

# **SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING**

**Exploring the career traps and ambitions of  
young people**

A research report by Common Purpose  
Summer 2004

inspiring leaders with

**commonpurpose**



## Executive summary

As providers of leadership development programmes for people of all ages and backgrounds, we are always curious about what people need and want in order to develop in their jobs and as effective members of society.

Because we have been offering leadership development programmes for 15 years and count quite a large network of leaders amongst our alumni, we are being asked with increasing frequency for recommendations of younger people who can take a lead, especially to serve on boards. But what is being done to encourage young talent to excel in their own organisations and also in wider society? And what are the obstacles that stand in their way?

The motivation for this research was a desire to understand more about the opportunities and the barriers for emerging leaders, and what is required to flourish in today's leadership roles. What are the career traps that limit young managers and keep them from fulfilling their potential as leaders of tomorrow?

No, we were not surprised to discover that young people thirst for meaning in their lives, and are not fulfilled by their work; many young managers who join our programmes speak of this. They will not stay with employers who do not support their efforts to find purpose in their lives. Fear that they are not finding this meaning is leading to a quarter life crisis, where younger people often drop out of their fast track or job hop in an attempt to satisfy their longing to make a difference.

The implications of these findings are that employers must work even harder to uncover the passion that fires their young managers' vision of what is possible, and provide opportunities for them to develop it and nurture it.

And employers must be proactive in this. They must seek out opportunities for young managers to learn how society works and to find their place in it. Only in this way will they attract and retain the best people, and avoid mass defection and burnout. It is no longer acceptable to expect young talent to put a whole part of themselves aside in the work place. Employers must address the needs of the whole person and recognise that the desire to make a difference will not go away. Instead the employee will.

### **Julia Middleton, CEO and founder of Common Purpose**

This report is based on online surveys completed by 1000 employees between the ages of 25 and 35 during May 2004. There was an even gender split. Prior to the online survey we conducted a focus group among 12 young high-fliers to explore the main career issues they are facing.

## Main findings

- Young, talented workers feel trapped in their current jobs and are leaving them in pursuit of more fulfilling work.
- The primary thing keeping many young people in their current jobs is their debts. They feel they have to stay put until they are cleared.
- Young people want careers that add purpose to their lives as well as fulfil their potential at work. Employers who fail to accommodate and listen to these wider ambitions risk leaving their high fliers feeling frustrated and de-motivated.
- A quarter-life crisis is a reality for young people today, and is a time when they evaluate what they're doing and what they want from life.
- The danger age when employers stand to lose their most talented employees is 30, when young people are most likely to feel most disillusioned with their careers.

