



Engaging with Gen Z: cultivating a diverse talent pipeline

June 2025

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Foreword

Understanding how young people engage with career options is essential for the pharmaceutical industry's future. As the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI), we recognise that insights into Generation Z's aspirations and workplace expectations are crucial for ensuring a robust talent pipeline.

In our conversations for this report, young people expressed frustration with generational stereotypes. Rather than being 'lazy' or 'phone-addicted', they care deeply about their futures and are navigating complex challenges in a changing and often challenging world. They find career decisions daunting and seek empowerment rather than criticism – wanting employers to meet them where they are.

The ABPI plays a pivotal role in fostering collaboration among our member companies to attract and retain young talent. We remain committed to promoting diversity and inclusion, ensuring that all young people can envisage meaningful careers in the pharmaceutical industry and wider life sciences sector.

The findings in this report underscore the importance of continually evolving industry's approach to supporting informed career decision-making, to align with the evolving expectations and values of the next generation. By doing so, we not only strengthen our sector but also our contribution to healthcare.

Above all, young people want to be taken seriously and have their voices heard. By sharing their perspectives in this report, we aim to do precisely that.



**Andrew Croydon, Director,
Education and Examination
Policy & Partnerships, ABPI**



Executive summary

Understanding what drives young people's career decisions is crucial if the pharmaceutical industry is to attract the future talent it needs.

As those born between 1997 and 2012 – 'Generation-Z' or 'Gen-Z' – start to navigate the increasingly complex career landscape, pharmaceutical companies must adapt their recruitment and engagement strategies to remain competitive in the talent marketplace.

This report explores how young people engage with career information and the factors that shape their choices. Our research reveals that Gen Z's approach to career exploration is different to generations before, with a strong preference for authentic insights, social media guidance and representation from people like themselves.

Career aspirations are seen as an ongoing journey, with many young people changing their minds multiple times before settling on a career path. The vast majority are on a winding journey shaped by various influencers, personal interests, and trial and error. Early and consistent engagement is vital to support this journey.

Our findings show that parental figures remain highly influential in career decisions. However, traditional career guidance is increasingly supplemented by social media platforms, with visual platforms surpassing professional networks as preferred sources for career information. This shift demonstrates young people's preference for authentic, relatable content over formal corporate messaging.

The report highlights several areas where more could be done to support the recruitment of high-quality, diverse talent. It's not that the pharmaceutical industry isn't doing this already, but that they should continue to build upon their efforts by:

- expanding authentic social media presence
- increasing work experience opportunities
- showcasing diverse entry pathways
- highlighting the variety of available roles

Young people are wary of what they perceive as tokenistic attempts at promoting diversity and polished corporate messaging. Instead, they want real and authentic proof of why they should consider roles, companies and industries.

Accessible content featuring day-to-day experiences of ordinary employees resonates more than polished marketing materials, highlighting the importance of genuine representation. Seeing people like themselves working in their desired industry directly impacts young people's career choices.

By addressing these opportunities and continuing to emphasise existing strengths – such as job security, competitive salaries and positive societal impact – the pharmaceutical industry can better align with Gen Z's evolving expectations and values. Through genuine engagement and authentic representation, the industry can build a robust talent pipeline that ensures its continued innovation and growth.

Key facts

1. Parental figure influence:

81 per cent of young people value input from a parental figure into their career decisions, with 44 per cent considering it very important, highlighting the significant role of family in shaping career choices.

2. Representation matters:

36 per cent of young people are influenced by positive role models or people like themselves working in their desired industry, emphasising the importance, for some, of visible diversity and inclusion in attracting young talent.

3. The importance of social media for career inspiration:

36 per cent of young people have used social media to inform a career/job decision, surpassing company websites.

4. Social media preferences:

TikTok (50 per cent) and Instagram (46 per cent) are the leading platforms for career guidance among young people, surpassing LinkedIn (36 per cent), indicating a shift towards more informal sources for perceived 'authenticity'.

5. Importance of careers content:

concerning career exploration preferences, 'Day in the life' posts from ordinary people are the most popular content type (36 per cent) for learning about careers, showing a preference for authentic, relatable insights over polished, formal corporate messaging.

6. Pharmaceutical industry awareness:

only 17 per cent of young people believe they have a comprehensive or broader awareness of pharmaceutical companies beyond medicines development.

7. The need for hands-on engagement:

90 per cent of educators believe pharmaceutical or life sciences employers looking to engage with students should offer work experience or internship opportunities.

8. Career aspirations are an ongoing journey:

only 6 per cent of young people say "they always had a clear idea of what job I wanted to do and pursued that", with the majority on a much more winding journey shaped by influencers, their own interests, and some trial and error.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, and building on the recommendations within our previous report, which investigated the attraction and perception of the pharmaceutical industry to Gen Z, we suggest the following practical recommendations for employers to consider to attract future talent:

- **1.** Starting small and locally can be transformative, particularly for those new to, or struggling with, engagement with educational institutions to provide meaningful impact. The ABPI's research found that meaningful impact is not exclusive to national partnerships but results from longer-term deep strategic partnerships.
- **2.** Explore the appropriate use of social media channels to provide trusted, accessible and authentic careers content that demystifies, showcases relatable and diverse role models, and reaches new or previously remote audiences.
- **3.** Consider new content formats to spotlight employees through short-form, behind-the-scenes video content highlighting employee stories and their day-to-day roles in the industry to bring authenticity and excitement to company websites and recruitment pages. Our research shows Gen-Z values transparency and real-life experiences over polished corporate messaging.
- **4.** Deliver a consistent presence supported by a variety of 'always on' accessible resources that connect learning with 'real-world application', so that schools can fit in at the moments that work for them. The ABPI's research found no clear consensus on the best time of year to provide career support due to the huge divergence of school-curriculum and careers-inspiration approaches.
- **5.** Ensure visibility when providing accessible opportunities for valuable work-based learning, in response to what our research shows educators and young people want from the pharmaceutical industry.



ABPI commitments

Adopting an industrywide approach to enable members to engage with Gen Z and access the right diverse talent, the ABPI will:

- **1.** Build on the current ABPI-schools pilot partnership established through the Careers and Enterprise Company 'Classroom2Careers' initiative, to replicate forging deeper strategic partnerships with schools and colleges in areas of education deprivation and industry 'cold spots', providing different types of support over time as part of an ongoing process for careers inspiration
- **2.** Work closely with STEM Learning UK to develop a unified sector-wide approach to supporting its flagship STEM ambassador programme, boosting opportunities for the education sector to engage with the pharmaceutical industry and support the creation of a more diverse STEM workforce
- **3.** Work with Futures For All, with a particular emphasis on supporting Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) engagement, to develop meaningful industry-focused work experience accessible across the four nations and meeting the needs of the work-experience guarantee for every young person to have access to high-quality, multiple workplace experiences, totalling 10 days' worth throughout secondary education¹
- **4.** Review existing ABPI online careers content to reflect the findings of this research, ensuring the appropriate use of social media channels to provide trusted content that: publicises the varied pathways available into pharmaceutical companies; highlights diverse, relatable role models and success stories within the industry; provides new content formats that spotlight employees; and supports informed career decisions
- **5.** Support the industry's consistent presence of 'always on' accessible resources to connect learning with 'real-world application' through the ABPI dedicated website for school and college educators and career advisors ([ABPI Interactive Resources for Schools](#)), reflecting the Department for Education updated guidance² for schools, colleges and independent training providers on careers education



Influencers and influences

The importance of different views and perspectives in shaping career choices

Young people place significant trust in the views and thoughts of those within their close circle in shaping their career choices and job opportunities.

Parents and guardians stand as the cornerstone of career guidance for young people, as 81 per cent of respondents value their input of which 44 per cent consider it very important, highlighting how career decisions do not necessarily start within a formal education setting, but rather at home.

Teachers maintain significant influence (68 per cent), with 28 per cent of respondents rating their views as very important. In our survey, teachers emerged as very slightly more important than careers advisors in education (64 per cent), highlighting the need for deeper partnerships with schools and colleges that support curriculum teaching alongside careers advice.

