public sector, where local or central government activity on careers guidance and training reform may create room for technology companies to build based on guidance or recommendations. But any product in this space has to resolve the issue of who funds it before it can reach the young people who need it.

²⁴ Springpod, [The work-based learning platform that builds futures](#), accessed 15th August, 2026

²⁵ Not Impossible, [Work experience shouldn't be about who you know](#), accessed 15th August 2026

Automated screening filters young people out on a signal they can't produce, and returns no feedback they can act on

Element 2: Signalling and screening

A university degree functions as a signal, giving a potential employer a low-cost read on a candidate's potential abilities before any direct assessment of their skills. Young people without a degree lack that signal, and those applying for their first jobs straight out of school also lack the work history that might substitute for it. This is a core barrier within the transition, and it sits as much within employer behaviour as with a young job applicant: employers are reluctant to take on an unproven and increasingly costly, young worker in the absence of such a signal.

Employers commonly state that they hire for attitude and potential but, when they have many applications, looking at credentials remains the fastest way to reduce an applicant pool. We heard at our roundtable that this is the method that recruiters default to under time and cost pressure. And the skyrocketing number of applications per job is partially driving the use of AI in hiring systems.²⁶ Employers hiring for entry-level roles in retail and hospitality report a doubling in the number of job applications they receive for a position.²⁷ One employer interviewed for the Milburn review described handling 600 applications for a single post.²⁸ At such scale, a manual review of every application may not be feasible, and employers rely on applicant tracking systems to reduce the pool. A survey of 1,000 hiring managers found that 71 per cent of firms in the UK use an Application Tracking System, of which 37 per cent rely on the system to screen out candidates.²⁹ But the downside of automated tools is that they tend to screen on the credentials that a young person find harder to produce.

Work history, the next best signal of a young person's capabilities, is also becoming less available. First jobs now tend to occur later, and a rising share of young people enter their twenties with no employment record at all.³⁰ The pandemic accelerated this by removing many Saturday jobs, volunteering, and work-experience placements that had allowed earlier cohorts to build a track record before formal employment.³¹

Our roundtable discussed how many young people hold genuinely relevant experience (like leading a team, self-teaching a skill, building an online following based on a passion)

²⁶ Institute of Student Employers, *The application explosion: key insights for employers*, 28 April, 2026

²⁷ BBC, *Next boss warns of 'dramatic' fall in entry-level jobs*, 26 May 2026

²⁸ S Gamote & P Hyman, *Inside the Mind of a Young NEET*, One Million Futures, May 2026

²⁹ Resume Genius, *2026 Hiring Insights Report: ATS, AI, and Employer Expectations*, March 24, 2026

³⁰ J Diniz & L Murph, *False starts: What the UK's growing NEETs problem really looks like, and how to fix it* Resolution Foundation, October 2025, <https://doi.org/10.63492/kvz546>.

³¹ M Gustafsson, *Young workers in the coronavirus crisis*, Resolution Foundation, May 2020, resolutionfoundation.org/publications/young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis.

but do not recognise it as something an employer would value, or cannot express it in terms an employer reads as evidence of skills. Here, we can see that the issues of signalling and confidence intersect: a young person who does not perceive their own experience as valuable is poorly placed to present it, and repeated rejection reinforces the belief that they have little to offer (we discuss this more in Element 4 below). This is an experience described in the testimonies within Hyman and Gamote's *Mind of a Young NEET*.³²

*"There's my CV with **** all on it. Who's gonna take me on?"*

(A young person's testimony, recorded in *Inside the Mind of a Young NEET* appraising their own record as empty and concluding they're undesirable to hire.³³)

The way that automated filters treat candidates deepens the problem. The most damaging feature is the absence of feedback: rejected candidates are told next to nothing, so failure returns no information they can act on. Young people describe a "black hole" of applications that go unanswered, sometimes even after an interview; one account in the Milburn review notes that repeated rejection "starts to look like personal failure, even when it is system failure."³⁴ The consequences have effects we have seen in previous elements; those without formal credentials are filtered out; and matching quality suffers, because a keyword-and-credential screen may discard capable applicants who don't present in the expected form. While there may be numerous cases where young people are screened out because a job, they applied to requires a formal qualification they do not have, where formal qualifications are used as a proxy for skills that a young person may have but cannot signal, they get filtered out erroneously.

