GETTING IN & GETTING STARTED

What new joiners and prospective employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds really feel about PwC

A REPORT BASED ON JOURNALS, RESEARCH & CO-CREATING SOLUTIONS

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Thinks
Insight & Strategy

in association with **pwc**

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INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD

Ensuring everyone - irrespective of background - has the opportunity to reach their full potential has long been a priority for PwC, and for me personally.

I'm proud of the progress we've made broadening access into the firm, such as by focusing recruitment processes on potential rather than past performance, and by introducing new apprenticeships and school leaver programmes.

IAN ELLIOTT
Chief People Officer
PwC UK

Some 82% of our people now disclose their socioeconomic background voluntarily - they can see it's helping us hold ourselves to account and do more to improve diversity.

The need has never been greater. If the pandemic made learning more difficult, the rising cost of living is making it more expensive. These challenges are having a disproportionate impact on people from poorer backgrounds. Opportunities have been lost, expectations and aspirations lowered. All of this puts pressure on social mobility.

This in turn cuts off a massive potential pool of talent - people that can help businesses plug skills gaps and diversify their workforce so it better reflects their customers and markets.

It is against this backdrop that we wanted to better understand the experience - warts and all - of prospective and new joiners from lower socio economic backgrounds. By learning what's working well and what isn't, we've been able to identify changes that we hope will make a significant difference to their experience.

I'd like to thank **Thinks Insight & Strategy** for their help designing and overseeing an innovative research platform for new joiners to share their candid views. And most of all I'd like to thank all those who participated in the research - your energy and ideas have underscored the talent we have in our midst and the need to ensure we don't squander it.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

PwC is committed to inclusion and diversity across its business, recognising that the firm creates most value for its clients, people and society when individuals from different backgrounds and with different points of view work together. This not only makes commercial sense, but is the right thing to do, in line with PwC's purpose.

Over the past few years, the firm has been thinking increasingly holistically about inclusion and diversity in its business, considering not only protected characteristics, but also recognising the intersectional nature of disadvantage, and the need to think broadly about the barriers that can prevent people reaching their full potential and hold back social mobility. Within this, it is important to identify and leverage different routes into work in order to attract talented individuals from a wider pool, including school leavers, those currently taking technical qualifications (e.g., apprenticeships) and those studying for degree-level qualifications.

In this context – particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic – PwC recognises the need to take its commitment to social mobility even further. To better understand the views and experiences of people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (see page 7 for definition), in October 2022, Thinks Insight and Strategy (formerly BritainThinks) was commissioned by PwC to conduct a qualitative research programme with two key audiences, both from lower socioeconomic backgrounds:

- New joiners: Those who have joined PwC in the last 12 months on school leaver and graduate programmes.
- Future employees: Young people currently in education (and a small subset of parents of young people).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this research was to understand the views of future employees, as well as new joiners' experiences of applying and starting at PwC.
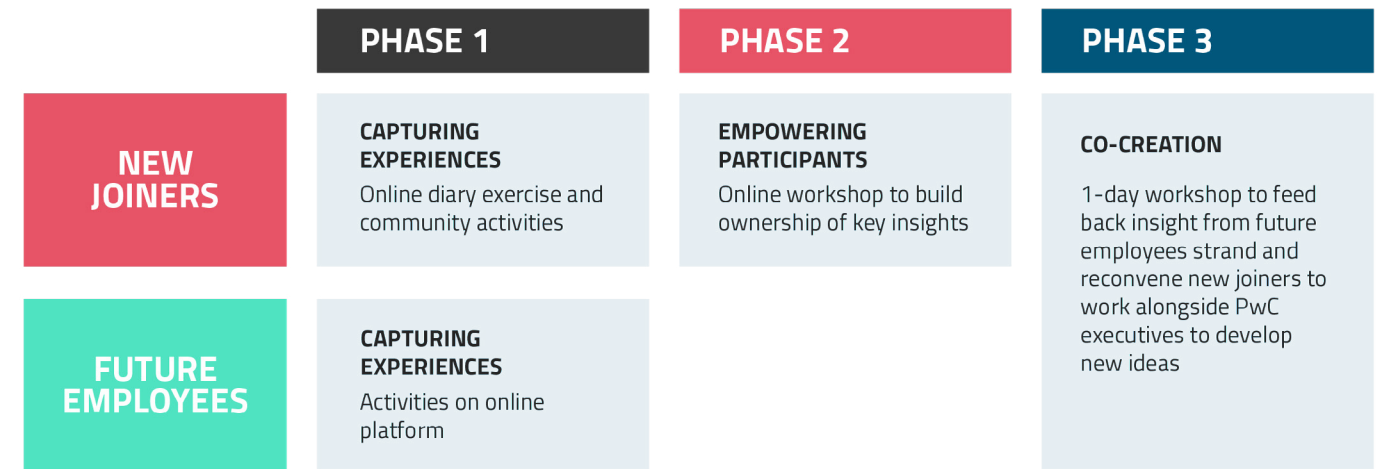
The research with new joiners explored:

- Levels of awareness and perceptions of PwC prior to joining;
- Considering and applying to PwC;
- Starting at PwC;
- People and places at PwC;
- Appraisals, development and progression at PwC;
- PwC's culture and values.

Specifically, the research with future employees explored:

- Young people's hopes and aspirations regarding careers;
- Career and education decision-making;
- Levels of awareness and perceptions of PwC, including levers and barriers to applying to PwC.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To address these objectives, we conducted an innovative, iterative process of insight generation and co-creation with the two audiences, comprising three key stages:

	PHASE 1	**PHASE 2**	**PHASE 3**
NEW JOINERS	**CAPTURING EXPERIENCES** Online diary exercise and community activities	**EMPOWERING PARTICIPANTS** Online workshop to build ownership of key insights	**CO-CREATION** 1-day workshop to feed back insight from future employees strand and reconvene new joiners to work alongside PwC executives to develop new ideas
FUTURE EMPLOYEES	**CAPTURING EXPERIENCES** Activities on online platform		

PHASE 1:

NEW JOINERS

To understand the experience of new joiners starting out at PwC, we took an online, diary-led approach, achieved by bringing all new joiners onto Recollective, a dedicated online platform which offered a neutral and anonymised space in which new joiners privately recorded their experiences as they embarked on their career at PwC.

This approach enabled us to explore new joiners' individual views, experiences, hopes, aspirations and frustrations in detail without risk of judgement. It also provided flexibility for new joiners to complete tasks at times which suited them and in whatever format they preferred (e.g., the platform offered the capability for uploading a video response, rather than a written response).

We used simple, structured questionnaires to capture both 'hard' system/process-related factors, and 'softer' cultural factors that impacted their experience of settling in and developing in their role at PwC. We also encouraged new joiners to think about the extent to which they felt these experiences related to their background or identity. Thinks moderators were able to respond in real time to what was coming out of discussions, and ask new joiners to expand on certain answers through personalised prompts.

The platform was live for a total of 8 weeks between March 7th and May 5th 2023. During that time, new joiners completed a weekly journal task in which they reflected on their week, including anything they enjoyed and anything they found more challenging. In addition to the weekly journal task, new joiners completed a task each week which focused on a specific topic related to joining PwC. These were as follows:

1. Choosing PwC;
2. The application process;
3. Starting at PwC;
4. Working relationships at PwC;
5. The working environment;
6. Appraisals, development and progression; and
7. The organisation as a whole, including its culture and values.

Within each of these topics, new joiners had a list of specific questions to complete allowing for deep reflection on their experiences.

FUTURE EMPLOYEES

To understand the views and experiences of young people and those who influence them, we brought students and parents/guardians onto a separate online platform, which ran for a shorter period of 2 weeks between March 23rd and April 6th 2023. We selected an online platform approach as this tends to work particularly well with younger audiences who may feel less comfortable participating in a focus group setting, especially when it comes to discussing personal values and aspirations.

Through the online platform, we explored the extent to which this cohort are thinking about careers, what they are interested in, what (or who) influences their decision-making, and how they feel about working at an organisation like PwC, including barriers and levers, and the paths they feel they need to take to get there. For those currently taking or who have recently completed technical qualifications, we asked additional questions about their experiences of these routes.

Research has shown that parents are highly influential in young people's post-16 and post-18 decision-making in relation to education and careers. For this reason, we also heard from parents about how, if at all, they are engaging with their child on this topic – including whether they are having career-based conversations, how well these are going and what sort of information they are discussing with their child, including about roles in organisations like PwC.

PHASE 2:

Following Phase 1, we undertook early analysis to identify the key themes and insights emerging across the project.

We then conducted an online empowerment workshop with new joiners to validate the emerging themes and allow participants to take ownership of the insights that emerged from their online responses. This session was also used to brief new joiners on the final stage of the research (see below) so that they felt suitably prepared for this and able to engage confidently with senior leaders.

PHASE 3:

The research programme culminated in a full-day, in-person co-creation workshop with senior leaders within PwC. This began with a presentation of the key findings from our research with future employees in order to bring their point of view to life and to allow for the discussion of implications and potential solutions to some of the barriers they experienced to applying to PwC.

For the second half of the workshop, we reconvened the majority of the new joiners who took part in Phases 1 and 2 to work with senior leaders to think through the key challenges identified and develop practical ideas for the business to take forward that could tackle some of the issues raised.

The session was carefully designed so as to foster collaboration and openness amongst all participants, with an agenda focussed on idea generation and innovation. To address this, in addition to the online empowerment workshop in Phase 2, we:

- Shared a pre-read with senior leaders attending the co-creation session so they were familiar with key themes before coming into the room;

- Delivered a briefing session to help leaders think about how to get the most out of their junior colleagues;

- Provided expert small group facilitation on the day, to ensure a positive, collaborative and constructive discussion that focussed on ideas and potential improvements.

AUDIENCE FOR THE RESEARCH

NEW JOINERS

To find new joiners from lower socioeconomic background to take part in the research, PwC promoted the research internally via various networks. Interested new joiners submitted a form registering their interest and Thinks then contacted those selected to take part (on the basis of demographic information and qualifying as being from a lower socioeconomic background).

Given the intersectional nature of disadvantage, we ensured that the sample was varied in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability and neurodiversity and sexuality. New joiners also represented different lines of service and were from a range of PwC offices across the UK. In line with the Social Mobility Commission's recommended measurement for social mobility, socioeconomic background was measured based on the occupation of new joiners' main household earner when they were aged 14. A full breakdown of the final sample can be found in the appendix of this report.

In total, 19 new joiners from across the business completed the online research (Phase 1), 14 of whom attended the co-creation workshop with senior leaders (Phase 3).

FUTURE EMPLOYEES

We used our specialist network of free find recruiters based across the UK to find 35 young people and parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

This included:

- 15 students in Year 11, 12 or 13;

- 10 students completing either a technical qualification or a degree-level qualification after taking a technical qualification;

- 10 parents and guardians (of whom 5 had a child also taking part in the research).

As above, socioeconomic background was measured based on the occupation of new joiners' main household earner when they were aged 14. The sample was varied in terms of gender, ethnicity and neurodiversity, with representation of young people from single parent households within this. Future employees were based across the UK, including in the Devolved Nations, and around half of the sample were recruited from areas identified as social mobility coldspots by the Social Mobility Commission. They were also recruited to have varied attitudes towards education in terms of confidence in their educational attainment. A full breakdown of the final sample can be found in the appendix of this report.