Perhaps surprisingly, friends were highlighted as the third most important source of influence (67 per cent). The impact of peer perceptions and behaviours is interesting to consider when it comes to awareness or behaviour-change campaigns around the pharmaceutical sector.

"I'll go to maybe one of my teachers at school or my parents because they're very experienced in giving advice out to me because they're very informed about society."

14-year-old male student from London.

"As I moved into year seven, I figured out that I was really good at biology for my age group. And I just really, really loved the subject. I think it's partially down to having a good teacher who showed me just what biology could be. I just rolled with it, and it was really good."

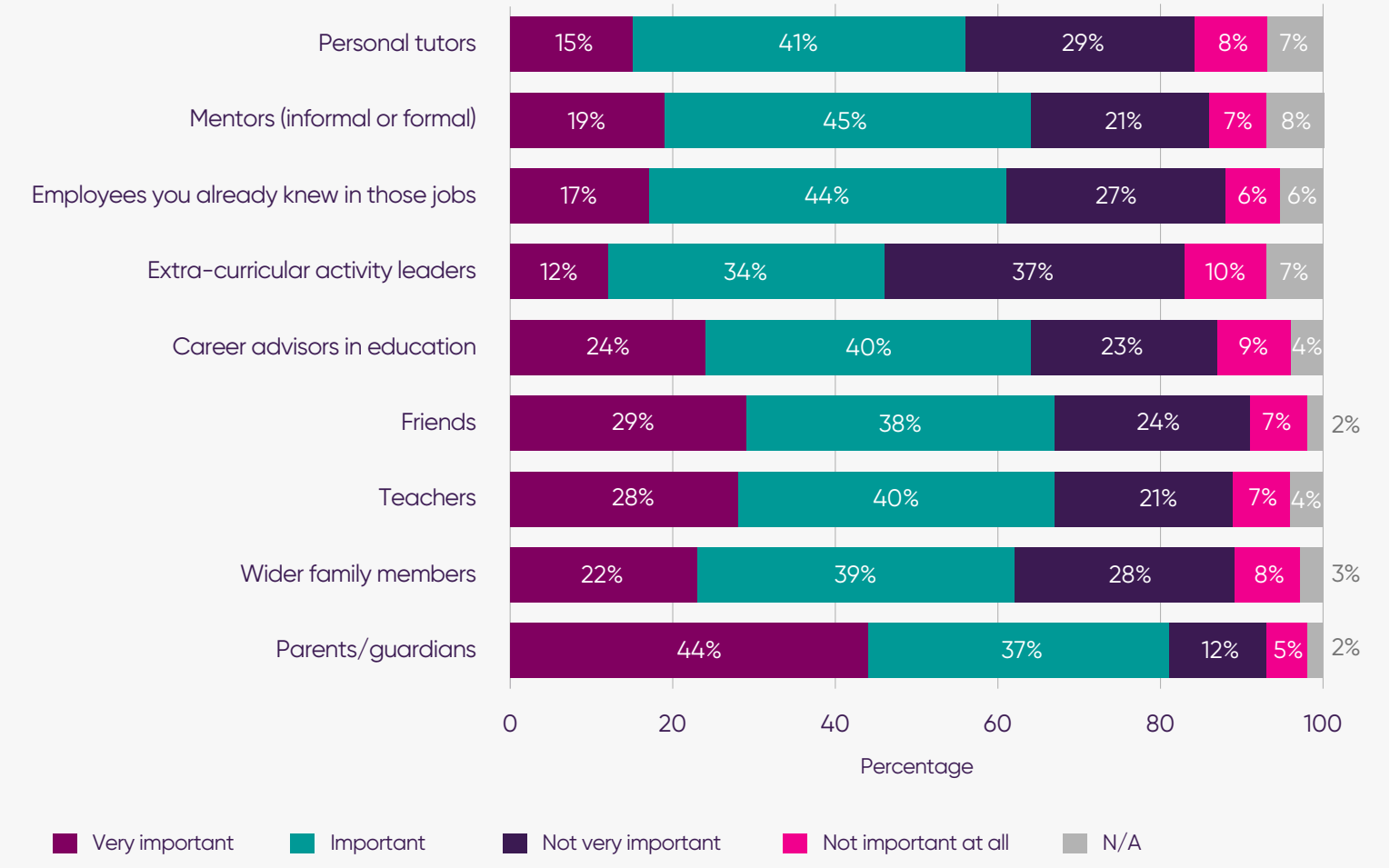
14-year-old male student from South West England.

Several factors influence young people’s perceptions of different sectors or jobs they aspire to. Not only do young people trust advice from a parental figure, but they also actively gravitate to emulate family members’ successful career paths, with 43 per cent of respondents inspired by family members with appealing careers.

Across responses, there is a clearly visible trend around the importance of experiences – whether that’s wider life experiences, work experience or experiences of family and friends. This aligns with other findings in the survey around the importance of authentic information over abstract or impersonal messaging.

Media representations have a measurable but more modest impact, with career-focused TV shows and films influencing 23 per cent of respondents, social media 19 per cent, and celebrity ambassadors 15 per cent.

Figure 1: “How important were/are the views/thoughts of the following people in shaping your career choices/job opportunities?”



There were gendered differences in these answers. Female respondents demonstrated notably stronger influences from personal connections and experiences compared to their male counterparts, with a measurable gender gap in respondents selecting family members (46 per cent females vs. 38 per cent males), life or personal experiences (45 per cent females vs. 32 per cent males) and previous work experience (42 per cent females vs. 32 per cent males).

By contrast young males, seemed to be more significantly shaped by social influences, including their friendship circle (31 per cent males vs. 22 per cent females) and social media experts or influencers (24 per cent males vs. 15 per cent females).

Figure 2: “What, if anything, is most likely to influence your perceptions of different sectors or jobs that you would aspire to?”

