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Practice makes perfect

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As part of a wider initiative to combat burgeoning unemployment rates, Guinness Northern Counties is holding job interview training sessions to inspire students and, hopefully, make a difference. Austin Macauley reports

It's a grey and drizzly day in south Yorkshire and the mood outside Sheffield Park Academy's sixth form common room is equally grim. Year 11 students hover nervously as they await their fate. Think back to that time at school when you queued up for your BCG injection and you'll get the picture.

Each student has completed a job application form and is about to attend an interview with one of the 22 local employers waiting inside. The jobs aren't real but both sides are taking the whole exercise very seriously.

As one student leaves, interviewer Brian Hamlin says: 'I'd give him a job today, so bright and enthusiastic.' But he quickly recalls an earlier interviewee: 'I was talking to myself really. But if it's made him go away and think about what he wants to do, it will have been worth it.'

His next 'candidate' is 15-year-old Rehmana Naziq. She's a high-flyer who's predicted to score good GCSE grades and has A levels, university and a career as a children's nurse in her sights. But she's clearly nervous and is relieved when it's over. 'I was scared,' she says. 'I've never been for an interview. I'd like to do this again so I know what to do in a proper interview.'

Breaking the cycle

Mr Hamlin is a community investment manager for 26,000-home Guinness Northern Counties and is the man behind today's training session. The initiative is part of the landlord's focus on tackling worklessness and it's the second time it has been run at Sheffield Park Academy. The Manor Castle ward, where the school is located, is among the 1 per cent most deprived areas in the country and its unemployment rate is double Sheffield's average, which at 10.4 per cent is well above the national average of 7.8 per cent.

GNC has about 560 homes in the ward and Mr Hamlin knows it's vital to break the cycle of unemployment that in some families extends to three generations.

The project works as follows. Students choose one of three jobs to apply for and complete an application form ahead of the interview day. Following interviews they receive a certificate and a feedback form is sent home to parents. When year 10 students took part in August their response was so enthusiastic those in year 11 asked if they could have a go too.

The only cost for running today's event is a £200 fee paid by GNC to not-for-profit training company Business and Education South Yorkshire for its help recruiting some of the interviewers and facilitating the day's proceedings. The outlay is kept to a minimum thanks to the willingness of the school to take care of things like printing and photocopying. But it took Mr Hamlin around four months to get the project off the ground. When asked to put a price on that time he says one consultancy estimates it would cost around £4,000 for it to develop the scheme in another location from scratch. 'The hard part is getting the schools involved and creating that network of employers,' he says.

Having tested it out at Sheffield Park Academy, next up in March is Wath Comprehensive School in Wath-upon-Deane, a former coal mining town north east of Sheffield.

Variety is key

Mr Hamlin says the key is 'getting the right people in the room'. 'You want a diverse range of employers - and plenty that are local people who have a stake in the area. It's good that big business comes but it's important that people from a similar background to the kids are here as well.'

Every local child who gets a job or a place at college will inspire others, he says.

'Other kids will say, "I can do that". If these kids see their siblings be successful, they are more likely to be successful. Inspiration is something you can't buy.'

After grilling the last of his candidates, Thomas Parker, a tools and maintenance specialist for BT Openreach, explains why he's back for a second stint as an interviewer. 'If just one student coming today does something as a result and a friend is inspired by that, we can create a positive snowball.'

By the end of the day 148 students have taken part. A few pulled out due to nerves. Claire Bailey, the school's assistant principal, says it's a mindset they must overcome.

'Some will say, "there's no point because there are no jobs". But the reason they won't do it is nerves... They need this experience if they're to get jobs - or into college.'

Case study: Laura Eyre

Tammy Careless, manager of Natwest in Sheffield city centre, waits for her next interviewee. The student's application form states one of her strengths is punctuality. 'She's late. That's not a great start.'

When Laura Eyre, 15, arrives she looks nervous and a little overawed. She begins to settle down when asked about school and plans for the future. What kind of job does she see herself going into? 'Dental assistant - I think I'd be good at keeping people calm,' she says.

And how would she find out how to forge that career? 'I'd go to a dentist and see what they did to get into it,' she answers.

Sell yourself more and research the job you're applying for, is the feedback from Ms Careless.

Afterwards Laura reveals it was her first interview of any description. 'I was nervous and didn't know what to expect,' she says.

What will she take away from the experience? 'I'd do more activities so I can talk about myself more. I've now got more ideas about things I can talk about regarding my future.'