Participants from the co-creation workshop.

A NOTE ON THIS REPORT

We have structured this report according to the journey that individuals may take, from starting to think about potential paths for their future, through to working at PwC.

- We begin by outlining views and perceptions prior to joining PwC, both around decision-making related to education and careers more broadly and awareness and perceptions of PwC at this early stage.

- We then move on to covering insight generated through the new joiner research specifically, including their experiences of applying for a role at PwC, getting onboarded, and their first few weeks at the firm.

- This is followed by a deep dive into specific elements of working at PwC, including their experiences of working relationships, the working environment, appraisals, development and progression, and PwC's culture and values more broadly.

- Finally, we end this report by outlining some of the potential improvements discussed as part of the co-creation workshop.

Due to the qualitative nature of this work, the findings throughout this report are indicative only and should not be interpreted as representative of the wider population of individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

On this note, this particular programme of research did not include participants (both future employees and new joiners) *not* from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which means there is no comparator data for this audience. However, throughout this report we have tried to pull out views and experiences that feel distinctly related to socioeconomic background. This is based on our direct questioning of participants, as well as triangulation with findings from other research we have conducted on this topic.

Throughout the report, where we have included individual case studies, names have been changed to protect participant anonymity.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Below, we have outlined the key themes that have emerged at each stage of prospective and current employees' 'journey' of considering or applying for a role at, and joining PwC (reflecting the structure of the report). Overall, it is clear that some of the challenges that have been surfaced in this research could affect all prospective and new employees, but are particularly acute for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

This is particularly the case against the current backdrop of the rising cost of living; for example, prospective employees are looking for secure and stable jobs, whilst new employees may be balancing their desire to live near the office with the higher cost of accommodation in city centres. A vicious cycle emerges where people worry they are less 'visible' and able to network face-to-face when compared to some of their peers, which they feel risks setting them back.

BEFORE JOINING PwC

- **Research with future employees shows that young people feel uncertain about their futures**, with fears about the current economic context and a potential recession further raising anxiety levels.

  □ This is causing young people to place significant importance on stability and security in the current climate, and is particularly true of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds due to a lack of financial resilience.

  □ It is also causing them to focus more on short- than long-term decision making, and decision-making about careers overall tends to feel distant and opaque to young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

- In this context, and that of low levels of awareness about the types of roles that might be available to them, **young people rely heavily on parents and other family members to inform and guide career decisions**.

  □ These informal influencers are typically drawing heavily on their own experiences of education and work, which may be limiting the options young people see as available to them, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds specifically.

- **Awareness and understanding of PwC as a potential employer among young people is relatively low (though this is in line with awareness and understanding of other corporate brands)**, and any consideration of PwC as a place to work is often drawn heavily from assumptions and impressions of the wider sector.

  □ For those who are aware of the firm, while PwC's level of prestige makes it an attractive place to work, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can feel concerned they may not fit the 'mould' of the type of person they assume works at PwC, acting as a barrier to applying.

  □ PwC's early careers website currently has mixed success in addressing these barriers and misconceptions.

APPLYING FOR A ROLE AT PwC

- **New joiners tend to view the firm's application process as more progressive and inclusive** than other organisations because it is seen to be more focused on how candidates think and their approach to work, rather than being heavily focused on previous experience and qualifications.

  □ However, the process of applying to PwC can still be stressful and difficult at times. Key reasons for this include a perceived lack of clear rationale behind different elements of

the application process, and a perceived lack of information at some stages of the journey.

▫ Whilst these challenges are felt to be true of all new joiners, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel these have a particularly pronounced impact on them over other candidates. This is because they may have both greater pressures on their time (e.g., because they are having to work to support themselves while they apply for jobs, rather than focusing exclusively on applications) and fewer sources of support to guide them through the process (such as family and friends).

GETTING STARTED AT PwC

■ Whilst new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds describe feeling excited upon receiving their job offer from PwC, this is typically coupled with feelings of **nervousness about whether they will fit in at PwC** as a result of their starting assumptions of the organisation and its people, and their experiences of the application process.

▫ The onboarding process is largely working well to address this nervousness, with new joiners typically feeling supported throughout and that they receive clear information, though a minority report less positive experiences where they feel they were given conflicting information.

■ Some new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds **face more practical challenges and find their financial resilience to be tested during the job offer and onboarding stage** as a result of their financial circumstances and precarity.

▫ This includes having relatively limited resources to prepare for starting their role at PwC, such as support with accommodation costs.

▫ Some were also faced with uncertainty around their job offer, such as not receiving a job offer initially and then being re-contacted with an offer, or job offers containing incorrect details.

■ On arriving at PwC, **new joiners often find their first few weeks at the firm relatively overwhelming**, specifically in terms of meeting

lots of people at once, having to take in a lot of information, completing lots of paperwork and having to start revising for exams very early on.

▫ Having few colleagues who they perceive to be from similar backgrounds can add to the pressure and overwhelming nature of joining the firm, as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have less opportunities to share experiences and have to make efforts to 'fit into' the culture.

LIFE AT PwC

PEOPLE AND PLACES AT PwC

■ Most new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel they have positive relationships with their colleagues **– describing them as supportive and approachable** – challenging their starting assumptions of the people and culture at PwC.

▫ However, a minority feel more isolated and excluded, particularly from their peers, due to affinity bias – for example, feeling excluded from conversations about luxury holidays or purchases due to their background and financial circumstances.

▫ Some also struggle with the emphasis they feel PwC places on networking, especially when networking with senior colleagues, who tend to be very busy. This is felt to be intensified for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who feel they may be less confident in and prepared for networking compared to their peers.

■ **New joiners' experiences of places at PwC and the working environments at PwC are also relatively positive**, though again there are some specific challenges that are exacerbated for new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in particular.

▫ These new joiners tend to appreciate the flexibility to work from home, particularly given concerns about commuting costs and that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may feel less able to afford to rent property

near PwC's offices. However, some express anxiety around having a poor set-up when working from home and share concerns around appearing unprofessional (e.g., because they are more likely to be living with family, or in smaller homes).

▫ They also feel largely positive about PwC's offices, which are felt to offer a positive, inclusive working environment. The exception is PwC's London offices, which are felt to have a more formal and competitive atmosphere, leaving new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds more likely to feel out of place.

APPRAISALS, DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESSION AT PwC

■ New joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to feel that, overall, progression pathways are clear and that they know, in theory, what they need to do to progress at PwC. However, **in practice, some feel there are certain barriers that make progression at PwC more challenging** – some of which they feel are specifically related to or exacerbated by their socioeconomic background.

▫ In particular, factors such as ability to network effectively, ask and chase for feedback, and pass exams are felt to be essential to progression at PwC, yet many from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel they lack the same confidence and experience in these areas compared to their peers.

▫ This is further exacerbated by the sense that resourcing can feel distant and opaque, with limited control over what new joiners work on. For this reason, it can feel difficult to meet performance goals, as new joiners do not necessarily feel they are getting the opportunities or exposure they need in order to progress – for instance, not being put onto enough projects, or not being put on certain types of projects.

▫ At the same time, for these new joiners, the impact of not progressing and the potential of being dismissed – something that is felt to be very real to those sitting exams – is particularly concerning given their lesser financial resilience.

CULTURE AND VALUES AT PwC

■ **New joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel largely positive about the culture and values at PwC and the majority feel these values are lived out in practice at the firm**. Of its core values, they tend to feel that PwC does live out its value of inclusion and diversity strongly.

▫ Staff are seen to be from a range of different backgrounds and diversity is felt to be actively celebrated.

▫ However, this is largely felt to be concentrated at the junior levels of the company and there is appetite for stronger gender, disability, ethnicity and socioeconomic representation in more senior positions.

▫ In addition, in terms of social mobility specifically, while many new joiners are aware of PwC's commitment to this, they typically have less clarity about what this looks like in practice compared to other areas of PwC's work on diversity

■ New joiners' **awareness of some key initiatives related to culture and values at PwC, such as the People Networks – including the Social Mobility Network – is relatively mixed**, with most in the sample for this research unaware of the Social Mobility Network. Those who are a member of at least one People Network largely share positive perceptions of these.

▫ New joiners do however feel more could be done to address regional disparities in the networks, as they currently feel London-centric – which can be particularly difficult for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may not be able to afford to travel there themselves and share uncertainty around whether this can be expensed.

BEFORE JOINING PwC

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS CHAPTER:

- Research with the future employees cohort suggests that young people feel uncertain about their futures, with fears about the current economic context and a potential recession further raising anxiety levels. This is causing young people to value stability and security more than usual, and this is particularly true of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds due to a lack of financial resilience.

- Decision-making about careers feels opaque and distant to young people, largely due to a lack of awareness of the types of roles available to young people, particularly in the professional services sector, but also because of a tendency to focus more on the short- than the long-term.

- Young people rely heavily on parents and other family members to inform and guide career decisions. These informal influencers are in turn drawing heavily on their own experiences of education and work, which may be limiting the options young people see as available to them, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

- Awareness of PwC among young people is relatively low (though this is in line with awareness and understanding of other corporate brands), and any consideration of PwC as a place to work is often drawn heavily from assumptions and impressions. For those who are aware of the firm, while PwC's level of prestige makes it an attractive place to work, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can feel concerned they may not fit the 'mould' of the type of person they assume who works at PwC, acting as a barrier to applying. PwC's early careers website currently has mixed success in addressing these barriers and misconceptions for young people.

The findings in this chapter are largely based on research with future employees, but findings from new joiners have been included where relevant.

HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Young people in this research often feel uncertain about their futures, with the rise in cost of living and fears about the potential of a recession raising anxiety levels. These wider contextual factors cause young people to feel the job market is becoming increasingly competitive, something which is being reinforced when discussing the topic with friends and relatives, and by media coverage.

These widely prevalent concerns about the job market becoming increasingly competitive, as well as a broader sense of uncertainty and instability created by factors such as the pandemic and political shifts, is resulting in an increased importance placed on job stability and security for young people. It is also discouraging young people from taking risks and from focusing on jobs and careers they might enjoy.

Importantly, this is heightened for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are financially less resilient and may be unable to rely on parental income – even in the short term – reducing their ability and willingness to take risks.

These broader challenges are also impacting how far young people in this research are thinking ahead and planning for the future, with many young people focusing on the here and now, and finding it overwhelming to look much further into the future than beyond the next 12 months. It is also causing them to focus heavily on education (rather than careers, which feel further ahead), and to feel significant pressure around their academic performance and achievement.

"It's important for me that I achieve a great grade within my university degree as it will help me to achieve high-paying and satisfactory jobs in my adulthood. I interpret a bad grade as a 2:2 or below in my computer science course degree and I am aiming to achieve a 1st class, which would be a great relief."
Future employee, male, university student

"How well I do in my degree (what grade I get) and also the experience I have so far [are important to me]. I also need to make sure I do the best I can to get what I want in the future."
Future employee, male, university student

Parents in this research echo these concerns and are conscious of the pressures they feel young people are under, including those related to the impact of the pandemic, the rise in cost of living, and a potential recession. This often leads parents to feel reluctant to be seen to place any more pressure on their children when it comes to education and careers, and place a stronger focus on supporting their children and protecting their mental health.

