



The Work Couch

NAVIGATING TODAY'S TRICKY PEOPLE CHALLENGES TO
CREATE TOMORROW'S SUSTAINABLE WORKPLACES

Season 2

Episode 5 – Exploring the cost of untapped talent: Social mobility with James Fellowes and Chance Bleu-Montgomery

Ellie: Hi and welcome to the Work Couch Podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. My name is Ellie Gelder. I'm a senior editor in the employment engagement and equality team here at RPC and I'll be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curve balls that it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of the podcast you'll feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way. And to make sure you don't miss any of our fortnightly episodes, please do hit the like and follow button and share with a colleague.

Ellie: Today, in part one of our mini-series on exploring the cost of untapped talent, we're discussing social mobility and the importance of inclusive hiring as part of your business's wider diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging strategy. With me to share their expertise on this topic, I am delighted to welcome two champions of social inclusion and pioneers of inclusive hiring who also have their own lived experiences of social barriers to employment: James Fellowes, co-founder and head of partnerships at Bridge of Hope, and Chance Bleu-Montgomery, brand ambassador and partner support manager at Bridge of Hope. Hi both, thanks so much for joining me on The Work Couch today.

James: Hi, Ellie, lovely to meet you. Thank you so much for inviting us today. We're super excited about the podcast.

Chance: and hello from me as well. I'm really excited to, in fact, it's an honour to be on this podcast.

Ellie: Oh, thank you so much. It's really wonderful to have you here. And James, I'd like to start off with a quote, if I may, when you said, "The job stops the unravelling". Really powerful words, which perfectly articulate exactly how fundamental a job is, aside from the obvious, which is the ability to earn a living. A job is actually central to someone's identity, their confidence, their purpose, how they interact with others, family, friends. So, can you just talk us through your own experience of social exclusion and unemployment, which ultimately led you to work in this field? So, if you can take us right back to the beginning, because I think your story highlights how any one of us can find themselves on the margins of society.

James: Thank you, Ellie. Yeah, I'd be delighted to. And if you want me to go right back to the beginning, yes. So, I was born definitely in the lucky 1% club, white, male, and exceptionally privileged. So privileged, I was sent away to the world's most famous boarding school, age 13. Yep, that one. And I was in the same class as a boy called Cameron, who went on to run the country. So, you kind of get the level of privilege I had. From there, basically I had the next two and a half decades of gainful employment for two of the largest drinks companies in the world. And life was fantastic. Happily married, fully employed, climbing the corporate ladder, moved internationally, which was fantastic. So, I was living in America with three young kids, big house and a swimming pool. What could...you know, frankly, go wrong.

James: well, pretty well everything, but it mainly involved unemployment and the misery of losing a job. So, I was actually made redundant five times in the period of six years. And having been possibly the luckiest guy on the entire universe for 40 odd years. You know, my luck totally deserted me. so badly so that no money left. I couldn't feed my children. And I ended up being sectioned for the foreseeable future. And that was in a psychiatric ward just outside New York, all pretty grim as you can imagine. And I came back to the UK to recover. And unfortunately, you know, I was diagnosed with bipolar when I came back, which at the time I kind of refused to accept, I was in full denial and now I actually see it as my superpower. But on the back of that, the doctor said I couldn't do any kind of serious work involving sitting behind the desk as it were, because I traumatized my brain. And so, I needed to try and get a job. And at the same time, while I was doing that, pretty well everything unfortunately unravelled. So, my

marriage went, my kids went, my home went, and frankly, my corporate career went. And so...I thought, well, I've got to try and get a job somewhere. So, I thought, well, I certainly know how to pour a pint. So, I went and tried to get a job in a pub, and nobody would give me one. And then I tried in coffee shops, and nobody would give me one there. And having been white male and very privileged, I'd never experienced barriers to employment, but there they were. Luckily there was a frozen meat factory down the road. They only cared if I was prepared to get up at four in the morning, work at minus 55 degrees and do 18-hour days on minimum wage which of course I was. So, I did that for the best part of nine months. While my classmate was running the country, I was the janitor. And fortunately, back of that, I did get a chance to go back into the drinks industry one more time and try and rebuild my life.

Ellie: So, what you're saying is that those enormous barriers, having been diagnosed with a mental illness meant that you couldn't return to the corporate world but then things got better, and you did manage to return to work in the drinks industry at a senior level but that wasn't the end of the story, was it?