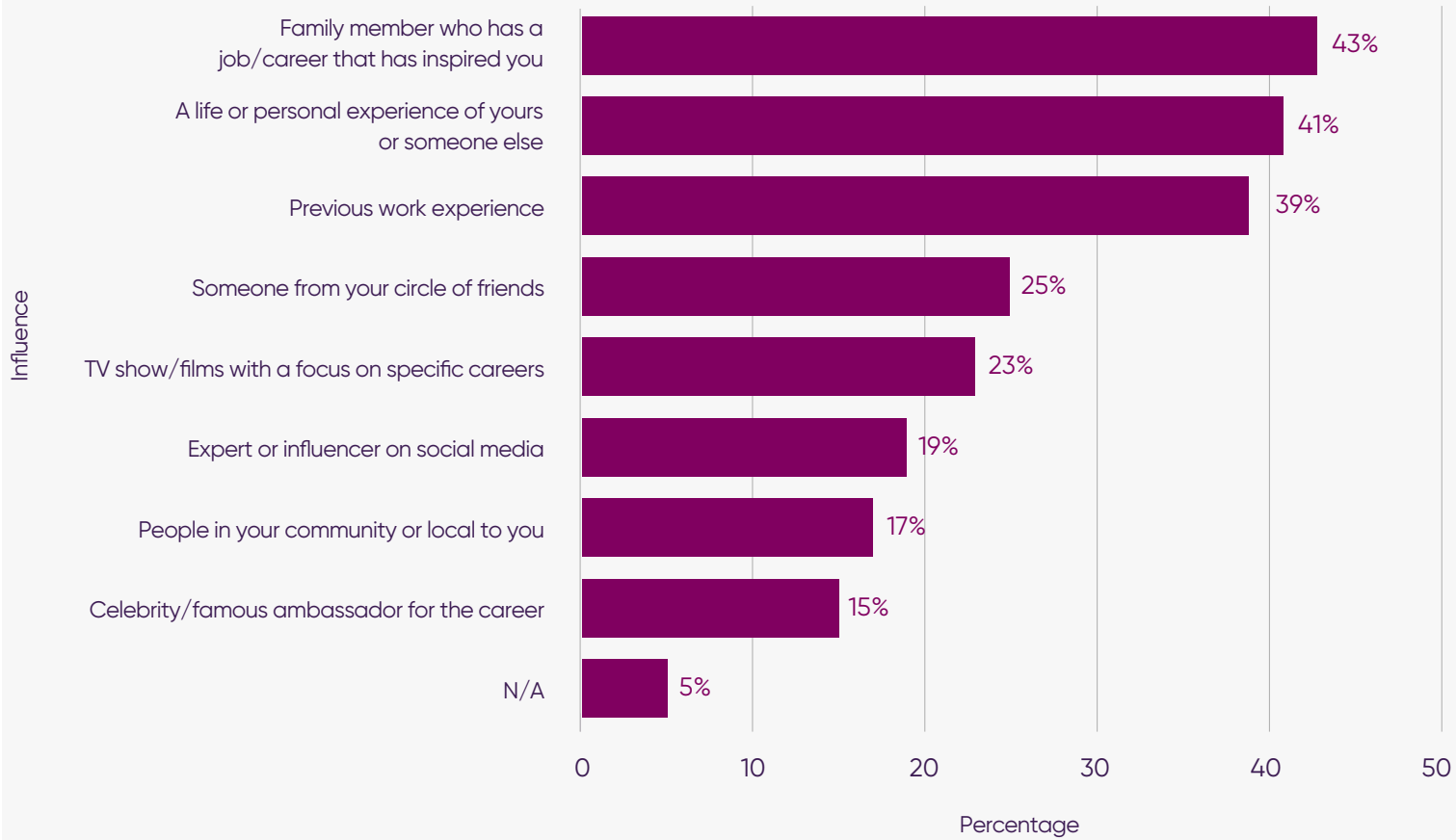
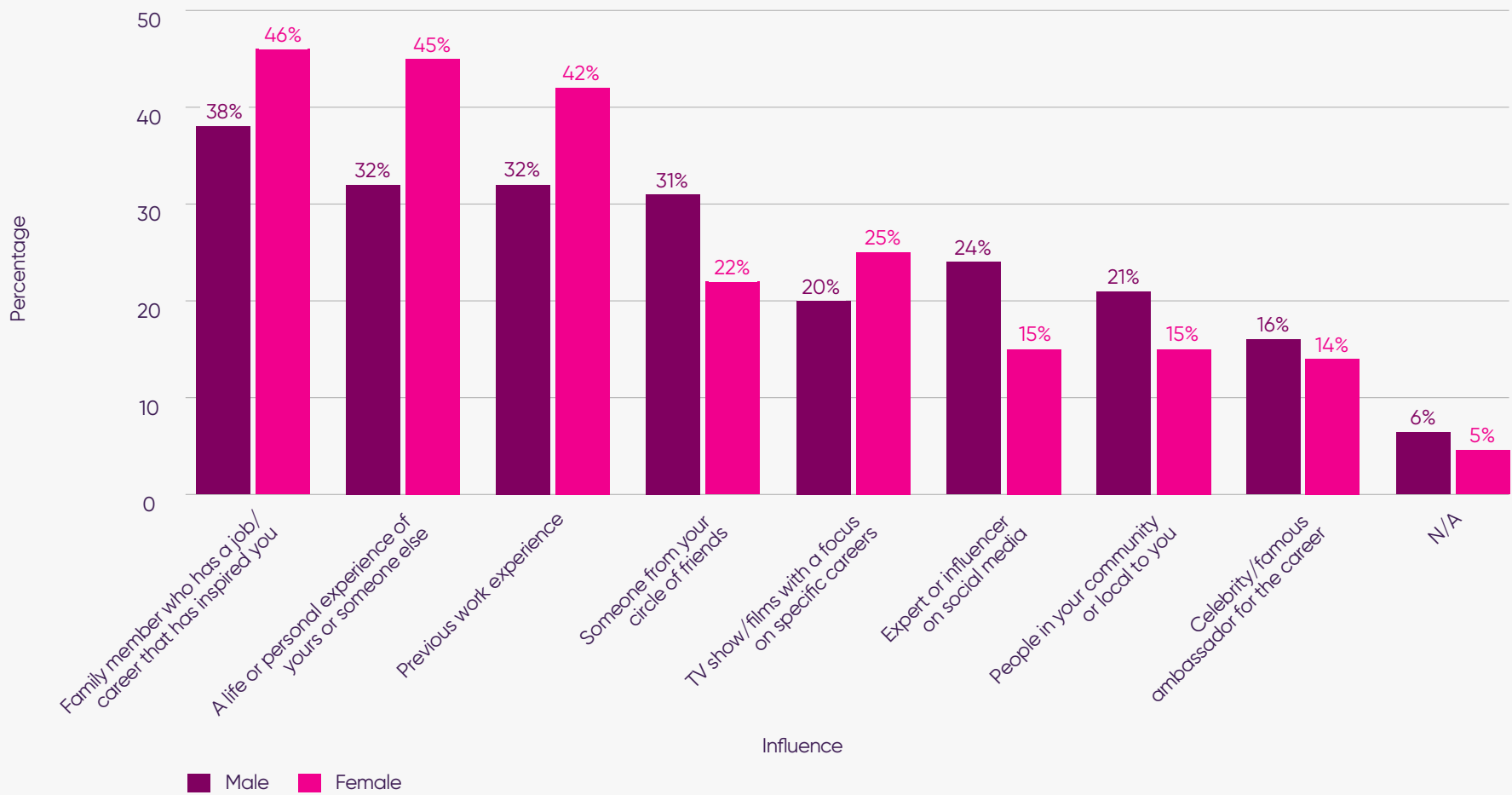


Figure 3: “What, if anything, is most likely to influence your perceptions of different sectors or jobs that you would aspire to? (male vs female)”



The role of social media & careers content

When asked which resources they have used to decide on a potential career, social media content was the second most selected choice (36 per cent), just behind job search websites (38 per cent) and higher than careers fairs, school and university career portals or even company websites.

This is a powerful finding, as social media offers a potentially rich and currently untapped opportunity (particularly around inspiring the future talent pipeline) for many companies.

The use of social media for career decision-making

Young people turn to a diverse range of social media platforms when seeking career insights, with TikTok emerging in this survey as the current leading platform, with 50 per cent of respondents identifying it as useful for career guidance. Instagram follows closely behind at 46 per cent, reinforcing how platforms primarily designed for social sharing and visual content have become significant sources of career information.

These findings challenge conventional wisdom that professionally focused networks dominate career exploration. Instead, it suggests many young people naturally gravitate toward the platforms they already use daily, seamlessly integrating career exploration into their existing digital habits. As such, careers content must evolve in a more fluid way, with industry adapting to shifting digital landscapes and preferences, where today's influential platform may be tomorrow's afterthought.

"I think it's easier to retain information from shorter videos, because there's a lot less to take in, but you can still be informed."

17-year-old female student from South East England.