"I am concerned at the amount of jobs and opportunities available to young people nowadays. I am also concerned at how the cost of living has increased so much."
Parent, female

Despite these concerns and perceived challenges, young people do still tend to feel ambitious and strive for professional success, which is often described as financial stability and security. However, while security is highly valued by young people, most feel it is important this does not come at the expense of their physical and mental health, and their relationships.

"My top priorities currently are achieving the best possible grades in my upcoming A-level exams and personal growth. I also hope to make the most of and enjoy my final year of playing rugby as an under-18."
Future employee, male, secondary school

MAKING EDUCATION AND CAREER DECISIONS

While young people in this research tend to have a vague idea of what they might want to do once they finish education, there is often a real lack of clarity of the specific types of jobs and careers they might do once they graduate from school, college or university. Their vague idea of what they might want to do is often limited to high-level areas and sectors they might like to work in or the type of working environment or salary they are aiming for, rather than specific roles and careers.

This lack of clarity is driven seemingly at least in part by a lack of awareness of the jobs that are available – particularly in sectors such as professional services – including the practicalities of each role and the types of roles that best suit different skillsets. Unsurprisingly, those at school or college and those with little to no working experience, tend to be least clear on the roles that might be available to them, while those studying technical qualifications or at university might have slightly higher levels of awareness.

As a result, young people tend to make education decisions without a clear end goal or career focus. Rather, young people tend to make education decisions based on broader factors such as enjoyment, attainment and options they *think* are likely to lead to better job prospects (e.g., because they assume they are attractive to employers). As such, many young people feel unsure about their current path and whether it is the right one for them.

"I found choosing my subjects for school very hard, as I am quite indecisive at times. However, I thought about the lessons I enjoy the most, the lessons that I want to carry on with, and the subjects that I knew I could excel in the most."
Future employee, female, secondary school

This is also the case for those studying technical qualifications, who tend to feel that the practical, hands-on nature of these types of qualifications better suits their skills and learning styles than the academic alternative, rather than having been driven to take a technical route by a career focus. On prompting, only minorities of those studying technical qualifications in this research wanted to go into a related field to their course, with most unsure and open to the type of role and career they want to take.

"I think that taking a BTEC is a lot easier then taking an essay based subject such as sociology as it allows me more time to complete tasks. However, it also includes certain aspects which I do not enjoy which would include the fact that it takes so much time to complete certain tasks, and it is also very hard to balance multiple BTECs at one time as there is so much coursework and time that needs to go into it."
Future employee, female, secondary school

Views about higher education and university are mixed among young people at present. On the one hand, university degrees are often associated with greater job security and stability on completing education than technical or vocational routes, which can feel less tried and tested and therefore higher risk, or less prestigious and widely recognised. On the other, the rise in cost of living and perceived risk of

a recession is raising concerns about the affordability of university fees and the related costs.

This latter concern is particularly pronounced among young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who feel that their (and their parents') financial situation makes it harder for them to both take on, and feel confident paying off, the debt associated with student loans. Several of those currently at university in this research raised significant concerns about paying off the debt they are in, with some expressing a sense of regret around choosing to go to university. For some, this is exacerbated by a perceived lack of clarity as to how their university course will help them to secure a stable job.

"Another difficult part of uni is being in a financial suitable position as often I find myself not having enough money and I worry about paying off the loans."
Future employee, male, university

INFORMING EDUCATION AND CAREER DECISIONS

In the context of significant uncertainty and low awareness about their career options, future employees tend to turn to three key sources of support and guidance to inform decisions about their future: parents and family members, teachers and career advisors, and online resources.

PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

Young people in this research often rely heavily on their parents and other family members to guide their early career decisions, and many report having frequent conversations about this. While these are often regarded as useful and productive, some parents allude to challenging conversations leading to disagreement over the path their child wants to pursue, while future employees sometimes feel 'pushed' into certain areas and roles by their parents.

"My parents and carers are verbally supportive. They do not offer me anything material, but they do verbally support me on my decisions. I don't really like speaking to my parents because they rarely offer 'real' opinions, they only give me support that they 'have' to give and it can be outdated."
Future employee, male, university

Importantly, the advice and information shared by parents is often guided by parents' personal experiences. However, these may be limited, by nature, to certain types of jobs and careers among those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds specifically. Following in their parents' footsteps is also often seen as a safe and familiar option in an uncertain job market and among an audience with a low-risk appetite and limited financial resilience.

Those aiming for education or career paths that differ from their parents' (for example, being the first family member to go to university, or choosing a career path that differs from their parents') can face significant challenges. This includes

challenges in understanding the right pathways to certain careers and obtaining first-hand advice and guidance on the skills employers in a certain field are looking for. These challenges are particularly prevalent amongst those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, causing them to turn to other sources of support.

TEACHERS AND CAREER ADVISORS

Young people also often rely on teachers and careers teams at their school, college or other education provider to provide advice and support in relation to education and career decisions. They are *largely* seen as having expert knowledge about the education and early careers system, and able to provide advice on the best routes to certain courses and jobs.

"At my school, there is a whole department that specialises in talking about the future/ careers and I think that they are interesting people to talk to when I'm trying to see what career path I want to choose."
Future employee, female, secondary school

However, some future employees and most parents feel their children's education providers – particularly schools and colleges – provide insufficient career support and could do more to support young people. Examples of desired support include helping young people draft CVs and personal statements, or having one-to-one sessions to help identify the right career paths for their child.

ONLINE RESOURCES

A smaller proportion of young people reference looking elsewhere for information and guidance on education and early career options.

This includes searching on social media sites (such as YouTube, TikTok and LinkedIn), listening to podcasts (such as Diary of a CEO or TED Talks), and visiting university and company career websites.

"Speaking to successful industry professionals [would help me make the 'right' career choice]. I currently look on LinkedIn and listen to podcasts like the Diary of a CEO."
Future employee, male, secondary school

FACTORS YOUNG PEOPLE VALUE MOST IN JOBS AND CAREERS

There are two key factors young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds value almost unanimously when choosing a role or career:

- **Salary** – having a secure and stable income where they feel financially resilient and are not struggling to pay for bills (in a way that they may have seen their parents have to do, and in the context that they often feel they lack a sense of financial resilience or a safety net at present).
- **Work-life balance** – a healthy work-life balance which allows them space for activities and relationships outside of work, and which allows them to protect and prioritise their wellbeing and mental health.

"It's very important to me that my job pays me well enough to live comfortably and not have to worry about bills. I do not need a lot of money, I just need enough to satisfy the demands of life as I do not have any high hopes or ambitions to do anything which requires large capital. I prefer experiences and having a relaxed life over stressors."
Future employee, male, university student

Beyond these two key motivating criteria, young people in this research also say they look for a range of other features when choosing a suitable role or career:

- **Interesting work** – in a field that is interesting to them and in a role that gives them variety.
- **Working culture and environment** – working for an employer that values its people and is a pleasant place to work.
- **Flexible working patterns** – including an ability to work from home or remotely. This flexibility is often linked to work-life balance.
- **Opportunities to develop and progress.**

"I think that it doesn't matter if you work in a large or small company, it matters about the people who work there and the work-life balance, because if you have unsupportive colleagues or unhealthy work-life balance, it could lead to you not liking your job and being unsatisfied."
Future employee, female, secondary school student

AWARENESS AND PERCEPTIONS OF PwC

Awareness of PwC as an employer is low, and in line with other professional services firms such as KPMG. Around 1 in 5 future employees and 1 in 10 parents in the sample for this research claimed to know a great deal or a fair amount about the organisation. Those with higher claimed levels of awareness tended to be male.

Most new joiners first found out about PwC at university by attending careers events, from conversations with other students, or when searching for internships and graduate roles. A minority also mentioned hearing about PwC as a professional services employer from the careers team at their school or college.

"I first heard about PwC when I was in my final year of university where I noticed them at the university stalls discussing the company. I had heard that PwC was one of the big four companies and a place where a future job would stand great in your career aspirations."
New joiner

A very small number of young people in the sample described knowing a friend or relative who works or has worked at the firm. This broadly comes with positive associations, with the colleague often recalling positive experiences about their time working at PwC.

Based on their relatively limited levels of knowledge, there are a range of associations future employees have with PwC as an organisation, many of which are conflated with the Big 4 and professional services more broadly:

ASSOCIATIONS WITH PWC

PRESTIGIOUS   PROFESSIONAL   COMPETITIVE

HIGH-QUALITY   SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS

EARLY CAREERS

DEMANDING   LONG HOURS

PROGRESSION

BIG 4   OPPORTUNITIES

"I know PwC has a reputation for being a highly respected and prestigious firm within the professional services industry."
Future employee, male, secondary school student

"I think I would be given long work hours and be worked and stretched."
Future employee, female, secondary school student

Associations with PwC as an organisation align closely with assumptions about the type of person who works at PwC, and are again often conflated with broader associations with the Big 4 and professional services:

ASSOCIATIONS WITH THE TYPE OF PERSON THAT WORKS AT PWC

CORPORATE   PROFESSIONAL   SUITS

HARD-WORKING

UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

STEM

WELL-PAID   UPPER/MIDDLE CLASS

BRIGHT

FINANCE

DRIVEN

"University educated typically, because I think most corporate jobs require a degree and normally a 2:1."
Future employee, female, secondary school student

"The people I associated with these companies are highly intelligent, focused and high-income individuals."
Future employee, male, at university

ACROSS THESE ASSOCIATIONS, THERE ARE THREE PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT COMMON THEMES:

- **Challenging** – future employees see PwC as a challenging place to work where employees work long hours (potentially without much flexibility) in a highly competitive environment. However, this is also expected to come with significant benefits such as having good progression and learning opportunities, feeling stretched and challenged, and relatively high pay.

- **Corporate** – PwC's culture and working environment is assumed to be corporate and professional, for example where employees wear suits and are relatively formal with one another. This can raise concerns around fit and suitability amongst those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

- **Exclusive** – future employees see PwC as exclusive when it comes to its recruitment of employees. Its people are assumed to be upper/middle class, university graduates, and those who study STEM subjects. This causes many to feel PwC is not the right employer for them.

On balance, some future employees would aspire to work at an organisation like PwC given its prestige and the perceived learning opportunities on offer, with parents being particularly likely to encourage their children to apply for a role. However, some future employees would not even consider applying as they do not feel they fit the PwC 'mould' and would have a minimal chance of succeeding in the
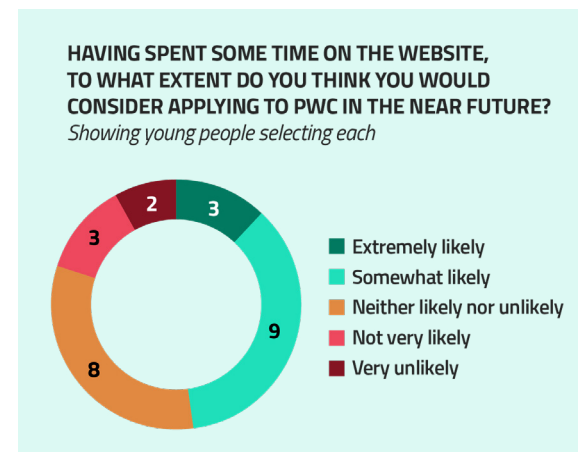
application process. New joiners echo these perceptions, often being attracted to PwC by opportunities to progress and develop, but also describing feeling concerned about whether they would fit in and were what PwC was looking for until they learnt more about PwC as an employer.