Applicants respond by using the same technology to draft and optimise applications at volume, which then produces an arms race that degrades the process further on both sides.

Technology has also improved parts of the recruitment process. Online applications and assessments have widened access to job postings, and a well-designed assessment can standardise parts of a process that were previously informal or network-dependent, and so can reduce some forms of bias. The harm lies in specific design choices; opaque filters, no feedback and credential-only screening systems; this is why, as we discuss below, transparency and feedback are tractable places to intervene. As mentioned above, a sustained run of early rejections does more than delay entry into work: it erodes confidence, raises the risk of disengagement, and begins the scarring that increases the cost of every subsequent stage.

³² S Gamote & P Hyman, *Inside the Mind of a Young NEET*, One Million Futures, May 2026

³³ S Gamote & P Hyman, *Inside the Mind of a Young NEET*, One Million Futures, May 2026

³⁴ A Milburn, *Young people and work: interim report*, Department for Work & Pensions, May 2026.

The most important lever is persuading employers to weigh skills over credentials over time. In the near term, enabling feedback loops is essential

Interventions are spread across three sides: the applicant, the employer and the application process itself.

On the applicant side, there is scope for tools that translate informal experience – such as hobbies, self-taught or self-honed skills, and volunteering – into terms employers recognise as evidence of skill. The underlying experience usually exists but the constraint for young people is the framing, presentation and evidencing of skills. This can be taught and, to a degree, systematised.

The limit on this intervention is that it can only help where an employer is already willing to weigh a demonstrated skill as equally as a degree; it does very little where a qualification is a hard requirement (instead of a proxy for skills required for the role).

On the employer side, skills-based hiring assesses demonstrated ability rather than credentials. It can surface the capability that a credential filter misses, but its impact depends entirely on adoption. A skills-based tool will change nothing if a qualification filter sits in front of it, so any new product will have to show a faster or better read on candidates than the credential it replaces. Such tools already exist, but in our experience as investors, we have seen funding concentrate on the graduate segment, and the non-graduate equivalent remains underdeveloped.

For the application process, the most immediate win in this area is the provision of feedback. This proposed intervention is narrow: it concerns how the process treats and informs the candidate, not whether a human or a machine makes the decision. There is no technical reason an automated screening system cannot return a reason for rejection; the current absence of feedback for candidates might reflect employer caution (based on legal risks), but could also be a lack of structure or best practices for the post-rejection journey for candidates.³⁵ Building feedback into the screening stage would give the candidate information to act on; it converts a dead end into a signal. Greater transparency in how screening decisions are reached can also serve the same end and, even where a process cannot be made fully fair, can prevent it from deteriorating further.

³⁵ BBC, [Why employers are stingy with job interview feedback](#), January 2024.

What looks like a motivation problem is often a match and fitment problem that is set before the young person even starts a job

Element 3: Matching and retention

When a first job fails to fit, it may have done so because of reasons that were foreseeable before the young person even started that job. In particular, the way that non-graduate candidates are matched to entry-level roles can be inefficient. For example, a candidate may accept a role without an accurate picture of what the work actually involves and, when the mismatch becomes apparent, they leave. In particular, ACAS research on young workers identifies common reasons for early departure that includes surprise at shift patterns and flexibility expectations, thin onboarding, and a disconnect between how the role was described and its day-to-day reality.³⁶ Resolution Ventures portfolio company Blend is at the forefront of this issue, and has built a microlearning platform to address some of the reasons behind young people's poor experience fitting into their first job (See Box 2).

BOX 2: Onboarding can be designed to help young people adapt and stay in their first jobs

Blend is a microlearning platform built for the deskless workforce (like hospitality). Its content is bite-size, mobile-first, and designed around how their employer-clients have found younger workers prefer to learn and adapt to a new job.

Blend saw how a young person can be hired into a first job and still leave within weeks when the early experience is confusing or unsupported. The platform aims to close the gap between what time-pressed employers can offer and what a young entry-level worker needs, so that more young people build independence, learn and stay in

the job and eventually find paths to progression.