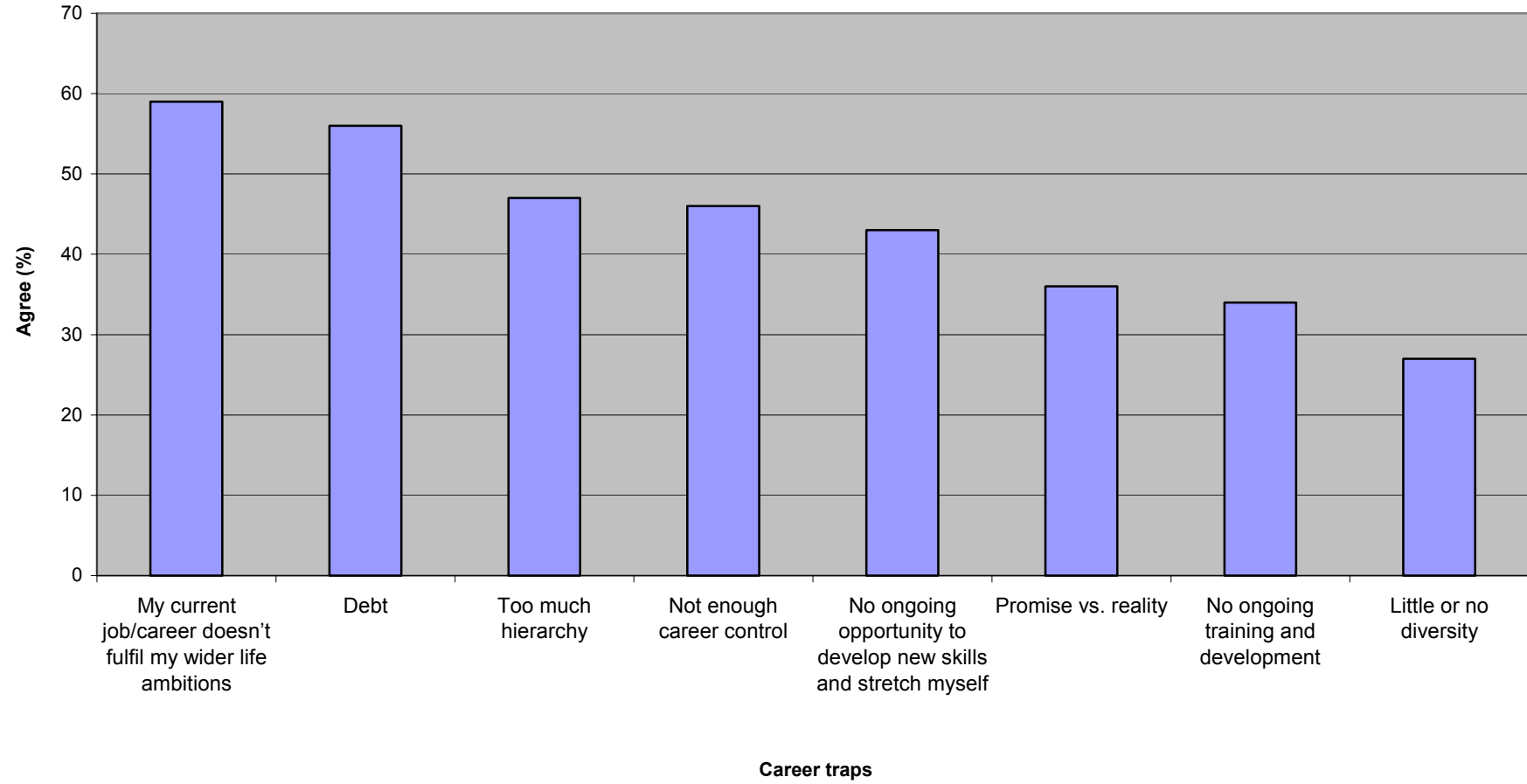
## Caught in a trap

Almost half (46 per cent) of young high-fliers feel caught in a career trap, with over half (57 per cent) looking for a new job or role at the moment.

### The top five career traps for young people

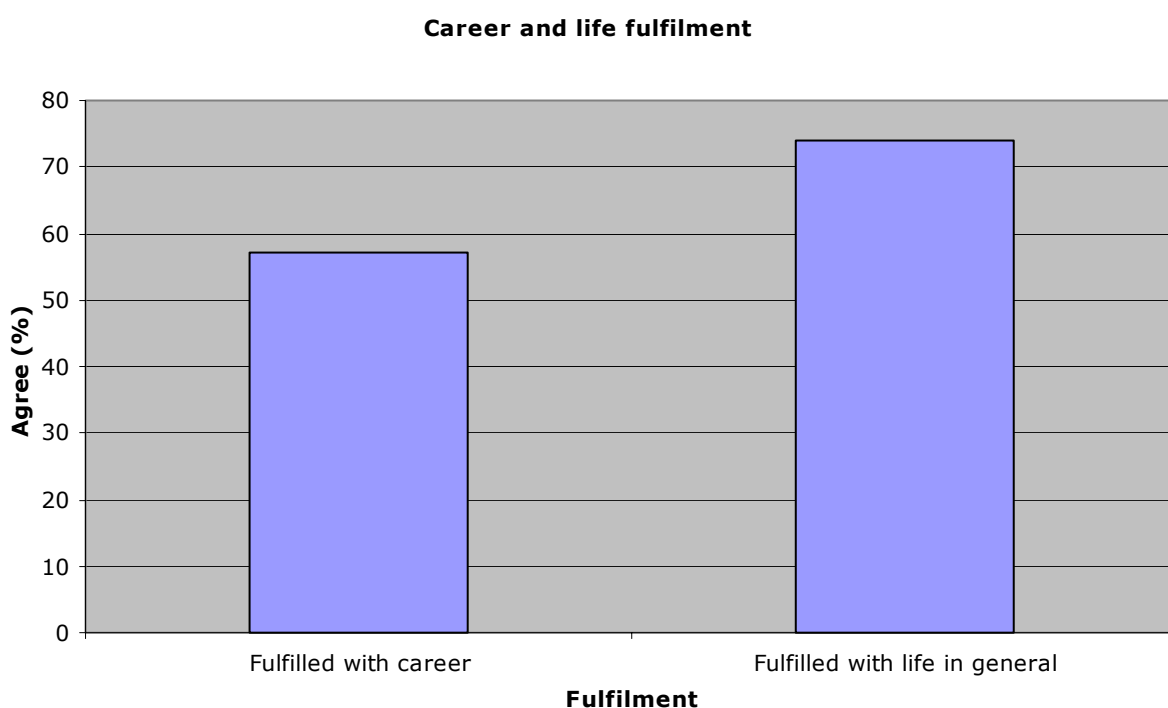
- Coping with debt is a key reason why young people feel unable to change careers, with over half (56 per cent) feeling chained to their desks by debt repayments.
- Careers that fail to fulfil young people's wider life ambitions are another frustration. While nine in 10 would like a career that adds purpose to their lives, 59 per cent admit that this isn't a reality for them.
- Young high-fliers thirst for challenge and feel they are not performing to their full potential. In particular, they criticise employers for failing to stretch them or help develop new skills. Over four in 10 (43 per cent) say they don't get the chance to stretch themselves beyond their current roles and a similar number claim they have little opportunity to be creative or innovative at work (44 per cent).
- Employers who fail to take a flexible approach to an individual's career progression are a problem for 46 per cent of young people, leaving half feeling that their organisation does not care about them as individuals. Meanwhile, too much hierarchy is regarded as a barrier to moving upwards for 47 per cent of ambitious young executives.
- High-fliers complain that too few colleagues are willing to listen and offer career advice. Nearly four in 10 (38 per cent) of respondents claim they don't have positive role models at work who they can learn from or turn to for career advice.