A minority of future employees describe feeling put off by the perceived competitiveness at PwC, which they feel may create a 'toxic' culture where employees work extremely long hours in an unsupportive environment. Interestingly, while new joiners shared this same perception about PwC's work-life balance and culture prior to joining, most were surprised to find this is a misconception, and that the work-life balance is manageable, the culture supportive, and the people caring. Future employees were also surprised by the flexibility on offer at PwC, which they had not anticipated to be the case.

VIEWS ON PwC'S EARLY CAREERS WEBSITE

As part of this research, future employees and parents spent some time on the early careers website to learn more about the organisation and the roles that are available.

On engaging with the careers website, PwC's focus on inclusion and diversity is highlighted as a lever to applying, and something that few had previously associated with PwC. This can help allay initial concerns about the organisation's perceived culture and assumptions about the type of person who works at PwC.

HAVING SPENT SOME TIME ON THE WEBSITE, TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU THINK YOU WOULD CONSIDER APPLYING TO PWC IN THE NEAR FUTURE?
Showing young people selecting each

- Extremely likely — 3
- Somewhat likely — 9
- Neither likely nor unlikely — 8
- Not very likely — 3
- Very unlikely — 2

"Their commitment to diversity and inclusion within the company is attractive."
Future employee, male, secondary school student

Young people also highlight the associated social media content as being particularly insightful and demystifying what jobs at PwC look like in practice on a day-to-day level. Having people from different backgrounds also helps make PwC seem a diverse and welcoming organisation, often more so than they would have expected.

"I think that the social media content is very good, especially on Instagram, as they include links, photos and videos to show what it's really like for example 'a day in a life'. I think that the website is also very as good, however, it has more written detail than the Instagram posts in my opinion."
Future employee, female, at secondary school

"From the Instagram page it seems a friendlier place to work. I was also pleasantly surprised that they have removed the 2:1 degree requirement which improves my perception of PwC."
Future employee, female, at secondary school

Parents are particularly complimentary of the early careers site, highlighting the career and progression opportunities at PwC, and most feel they would encourage their child to apply as a result. Parents also often pick up on key details about eligibility criteria from the site and are pleasantly surprised to see that a university degree is not needed to apply to PwC.

"I think PwC offers great opportunities and career progression, a good social scene, and good benefits."
Parent, male

Overall, exposure to the site has mixed impacts on claimed likelihood of applying to PwC, with around half of young people in this research feeling it would not make them any more likely to apply. In some cases, this is simply because they are not attracted to the type of roles on offer, but for the most part, this is because they still feel unclear about the work PwC does and the roles on offer, feeling the information on the website is not accessible or easy to digest. This can reinforce the idea that a role at PwC is out of reach for someone from their background.

"I think there is maybe too much text and it could have less words and some of the language is a little difficult, like social mobility. I would not really know what this meant. Maybe use language that is easier."
Future employee, male, at secondary school

Some who are at school or college also feel that the website is geared more towards university graduates, and there is little information on school leavers and their routes to PwC, creating doubt over whether it is really true that you do not require a university degree in order to apply to PwC.

"My first thought is that there is a lot of information on the website and social media pages and it's a lot to take in. I'm not really sure how this all ties in with leaving school and starting college."
Future employee, male, at secondary school

When asked to design their own advert for PwC highlighting what future employees think other young people would want to know about working at PwC, some consistent themes emerge around emphasising:

- Salary, which is presumed to be high;
- The range of roles on offer;
- The diverse and inclusive culture;
- That roles are available to school leavers, undergraduates and graduates (with no 2:1 degree needed);
- Wider employment benefits.

Issue №3

Working at PwC

Opportunities for everyone regardless of education background:
- School leaver roles
- Flying start degree
- No criteria for a 2:1
- Graduate placements

— **Core benefits**
- Private Medical
- Life assurance
- Income Protection
- Personal accident

— **Inclusion**
Various inclusion networks including a black network and a gender balance network.

Business areas
- Actuarial
- Audit
- Business Solutions
- Consulting
- Deals
- Legal
- Operate
- Risk
- Tax
- Tech

Application process
- Recruit on a rolling basis
- Dependent on the role and business area
- Various rounds to pass, can include: assessments, video interviews and going to an assessment centre
- May need a specific degree eg economic consulting requires an economics degree

PwC UK

General enquiries, PwC United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)20 7583 5000

What we offer
We offer a variety of programmes for School and College Leavers, undergraduates and graduates to start creating their careers with PwC. We focus on your skills and passions, not just your degree and education. With our diverse range of businesses and variety of work you'll easily find your perfect role.

Events
→ Virtual Park
→ In person events
→ PwC Virtual events
→ PwC's Virtual Classroom
→ In person office events
→ Employability Hub

What we are looking for
All routes offer you the same deal. The opportunity to grow as an individual, to meet new people, and build lasting relationships that will stay with you for life. In return we need people who are resilient, willing to work hard, are quick to learn, and who, above all, are passionate about going the extra mile to help our clients.

Register Now
+44 (0)20 7583 5000

Find Us
https://www.pwc.co.uk/

APPLYING FOR A ROLE AT PwC

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS CHAPTER:

- PwC's application process is largely viewed as more progressive and inclusive than other organisations' because it is seen to be more focused on how candidates think and their approach to work, rather than being heavily focused on previous experience and qualifications.

- However, many new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds find the process of applying to PwC stressful and difficult at times due to a perceived lack of clear rationale behind different elements of the application process, and a perceived lack of clarity or information.

- Whilst these challenges are felt to be true of all new joiners at PwC, new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel these have a particularly pronounced impact on them over other candidates because they may have greater pressures on their time (e.g., due to the need to work to support themselves) and have fewer sources of support with the process (e.g., not knowing anyone with relevant experience).

**This chapter is based entirely on findings from new joiners.**

As part of the research, new joiners reflected on the application process which led to them being offered a role at PwC. Matching future employees' and new joiners' perceptions of the firm before joining, PwC's application process is seen as highly competitive. However, for those who also applied at other organisations (or had knowledge of what other application processes look like), PwC's application process is largely regarded as more progressive and inclusive. New joiners feel that PwC places more focus on their personality and how they think, rather than their past experience. This is seen as a positive as it is felt to open up opportunities to candidates from a wider range of backgrounds.

"[The application process] looked at you more as a person rather than what qualifications you had, what grade you had, what skills you had, what you've done in the past. It was more about you right there and then and what your abilities are, which I feel is really important."
New joiner

Despite positivity about this element of the application process (particularly in comparison to those of other organisations), overall, many new joiners say they found the process stressful and difficult at times. Challenges identified largely centre around two key themes:

RATIONALE BEHIND ELEMENTS OF THE APPLICATION PROCESS:

Some elements of the application process are felt to be vague and unclear in terms of how to succeed. One example of this – which is raised by the majority of new joiners – is that 'game' elements of the process can feel particularly opaque, with little instruction on what these tests are looking for. Many new joiners also feel that it is not clear how the tests relate to the role they are applying for.
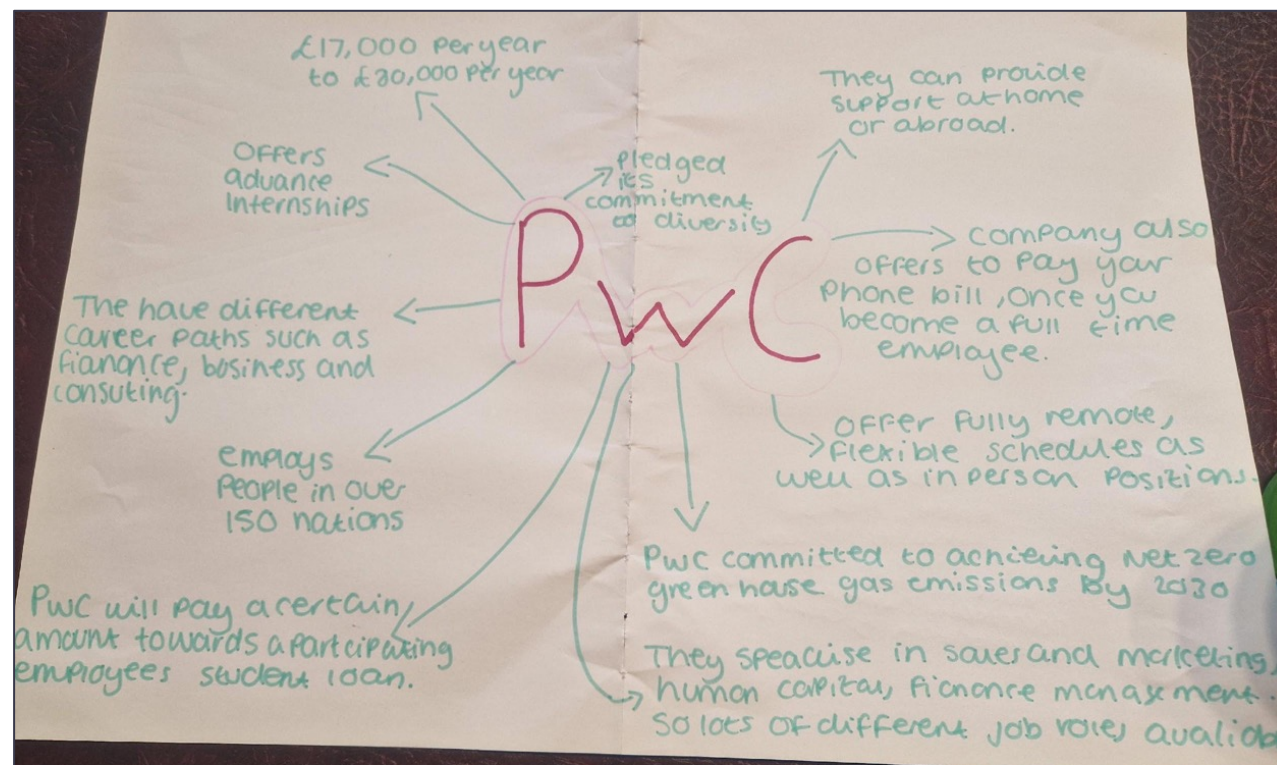
LACK OF CLARITY THROUGHOUT THE APPLICATION PROCESS:

Some new joiners commented on the length of time their PwC application took, from beginning the process to receiving their offer. They feel that timelines weren't always clear and that the process seemed very long. Additionally, new joiners feel it wasn't always clear who to contact with questions – and that even when they did manage to speak to someone, this was likely a member of the recruitment team who was unable to answer questions about the role itself.

"The hardest part was the initial 'game' that you have to play in order to pass the first phase. It seemed odd, and unlike other application processes, and a strange and vague way to decide whether you are worthy or not […] I think the purpose was not about the score, but the 'approach' taken to the tasks. However, it was very opaque."