Co-founder Jonah Werth frames the retention stakes as so: "Without the right support, 60% of young workers don't even make it past probation creating an endless cycle of churn and wasted opportunity... we have designed a solution to bridge the gap between time stretched operators and entry level workers to ensure training is bitesize, mobile first and accessible from day one."

Employer demand for this kind of support reflects capability rather than

³⁶ J Forth & H Metcalf, [Young people's experiences in the workplace](#), The National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2014,

indifference. Co-founder Jules Smith describes a pattern across hospitality employers: "One thing I see again and again from working closely with hospitality employers is that they genuinely want their people to succeed, but often lack the time or tools to give every new starter the support they need... the best employers understand that great onboarding is not just about getting someone up to speed. It is about helping them feel confident, enjoy their work, build new skills and see a future with the business. A first job can shape how a young person sees themselves and the world of work. It should build their confidence, not knock it."

Designing for younger workers shapes how the platform works. Co-founder Helen Sydorenko said: "For young deskless workers, onboarding should

not feel like a test they are already behind on. It should feel clear, practical and human, helping them understand what is expected, build confidence quickly, and feel ready to grow from day one."

Blend has begun to treat rejection from jobs as a point of intervention too. Through its 'NoRegrets' campaign, run with the jobs board Leisure Jobs, the company gives candidates turned down by participating employers free access to its courses, including Food Safety and Allergens training, so they can strengthen future applications. Rejected candidates also receive guidance on improving their CV and preparing for trial shifts, which extends the platform's reach beyond those who have already secured a role to those still trying to enter the sector.

This failure of the matching process can interact with the other Elements in our young person's journey. When a young person moves into a role that fits, they accumulate experience and build a track record that a first job is meant to provide (making Element 2 easier to navigate in future). But a young person in a role that does not fit is likely to leave early and then re-enter the job market with a short and unexplained stint behind them, making the signalling problem set out in Element 2 even worse. Repeated across several attempts, this is one of the routes into the scarring described in the main introduction.

Correcting expectations before a young person starts is the intervention most likely to keep the first job intact

The intervention the evidence points to here is better matching, defined more broadly than current tools define it. Standard job-matching products match a CV to a vacancy on keywords, which does nothing to address expectations of the jobseeker or the potential fit for the employer. But matching that accounts for working style, motivation

and a realistic account of the role may address early exit from jobs, and roundtable participants reported that personality-based matching has shown to have improved both engagement and retention in the job.

Realistic pre-job entry exposure could also help here. Allowing a young person to experience a role before committing to it could correct mismatched expectations before they harden into an ill fit and resignation. This overlaps with the taster and work-experience tools discussed in Element 1, where the same mechanism supports exploration. Its function here would be narrower, and specific to the job application stage, rather than to form careers guidance, with the ultimate goal being to align a candidate's expectations with the role actually on offer.

A poor job search can worsen mental health, and worse mental health makes the next application harder, a cycle that hits low-qualified young people hardest

Element 4: Resilience and confidence

Young people are currently reporting worse mental health than their predecessors, and it is unsurprising that poor mental health and low confidence will make the transition into work harder for young people.³⁷ We are not talking here about the serious and acute needs of young people suffering ill mental health for whom work is not yet a realistic next step. Instead, we are looking at where aspects of mental health, such as low confidence or anxiety, may amplify the barriers that already exist in the transition from education to work.

Resolution Foundation research found that, between 2018 and 2022, 21 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds with mental health problems were workless, against 13 per cent of those without.³⁸ The Milburn review reaches a similar conclusion from the NEET side, finding that health, and mental health in particular, has “become central to who becomes NEET and who stays NEET”.³⁹ In a 2026 survey of young people by Mental Health UK, 76 per cent said their mental wellbeing affects their ability to look for work, and 90 per cent reported feeling stressed, anxious or low while job-hunting.⁴⁰

This data and testimony does not firmly establish causation. Resolution Foundation analysis presents poor mental health and joblessness as moving together, and the Milburn Review is explicit in saying that mental health is not the origin of a young

³⁷ C. McCurdy & L. Murphy, We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment, Resolution Foundation, February 2024

³⁸ Catch22, [How strong really is the link between mental health and unemployment?](#), accessed 23 July 2026

³⁹ A Milburn, [Young people and work: interim report](#), Department for Work & Pensions, May 2026.