James: And no, it wasn't. I thought it was the start of the next chapter. Well, it was, but the chapter didn't last very long because despite breaking all the kind of records all my targets that were put in front of me, I was made redundant again. And that was 2018. And Ellie, I went, and I sat on a wall in a church yard just outside Islington in North London. And I had a bit of an epiphany, call it what you like. And I was getting clear direction that I should do something more meaningful for my life. I didn't really know what, but I did know that a job was central to that. When I was in employment, life was absolutely fantastic. And when I wasn't, it was utterly miserable and there was frankly nothing in between.

Ellie: So yeah, just going back to how fundamental a job is to someone's identity. And Chance, if I can bring you in here, you also have an incredibly inspiring, but very different story of how your life unravelled at a young age. You found yourself in a desperate situation, but you ultimately turned things around to get back on your feet, and you're now working as a champion and advocate for social inclusion. So can you just tell us a bit about your own journey?

Chance: Yeah, absolutely. So, for me, I unfortunately, I didn't get to go to a fancy school or anything like that. So, I had this really tough upbringing in a tough area. And it started with my childhood experience being that my dad didn't think I was his and to start with. And so, I experienced huge amounts of physical abuse. I first been before I was one year old and that left me with what I thought were birthmarks until I was 21. So, I didn't feel significant growing up. I ran away a few times and I ended up staying out. I met some friends, and they made me feel great. They made me feel significant and they gave me this sort of sense of purpose and belonging. But the byproducts of that was they were from the antisocial membership, and it was only gonna be a matter of time before I got into trouble.

And so, and I did by the time I was 16, I ended up in prison. By the time I was 18, my sister took me to a mental hospital because the childhood trauma and depression had really taken its toll, you know, and I, I did try to make some changes in my life, not to much success, you know, I did, I tried to get jobs, couldn't get a job, any of that stuff. And then, you know, fast forward, my sister, who's my absolute rock.

She died of cancer, age 36, and I didn't wanna talk about it because then that would make it real, which is the worst possible thing you could do because within a year, my life completely unravelled, completely came apart, and I ended up back inside one last time. But this time, I asked myself this question, I said, "Do you like who you are?" And the answer was a solid "no". In fact, I thought that if this was gonna be my existence for my future, I didn't see the point in having one. I really didn't. And so, I was left with these choices in my mind. but I chose in fact, I threw everything in the kitchen sink and the neighbour's kitchen sink at change and spent three years and 10 months in therapy, almost every day to unlock some pain and to deal with those childhood traumas while spending five years studying with the Open University to give myself an education my childhood didn't afford unto me. But then this incredible day came upon me where I was just filled with ebullience and the warm, warm tears of joy came flooding down my face. And it was because for the first time in my entire life, I felt a sense of freedom. No more emotional discombobulation, no more anger. I was filled with forgiveness and topped to the brim with self-respect. And I realised two things had happened to me at this point. One, my childhood experiences were no longer going to define my future. And two, I'd finally become the person I was always meant to be. And so that was the day I decided whatever work I'm doing, I want it to be changing lives. I want it to be about changing lives, changing communities, and changing the way the systems are having impact on disadvantaged groups. And so that's where my passion comes from for this work. And that's why I'm an advocate with those lived experiences and really looking forward to shift hearts and minds in this space.

Ellie: So, two amazing and very inspirational stories, very different stories, which brings us on now to talking about Bridge of Hope. So how was it founded and what is its mission?

James: Well, thank you for asking, Ellie. I mean, it was all pretty naive, is the honest answer. This is five years ago, and I'd just been laid off. I decided that I was gonna try and do something more meaningful with my life. I thought I wanted to try and help other people, particularly who had significantly more challenges than me, who may be experiencing