Having spoken to other new joiners since starting at PwC, new joiners do not necessarily feel that these experiences and concerns are exclusive to them as a result of their background, and most feel that these challenges are likely experienced by applicants across the board. However, importantly, many do feel that these challenges are, in some ways, exacerbated by their background:

- Finding the time to apply

  - Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds report that finding time for the assessment centres and application process more broadly can be challenging, as many new joiners in this situation are balancing this with full- or part-time work due to their financial situations (as well as with studies and other applications).

- Lacking guidance from family, friends and education providers

  - Having attended a school or college with limited (or even no) careers guidance is felt to put some new joiners at a significant disadvantage, as these individuals feel that they have had less access to practical support with applications (e.g., help preparing for video interviews and aptitude tests). New joiners also describe a sense that private and selective state schools are able to provide greater levels of support and preparation with these types of application processes, though some also relate this to geography (e.g., schools in deprived areas being less able to provide support).

  - Additionally, many feel their family and friends, who are often a key source of support, could offer little support due to their own lack of experience completing application processes like this.

"There could have been more opportunities to retake the video interview as I found it was quite hard to complete the videos in one take as I have not had any experience in completing a video interview. I felt that others may have succeeded in this as they may have had some sort of training in college or high school."
New joiner

"The [lack of] face-to-face help and guidance which was available [was a barrier], as my parents did not have experience in an office setting and my school encouraged students to apply to university."
New joiner

"In terms of barriers, I felt a bit unconfident at first applying for the scheme given my lower socioeconomic background and the way I speak, but these were more mental barriers I imposed on myself rather than any actual barriers caused by the process."
New joiner

"I found I was kind of 'chucked in the deep end' with applications. I had done job applications for part-time and casual jobs but never a 'professional' job. I felt like there was little guidance for people like me who had no relatives or contacts in a similar field. Most of the time I felt like I was winging it."
New joiner

GETTING STARTED AT PwC

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS CHAPTER:

- While most new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds describe feeling excited upon receiving their job offer from PwC, some still feel nervous at this stage about whether they will fit in at PwC as a result of their starting assumptions and impression about the company, and their experiences of the application process (see previous chapters).

- The onboarding process is smooth for the majority of new joiners, who tend to feel supported throughout and that they receive clear information from PwC. However, a minority report less positive experiences where they were given conflicting information, or a sense of uncertainty around their job offer (e.g., being told that a position was only available for them if another candidate declined their offer).

- Many new joiners found their first few weeks at the firm relatively overwhelming, specifically in terms of meeting lots of people at once, having to take in a lot of information, completing lots of paperwork and having to start revising for exams very early on.

- Similar to the application process, while new joiners feel challenges are universal, some feel elements of their background make these challenges especially pronounced. This is particularly true of challenges around job offers at the onboarding stage, with the precarity of these new joiners' financial circumstances meaning that certainty and financial security is particularly important to them.

This chapter is based entirely on findings from new joiners.

THE ONBOARDING PROCESS

Upon receiving their job offer, most new joiners describe feeling strong levels of excitement and pride – particularly given the perceived competitiveness of the application process. However, some also say they felt surprised to find out about their offer (especially those who had had more negative experiences at assessment centres), and nervous about starting a new job and fitting in at PwC. This is particularly the case for new joiners who previously had concerns about PwC being for someone 'like them' due to perceptions of the firm.

Recollections about the onboarding process are generally positive, with most new joiners saying they felt supported throughout and received clear information about next steps (though some recall that there were, at times, lengthy delays in this process). New joiners generally feel that they knew who to contact if they had questions and found that the support they received was useful.

"I felt really supported ahead of starting. I really liked that I got a call from an onboarding person to communicate the offer, and that I had the same person's contact details and could ask her any questions I had. This was absolutely brilliant because it meant I had a person who already had all the background information on my situation and could answer any questions I had."
New joiner

In terms of the information they received in this period, some new joiners report feeling pleasantly surprised upon learning about the flexibility offered in working patterns and the importance placed on employee wellbeing.

However, some new joiners report having had less positive experiences with the onboarding process, with several sharing anecdotes about not receiving a job offer initially and then being re-contacted with an offer, initially heightening any concerns that they may not be a 'good fit' for the organisation, or job offers containing incorrect details. Some also report receiving conflicting information during this period, being told one thing in an email from recruitment and then something else in conversation with others, such as their future manager, as in the example below.

"We were told in an email that we [misinterpreted as meaning we] couldn't take any time off in our first six months, which was not true. I never received a proper graduation and was worried upon joining that I wouldn't be able to attend my Master's ceremony [...] It was something I had to argue with student recruitment over the phone, despite the managers in [my] office having no issues with it."
New joiner

Whilst these issues were rectified, new joiners who experienced them felt that they caused significant stress and anxiety at the time. Furthermore, new joiners feel these experiences are particularly stressful or impactful as a result of their background. With living expenses to cover and more limited means to do so, less flexibility in their finances, or less of a safety net (e.g., less prospect of parental support), any perceived delay is seen as less than ideal for this cohort.

"It took a while to receive my offer, then when I received it, [my impression was that] the offer was for the wrong office. It made me anxious as I needed to get a job fairly quickly to pay my rent."
New joiner

On reflection, new joiners recall feeling least financially resilient on joining the firm, which is further exacerbated by not receiving their first pay check until the end of the month. They can also feel unclear on what they are able to expense and what they are not – adding to the financial pressure of joining the organisation.

CASE STUDY: HAMISH

Hamish is based in PwC's Glasgow office. Despite getting through the application process and being told he had passed the final stage, he was then informed that all the positions had been offered to other candidates and that a position being offered to him was subject to someone else declining their offer. Whilst Hamish was relieved to finally receive his offer, this experience caused him significant anxiety, as he was concerned that he would not be offered a role and would struggle financially as a result.

"I had to wait I think 2 or 3 weeks [...] I was anxious as to whether or not I had the job."

THE FIRST FEW WEEKS

On reflection, the first days and weeks at PwC did feel relatively overwhelming for some new joiners, specifically in terms of:

- **The overall intensity of induction,** especially on new joiners' first days where they were going into the office for the first time and meeting lots of people at once.

- **Needing to take in lots of information**, particularly during their first few days at the firm.

- **Completing lots of paperwork**, which can feel tedious and overly bureaucratic at times – and new joiners do not always feel they knew who to contact if they had questions.

- **Having to begin revision for exams early on**, which can be particularly overwhelming when also trying to settle into working life, with some reporting that they had to do a lot of work out of hours as a result.

"[My first day] was quite overwhelming to be honest. To find myself in a room with 90 people on the 9th floor of a city building was very... interesting. I was comfortable throughout, and felt well looked after, but I think that was the moment when I realised just how big PwC is."
New joiner

"I am on a professional qualification path, so my first week involved revision. I was studying for a large majority of my time in the office [...] I was stressed because I do not come from a mathematical or financial background, so learning all of this information in a short space of time was daunting, but I managed to succeed and it was helpful to talk to fellow new joiners who were in the same boat."
New joiner

From conversations with colleagues, new joiners largely feel that these experiences are universal rather than specifically due to their background, and there is recognition that some of them are simply par for the course when working in a large professional services firm.

However, similar to experiences with the application process, some feel that these struggles may have been intensified due to their personal circumstances – for instance, having to wake up early and travel long distances to the office at first due to factors such as not being able to afford to move out of the family home at this early stage in their career.

"I was extremely nervous, especially because I was commuting from my family home at the time, so I had to leave at 5AM."
New joiner

"After your first week they send you away for classes which are all virtual. I don't live close to the office and I didn't have much money after the summer so I opted to complete my studies from home. This was quite weird as I didn't really feel a part of the company or really have any contact from PwC until coming back which was about 2/3 months after I joined."
**New joiner**

Some new joiners feel that more could have been done in advance to prepare them for this level of intensity before they started at PwC (for example letting them know what they could expect in their first few weeks) and to ensure that they were signposted to support upon their arrival.

"I just don't think I was fully aware of what I'd applied to, having not come from a background where any information is known about the big 4 or what accountants do."
New joiner

CASE STUDY: LUCY

Lucy works in the Glasgow office and commutes in from outside of the city. She worked for a few years before deciding to go to university, so when she started her graduate scheme at PwC, she was older than most of her cohort. She feels this sets her apart from other new joiners. She had some concerns about fitting in at PwC, as she felt there might not be many people from the same background as her. Lucy feels that as time has gone on, those fears have been confirmed. She feels she is the only person not from a Russell Group university, and some other new joiners have made passing comments about this. She had a negative experience on her induction day; she found it very overwhelming to meet so many new employees at once and because she couldn't afford to stay overnight, she missed out on socialising after the induction. PwC encouraged her to make use of their loan scheme to pay for things like this, but she didn't feel comfortable having a loan hanging over her head.
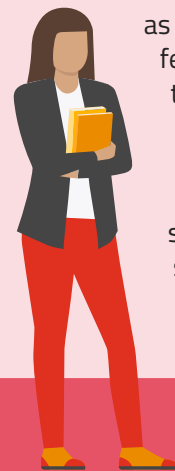
"In hindsight it was very obvious that a lot of people were not from my world and that made getting to know them difficult and the longer we have been here the more uncomfortable it has become."

LIFE AT PwC

The following section of this report focuses on the experiences of new joiners once they have settled into their role, grouped into three key themes:

- People and places, including views on working relationships and their working environment;

- Appraisals, development and progression;

- Culture and values.

PEOPLE AND PLACES

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS SUB-CHAPTER:

- Most new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel they have positive relationships with their colleagues, describing them as supportive and approachable. However, a minority feel more isolated and excluded, particularly from their peers, because of affinity bias, for example feeling excluded from conversations about luxury holidays or purchases.

- New joiners feel that PwC places great importance on networking, but can find this challenging in practice, especially when networking with senior colleagues who tend to be very busy. This is felt to be intensified for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who feel they may be less confident in networking compared to their peers.

- New joiners feel largely positive about PwC's offices, which are largely felt to offer a positive working environment and to feel inclusive. The exception is PwC's London offices, which are felt to have a more formal and competitive atmosphere, leaving some new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feeling out of place.

- New joiners tend to appreciate the flexibility to work at home, particularly given concerns about commuting costs and that they may feel less able to afford to rent property near PwC's offices. However, some express anxiety around having a poor set-up when working from home and share concerns around appearing unprofessional when they work from home.

This sub-chapter is based entirely on findings from new joiners.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH COLLEAGUES

Most new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel that overall, they have a positive relationship with their colleagues at PwC, describing them as supportive and approachable. This is particularly the case for relationships with colleagues at a similar level to them and within their project teams. New joiners particularly highlight compassion, empathy, and tolerance as the key traits in making a supportive colleague, which they largely feel is the case.

"I feel I fit into the team well, I have good rapport with my immediate colleagues, I feel respected by senior members of the team, and my contribution is highlighted positively."
New joiner

For those who feel they have less strong relationships with their colleagues, this is primarily down to factors outside individuals' control, rather than down to colleagues' personalities and behaviour. Examples include changing projects often and therefore struggling to form solid working relationships, as well as working with colleagues in offices other than their own a lot of the time, meaning they have fewer opportunities to connect face-to-face with their peers.