⁴⁰ Mental Health UK, [Supporting Young People: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions](#), May 2026

person's NEET status but can amplify it.⁴¹ Mental Health UK finds that, for many young people, repeated rejection and non-response create "a negative cycle of failed applications, financial pressure, and worsening of their mental wellbeing". Its report is also clear that being NEET "is the outcome of repeated knock-backs rather than a lack of motivation."⁴² And this lands hardest where young people have both poor mental health and low qualifications: they are more likely than either their healthy peers or their degree-educated peers to be workless or in low-paid work.⁴³ Mental Health UK argue that the benefits system can itself worsen mental health, with young people who had dealt with the social security system markedly more likely to report that their wellbeing affected their ability to look for work.⁴⁴

The Covid-19 pandemic added a specific erosion of social confidence. Interviews conducted by Gamote and Hyman record young people describing their social progress as "reset right back to zero" and the loss of "maintaining eye contact, hand gestures and all sorts".⁴⁵ The consequences become apparent where the transition to work demands social performance, such as in applications, interviews and early workplace interaction. A young man interviewed in Cardiff had left two jobs and attributed this not to the work but to "anxiety in the workplace" and a "spiral of what could and what if."⁴⁶ The Mental Health UK survey locates the same anxiety at the application stage, where fear of rejection was the most common thing young people said knocked their confidence.⁴⁷

So, a young person whose confidence holds continues to engage, absorbs setbacks without withdrawing, and is likely to stay in the transition long enough to complete it. But a young person whose confidence goes unsupported reads each rejection as confirmation of failure, disengages, and risks the drift toward inactivity, and ends up as a long-term NEET. Despite this evidence, existing employment programmes focus too narrowly on job starts rather than on readiness and retention. But 43 per cent of those whose wellbeing most affects their job search said access to mental health support would significantly increase their confidence in finding work.⁴⁸

The link between poor health and the UK's economic performance is now the subject of major reform, though the reform is aimed at a different population and reaches the group of concern to us only in part. The government-commissioned Mayfield review, Keep Britain Working, moved into a three-year employer-led Vanguard phase in early 2026, working with 150 organisations employing around 1.5 million people to build a Healthy

⁴¹ A Milburn, *Young people and work: interim report*, Department for Work & Pensions, May 2026.

⁴² Mental Health UK, *Supporting Young People: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions*, May 2026

⁴³ Catch22, *How strong really is the link between mental health and unemployment?*, accessed 23 July 2026

⁴⁴ Mental Health UK, *Supporting Young People: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions*, May 2026

⁴⁵ S Gamote & P Hyman, *Inside the Mind of a Young NEET*, One Million Futures, May 2026

⁴⁶ S Gamote & P Hyman, *Inside the Mind of a Young NEET*, One Million Futures, May 2026

⁴⁷ Mental Health UK, *Supporting Young People: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions*, May 2026

⁴⁸ Mental Health UK, *Supporting Young People: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions*, May 2026

Working Lifecycle standard, better workplace health provision, and a Workplace Health Intelligence Unit to underpin incentives for adoption.⁴⁹ Its purpose is to tackle economic inactivity driven by ill health, and it is explicit that health at work should become a shared responsibility between employers, employees and health services. However, what the Vanguard does not address is the phase before a young person is hired, where the confidence and anxiety barriers set out above are at their sharpest and where no employer relationship yet exists to carry the support. Its early reach also skews toward large employers; the small employers that hire many young people, and that Mental Health UK identifies as least equipped to support them, are being tested regionally rather than served from the outset.⁵⁰

The most effective tools reduce isolation and build confidence, yet the user with the greatest need has the least ability to pay

Technology interventions for this element tend to work best when they sit alongside human support, rather than in place of it. Mental Health UK found the most wanted forms of support were one-to-one personalised help, and second, digital tools and online resources.⁵¹

The clearest opportunity could be in providing platforms for peer support. Mental Health UK found that 89 per cent of the young adults it surveyed felt isolated or disconnected while unemployed. As a result, it is piloting a structured peer-support model precisely because that isolation is something the welfare system does not address.⁵² Peer support spaces attached to the job search reduce that isolation at low cost, and they sustain engagement through the stage where the principal risk is withdrawal.