barriers to employment to actually see if they could get into employment. I didn't really know how, where, why, but that was the guiding force. So, I thought what I'll do is I'll ring up a few charities. I rang up actually over 50 charities and who helped people in some way or another. And whether those people were neurodiverse, they might have been veterans, they might have been refugees, they may have been in prison, pretty well across the board. And I was talking to the CEOs, and I said, can you tell me kind of what you do? What is your model and where does employment fit in? And they all gave me this incredible answer about their model, which was amazing. And they were getting people back on their feet and doing an extraordinary job around rehabilitation. And I said, "Well, where does the job fit in?" And the answer was "The job doesn't fit into that. That's not our responsibility." And now this is no criticism of the charities. This is more criticism of the system. But the system really didn't take into account the final piece of the puzzle, which was getting them a job. And at the same time, there was a big talent shortage as well. And so, this was, you know, five years ago, companies were desperately looking for people and also wanted to be more inclusive and more diverse. This was very early stages around D&I, but they really didn't know where to find them. So, it struck me as there was a missing link between job-ready talent who were initially coming out of charities to inclusive employers who were prepared to give people a second chance or could see the benefits of hiring from this amazing group. And so, we started as a little charity. We spent two years basically connecting job ready talent to employers, initially piloting in the horse racing industry. And we had a sister social enterprise that at the time was helping ex-offenders get into work and they had a digital job board, but they couldn't make any money out of that. And we thought, well, why not combine the two? Why not take our concept of my fully inclusive Bridge of Hope, helping people from charities. And we thought, well, we'll extend it also people coming out of non-Russell group Unis, boot camps, social enterprises, it didn't really matter where they are, anybody who just needed access to employment, and then put them into work anywhere. So, we wanted to be sector agnostic, and it was to connect the two. And we're now three years in, and we've been trading, going for three years, we hoped we may have, I don't know, 1500, 1800 candidates. But we've had over 88,000 who've registered. And last time I checked this morning, we have 41,000 candidates who are live on our system. And they're typically not on the other job boards. And they may have a gap in their CV, they may have a mental health condition, but they're fantastic candidates.

Ellie: Those numbers are so impressive. And if we look at the kinds of adversity that we're talking about here, what kind of pools of talent is Bridge of Hope helping to connect with inclusive recruiting employers? You've mentioned ex-offenders, and what sort of unique qualities and skills can they offer?

James: So, we're fully inclusive. We want to literally help anybody with a barrier to employment. And that could include across the board, whether it's age, race, background, previous history, we don't care. And the kind of agreement we have with the charities who feed in, we have about 100 charities, is that, look, they've gotta be job ready. They've got to be a good person. And we ask the charities to kind of help them on that journey as well and provide some aftercare. But when it comes to the actual research, the research is very compelling and both Business in the Community and CIPD have looked at this group. We call them untapped talent. Some people call them marginalized candidates or overlooked candidates. But when they compare them to typical talent, it's extraordinary. They work much harder, they stay much longer, and they come with grit and resilience. And Chance will tell you a little bit more about that as well.

Chance: Yeah, absolutely. And we mustn't forget those who walk in and identify as system-impacted or disadvantaged in any way, because they're welcome. But what I see these candidates as are what I call "diamonds in the rough". And I'll come onto grit in a second and I'll tell you why I call them diamonds in the rough. We're going into that jewellery shop and looking at those sparkling diamonds. But some of those are zircons and cubic stones because Mum wrote the CV or ChatGPT wrote the CV. And so, what I'm talking about as diamonds in the rough, these candidates are not on these regular jobs boards. And so, what they need is just a little bit of polish and they'll sparkle like any other diamond. But we know it's pressure that makes our diamond as special as we love it. And its pressure that makes our system-impacted candidates come with so much grit and resilience. And we know resilience and grit is the number one predictor of success. And so, there's something really great about these candidates, whether they're system-impacted through being a veteran or neurodiverse or whatever it is, they build up this resilience. And it's really important for us to not look at this through altruistic eyes, we must know that if these people have the predictors of success, you know, grit, resilience, emotional intelligence, the ability to improvise, particularly in tough situations, these are the predictors of success. We ought to be going out and mining for these rough diamonds.

Ellie: I love that analogy, Chance. So memorable, but it completely articulates what you're doing here. And like you say, you refer back to the commercial gains of engaging with these pools of talent. Can you tell us about the role that empathy has here and why it's really crucial to create an organisational mindset shift through empathy, through hearing people's lived experiences.

Chance: Absolutely. You know, I'm really glad you asked this question because we've actually developed a masterclass, which is a learn with empathy model. And so why it's important to build in the empathy is to create that equilibrium

of thought in regard to social mobility. So absolutely right to hit the targets, absolutely right to tick the boxes, absolutely right to do this for the right reason. And if you do something for the right reason, it will shine out in your organisation's personality, if you like. You know, and so the masterclasses, they include all the wonderful stuff like unconscious biases, understanding the intersectionalities of candidates, you know, resilience and grit those predictors of success. But we dapple them with these lived experience stories so that people can really hear from a candidate and their particular journey in life. But the neurodiversity games that we play, so they're very interactive, are designed, for instance, to make you feel what it might be like to have cognitive overload from ADHD or feel what it might be like to be dyslexic. So, these games are really important and that really builds in empathy.