"I had joined a project and was the only employee from the Belfast office to be working on it… It made me isolated and I didn't have any office experience with anyone as I was not networking with my Belfast colleagues."
New joiner

However, when talking about their relationships with their peers, some new joiners discussed feeling isolated at times due to specific behaviours related to differences in background, and not being able to relate to them as a result. Conversations about expensive experiences and 'luxuries' (such as expensive holidays or expensive purchases) are seen to be relatively common, and can lead some new joiners to feel out of place.

"Sometimes it feels like I don't fit in simply because people are talking about their backgrounds and how they go skiing and they have all these luxuries around them. It's difficult to relate to it, but you can't stop someone from doing that."
New joiner

Some also report that during their time at PwC so far, they have been asked questions that have felt uncomfortable answering – for instance, one new joiner recalled conversations where they had been asked why they didn't have the latest smartphone, and why they took the bus to work rather than the tube (which was, in their case, to save money). This is something that can act as a barrier to forming strong relationships with peers.

"Sometimes I think that my background in terms of social and economic differences prevents me from forming relationships with people […] I haven't found anyone who has a similar experience or upbringing to me, so I can't form that connection with people outside that circle because that is 'alien' to me."
New joiner

CASE STUDY: AARON

Aaron works in one of the London offices. He generally gets on well with his co-workers. However, Aaron doesn't feel he has had much chance to network with people from a similar background. He recalls certain conversations with co-workers that have stuck in his mind. On his induction day, someone asked why he didn't have an iPhone, and Aaron can also remember occasions where a co-worker asked him why he gets the bus to work. He felt embarrassed and didn't want to say that this was due to financial reasons.

"Another conversation that happened with different colleagues is how I travelled to work. I usually come by bus but when I say this, some people ask why I don't take the tube instead, so I feel a bit embarrassed because the reason I take the bus is because it is cheaper."

NETWORKING AT PwC

New joiners feel that PwC places great importance on networking. However, many find this challenging in practice. A perceived disconnect between junior and senior colleagues, coupled with a perception that senior colleagues are extremely busy, means that new joiners often feel uncomfortable approaching their senior colleagues for networking purposes. This is particularly the case in their first few weeks or months at the firm, when they are still unsure of who everyone is and the correct way to go about networking.

"I think it's always a little bit daunting to speak to someone who's director or partner […] I don't want to get in their way."
New joiner

Whilst new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not tend to feel this is exclusive to them as a result of their background, some feel they lack the confidence of their peers as a result of knowing less about networking generally (e.g., having never discussed this during their education, or having nobody around them in their personal lives in more professional roles). For some, this can conflict with their desire to make themselves stand out due to concerns around lacking experience compared to their peers (e.g., not having completed low paid or unpaid work experience in the sector or relevant workplaces due to having to take on paid work).

"My background makes me feel that I need to place more emphasis on myself to network with others to be seen and realised for my talent as I have no special background behind me […] My background impacts my confidence as well in networking with people beyond my grade, as I feel that if people knew, they would have a change of opinion or look at me differently."
New joiner

In terms of feeling able to network with people from similar backgrounds, views among new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are mixed. Whilst some are members of PwC People Networks related to aspects of their personal identity such as their religion (more detail on this can be found on page 42 of this report), new joiners feel that it is more difficult to identify others who might be from a lower socioeconomic background given that this is felt to be less overt than other factors, such as ethnicity, and is also something that people may not actively talk about.

"I am not aware of people with a similar background to me. I feel sometimes when I am in the office, I am the only one who has this background compared to others."
New joiner

They remark that where they have had opportunities to do so, networking with people from similar backgrounds – whether this is based on socioeconomic status or other characteristics such as gender and ethnicity – is crucial in feeling like they 'belong' at PwC.

Hope works at one of PwC's regional offices. She decided to relocate there after being informed that it would be a good place to network and find opportunities in her service area. However, since moving, Hope has spent a lot of time 'on the bench'. She believes the way work is assigned can be unfair, as she feels this is almost entirely down to an associate's ability to network with senior colleagues. This is something she finds particularly difficult; most of the partners in her office are white, middle-aged men and she struggles to find common ground with them. The only exception has been Hope's one experience of having a call with a partner from a similar background, on which she felt really comfortable and which she found very useful.

"There is quite a hierarchical set-up to the business, which means it can be very intimidating to be on a call with a director or partner, but if we want to network our way onto projects that interest us, we need to be doing these calls with directors so they put us on their projects."

THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

New joiners are largely positive about the PwC offices they work in and have experienced. They are largely described as being clean, modern and airy, with excellent facilities. However, this is something that is felt to differ across offices, with a sense that some of the smaller, regional offices are potentially more outdated.

In terms of their working environments when working from home, some new joiners express anxiety around having a poor set-up, citing unreliable WiFi, small desks, lacking second screens and having poor webcams as factors that can impede their work to varying extents. This is felt to be particularly pronounced among new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as they may be more likely to be living in their family home (due to being or feeling unable to afford to rent their own home privately), and those homes are more likely to be smaller, and shared with others. Some share concerns around appearing unprofessional when they work from home and can feel self-conscious during calls as a result.

"My work from home set-up is not very good as it is literally just my laptop without a spare monitor which I really need [...] Also, the camera is not great and can look a bit unprofessional if I am doing client calls."
New joiner

As mentioned previously, most new joiners were pleasantly surprised to discover upon joining that PwC offers a flexible approach to working, where staff can work from home some of the time. They tend to see benefits both of being in the office and of working from home – and most new joiners appreciate hybrid working.

WORKING FROM THE OFFICE:

Working from the office means that new joiners find it easier to ask team members questions, socialise with peers and network more broadly – which is felt to be particularly important at the outset of their career.

WORKING FROM HOME:

Being able to work from home at times offers flexibility, which is particularly important for those whose circumstances can make it more difficult to go into the office (e.g., those with a disability). It is also felt to take into account the potential cost of commuting, which can be very high for some – particularly when exacerbated by not being able to afford to live near the office due to high costs.

"I feel when in the office you can actually get that person you are needing's attention better if you require something urgent throughout the day."
New joiner

"I feel like I have a more relaxed day by taking out the travelling aspect of the day."
New joiner

However, some new joiners share concerns around the need for staff to go into the office 2–3 days per week and how this might impact them. As outlined above, flexibility is highly valued by new joiners, particularly those who find going into the office more challenging due to factors such as their health, caring responsibilities and financial circumstances (which can, for example, lead to concerns about the costs of commuting). Relating to the cost of commuting in particular, some worry that the push for staff to go into the office more often will disproportionally affect those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

"There is a push at the minute for more days in the office compared to at home, but it's extremely expensive for me to get into the office – my train ticket is £15 per day."
New joiner

CASE STUDY: OLLIE

Ollie is based in PwC's Belfast office. When searching for a role, having a good work / life balance was something that was especially important to him. He feels positive about PwC's flexible working policy and makes use of it. However, he is disabled, which can make travelling into the office more difficult, in turn meaning that he must decide on a day-to-day basis whether he feels well enough to go into the office. His disability is unpredictable and sometimes he is unable to come in for the minimum of two days required. Furthermore, the cost of commuting to the office is expensive and this is something that also concerns Ollie. He sometimes worries that his lack of presence in the office might be interpreted as laziness and fears it could impact his development – particularly when he is less able to network, as he can't always attend work events.

"I aim for two [days in the office], but I work by a day-by-day assumption due to having a disability [...] This can impact my decisions to work from home. I feel at times that because my disability isn't visibly seen, people can assume you are just too lazy to attend."

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

As part of this research, we heard from new joiners located across the UK. Whilst there are felt to be some similarities across offices – particularly in terms of sharing positive views of their office itself – new joiners do feel that offices can differ in terms of atmosphere and culture. This is especially the case in relation to perceived differences between PwC's London offices and its regional offices.

In regard to PwC's London offices, these are felt to have a more formal and competitive atmosphere, for example in how colleagues dress and relate to one another. New joiners based in these offices are more likely to report having had interactions with colleagues that left them feeling uncomfortable and like they do not fit in, whilst those based in other offices notice a difference when they visit the London offices. Some feel the more formal atmosphere can mean that differences in socioeconomic background are felt more strongly here.

In comparison, the regional offices are generally perceived to be more collaborative and casual in nature and new joiners are less likely to feel that their background or circumstances set them apart from their peers.

"It certainly seems like the larger offices such as London, due to the bigger clients, have a much more intense office culture which seems more demanding and less personable than the smaller Cambridge office."
New joiner

"What I hear from [the] More London [office] and what I see when I go down there or have calls with people in that office is that there is a really competitive atmosphere […] It's probably a bit more uptight as the boys are always wearing suits and the girls are dressed business casual, so I stick out a bit when I go down there when I wear jeans and trainers. Also, there is not so much of a chatty atmosphere there compared to the regional offices I have visited (Bristol and Manchester)."
New joiner

Participants from the co-creation workshop.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS SUB-CHAPTER:

- New joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel that progression pathways at PwC are clear and that they know, in theory, what they need to do to progress. However, in practice, some feel there are certain barriers that make this more challenging – some of which they feel are specifically related to their socioeconomic background.

- Factors such as ability to network effectively, develop at a fast pace and pass exams are essential to progression at PwC, but resourcing decisions can feel distant and opaque, creating challenges in progressing.

- There are also some latent concerns about ability to progress compared to their peers, with new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feeling they lack the same confidence and tools to progress quickly. New joiners from these backgrounds also feel particularly anxious about progressing at the expected rate and passing exams given the very high levels of importance they place on job security and financial certainty.

- Feedback is also seen as key in facilitating career progression. However, new joiners experience challenges in receiving feedback (though do not explicitly relate this to their background).

This sub-chapter is based entirely on findings from new joiners.

PROGRESSION AND DEVELOPMENT

Positively, new joiners tend to feel that progression pathways are very clear at PwC and relatively confident that they know how to progress. However, there are certain barriers (outlined below) which can leave some new joiners feeling less confident that they will actually get the opportunities to develop in their role, thus potentially hindering their progression.

As previously mentioned, new joiners view networking as an integral part of PwC's culture. A number feel that their progression at PwC is, at least in part, dependent on their ability to network with other employees – particularly those at more senior levels – both to develop their professional relationships and their profile internally, and to secure the opportunities they need to develop. As a result, those that find networking more challenging share some concerns that this may impact your ability to progress at the firm.

Overall, new joiners share a sense that staff at PwC must develop at a fast pace or risk getting left behind. Whilst this is not necessarily something that surprises them or they believe needs to change, this is nevertheless difficult for new joiners to adjust to and can add to a sense of competitiveness within cohorts. Again, some relate this to their background, pointing to the fact that they may already feel less confident than some of their peers, and therefore more concerned about falling behind. This causes new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to feel particularly anxious given the importance placed on job security and the financial implications of being dismissed.

New joiners do feel that PwC offers extensive training and development opportunities – and for many, this is something that drew them to initially apply to the firm. Where they have completed courses or attended sessions, they tend to find these incredibly helpful. However, on the whole, new joiners do find that these

can be difficult to balance with project workload. For this reason, online training that is easy to access at any time and from any location is felt to be particularly useful.