The second opportunity is through confidence and coaching tools, including interview preparation and low-stakes practice in the interactions required by the transition to good work. Our roundtable noted that some digitally delivered therapies, when properly designed, can be a non-judgemental first point of support; such tools could help prevent young people from turning to general-purpose chatbots that were not built, and certainly not governed, for the purpose.

A key constraint here is securing the payer, and it is more acute than in any other element because the user with the greatest need has the least ability to pay. A tool aimed solely at unemployed young people has no obvious commercial customer, and public-funded employment programmes have historically funded job starts rather than the readiness and confidence work that precedes them. Two routes are more plausible than

⁴⁹ Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Business and Trade & Department of Health and Social Care, [Keep Britain Working review: March 2026 update](#), July 2026.

⁵⁰ Mental Health UK, [Supporting Young People: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions](#), May 2026

⁵¹ Mental Health UK, [Supporting Young People: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions](#), May 2026

⁵² Mental Health UK, [Supporting Young People: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions](#), May 2026

direct-to-user. The first is employer-funded support tied to onboarding and retention, which the Mayfield reforms are actively building a market for, although only once a young person is in work. The second is the public sector, through the reformed careers and Youth Guarantee infrastructure discussed in Element 1, which is the most likely payer for support in the pre-employment phase. Any product in this space would need to resolve which of these it is built for.

Cutting across all four elements are broad-based social inequalities and the behaviour of employers

Two considerations run through all four elements of the transition. The first is social inequalities: the uneven distribution of the informal advantages that make the transition easier. This factor is important as it highlights challenges or barriers that technology cannot credibly address. The second is employer behaviour, which will determine if the technology opportunities identified above are ever adopted. Below, we dive deeper into both these factors, to help inform founders and investors interested in addressing the barriers to young people gaining a foothold in the labour market.

Technology can surface routes and role models, but it can't replace the networks, resources and relationships behind them

Not all gaps in employment outcomes are about ability or signalling. They may reflect the uneven distribution of informal advantages (such as networks, opportunities for work experience, role models and family resources) that make the transition easier for some young people than for others. Irrespective of formal qualifications, family and social networks help people land jobs at higher paying, more prestigious firms, and cues of elite social or cultural background continue to shape hiring decisions, even between candidates with identical credentials. The lack of such informal types of support is correlated with other forms of disadvantage and social barriers and recurs at every stage of the transition we have mapped out.

Technology can lower some of these barriers. It can surface routes and role models, return the feedback that well-connected candidates receive informally, and translate informal experience into employer-legible terms. But it cannot substitute for the relationships or the resources themselves: access to work also depends on factors like stable housing, access to affordable transport, and caring responsibilities. These all lie well upstream of the transition to good work and are often beyond the reach or potential impact of any technological tool.

Most potential tools will succeed or fail based on whether employers adopt them and change their practices

Most of the technology opportunities discussed above will succeed or fail on a single variable: whether employers adopt them and change their practice.

We can see this across different elements. Employers filter on credentials under volume pressure and run screening systems that return no feedback, though the silence is a design choice rather than a technical limit (Element 2). They perceive a high training burden in hiring young people and provide thin onboarding (Element 3). And the mental health support they provide varies sharply, with smaller employers least equipped to do so (Element 4).

It would be easy to read this as employers having turned away from young people, but the evidence does not support that interpretation. The share of employers taking on someone fresh from education has not fallen: 33 per cent did so in 2024, against 31 per cent a decade earlier.⁵³ Participants at our roundtable told us that where employers hesitate to hire young people, it tends to be due to the rising cost of young workers and a perceived pastoral burden of training and onboarding them, rather than a shortage of roles.

Despite these hesitations, employers are not opposed to supporting young workers. Mental Health UK found that employers want to do better but lack the support and resources to do so, a gap that is widest for small employers, and that early difficulties with young starters are rarely about capability and more often about emotional strain and unclear expectations.⁵⁴ Our roundtable also described a strong ‘paying it forward’ motivation among those employers who engage with and hire young jobseekers:

“Almost always because somebody did it for them and they want to pay that forward.”