### What are the career traps?



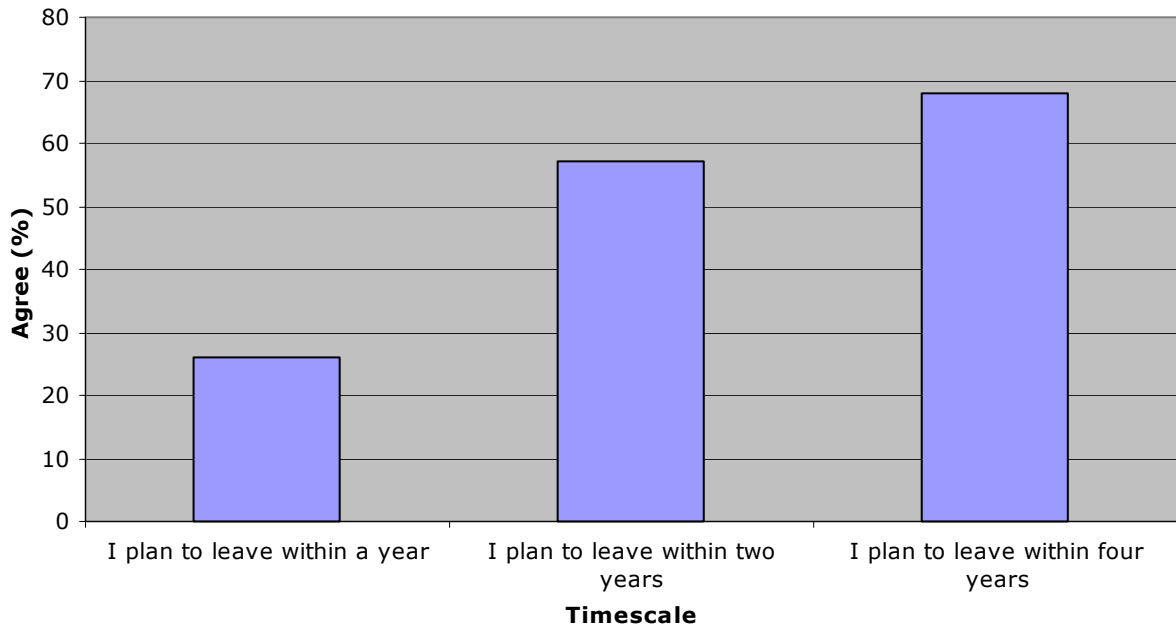
## Quarter-life crisis

- Over eight in 10 (83 per cent) talented youngsters believe there is such a thing as a quarter-life crisis when they and their peers think about what they're doing and what they want from life.
- The danger age for employers is 30, when young people are likely to feel most disillusioned with their careers.