"I do believe that PwC has endless opportunities for further growth and development through their online training programmes."
New joiner

Some share concerns that they are not progressing as quickly as others in their cohort and express frustration around this. They feel that resourcing can be quite opaque and distant, with limited control over what they work on. For this reason, it can feel difficult to meet performance goals, as new joiners do not necessarily feel they are getting the opportunities or exposure they need in order to progress – for instance, not being put onto enough projects, or not being put on certain types of projects.

"I think the main limiting factor is resourcing and actually being given enough work to do. While we do have individual responsibility and proactivity in order to find work ourselves and keep busy, there is only so much we can do and I feel that management and resourcing should provide more support to new joiners in finding work and building experience."
New joiner

Those studying for exams alongside their role feel that this can sometimes act as a barrier to development initially, as they feel they have less time 'on the job' to develop their skills. Some also feel under significant pressure to pass their exams due to a perception that their progression is reliant on this – something that is felt to be especially pertinent for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, where job stability is particularly highly valued.

CASE STUDY: KARIM

Karim works in one of PwC's London offices. He largely enjoys his role and feels he has developed professionally since starting at PwC. In particular, working on different rotations means that Karim is exposed to a varied range of clients and colleagues, thus widening his skillset. However, Karim has to take exams as part of his role and finds this element particularly challenging. Whilst he is working really hard to study for these, he feels under significant pressure to pass as he is under the impression that if he fails, he risks losing his job. Since he cannot afford to be unemployed, this leads to feelings of anxiety – and Karim is constantly assessing the job market just in case.

"I'll be very open about the fact that because of that lack of security, I am constantly looking at what's out there in the market and what kind of roles are available because I can't afford to lose a job and be unemployed. Of course, some people can be in that position, but that would be so much financial hardship for me."

FEEDBACK AT PwC

Feedback is viewed as key in facilitating career progression at PwC, as well as important and valuable in and of itself. However, there are some important challenges in practice when asking for and receiving feedback, explored below, though these may not necessarily be unique to new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and few drew an explicit link between their background and their experiences of receiving feedback.

One such challenge, is that, for some, frequent rotations and spending very short periods of time on projects means that receiving meaningful feedback is more challenging, as colleagues have had less opportunity to get to know them and their ways of working. Where new joiners do receive feedback from these projects, this can sometimes feel generic and more like a bureaucratic 'tick-box' exercise – particularly feedback from more senior colleagues – rather than a process genuinely aimed at aiding development.

"It doesn't feel like everyone takes it seriously… Sometimes feedback can feel like a tick-box. The most senior person who gives feedback on me always just says 'I echo what you've said', talking about what I've said in my self-appraisal, or just writes one sentence that's really generic."
New joiner

Additionally, many new joiners mention issues with colleagues ignoring feedback requests. They feel they often have to chase these up to receive responses, which can be particularly daunting when initially starting out in their roles and when they are awaiting and need to chase feedback from more senior colleagues.

"I request feedback by confirming with the individual they are happy to provide feedback and then send a request for it through the official channel on Workday. The requests are not always responded to meaning that this form of feedback is not regular."
New joiner

"Gathering feedback through Workday is relatively easy, however there is a real issue with staff being able to ignore feedback requests. It took several months to receive formal feedback from a large engagement, and there seems to be no penalty for those who refuse, or greatly delay, providing feedback, which is an integral part of the moderation process."
New joiner

CASE STUDY: SHYMA

Shyma works in one of PwC's regional offices. She is keen to progress quickly and in particular to increase her salary, which she feels is relatively low compared to the hours and effort she puts in, and in the context that she doesn't get any parental support and of the rising cost of living. Shyma thinks that, in theory, there is a lot of clarity about how to progress at PwC, with lots of emphasis on giving feedback. However, in practice, she doesn't feel entirely clear on how she is performing. This is largely due to difficulties she has had in getting feedback since she started working at PwC, including having colleagues ignore feedback requests and receiving generic feedback.

"A lot of the feedback I do receive feels quite generic, as everyone has to give everyone feedback [...] I don't think people want to be critical."

CULTURE AND VALUES

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS SUB-CHAPTER:

- New joiners feel largely positive about the culture and values at PwC and the majority feel these values are lived out in practice at the firm.

- Of its core values, new joiners generally feel that PwC does live out its value of diversity and inclusion strongly. Staff are seen to be from a range of different backgrounds and diversity actively celebrated. However, some feel this is largely concentrated at the junior levels of the company and that there could be stronger gender, disability, ethnicity and socioeconomic representation in more senior positions.

- Those who are members of People Networks at PwC largely share positive perceptions of these. However, some feel that more could be done to address regional disparities in the networks, as they can feel London-centric – which can be particularly difficult for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may not be able to afford to travel.

- In terms of social mobility specifically, whilst many new joiners are aware of PwC's commitment to this, they typically have less clarity about what this looks like in practice compared to other areas of PwC's work on diversity, and awareness of the Social Mobility Network is low.

This sub-chapter is based entirely on findings from new joiners.

New joiners feel largely positive about the culture and values promoted by PwC and express that this is one of the primary factors that drew them to the firm.

Most feel that these values are clear and instilled within employees across the business – and that these also strongly align with their own personal values. They perceive these values to be reflected in day-to-day working and upheld by staff working across the firm rather than simply lip service. There is a strong sense as a result that PwC values its people.

"I feel the culture PwC talk about openly to the public is what they do value and represent within the business. In no way do I feel this is a 'front' put out for the public or the business."
New joiner

"I think PwC's purpose aligns closely with 'the people', where its employees are at the heart of its success and reputation because the firm consistently helps us to focus on goals to solve problems in wider society, whilst improving our personal development at the same time."
New joiner)

New joiners tend to identify six key areas which they feel are representative of PwC's culture and values as an organisation:

DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE:
Actively celebrating and supporting difference

INNOVATIVE:
At the forefront of change and adopting new technologies and ways of working

COLLABORATIVE:
Always working together to achieve the best outcomes

CARING:
Demonstrating respect and care for others, both at a societal level and a colleague level

FLEXIBLE:
Offering flexibility in terms of where and how staff work to accommodate individual needs

HARD-WORKING:
Consistently striving to work hard and achieve a high standard of work

INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY AT PwC

Of its core values as an organisation, the majority of new joiners feel that PwC does live out its value of inclusion and diversity strongly. PwC is seen as a diverse employer, with staff from a wide range of backgrounds. Furthermore, new joiners appreciate that PwC actively celebrates and promotes difference through events and networks – particularly in relation to ethnicity and religion, which new joiners are more likely to feel is recognised and celebrated than differences in economic background.

"I find that PwC is a very diverse and inclusive place to work as there are so many people from different backgrounds […] I feel I've had great opportunities to learn about other people's customs and cultures while being here."
New joiner

CASE STUDY: GABI

Gabi works in one of PwC's London offices. Diversity and inclusion is one of the key factors that drew her to pursuing a career at PwC, as she felt the firm placed high importance on this. As a woman of colour, she thinks it is particularly important to see other women and people of colour in positions of leadership. So far, she has been pleasantly surprised at just how inclusive PwC is. Gabi feels that diversity is actively celebrated in her team and doesn't believe her background has had any impact on the opportunities she has been offered thus far.

"In my team, diversity is 100% celebrated. Being a woman of colour, I don't feel like I have been given less opportunities."

"The culture is inclusive and positive. People care about your time […] I feel very well supported in my role."

However, some feel that there could be stronger gender, disability, ethnicity and socioeconomic representation in senior positions, and feel that there is generally far less (visible) diversity at the top of the firm.

"I think the newest associates are much more diverse than the rest of the company. There is a lot of diversity at associate level, with almost 60% of people at my CE training being from a diverse background, whereas every partner I have met bar one in the last 6 months has been white. So, although there is a lot of diversity, it is not spread through the company."
New joiner

PwC'S PEOPLE NETWORKS

Around a third of new joiners involved in this research were already members of a People Network, including networks focused on religion, disability and sexuality. Those who are members of these networks generally share positive experiences of them, including gaining a greater sense of community in the workplace and being able to meet other like-minded individuals through attending network events.

"I think networks are really important […] We're all like-minded individuals, we all come together and we have a common theme. Having a sense of identity is very important to me."
New joiner

However, some members of these networks feel that more could be done to address regional disparities in terms of where in-person events are held to ensure that as many people are able to attend as possible. At the moment, London-centric events are felt to be somewhat exclusionary. This is especially pertinent for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, for whom the cost of travel and other expenses may be too much (and it is often felt to be unclear as to whether these expenses would be covered by the firm).

"I joined the PwC Hindu Network to try and get involved with some cultural activities and socialise. However, the events are usually held in London which makes it difficult for regional teams to join for events that are only an hour or two long. It would be nice to have events being held in different offices each time."
New joiner

THOSE WHO ARE NOT MEMBERS OF A PEOPLE NETWORK TEND TO CITE THREE KEY BARRIERS TO GETTING INVOLVED:

LACK OF AWARENESS:
Many new joiners simply aren't aware of what networks are available to them – and if they are aware, some lack clarity on how to get involved and / or the benefits of joining a network.

LACK OF TIME:
Some new joiners (particularly those who express feelings of stress and burnout) share concerns that they wouldn't have time to balance these commitments with their workload.

LACK OF RELEVANCE:
Others feel that there isn't currently a network that feels relevant to them or suits their interests. Networks may also feel less relevant if most of the events are held somewhere other than their office.

SOCIAL MOBILITY AT PwC

Many new joiners are at least somewhat aware of PwC's commitment to social mobility and view this positively. Some are even involved in initiatives run by the firm to empower young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, including partnerships with schools with lower levels of social mobility.

"PwC ran a mentoring programme for secondary school students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with Ahead Partnership which I volunteered for. The aim of this was to improve the students' self-confidence, resilience, and understanding of the world of work."
New joiner

However, a significant proportion feel that whilst they know PwC places importance on social mobility in theory, they have less clarity about what this looks like in practice. New joiners' understanding of this commitment is largely based on *assumptions* that PwC run outreach programmes with young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, rather than any in-depth knowledge.

In terms of more internally-facing initiatives, there is low awareness of the Social Mobility Network within this sample (only a couple of new joiners who took part in the research were members) – with spontaneous calls from those currently unaware to create something like a social mobility network.

"I have not yet come across anything specific for me. Perhaps a 'social mobility' network would be good […] Similar to other networks at PwC, there could be networking events, social events and meetings. It would be a good way of being introduced to people from similar backgrounds."
New joiner

Whilst PwC is generally felt to be a diverse and inclusive organisation, as above, some question how much diversity there is in terms of representation of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds – particularly at senior levels (though some new joiners do recognise that this may be less 'visible' than some other diversity characteristics such as ethnicity or gender).

"I think PwC does enough for diversity and inclusion in most other areas, but could do much more on socioeconomic backgrounds."
New joiner

CASE STUDY: LAILA

Laila works in one of PwC's London offices. She feels that whilst PwC talks a lot about diversity and inclusion, this isn't necessarily reflected in who they hire, with a lack of ethnic minority and disability representation, or women and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in senior positions. Additionally, although she feels PwC has a collaborative and supportive environment generally, she does feel that there is competition between junior members of staff which can create an unpleasant tension. Laila also finds that the other new joiners can be hard to relate to – they talk about 'luxuries' and don't seem to realise that their experiences aren't universal.