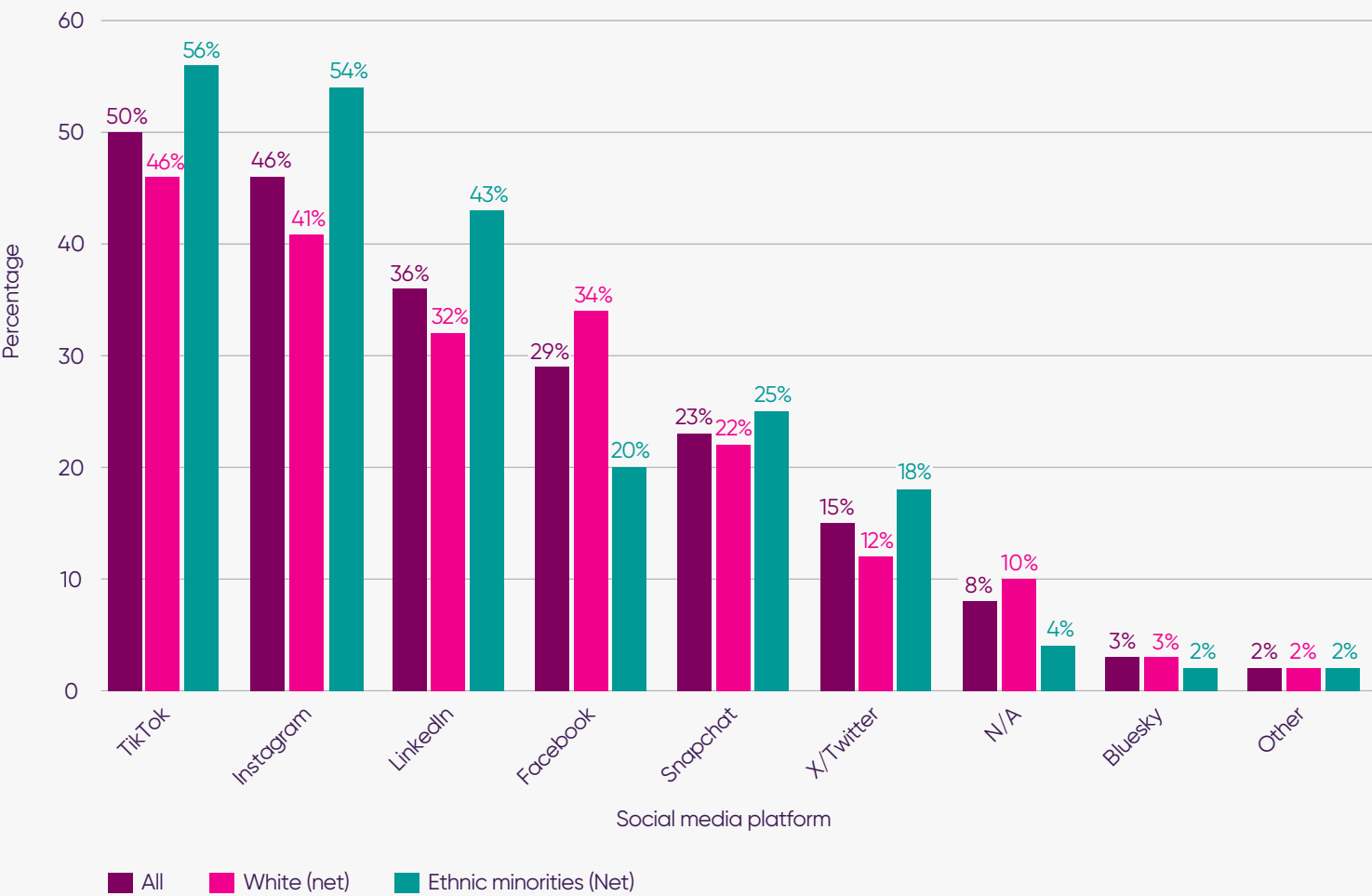
LinkedIn, often perceived as the definitive professional network, ranks third, with a still significant 36 per cent describing it as useful for career insights. This finding is perhaps reflective of fewer young people having LinkedIn accounts and reinforces that to have the widest influence, companies need to meet young people in the places where they are, through providing authentic, behind-the-scenes glimpses of working life.

"I think what the employees themselves do, how they portray the company that they work at, says more than the marketing of the company itself. You like to see the enthusiasm and that inspires you and makes you want to consider applying to that company."

25-year-old male from the West Midlands.

There are significantly more respondents from minority ethnic backgrounds reporting that all social media channels (except for Facebook) are useful for careers, something echoed in subsequent findings.

Figure 4: "Which social media platforms do you find most useful for career insights?"

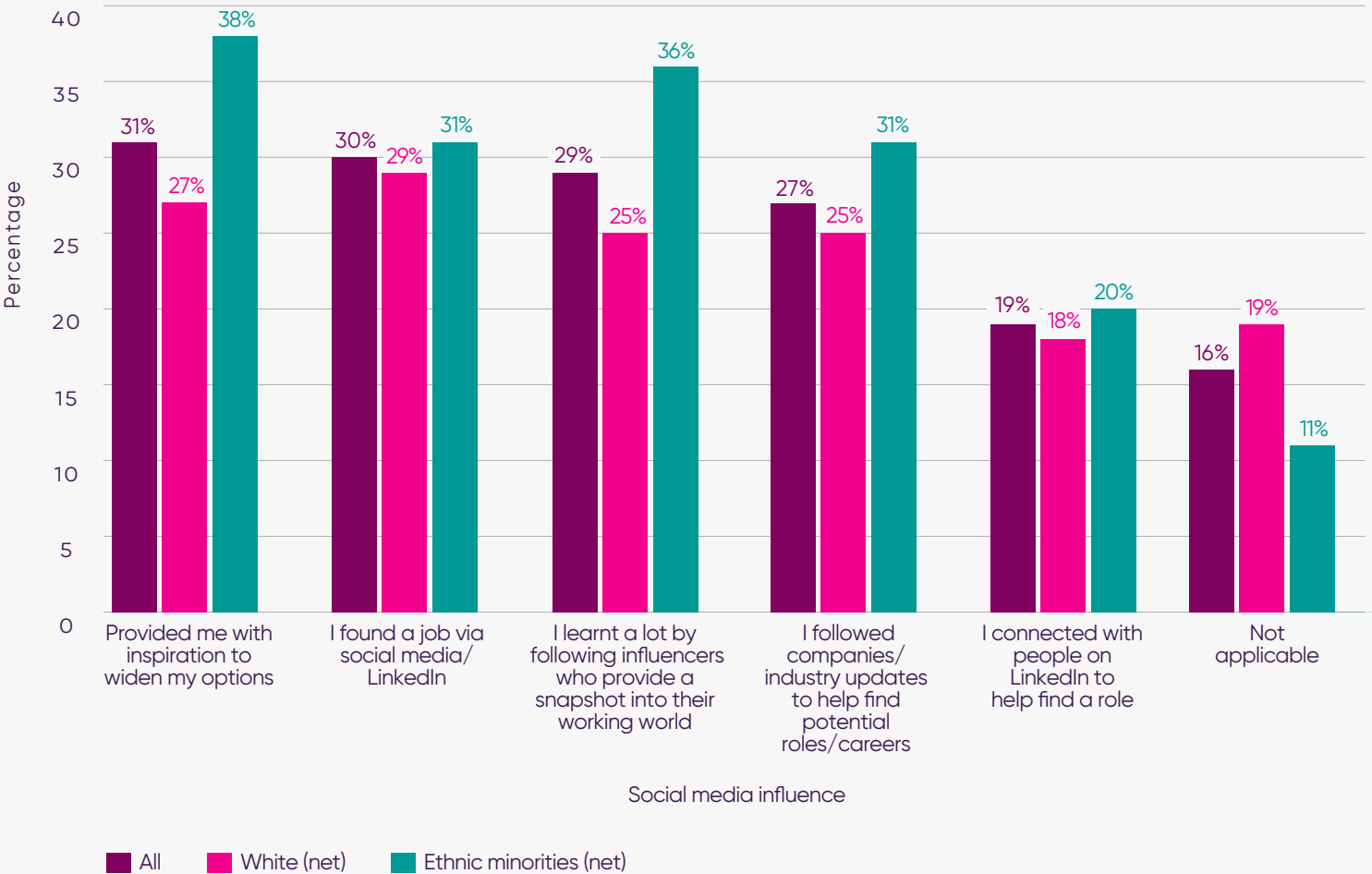


Considering how social media has directly influenced the careers decision-making of young people, there was an even spread of responses, with many selecting more informal processes including "inspiration to widen their own career options" (31 per cent), "following influencers who provide a snapshot into their working world" (29 per cent), and "company and industry updates on social platform" (27 per cent).

Direct job acquisition through platforms such as LinkedIn was selected by 30 per cent of respondents and very comparable between those from ethnic and white backgrounds, reminding us that social media functions not just as an inspirational tool for some, but also as a practical job marketplace.

For companies, however, the widespread importance attached to informal inspiration and introducing young people to new opportunities is a clear opportunity. There is evidence that this is also particularly valuable to young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, so investing in this type of content could also help to diversify future talent pipelines.

Figure 5: "In which ways, if any, has social media influenced your career or job decisions?"





The educator view:

It's interesting to juxtapose these findings with the results of our poll of educators. There we found a significant amount of scepticism, with the vast majority selecting statements highlighting the negative impacts of social media on careers.

Twenty-one out of the 29 educators who completed the poll selected statements saying it has negatively influenced careers aspirations by encouraging negative values or promoting get-rich-quick or hustle culture. Seventeen also selected the statement that it has negatively influenced aspirations by offering unrealistic portrayals, misconceptions or myths about jobs.