- While most (87 per cent) agree that people nowadays want careers that add purpose to their lives, only a third (35 per cent) believe this happens in reality. This leaves 59 per cent of young people searching for something more from their jobs.
- Evidence of this crisis is rife, with 57 per cent of young people looking for a new job or role outside of their current employer at the moment. Over a quarter (26 per cent) plan to leave within the year, over half (57 per cent) within two years and 68 per cent have no intention of being with their current employer in four years' time.

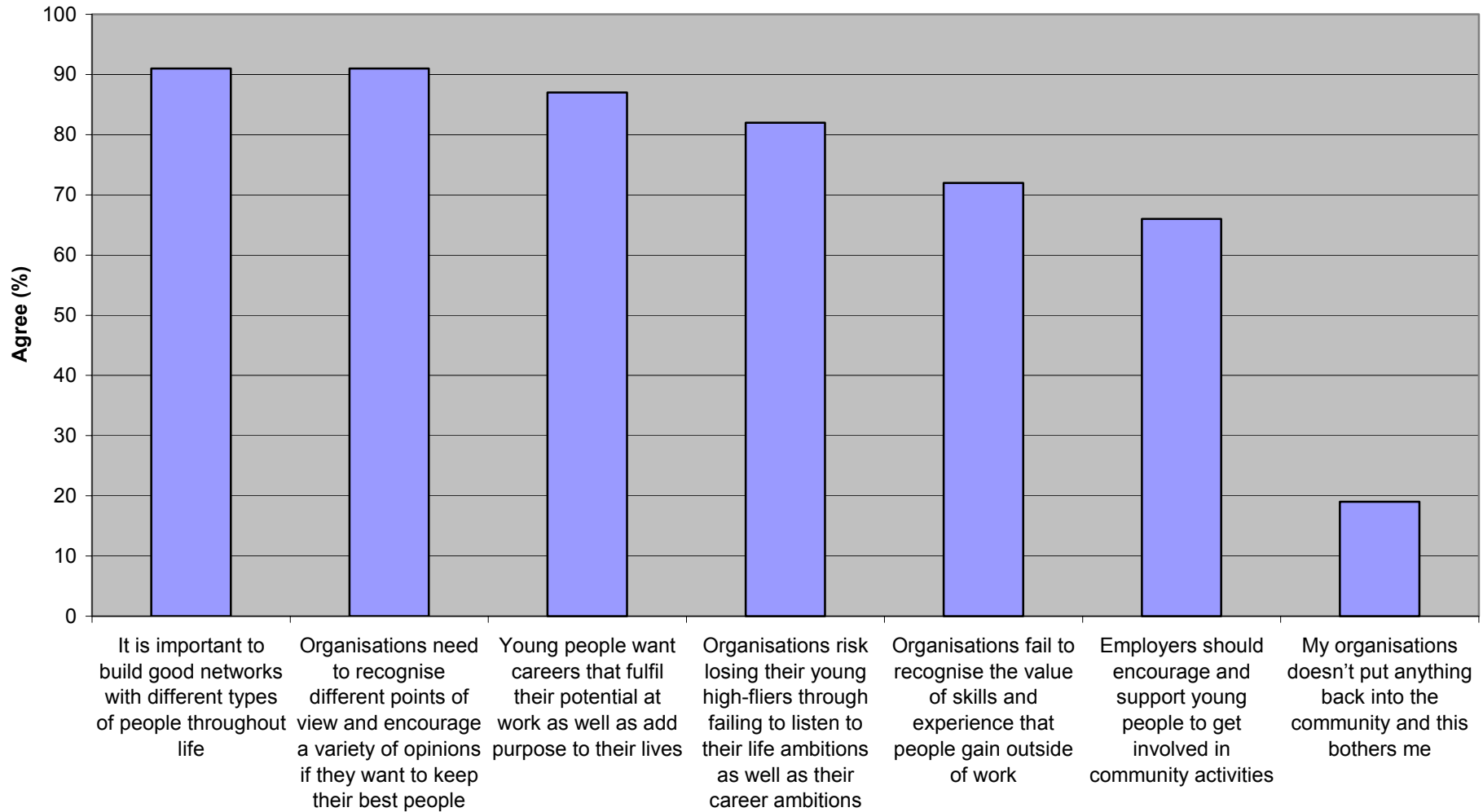
### How long do you plan to stay with your current employer?