"There's a massive, massive promotion of inclusion and diversity in the recruitment process and online but one of the first things I noticed on my first day was the fact that there was mainly white, middle class to upper class men […] There seemed to be a lack of women, there seemed to be a lack of people of colour […] I think whilst this is great to be promoting, I think if you're going to talk the talk, then walk the walk."

Participants from the co-creation workshop.

CO-CREATING SOLUTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

During the co-creation workshop, senior leaders reflected on the findings from potential employees, and then worked together directly with new joiners to discuss the key challenges for this cohort identified during the research. PwC colleagues then worked collaboratively together to discuss and co-create practical ideas and solutions for PwC to consider pursuing in order to go even further to deliver on its commitments to social mobility.

Positively, many of the ideas and solutions that colleagues suggested overlap with initiatives and actions PwC is already taking (of which new joiners in particular may not necessarily be aware). This chapter outlines the key themes in the ideas and solutions that colleagues identified, while the final chapter of this report sets out PwC's response both to these suggestions and to the broader findings of the report, and indicates what the organisation plans to do next.

The ideas colleagues identified through co-creation fall into five broad categories (the first, second and fourth of which particularly overlap with initiatives which PwC is already undertaking), relating to:

1. External engagement
2. The recruitment and application process
3. Financial support and concessions
4. Internal engagement
5. Transparency in pay and progression

Each of these categories is unpacked in turn below.

IDEAS RELATING TO EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT

New joiners and senior colleagues both feel it is important that PwC engages outside the organisation, and engages early, to raise awareness of professional services overall and PwC specifically as a potential career option for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Within this,

there is particular interest in seeing PwC considering opportunities to (continue to):

- **Reach a range of schools and academies** to raise levels of awareness of the organisation and encourage young people from a wide range of backgrounds to consider applying for a role at PwC. Positively, this is already an area in which PwC is very active (for example, in the most recent financial year, PwC have upskilled more than 17,500 secondary school students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds), though new joiners in particular are not always necessarily aware of this activity.

  - Within this, targeting girls, those from minority ethnic backgrounds, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds specifically (and considering how these different groups may intersect with one another) is of particular interest, and seen as an effective way to address current potential imbalances.

  - Some new joiners and senior leaders discussed that using scalable approaches, for example focusing on locations where PwC has a physical presence - such as the partner schools model in Cardiff – may help achieve impact and make the most of PwC's local profile.

- **Ensure PwC has a strong social media presence** to raise awareness of the organisation, but also to drive knowledge and understanding. In particular, social media is felt to be a valuable channel to harness in order to address potential 'myths' about the type of person that works at PwC, and engage with younger people, who may look for less curated information about the organisation compared to older people.

  - Within this, 'day in the life' videos from current employees are felt to be especially useful in understanding what it is like to work at PwC, demystifying professional services, and dispelling the assumption that people at PwC

work very long hours in inflexible working conditions. New joiners feel the current 'day in the life' videos could be made even more effective by being more specific, for example by including further detail about specific tasks conducted (while still maintaining confidentiality).

- **Use external role models and advocates** to raise the profile of and spark interest in applying to PwC.

  - In particular, some new joiners and senior leaders express interest in PwC working with external role models and advocates which young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds will find particularly relatable in order to address some of the misconceptions which risk acting as a barrier to applying, such as concerns that candidates may need a degree to apply or that they don't 'fit the mould' of a PwC employee. Again, positively, this is already an area in which PwC is conducting considerable activity.

IDEAS RELATING TO THE RECRUITMENT AND APPLICATION PROCESS

Positively, this research has found that the recruitment and application process at PwC is already seen as relatively inclusive and progressive, particularly compared to some of its competitors (see the chapter on 'applying for a role at PwC'). New joiners and senior leaders are keen to see PwC consolidate its strengths in this area, for example by considering opportunities to (continue to):

- Provide channels and opportunities for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to engage or network with PwC colleagues prior to applying for a role.

  - Having opportunities to engage with current colleagues is felt to be important in levelling the playing field between candidates from different backgrounds. In particular, this is felt to provide candidates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with an opportunity to gain the insights into these types of application

processes that they feel that other candidates may be getting from family and friends, and build their confidence as they prepare for interviews and assessment centres.

  - Again, positively, this is already an area of considerable focus for PwC through important partnerships and the provision of valuable online resources, though is not necessarily one of which new joiners in particular are aware.

- Ensure the interview dynamic and environment is as inclusive and unintimidating as possible.

  - Within this, there is interest in ensuring that interviewers have the support and training they need to make candidates feel as comfortable as possible. Some also raise training on recognising and combatting unconscious bias, an area in which PwC is, positively, already investing heavily.

- Make the content and language of the early careers website as accessible as possible.

  - To achieve this, there is interest in including practical, simple and easily digestible information about different job roles and practicalities of working at PwC, highlighting particularly where these relate to specific skills new joiners may wish to develop, or tasks they may excel at.

  - This information should also clarify the types of people that are eligible to apply for a role at PwC.

IDEAS RELATING TO FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND CONCESSIONS

Given the lower levels of resilience among new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds surfaced in this research, new joiners and senior leaders discussed the role that financial support and concessions might play in reducing any barriers to employees applying for and succeeding at PwC as a result of their financial circumstances. New joiners and senior leaders feel there are a number of ways in which PwC could explore this further, for example by considering:

- **Providing an advance on employees' first paycheck, or, alternatively a sign-on bonus** to support those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to prepare for starting work at PwC and to reduce financial uncertainty for these colleagues.

- **Introducing subsidies and grants** to help those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to pay for work-related costs, such as commuting and relocation.

  □ Subsidies and grants are strongly preferred compared to loans, as there is some stigma surrounding debt and loans amongst this audience. Offering subsidies and grants would help to overcome this potential barrier to taking up initiatives in practice.

- **Salary reviews at entry and junior levels** to account for inflation and the cost of living and to ensure that these are reflective of the time and effort expectations of roles at PwC.

IDEAS RELATING TO INTERNAL ENGAGEMENT

In this research sample of new joiners, awareness of key forms of internal engagement such as the Social Mobility Network was relatively low, though views of the Network are very positive among those who are more familiar with it. New joiners and senior leaders are therefore interested in any opportunities to raise awareness and widen the scope of the Social Mobility Network, for example by considering opportunities to (continue to):

- **Remind new joiners of the Networks, including the Social Mobiilty Network, on settling in at the organisation**, as well as part of the induction process, when new joiners feel that they are already taking in a lot of information and may be missing a key opportunity to learn and hear more about the Networks.

- **Harness the power of the Social Mobility Network to educate all staff about inclusivity and tackle unconscious bias**, to ensure that even staff who are not part of the Network benefit from the experiences and insights of its members.

Building on this theme, following the workshop, one participant raised the idea of introducing socioeconomic training specifically across PwC.

- **Elevate the role of senior colleagues from lower socioeconomic backgrounds within the Social Mobility Network** by supporting them to act as role models and mentors to junior staff and new joiners, and to raise awareness of senior staff's diverse backgrounds (particularly given that it may be less obvious when they come from a lower socioeconomic background, compared to, for example, an ethnic minority background).

- Within this, introducing a coffee roulette system was raised by some new joiners and senior leaders as an example of a potentially useful yet informal way of helping new joiners to connect with senior colleagues from different backgrounds.

IDEAS RELATING TO TRANSPARENCY IN PAY AND PROGRESSION

Lastly, new joiners and senior leaders also discussed how PwC could be even more transparent around pay and progression, particularly given that this tends to be especially important to new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds given their more precarious financial situations and greater need for financial security. Within this, there is interest in whether PwC could do more to:

- **Publicise salary bands** on job adverts, particularly those for entry level and junior roles, and providing more information about salary bands on its website to further increase transparency in pay.

- **Outline pay progression on the website using averages** in order to provide new joiners from socioeconomic backgrounds with a clearer sense of what they can expect and aim to be earning at PwC as they progress in their careers.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS - PwC

PwC is committed to creating an inclusive culture where everyone can be the best they can be. This research has given us new perspectives and a greater understanding of the experiences of prospective applicants and new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We are hugely grateful to all those who participated.

The research has helped focus our minds on actions to better support prospective applicants and new joiners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This is something we will continue to focus on. For now, we're taking the following steps:

MAKING OURSELVES MORE RELATABLE & ACCESSIBLE TO PROSPECTIVE JOINERS

- We have updated our recruitment process to make it more relatable and accessible. Our new selection process will feel much more relevant to the job role being applied for. Practice tests are available, encouraged and signposted during the process. Students will be guided through the process step by step, decreasing the gap between students who will have knowledge of the recruitment process from friends and family, and those who don't. The new process will be structured so that everyone has a chance to be considered regardless of when they apply in the process, rather than first come first served. For many of our programmes, we offer additional coaching and support through the recruitment process for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and our employability hub is a virtual coaching tool available to all.

- We are continuing to improve accessibility across our student careers website by reducing the number of pages, improving navigation and how our site experience appears on a mobile device. Our skills navigator tool will be going live soon; students will be able to input their skills and areas of interest and will be served job opportunities based on their responses. We also have new web tools, a chatbot and updated e-learns to help demystify the application process.

- We are evolving our schools outreach to ensure deeper and more sustained engagement with schools with a higher-than-average proportion of students eligible for free school meals/and are located in a social mobility coldspot. This will increase opportunities to engage with parents and teachers at those schools. We are also doing more to promote our schools outreach work to our people and the opportunities to get involved in volunteering and become role models.

- We will profile more of our social mobility programme alumni on social media and encourage them to act as ambassadors at our outreach and recruitment events.

FINANCIAL WELLBEING AND SUPPORT

- We recognise the upfront costs for young people when they start work - from housing costs to socialising with new colleagues - all before the first pay cheque. Starting from September 2024, we will be giving all new joiners on our graduate and school leaver programmes the option to advance up to a £1000 of their first month's salary. This will be available in their first week and open to everyone, reducing any potential stigma associated with the request.

- We want to give prospective joiners more clarity around starting salaries to help them plan ahead. In a move that is unusual in our sector, we will be publishing salaries on job descriptions for our school leaver apprentice programmes, and will then review whether to expand this to all entry level roles.

- We are introducing more support for new student joiners around financial awareness and wellbeing.

SETTLING IN AND PROGRESSING

- We will raise awareness of our social mobility network and the other networks we have to support different communities within the firm. These are promoted during the induction process, but many of our new joiners said they were unaware of these networks. We will ensure there are multiple points at which the people networks are highlighted throughout the first few months.

- We are expanding our social mobility network mentoring scheme to support more of our people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to develop networks. We will also include more networking guidance and advice in the induction for new joiners.

- We have set and published social mobility workforce targets, backed by a new socioeconomic action plan to hold ourselves accountable. The targets are set by grade, recognising the importance of socio-economic diversity at all levels of the organisation and the need to ensure progression for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

- As part of our new socioeconomic inclusion action plan, we are looking to develop and introduce socioeconomic background awareness training which will improve firmwide understanding of the topic.

- We are incorporating socioeconomic background data into the way we monitor the fair allocation of work. Currently other characteristics such as gender and ethnicity are already part of this review programme.