Far fewer selected positive statements, suggesting overall educators feel the content currently available is unhelpful.

Finally, although more than half of the careers leaders, advisors and teachers that we spoke to follow companies or industry updates on social media to boost their own knowledge, few would encourage students to do the same.

Overall, this suggests there is an opportunity to tackle the negative influences and misinformation head-on and be shown as a trusted source to educators while providing more positive, realistic and educationally aligned content within traditional social media formats.

"I think they (older generations) see social media as having a lot of negative impacts on us, but I think they are blind to the fact that it can also be beneficial."

17-year-old female student from North West England.

The most appealing content to boost career interest

The most popular content when learning about new job opportunities were all examples that capture the authenticity that young people find most useful, with 'day-in-the-life' posts from ordinary people the most popular (36 per cent), followed by short, TikTok-style video content (31 per cent) and stories from people currently working successfully in the sector (26 per cent).

Each of these performed particularly well with female respondents – 39 per cent (compared to 31 per cent of male respondents) selecting day-in-the-life posts, with 35 per cent (compared to 26 per cent) choosing short, TikTok-style videos.

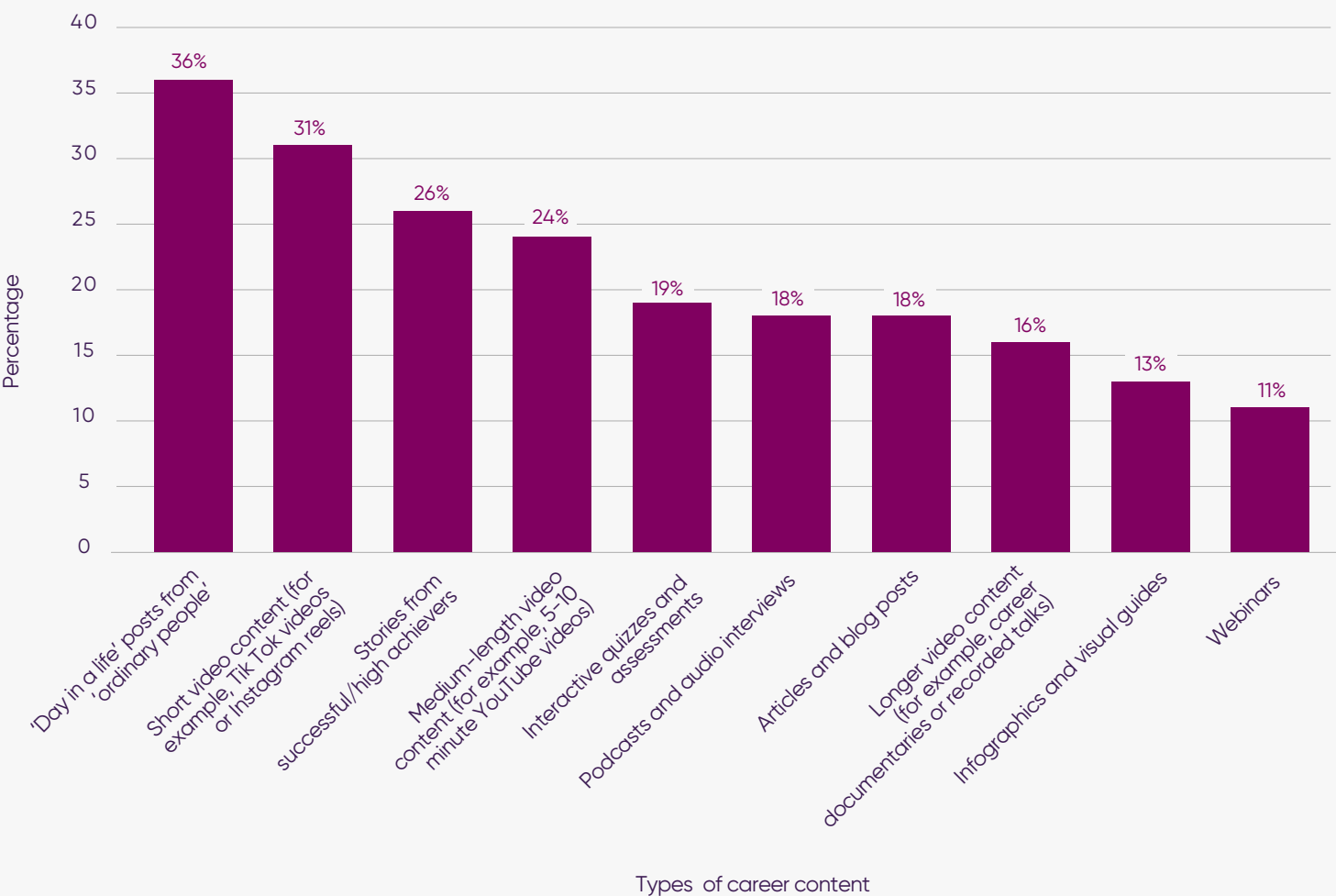
"I would say day-in-the-life posts, I'm big on the emphasis of getting the information from people actually working in the industry, that's something direct from them so it doesn't have any corporate feeling."

25-year-old male from the West Midlands.

These insights align closely with wider beliefs around authenticity and purpose. Common across these preferences are the ideas of hearing from and seeing relatable and relevant people in the sector, in their own words, to bring jobs to life. As consumers, Gen Z demands a higher emphasis on authenticity, social responsibility and brand values than the generations before.³

This is a positive message, because this kind of content does not need to be polished or have high production values (indeed, this may actually be an advantage). Companies, regardless of size, across the sector can trial these new formats with a minimal budget. They draw on companies’ most valuable resource – their people.

Figure 6: “What types of content do you find most interesting or useful when learning about careers/job opportunities?”



How Gen Z judges potential employers



Corporate red flags and green flags

"So for me looking on like the company's website, I wouldn't really trust anything because most of the time it's just positive. So social media - maybe like TikTok, Instagram, getting insight from people who work there that might post about it - I trust that more."

17-year-old female student from North West England.

For pharmaceutical companies looking to attract Gen Z talent, the message was clear – they want to see and hear about what life is like in those jobs with an authentic look 'behind the scenes'.

What Gen Z is looking for is evidence of company values or what working life is like within organisations:

Corporate green flags 	Corporate red flags 
Signs of a positive work culture, people with other interests beyond work	Unrealistic expectations relative to job level (references to jobs requiring, for example, a master's degree)
An inclusive environment that shows diversity among employees	Evidence that they would not support a positive work-life balance or would have a toxic work environment
Good communication from the company, for example, positive interactions when enquiring about a role	Lack of diversity or perceptions of a lack of authenticity around diversity actions
Anything on social media showing colleagues doing things together as a team (for example, employees at social work events for team bonding)	Lack of enthusiasm from their public communicators and spokespeople
Other signs that show that employees are valued	Language that suggested an unhealthy competitive team dynamic
Charitable donations and activities	Bad reviews (for example, Glassdoor, social media) or poor staff support
Long-term employees or employee loyalty	Micromanagement
Training opportunities advertised	Poor incentives
Displaying employee turnover rate (as an indicator of work culture)	High salary far above the industry standard (suggests a red flag to some)

Why representation matters

When discussing 'green flags', the focus group emphasised authentic representation of diversity and inclusion as a significant positive signal. They made a clear distinction between superficial diversity efforts and genuine commitment, noting that representation of various forms of diversity indicated a truly inclusive workplace. This suggests young people are adept at distinguishing between tokenistic representation and authentic organisational values.

"It's inauthentic – I feel like a lot of places when they're advertising, they specifically pick out sort of like different minorities to showcase what they would class as diversity generally."

17-year-old female student from South East England.

"Obviously there is disability diversity as well. I think this is something that more companies should advertise because there are a lot of people who are maybe intellectually or physically disabled who feel a bit ostracised from the working world because they don't see role models that have the same disabilities as them."

17-year-old female student from South East England.

When young people do not see themselves reflected in an organisation, it signals that they may not belong. This is particularly critical in a sector like pharmaceuticals, where diversity gaps remain.