### Organisational risks

- Organisations risk losing their young high-fliers through failing to listen to their life ambitions as well as their career ambitions according to 82 per cent of young people.
- Recognising diverse points of view and encouraging people to express their opinions is important if employers want to hang on to their hottest talent, with the majority (91 per cent) of young people citing this as important.
- Although 91 per cent also agree that it is important to build networks with different kinds of people at work, over a quarter (27 per cent) believe their organisations are weakened by little or no diversity.
- Organisations need to make sure that when it comes to promoting and developing young people they get it right. Three quarters (75 per cent) believe that employers underestimate the abilities of young people, with 89 per cent agreeing that age shouldn't be a barrier to moving upwards and that promotions should be based purely on talent rather than length of service.

## Messages to employers

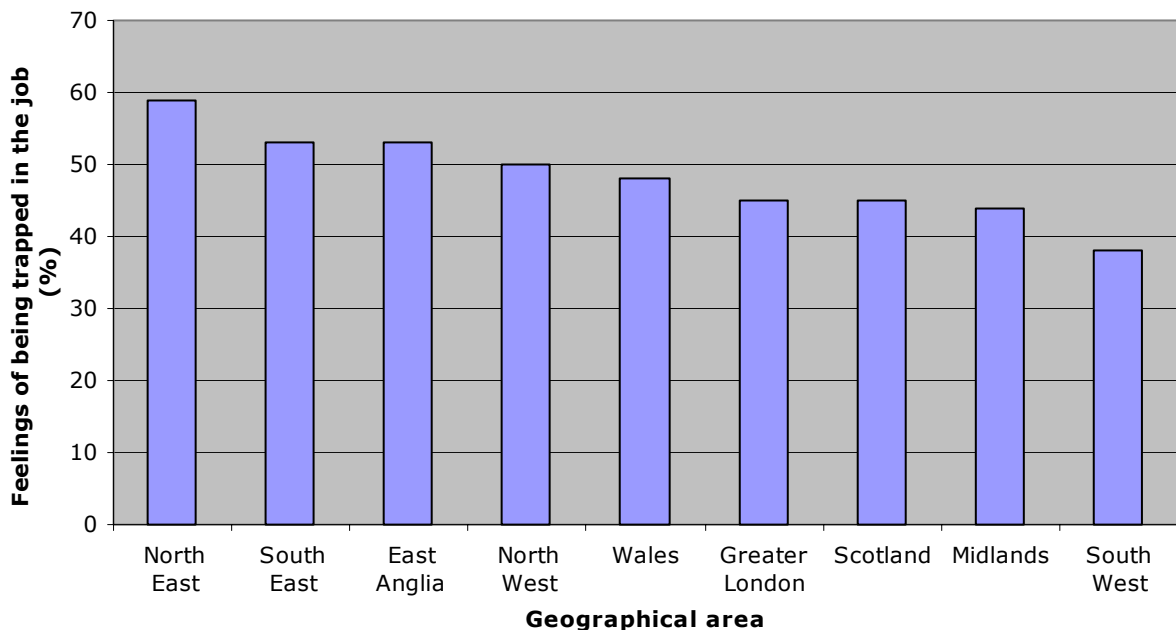


- Investing in the training and development of young employees needs to be a continuous priority for employers. A third (34 per cent) of young people say that their employers do not provide this. Supporting this, 33 per cent of young people leave their companies on completion of the graduate training schemes.
- Ethical business practice is also important. Over a quarter of respondents (27 per cent) admit that their organisation is not as ethical as they would like it to be. Two thirds go one step further, calling for employers to encourage and support young people to get involved in community activities.
- Broken promises have left over a third (36 per cent) of young people angry with their employers, complaining that there is a big difference between what they were promised and the reality of their jobs.
- Employers are also pulled up by 72 per cent of respondents for failing to recognise the value of skills and experience gained outside of work.