(Participant in our roundtable on employer motivations)

This suggests that rather than employer disengagement, there is instead a set of entrenched practices (and in some cases perceptions) shaping how young people are screened, supported and retained, all of which can be improved through technology.

The above findings from our roundtable, as well as our experience advising founders building in this space, shape what a technological intervention must do and demonstrate to succeed in selling to employers. Employer adoption depends on a low-friction, bounded ask, a clear and quick return on investment, and a design that works for small employers without dedicated capacity.

⁵³ N Cominetti et al., Take a chance on me: How can employers be incentivised to employ NEETs?, Resolution Foundation, June 2026, <https://doi.org/10.63492/ugii1652>

⁵⁴ Mental Health UK, [Supporting Young People: Mental health, meaningful activity, and life transitions](#), May 2026

Equipped with a map of the points of failure in the transition to good work, we turn to where founders can build to solve them

In making our way through the elements of the transition to good work, we have reviewed the work of researchers, heard from practitioners, and reviewed the voices of employers and young people in government reviews and news stories. In doing so, we have identified specific points of failure within this transition, particularly for young people without degrees.

Our next question as investors is where tech can credibly tackle those points of failure, and what that intervention could look like. Each failure is a gap that founders could seek to address.

The strongest opportunities are the intervention points where technology can work across several elements

Technology appears to be an effective intervention at a handful of intervention points, and the strongest of these intervention points cut across more than one element. For a founder or an investor, those cross-cutting points are where building a tool or platform could have the most impact.

Job rehearsal tools stand out because they address problems at several stages of the transition. Letting a young person sample a role before committing to it supports genuine exploration (Element 1), builds a signal an employer can read (Element 2), corrects the expectation mismatch that drives early exit (Element 3), and rehearses the interactions that anxiety makes hardest (Element 4). Above, we mentioned examples such as Not Impossible and Springpod that already operate within this space.

Participants at our roundtable emphasised that, for job rehearsal platforms, format matters just as much as the technology powering them. They also warned that, although virtual placements are infinitely scalable, they can hold broader value for young people when they are designed to provide exposure to a wide range of experiences, instead of solely acting as a channel for recruitment or brand-building for (mainly large) employers.

Responsibly-designed applicant feedback systems are another low-cost, yet potentially highly consequential, intervention. Feedback built into the (initial) screening stage can convert a dead end into information a young candidate can act on. This also applies to where technology can enable more transparency about how hiring decisions are reached, for example, providing candidates with statistics on how they scored against other applicants, or an indication of key skills or competencies featured in successful applications.

Skills-translation tools convert informal experience into terms an employer can read as evidence of capability. The underlying experience, whether care work, volunteering, part-time jobs or running a household, usually exists already; but the constraint tends to be that young people cannot frame it in language employers readily recognise. We think that framing can be taught and partly systematised. Micro-credentials and digital badging could showcase skills built through incomplete qualifications or non-traditional routes.

The limitation here is the employer. Translation helps where an employer is willing to weigh a demonstrated skill against a formal credential but does little where a specific qualification is a hard requirement. Adoption and changing employer behaviour make this intervention challenging.

Role-model discovery tools make vocational and trades routes visible to young people who have no example of them in their own networks. Tools like these, delivered through technology, could form the equivalent of pathways that channel graduates towards structured programmes at large companies. They widen the set of options a young person can see, which addresses the guidance failure described in Element 1.

Peer-support platforms address the isolation of the job search directly. Mental Health UK found that 89 per cent of the young adults it surveyed felt isolated or disconnected while unemployed, and our roundtable saw peer community as essential infrastructure for preventing feelings of isolation during this transition. An online space in which young people can connect with others in a similar position may help sustain engagement through a transition where withdrawal can be a huge risk.

Reaching the young people who need it most depends less on the technology than on how it's designed

Through our research and roundtables, we have identified three design considerations that founders can use as guiding principles to ensure that the young people most in need of support are served by any intervention.