Fewer than 1 per cent of life sciences employees are 'black/African/Caribbean/black British', compared with approximately 3 per cent in the wider economy,⁴ while the Social Mobility Commission estimates that just 9 per cent of life science professionals are from a working-class background.⁵

"I want to research the company, see their values and what they stand for. What they stand against, whether they're going to let discrimination pass by them, or if they're going to stop it and make sure it doesn't happen, it's very important."

14-year-old male student from London.

Women make up approximately 41 per cent of the life sciences workforce in the UK, albeit variation exists across some of the major occupational groups – in senior leadership positions women are still underrepresented as they hold only 32 per cent of director-level roles.⁶

Moments that matter in pharmaceutical industry career exploration

The career-decision timeline

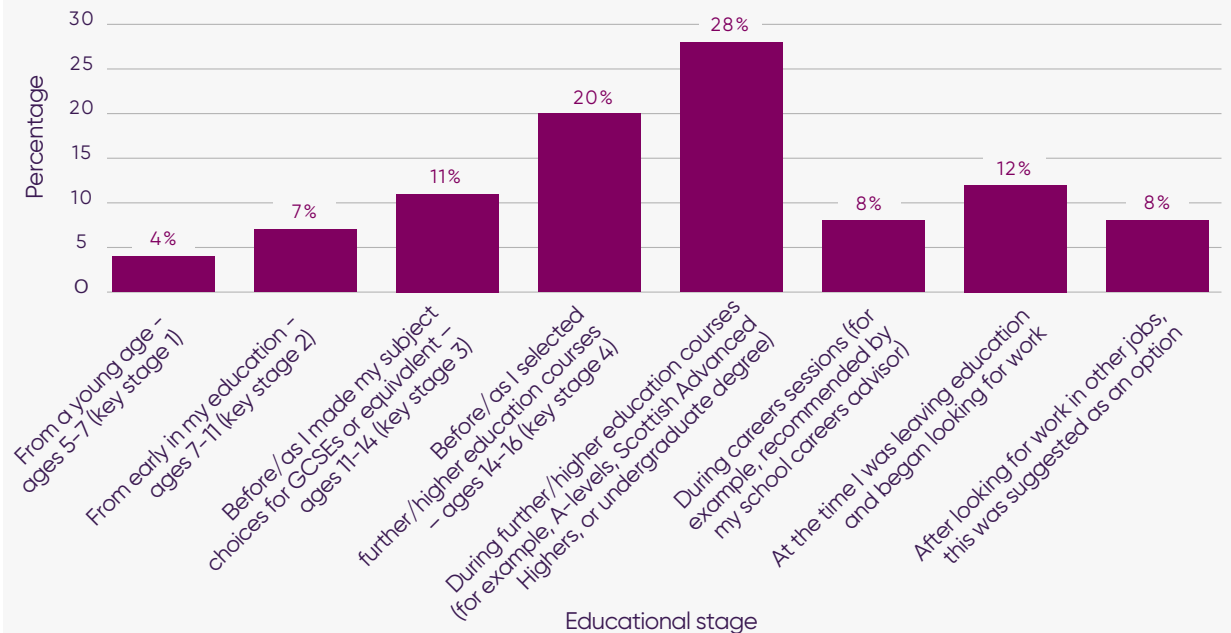
Understanding when young people make decisions about career paths is crucial for pharmaceutical companies looking to engage with, and attract, young people.

Collectively, 22 per cent of young people picked any point up to or including selecting their GCSE subjects or equivalent (by age 14), 20 per cent said in the lead-up to choosing higher education (HE) or further education (FE) options (14–16), 28 per cent selected during HE or FE, and for a further 20 per cent it was upon entering the labour market. In other words, 'one size does not fit all'.

The key message from our survey of young people and educators was the importance of considering career inspiration – and building a future talent pipeline – as a consistent process, not a one-off moment.

Additionally, if companies only concentrate on the later points, such as during HE, it is in most cases too late to reach students who have already ruled themselves out or chosen subjects they believe do not equip them for careers in the sector.

Figure 7: "Think of your most recent job, or your current career/job plans if you aren't working yet. When did this job/sector first become something you realistically considered?"





The educator view:

As we might expect, **educators were clear that career information should start much earlier than the moments when young people are making decisions**, so they are informed and inspired upstream and making career decisions from a position of strength. Most selected ages 11–14 as the crucial moment of inspiration.

"Getting the information to young people is the challenge, they need to be seeing these options and thinking about the diversity of careers around the time they move from Year 6 to Year 8."

Head of Science from South West England.

Educators also displayed a range of views with no clear consensus on when the best time in the year was to provide careers support to schools (although some moments, like the summer term, were selected by fewer educators, likely due to exam season). This reflects the huge divergence of school curriculum approaches, with each approaching careers inspiration differently, and highlights the need for a consistent presence from pharmaceutical companies supported by 'always on' resources that schools can fit in at the moments that work for them.



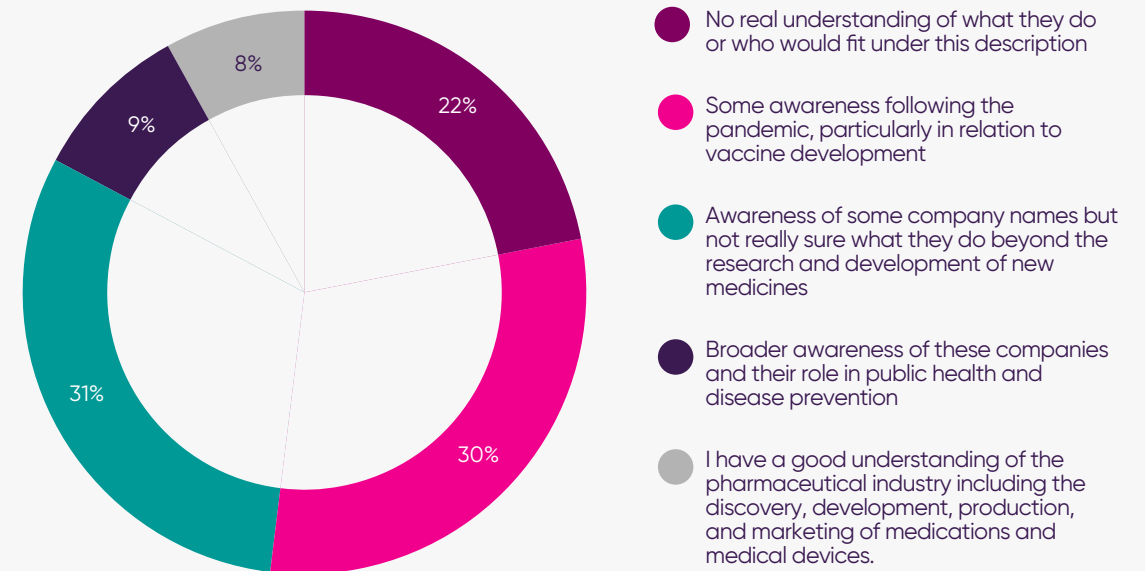
Young people's perspectives on careers in the pharmaceutical industry

The current pharmaceutical industry knowledge gap

Our survey showed the opportunity for new and inspiring engagement strategies to transform understanding of the industry, which still faces knowledge gaps, with only 17 per cent of respondents having a comprehensive or broader awareness of these companies' roles beyond medicines development, such as their role in public health, disease prevention and the full lifecycle of medicines from discovery through to marketing.

Of the remaining respondents who indicated a limited understanding of the pharmaceutical industry, 31 per cent said they were aware of company names but unclear about their functions beyond research and development, 30 per cent only had pandemic-related awareness primarily through vaccine development and 22 per cent admitted to no real understanding of the industry or its workforce.

Figure 8: "Which of the following would best describe your understanding of the pharmaceutical industry in the UK?"



Our previous research found there is a general lack of awareness about the diversity of roles available in the industry.⁷ This lack of awareness means young people may feel the industry is not for them or struggle to navigate it.

Building on these insights, this survey found that the young people who feel they do understand the diversity of roles available still have little clarity about what these roles entail in practice. While some misconceptions around jobs in the sector showed evidence of improvement in conversations, a lack of understanding about what the day jobs actually entail remains significant.