## Regional variations

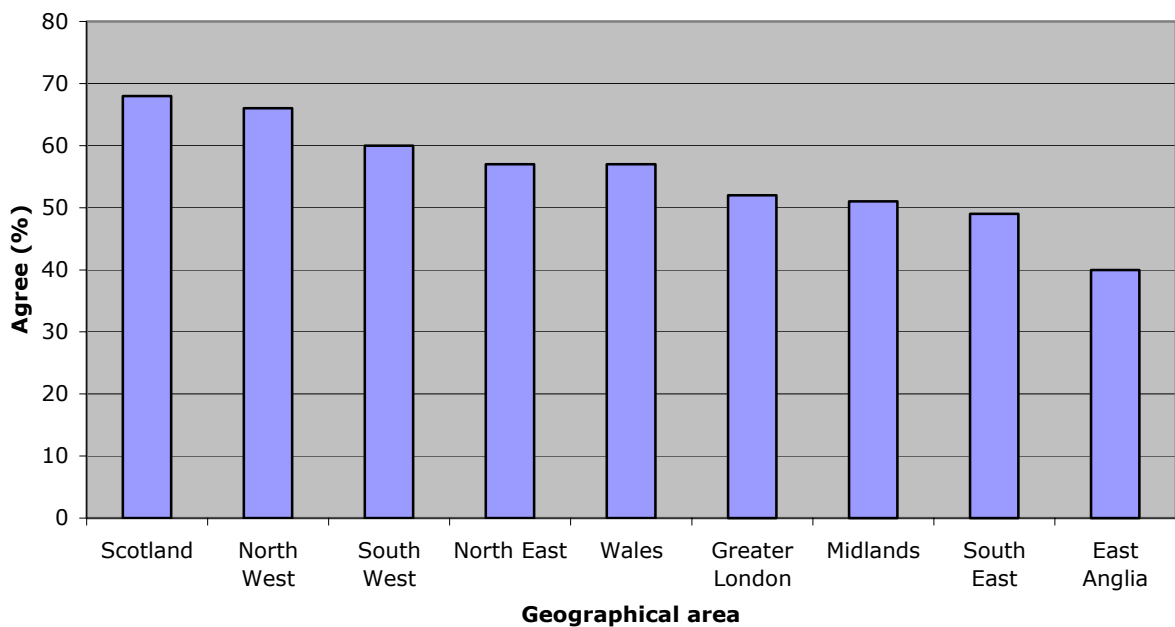
Young people in the North East feel most trapped in their current jobs, with 59 per cent admitting that this is the case. The South West boasts the most satisfied young workforce, with just over a third (38 per cent) complaining of being trapped.

**How trapped do you feel in your job?**



- Those working in the South West are also least likely to feel their current job/career doesn't fulfil their wider life ambitions. Just 47 per cent agree with this compared with 64 per cent of those in the North East, 60 per cent in Scotland and 58 per cent in Greater London.
- Young executives in Scotland are the most likely to stay put to pay off debt. Over two thirds of Scottish respondents feel trapped by debt (68 per cent) compared with 52 per cent in Greater London and 40 per cent of those in East Anglia.

### I'm staying to pay off my debts



- Employers in the North West, North East and Scotland should be most concerned about their young high fliers moving on. Sixty four per cent of those in the North East and Scotland and 66 per cent in the North West are currently looking for a job compared with 51 per cent in the Midlands and the South West and 58 per cent in Greater London.
- Young people in Scotland and the South East (91 per cent) are most determined that a job should bring purpose to their lives. The least concerned are employees in East Anglia and Greater London (81 and 82 per cent respectively).

## Men versus women

- Women are marginally more positive about their jobs. Forty seven per cent say they feel trapped compared with 49 per cent of men.
- More women than men feel trapped by debt, with 57 per cent of young female executives admitting this compared with 54 per cent of their male counterparts.
- Slightly more men are looking for a job right now compared to women (58 per cent vs 56 per cent).
- Men are less fulfilled with their careers than women (40 per cent vs 20 per cent) as well as their lives in general (27 per cent are not happy compared with 20 per cent of women).
- More men (83 per cent) compared to women (72 per cent) agree that employers are at risk of losing their young high-fliers through failing to listen to their wider life ambitions.
- A job that provides young people with purpose in their lives is a top priority for both men and women, with 83 and 89 per cent agreeing respectively.
- The quarter-life crisis is a real prospect for more women (86 per cent) than men (79 per cent).