Ellie: And Bridge of Hope is doing absolutely wonderful work in connecting that talent which you've outlined with inclusive employers. So can you give us some real-life employer examples that have been especially impressive?

James: Yeah, I'll give you a couple. I think one we're working with very closely right now, and we're incredibly impressed by is a very large international beer company. And, you know, I came out of the drinks industry myself, but they just totally get it. So, for example, they're actually doing a big programme at the moment around open hiring. So, they literally just get rid of the CV and concentrate on, "Okay, are you hungry? Have you got the right attitude? And do you want an opportunity?"

So, we love what those guys are doing. And then there's another organisation and we've been very impressed by what they do. And they're actually a recycling business based up in the Northwest and they basically recycle TVs and fridges.

But where their secret source was, they created a foundation and they found they basically went around Preston, their local area, and found people who are homeless and said, "Look, would you, you know, would you like another crack at life", they say, "Well, come and join the programme". And the programme was an employability programme to help them get back on their feet, give them a roof above their head. At the end of it, an opportunity to work in the organisation or some of them went and worked for competitors and they were quite happy. They just wanted to give people another chance. And so, when I heard this story, I was like, "That's remarkable. I love it. What have been the three biggest benefits?" And the CEO said, "Well, there've been three, you know, in ascending order. First of all, these people work much harder than everybody else. And so, not only do they work harder, but everybody else's productivity has gone up because they have to kind of keep up". And I said, "What's the second one?" And they said, "We don't really have a word called retention because this whole programme has acted like glue and held together everybody. People are not leaving anymore and certainly not the people we're bringing through this programme". I was like, "Wow. Okay, and anything else?" And they're like, "Yep, the number one thing is, and we're kind of a bit embarrassed to say it, but why not? We win more bids because of it. When we're pitching for a new tender, we're competing against four or five other waste management companies, and they quote in pounds, and all try and discount each other. And we quote in people and say, if you have 100 tonnes, we can put two homeless people into work. And if you've got 500, we can put 14 people into work. And we invariably win the pitch". And I said, "Wow, that's pretty incredible. What's your pricing like?" And they go, "Well, it's more expensive than everybody else". So, for me, that was the Nirvana. I've come out of corporate now in social, but the two are not mutually exclusive. And inclusive hiring and social value all are commercially really smart things to do plus socially the right thing to do.

Ellie: I think that example just says it all beautifully. And, Chance, we've discussed the kinds of adversity that people might have faced before Bridge of Hope helps them find jobs. So how does Bridge of Hope help candidates on their journeys?

Chance: Well, the passion goes all the way through what we're talking about here. I thought it was fantastic when I met James and we became really great friends and he invited me onto Bridge of Hope because it was like, finally, here's a bridge, a pathway where candidates who are system-impacted could walk towards employers who are looking for them. But we both wanted it to be more than brilliant. And so, we created what we call the coalition of skills and support partners to ensure that happens. And so, if I give you just a few examples, candidates who are ambivalent, unsure of what they want to do, we have partners where they can tap in their personality traits. It's very gamified so fun. And it will give them back a list of industries their personality is transferable to. Now this really opens up the mind of the candidate as to what they can do with their options. They can access free qualifications, we have partners for that, and various pathways into certain trades. But two that really, really was super important, and that was financial support. And so, through signposting, our candidates can access their wages before payday. How this works, a candidate, if they've worked two weeks, they can access two weeks, not three, so it's very fair. But this is important because it doesn't matter who you are, you go into a new job, you're out of your comfort zone. And if you're experiencing social anxieties from neurodivergence or imposter syndrome, this type of thing, and a utility bill comes in whilst you're trying to work, that's gonna raise anxiety. And so, this is in place where a candidate can say, right, I'll take a week out and two weeks of work, pay that bill and carry on down the good path. Now the other piece of financial support that we can offer through signposting, should any one of our candidates tap into our

info page and say, I need help with financial support. We can signpost them some free financial advice. And this is really important for candidates to know they can get this for free, but it doesn't stop there with the candidate. This is extended to the whole family. And I'll tell you why this is important. Because if you're the one in your family, the only one who's landed that good job, got a diploma or a degree.