- **Design for constrained access and mobile native users.** Many young people use the internet primarily through a phone, often on limited data, and sometimes without consistent access to a device or connection. Tools designed around a laptop, a stable broadband connection and long web forms will fail. Instead, low-barrier, mobile-first formats will work best, with content delivered through channels young people already use. WhatsApp-based delivery and short, TikTok-style content were singled out by participants at our roundtable as effective ways to engage a group that a conventional application would not reach.

- **Building for a hybrid delivery model.** Our roundtable included participants deeply embedded in support systems designed to reach those young people at the heart of this report. We learnt from them that technology works best alongside a trusted person, rather than in place of one. We see the relational element between a young person and an advisor as trust-building, while technology helps scale reach and contain costs. Technology could take on the work that scales cheaply, including reach, first contact, initial questions (where there is lower fear of judgement) and administrative friction, reserving the human relationship for the points at which trust and readiness need to be built. Our roundtable described conversational AI agents as a potential first step, if designed as a non-judgemental and always-available interface where a young person can ask the questions they would be hesitant to put to a person.
- **Making the employer return clear and quick.** Adoption is the binding constraint that runs through every element, and employer adoption is almost wholly dependent on the return they expect to get from using a tool. As investors, we know this is a theme that runs through all WorkerTech companies and markets; demonstrating a return on investment for the client (in this case, employers) is essential for commercial viability and growth. Any tool, platform or service that requires employer buy-in will need to demonstrate employer benefit, such as increased retention or quicker onboarding. A product that asks employers to invest against a distant or uncertain payoff is likely to stall or be dropped entirely.

Generic pathways and tech that remove human support are unlikely to be effective

Our roundtable of experts also identified approaches that are likely to fail, informed by their experiences supporting young people across the country through this transition:

- **One-size-fits-all pathways.** Young people start from very different points, with different motivations and constraints, and a single generic journey does not account for the person taking it or the route they take. A standardised training or guidance route tends to lose the young people whose circumstances depart from the assumed path, who are the young people it most needs to hold.
- **Technology as a substitute for people.** Technology deployed as a complete substitute for human interaction or support rarely works. Our roundtable highlighted that trust is a crucial input for young people who need support in navigating this transition, so technology is more likely to be successful if it extends a relationship, rather than trying to build one from scratch. Shaw Trust's Closer to Work research found that young people facing health barriers take notice of

opportunities when they come through someone they already trust, and that a trusted person vouching for a programme is often what gives it credibility.⁵⁵ Where that relationship is absent, a young person managing anxiety or low confidence is unlikely to act on what a tool tells them.

Hard degree requirements, the challenge of getting a job in a loose labour market, and upstream barriers like poverty and housing sit beyond any tool

Many of the barriers in the transition from education to a good job are difficult to tackle, and some are structural problems that technology cannot solve.

For example, skills translation and skills-based hiring can help those who are repeatedly failed by automated recruitment systems, but only where an employer is willing to weigh a demonstrated skill against a credential. Where a degree is a hard requirement, no amount of better signalling can get a non-graduate past the filter. Technology also cannot persuade employers to hire younger and less-experienced workers in a loose labour market. And upstream social barriers, such as poverty, housing instability and caring responsibilities, will all shape whether a young person can engage with the process at all. A tool can surface a route or translate an experience, but it cannot provide stable housing, relieve financial pressure or remove a caring load.

Conclusion

The transition from education into good work can be difficult for young people, but the barriers do not fall evenly. Young people without degrees have fewer established routes to follow, weaker signals to show employers what they can do, and less support when their first attempts at work go wrong.

This briefing note has surfaced those barriers and identified where technology could make a difference for young people in need of support. But, if lessons can be learned from design best practices and from proven approaches elsewhere, these barriers can also represent opportunities for WorkerTech founders to build tools and platforms.

⁵⁵ Shaw Trust, [Closer to Work](#), June 2026.

Resolution Ventures exists to back innovative start-ups seeking to change the world of work for the better, and early-stage ventures seeking to improve the prospects of low-to-middle income Britain.

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A decorative image in the bottom-left corner showing a person in a blue suit standing next to a modern, metallic structure with blue lighting. The image is partially cut off by the bottom-left corner of the page.

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