The survey found scepticism as to whether pharmaceutical jobs offer variety in day-to-day work, suggesting a perception of routine or repetitive tasks, and if the industry offers modern workplace practices like flexible or hybrid working arrangements. Some young people told us that the sector would require physical presence all of the time.

"I think it's quite unflexible due to how it's difficult to work from home in the pharmaceutical industry compared to other office jobs. Obviously, you can work from home via a computer, but with the pharmaceutical industry it's either quite hands-on with lab equipment or it's just down in office."

14-year-old student from South West England.

This knowledge deficit represents both a challenge and an opportunity for pharmaceutical companies seeking to attract young talent, and careers content should not only promote the diverse roles available in the industry but also the diverse responsibilities for each of those roles too.



The educator view:

When asked to reflect on barriers to engaging with the industry more in schools and colleges, educators highlighted a lack of connections as the biggest factor, limiting access to experiences like employer talks, mentoring and work placements. Many also highlighted a lack of local opportunities – whether because they were in a pharmaceutical industry cold spot, or because local companies did not work with educators or offer students a window into the world of pharmaceuticals through firsthand experience.

"Young people don't know about things they haven't seen and interacted with – we need more speakers, work experience and workplace visits."

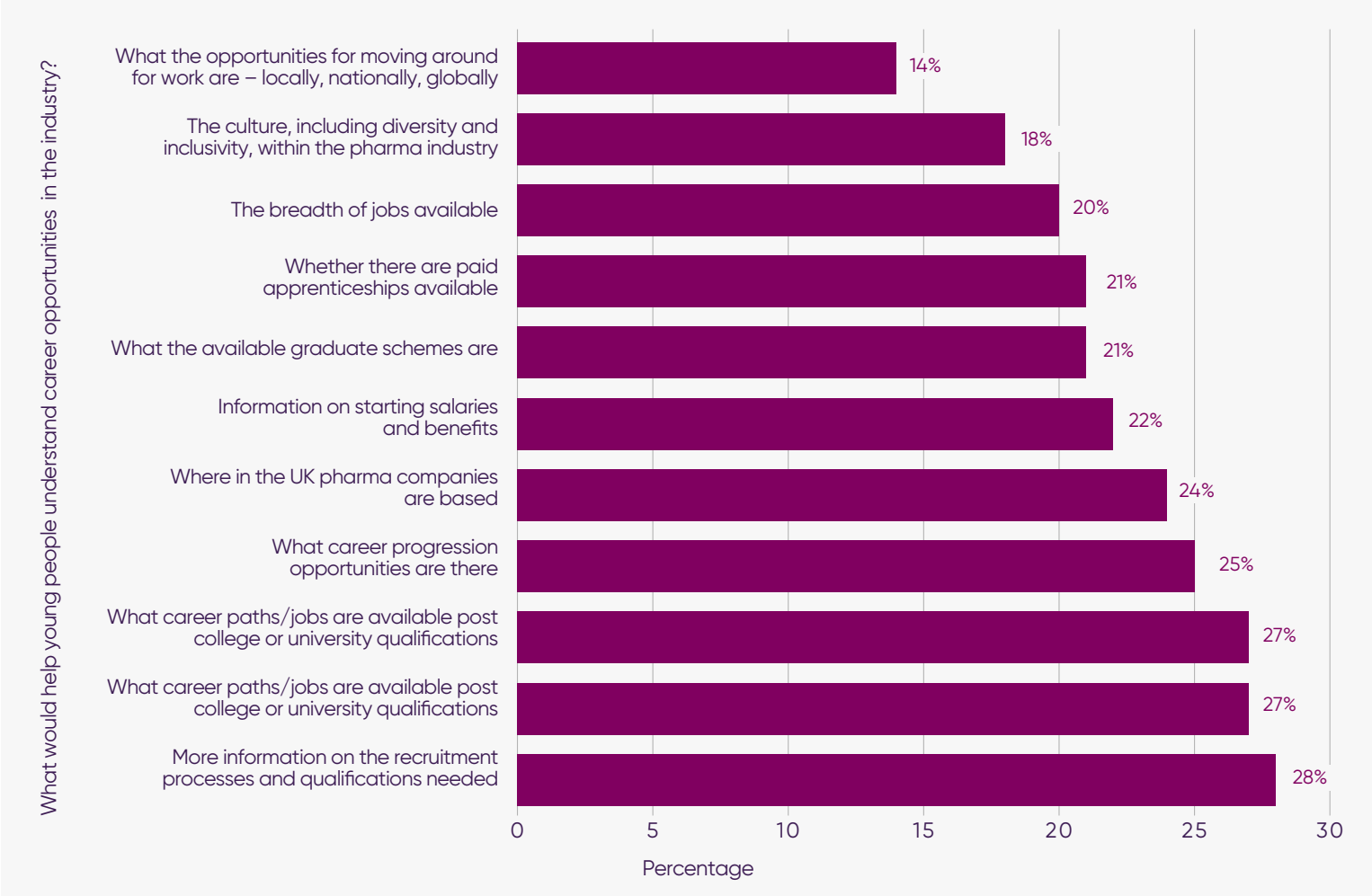
Careers Leader from Scotland.

What do young people want to know about the pharmaceutical sector?

To bring roles to life in the pharmaceutical sector, young people prioritise more practical insights about pathways and connections to real employees. The top information gaps include recruitment processes and qualification requirements (28 per cent), post-education career paths (27 per cent), and access to people already working in the sector (27 per cent).

Practical considerations also feature prominently, including company location (24 per cent) and compensation details (22 per cent). Taken alongside other responses, it looks like young people would turn to social media as part of their own research to judge answers that scored lower here, such as culture and diversity.

Figure 9: “Which of the following do you think would help you to understand more about the career opportunities and jobs within the pharmaceutical industry?”





The educator view:

Educators were aligned with young people when asked what the pharmaceutical sector could do more of. They echoed the focus on the importance of accessible pathways and opportunities. Almost all said work experience or internship opportunities would be the most valuable.

"Be visible and provide opportunities for work-based learning, for example, work experience, internships and simulated workshops in schools."

Careers Consultant from London.

Connecting curriculum to real-world employment, raising awareness of local job opportunities, and providing career pathway demonstrations, mentorship and skills workshops are also highly recommended approaches.

"Share curriculum resources with key stages 3 and 4 to connect learning with 'real-world' application."

Careers Leader from the West Midlands.

"Offer work experience to young people so they can gain a real insight into what job roles entail."

Careers Leader from South East England.

"Work with organisations familiar and experienced with providing careers content to young people. Make content accessible in various ways: website, webinars, real experiences like talks or workshops in school."

Careers Leader from the West Midlands.

Developing these kinds of engagement strategies can be challenging for smaller companies in the sector, but the importance educators attach to local employers creates an opportunity.

Seventy-six per cent of educators say they prioritise locally available companies and sectors. This means pharmaceutical companies can have significant impact with local partnerships – and not having the capacity for a nationwide intervention does not have to be a barrier. This is a particularly strong opportunity for SMEs who are the backbone of the industry but may have lower awareness among busy educators and careers advisors.

Understanding the shape of career journeys

In reviewing the literature or speaking to young people, the idea of career aspirations and inspiration as a journey shines through.

Yet through our research, strikingly different attitudes and behaviours about that journey become apparent. For some, it is exciting and for others nerve-wracking. Some are laser focused on one destination; others take a more circuitous path.

"It can feel so scary pursuing such competitive industries, wondering if I am going to make it. Thinking about all that from a young age can be really overwhelming at points."

15-year-old female student from Scotland.

"I think there's just so many things to consider, and then it's being stuck in that same career for the rest of your life. Do I know if I want to be doing that job, how do I know if I won't change my mind in 10 years' time?"

17-year-old female student from North West England.





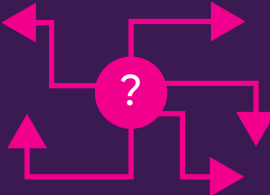


Key differences also emerged in how informed young people were, or how much the views of others shaped their own thinking. Only 6 per cent of young people said "they always had a clear idea of what job I wanted to do and pursued that".

"I've kind of gone through about five to 10 jobs where I felt like this is what I want to do. So they've changed very frequently."