## By age

- Frustration with employers who fail to listen to their ambitions peaks with young people aged 29-31, with 83 per cent agreeing that this will lead them to leave.
- Feeling trapped increases with age. Forty seven per cent of 25-28 year olds feel this way, rising to 48 per cent among those aged 29-31 and to 50 per cent among 32-35 year olds.
- Unsurprisingly, 25-28 year olds feel more trapped by debt than their older peers (59 per cent vs 56 per cent of 29-31 year olds and 52 per cent 32-35 year olds).
- Those at either end of the 25-35 age range (25-28 and 32-35) feel most strongly that their current job/career doesn't fulfil their wider life ambitions.
- Young people seem to become less fulfilled with their careers as they get older but more fulfilled with their lives.

## By job function

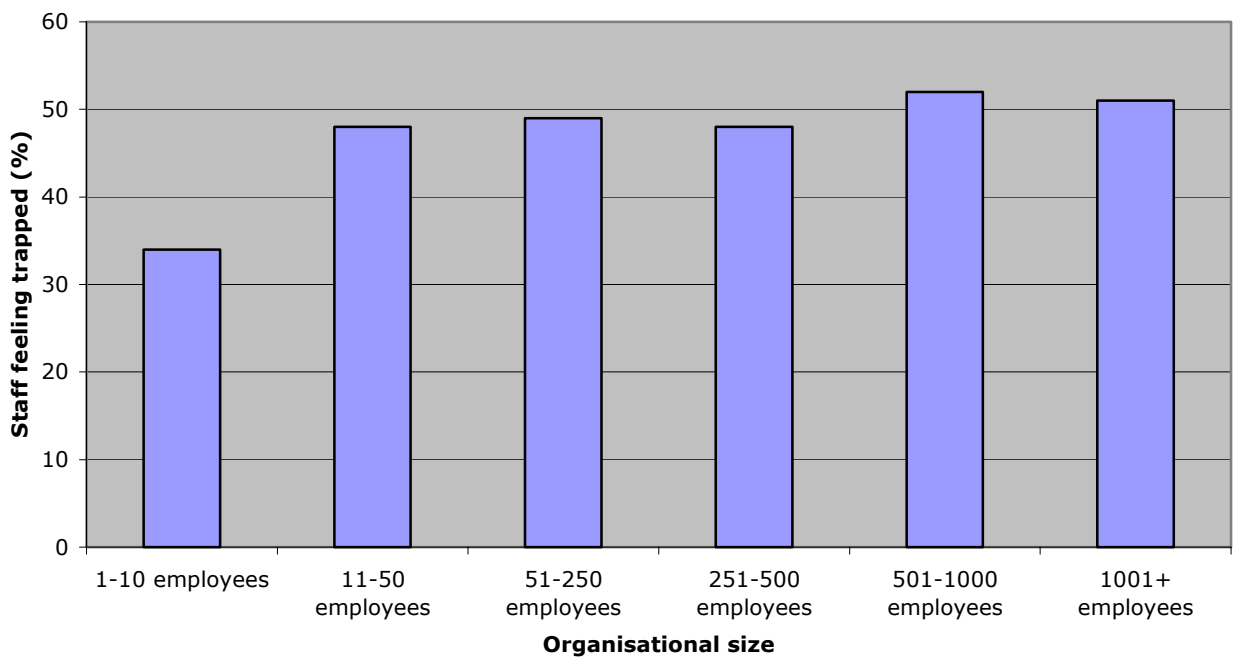
- Young people in finance/accounting functions feel least trapped. Just 45 per cent feel trapped compared with 52 per cent in IT/telecoms and 53 per cent in PR/marketing/sales. Meanwhile, 58 per cent of those in general management roles admit to feeling stuck.
- Young executives in PR/marketing/sales are most trapped by debt. Nearly two thirds (64 per cent) in these functions blame debt for getting stuck, compared with 51 per cent in finance/accounting and IT/telecoms.

- Heads of PR/marketing/sales functions should be most concerned about their young high fliers moving on. Sixty three per cent of young people in these roles are currently looking for a job compared with 55 per cent of those in finance/accounting functions and 57 per cent working in IT/telecoms.
- Those working in IT/telecoms feel most strongly that their job/career doesn't fulfil their wider life ambitions. Two thirds feel this way compared with 59 per cent of those in finance/accounting roles.