It's not just yours. It's not just your job, diploma or degree. The whole family just got a degree or a job. That's the experience of a first in family grad, for instance. Everyone in that house has banked their hopes in one person. And it's a privilege. It's an absolute privilege to be in a position where you can support your family members, but it's still a financial pressure at times. And so now a candidate can say, "Of course, Cousin Johnny, of course I can support you. I'll introduce you to these professionals. They'll create a budget and clear path for you to get out of your financial troubles, maintain your independence". Now that reduces the pressure from our candidates, but it also gives them the feeling that they have something there they can turn around and support family members with. You know, and a part of the driver for a lot of this is something really quite simple that my son said to me whether I was good or bad, my son always said to me, "Dad, I love you". And it's beautiful to hear; any parent would say that. But one day he came up to me with all the changes I made in my life. And I'll never forget this day. He came up to me and he said, "Dad, I love who you are". And that moved me. That made me start to think about all the other families from disadvantaged backgrounds, of course, the children love them, but do they love who they are? Because it's when they love who they are, that's when inspiration strikes in the household and ricochets out as a positive light in our communities. So social mobility for us is not just about how it affects the candidate, it's about how it affects the family, the generation behind that.

Ellie: Absolutely, and it goes back to the role a job plays in a person's interactions with their family and others. Fantastic. And James, you've got some remarkable stats on how inclusive hiring is generating staggering amounts of social value.

James: Yes, so this has been a big development for us in the last three or four months really. So up till probably September, October, we were a small little social enterprise. The great news was we were growing incredibly fast. And we had 62 odd blue-chip employers and agencies all sounds fantastic all these candidates. But the reality is we didn't have any backing. So, we were looking for investment.

And so started talking to an organisation called nGAGE Talent. And they own about 23 other recruitment agencies. And they were really interested in us combining forces but talking to the CEO, He said, "So what exactly is the social value of one of your candidates?" And I said, "Well, according to the social value portal, we're talking about around about £19,000. And some of the other currencies, as it were, social value currencies, it's a little bit up, a little bit down. But if you've been in prison, you could probably treble it".

There isn't another way to spike social value like inclusive hiring. And so many companies now are having to do bids and tenders and particularly if you're doing that in the public sector or local government, et cetera, these bids or tenders up to, we've heard up to 30 or 40%, but typically, 10 to 20 or 25% will be based on social value. And so, we work with organisations to try and help those companies win those bids. We provide a service to say, okay, we can help you to really differentiate yourself and lean into social value rather than copy and paste the same stuff that you put in the last 15 bids.

Ellie: Chance, can I just finish by asking you to sum up, what's the potential cost to a business that doesn't choose to tap into these wonderful, these unique pools of talent that we've discussed?

Chance: You know, that's a really good question. We're talking about your employer brand here. So, when you're not hiring with inclusion in mind, you're gonna end up with the same types of people. And so, this will affect your reputation, your brand. And I can tell you, candidates can see the personality of all these organisations out there. And so, what you look like internally will reflect externally. And so, this is really important. The public and consumers, they're increasingly expecting companies to be socially responsible.

If you do not embrace inclusion, how on earth are you gonna sort out the barriers that disadvantaged people face if you're not letting them through the door in the first place? And this will cause you to fall short against your competitors who are doing this well. So, by the time you've got these candidates, and right, we better get some in, your competitors, they've already sorted out their candidate pathway. I mean, we offer advisory services to ensure that candidate pathways are as barrier-free as possible.

So, you wouldn't have had the opportunity to do that unless you were hiring them through. So again, the customers, they make purchasing decisions based upon this now. They have a look on your website, they wanna see the diversity in front of their faces. And so, this is why I don't want people to think, oh my God, we better get some faces in because this is the problem. So, understand that actually we need to get these people in because it really is the right thing to do. Let's just do the right thing and everything else will organically follow.

Ellie: Absolutely, and it goes back to that example James mentioned about a company's pitch and how they've won against competitors because they've got that social value in place. So, it really is a commercial imperative, isn't it?

Chance: Absolutely.

Ellie: Well, thank you so much, James and Chance. You've both provided such compelling stories of why social inclusion is so important and why it deserves to sit at the top of the commercial agenda. Thank you so much for joining us today.

James: Thanks, thanks for having us. And we'll be back if you like, with some more news and updates because we are making lots of progression in this space. So, keep your ears close to this podcast, I'd say.

Ellie: Absolutely, we'd love to have you both back again soon. Thank you.
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