23-year-old male student from London.

In line with the idea of this process being a journey that evolves over many years (sometimes rapidly, other times more slowly) we have identified different 'routes' such careers journeys can take – these journeys may prove helpful for companies when thinking about how they engage with young people, and which touchpoints and support can make the difference.

The journeys below are based on survey data and conversations with educators and young people and aim to be a conversation starter around talent pipeline.

						
<div>1</div> <div>Linear journey</div>	<div>2</div> <div>Winding path</div>	<div>3</div> <div>Passenger</div>	<div>4</div> <div>Missed turning</div>	<div>5</div> <div>Random walk</div>	<div>6</div> <div>Steep climb</div>	<div>7</div> <div>Maze</div>
<p>This is the route for young people who quickly identify what they want to do and throughout their career refine or zero in on their destination.</p>	<p>Most young people consider several careers, weighing up their decisions and changing their minds before they arrive at a suitable decision. At different moments, they have very different destinations in mind but many gradually home in on their destination through support, resources and guidance available.</p>	<p>For some young people, the influence of others on their journey can be stronger than on their peers. Some, especially those lacking confidence, can be seen as passengers or hitchhikers with the views of others playing an outsized role in changing their destination.</p>	<p>There are young people who have a sense of their destination, or work through their journey, but without support to raise their horizons, they settle for the easy route or the safest journey. They perhaps do not realise the full range of options available to them and end up settling.</p>	<p>For others who feel anxious about the process, educators describe them as setting out on a seemingly random walk or bouncing around – changing direction suddenly or prompted by the last conversation or encounter they had.</p>	<p>Some young people have very clear ambitions – but these are not grounded in realistic information or pathways available to them. They may not realise they lack the equipment to take the steep climb ahead of them, and are at risk of being left stranded, far from their destination.</p>	<p>For many young people, picking subjects at school and thinking about future careers is overwhelming and associated with a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. For some, there is no clear sense of where they are going and they see only the obstacles in their way.</p>

Providing meaningful, actionable support for young people on their individual journeys

While the journeys above are highly personal, with each young person feeling a different combination of stability, clarity, excitement and support, by understanding some of these typical journey arcs we can start to better meet young people’s differing needs.

Below is an exploration of what that might look like for four example personas, inspired by the survey and focus-group data, showing how

employers in the pharmaceutical sector can support different personas on their journeys.

There will be differences in young people most closely matching each of these personas – for example, young people from minority ethnic backgrounds were much more likely (32 per cent) than white respondents (20 per cent) to describe their journey as about exploring different roles linked to their strengths.

Persona	About this persona:	How pharmaceutical can respond:
Confident planner	This is the group that fewest young people fall into – those who follow the linear journey, feeling confident at each stage of the process. They are confident, informed and engaged.	Needs: early intervention; diverse, exciting, engaging education content that inspires this audience pre-subject choices. They can form and achieve their ambitions and use the relevant support to get there. For the pharmaceutical sector, reaching this audience means intervening earlier – if the sector lacks a compelling narrative that engages this audience early, at the point they are ready to make decisions on subject choices, then the sector may not benefit from their talent.
Cautious considerer	This is one of the largest groups according to our research. It is young people who are engaged and want to make positive progress but find the process overwhelming and daunting. This means they instead take a route with many more twists and turns.	Needs: to feel reassured that this sector is for them; exciting, inspiring, engaging content that helps them rule themselves in and feel confident in their decisions. They are likely to worry about their decision, second guess themselves, or not feel confident that roles in the pharmaceutical setcor are for people like them. They can particularly benefit from the day-in-the-life and accessible, short-form video content that reassures them that they could fit – and thrive – in this sector and enjoy it too.

Persona	About this persona:	How pharmaceutical can respond:
Guided decision-makers	These are young people where the opinions of others play a particularly influential role. For young people on the passenger track, the approval, validation or assurance of their greatest influencers (whether parental figures, peers or educators) is going to be particularly important.	<p>Needs: a shared language and story, in particular myth-busting campaigns and discussion toolkits that help tackle misconceptions that lead their influencers to advise them away from the sector.</p> <p>When the decisions are so shaped by others, we need to consider how we influence the messages they are getting from others – and tackle any commonly shared misconceptions.</p> <p>The pharmaceutical sector should aim to equip those influencers and decision-makers to have better conversations together, whether at home or in the classroom.</p>
Security-driven strivers	Lacking confidence, these young people can rule themselves out of careers where they could be successful, as they struggle to see how they would fit in and thrive. If they value safety and security, they may perceive a sector that they have no personal experience with as a risk.	<p>Needs: to feel confident that they could succeed in this sector, and there are a variety of practical routes and pathways that are accessible to them.</p> <p>The pharmaceutical sector can support these young people by providing more information on different pathways into the sector.</p> <p>Emphasising pay, benefits, opportunities for training and mentorship, and diversity and inclusion initiatives can also help feed confidence that they can succeed.</p>

In conclusion, by considering these different journeys and needs, it will be possible to produce targeted and tailored careers content covering a young person's education journey that inspires and supports them into meaningful careers in the pharmaceutical industry.

Methodology note

This research took a mixed-methods approach to gaining a greater understanding of the factors influencing student career decision-making and how the pharmaceutical industry can best attract young talent.

Three different strands of research were undertaken; a nationally representative survey of 16–25-year-olds in the UK, a small survey of STEM subject teachers and careers leads, and a focus group.

Young person polling:

Hopscotch conducted a survey of 502 young people aged 16–25 years old between the 12 March and 18 March 2025. This included questions on career influences, preferences for receiving career information and perceptions of the pharmaceutical industry.

The sample was balanced by gender and by STEM background, comprising equal numbers of male and female respondents, and of those who had studied STEM subjects post-16 years old and those who had not. Fifty per cent of participants also resided in a pharmaceutical cold spot – a region with fewer than the national average number of pharmaceutical jobs per 100,000 people, according to the ABPI's interactive Sector Insights Map.⁸ The survey additionally included minimum quotas to ensure representation from underrepresented groups, with at least 10 per cent of respondents from each of the following: racial or ethnic minority; physical or cognitive disability; lower socioeconomic status; LGBTQ+.

Educator polling:

Hopscotch ran a supplementary survey of 29 STEM subject teachers and careers leads across schools, colleges and universities in the UK to understand educators' perspectives on students' career aspirations and support currently available, particularly in relation to the pharmaceutical and life sciences industries. This included questions about students' motivations, barriers and misconceptions regarding potential career paths.

Focus group:

Hopscotch undertook an independently recruited online focus group of young people aged 14–25 years old from across the UK. The group was recruited to ensure a mix of gender, educational stage and ethnic diversity, with 50 per cent of participants residing in a pharmaceutical cold spot.

About this research

Research for this report took place between March and April 2025 and included:

- a survey of 502 16–25-year-olds in the UK
- a survey of 29 STEM subject teachers and careers leads across schools, colleges and universities in the UK
- a focus group of 14–25-year-olds at different educational stages and early career positions, with various levels of interest in STEM subjects

The ABPI would like to thank Hopscotch for research delivery, analysis and the development of this report.

About the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry

The ABPI exists to make the UK the best place in the world to research, develop and access medicines and vaccines to improve patient care.

We represent companies of all sizes that invest in making and discovering medicines and vaccines to enhance and save the lives of millions of people around the world.

In England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we work in partnership with governments and the NHS so that patients can get new treatments faster and the NHS can plan how much it spends on medicines. Every day, our members partner with healthcare professionals, academics and patient organisations to find new solutions to unmet health needs.

www.abpi.org.uk

About Hopscotch

At Hopscotch we are passionate about driving change through education. We have been trusted by some of the UK's leading organisations to create innovative school programmes and award-winning campaigns that reach, engage and inspire young people, teachers and parents.

Hopscotch was established in 2010 and has a specialist team creating and implementing programmes around a range of themes, from climate change and the environment to careers and employability, STEM, health and wellbeing and more. We are experienced in the education landscape, policy and the curriculum, coupled with unique insight into and understanding of how to engage schools and their communities.

www.hopscotchconsulting.co.uk

Endnotes

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