### By size of organisation

The sense of feeling trapped increases with organisation size. Just 34 per cent of those working in organisations employing fewer than 10 people feel stuck, rising to 51 per cent among those in the largest workplaces.

**Feelings of being trapped in job or career**



- Interestingly, those working for the largest organisations (>1000 people) feel most trapped by debt, with 59 per cent citing this compared with 51 per cent in the smallest companies.
- Larger employers should be most concerned about their young talent walking out. Fifty nine per cent of those working for organisations employing between 250 and 1000 staff

and 58 per cent of those working with 1000+ staff are currently looking for a new job. This compares with 53 per cent of those employed by organisations with 10-50 staff.

- Those working for smaller organisations are less likely to feel that their wider life ambitions are compromised by their current job/career. Seventy eight per cent of those in organisations employing 1-10 staff feel this compared with 87 per cent of those in organisations employing 500-1000 staff.

## **Top tips for employers from today's young high-fliers (and tomorrow's leaders)**

1. Listen, listen and then listen some more. In order to begin to address the needs of your young high-fliers you need to understand what frustrates and motivates them inside and outside of work.
2. Take a flexible approach to career progression developed in consultation with the individual. Beware of blanket career schemes, particularly in larger organisations.
3. Keep stretching and challenging your brightest people by providing ongoing training and development. By maintaining an open mind about job roles and allowing a degree of flexibility, young people will be keen to shape their own roles.
4. Treat your youngest talent as leaders in the making and encourage them to hone and explore their leadership potential inside and outside of work.
5. Work hard at keeping a connection between what they are doing in their jobs and how this fits in with society.
6. Recruit the right young people. Look for people who will bring different points of view to your organisation and you will benefit from their passion and innovation. If you recruit only on academic excellence, you will overlook some of the best people.
7. Find out where your young employees' passions come from. Even though you may not see it, they will not have switched them off. If you think they have, you may be fooling yourself; don't be surprised when you lose them.
8. Embrace the whole person. Young talent will not tolerate dividing lines, and if you insist on them, you'll miss benefiting from their wider knowledge and experiences.
9. Encourage your young talent to shadow your current leaders, so they can learn from and be inspired by them.
10. Most importantly, don't forget to develop the managers who are good at mentoring your younger talent. Nurture the nurturers and they will behave in ways that will retain your future leaders.

## Top tips for young high-fliers

1. Don't worry about being naïve – this is a huge strength. By being new to something you may see it differently to people “in the know” and have the spark it needs to become interesting again.
2. Be bold. Get out there and try something new. This might mean investigating a new sector or taking part in a training session which doesn't appear to be directly linked to your immediate role.
3. Don't be put off if the established leaders all seem to be older than you. Accept the challenge and show them how beneficial it is to have a younger mind on board. You'll not only win credit for your good work, but respect for tackling a perceived problem and overcoming it.
4. Remember that things won't change overnight, but over time. Stick with it.
5. Develop yourself outside of work as well as through your job. You may learn valuable skills that you can bring to your role, adding value to what you already do.
6. Don't expect to switch off your passions and your caring for the world. Find a channel for it and plan your career as a citizen. For example, join a board or become a school governor.
7. Develop your networks, and not just at work. New or turbulent networks can help you tap into new perspectives and bring clarity to your existing role.
8. Do not be afraid to learn something new and place yourself in uncomfortable situations both inside and outside of work. Engaging with new people will help you spot new opportunities and communicate better, taking your career to new heights.
9. Don't let status become too big a piece of your decision. Choose your next job by the opportunity to learn and who you'll be working for, not the status/grade.

## **About Common Purpose...**

Common Purpose is a campaigning organisation that believes the UK needs more – and more diverse – leaders. It runs leadership programmes for leaders of all ages, backgrounds and sectors.

Since 1989, more than 60,000 people have been involved in Common Purpose and over 16,000 leaders from every area of the UK have completed one or more of its programmes. More than 70 per cent of FTSE 100 companies and many small businesses and organisations across all sectors have used Common Purpose for professional development.

For more information on Common Purpose visit [www.commonpurpose.org.uk](http://www.commonpurpose.org.uk)