Transcript

How to smash the class ceiling in the workplace

We like to think of the workplace as a meritocracy, but is it really?

Isabel Berwick OCTOBER 3 2023

This is an audio transcript of the Working It podcast episode: 'How to smash the class ceiling in the workplace'

Sophie Pender
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Isabel Berwick
Hello and welcome to Working It from the Financial Times. I'm Isabel Berwick.

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Getting what you want from your career isn't easy, but getting what you want when you start at a disadvantage is even harder. People are getting better at talking about some of the factors that can make career progression tougher, like gender and race. But one we don't really talk about enough is class. KPMG published a fascinating piece of research last year looking at which factors slowed their employees' career progression. Coming from a lower socio-economic background was by far the biggest impediment to getting ahead.

In this episode, I'll be speaking to John Friedman, professor and chair of economics at Brown University in the US, and he studies the impact of childhood inequality as well as policies that can improve children's opportunities. John explains why social mobility has faltered in the US and how that trend might be reversed. But before we hear from John, I'm going to speak to Sophie Pender, whose voice you heard at the top of the show. Sophie is a corporate lawyer, but she's also the founder of the 93% Club. It's a UK network named after the proportion of children who go to state schools, and its aim is to offer those people opportunities they might not otherwise have. I started by asking her to tell me more about the 93% Club.

Sophie Pender
The 93% Club is the UK's largest network of state-educated students. It is something that I set up when I was 19. I had gone to the University of Bristol from a state comprehensive. In my year, only 34 per cent of us got a C or above at GCSE. So most of us actually failed our GCSEs. I decided that actually, I wanted to go to university and I wanted a better life for myself because I'd always grown up very poor.

I worked really hard. I got three A*s at A-level whilst working in McDonald's and John Lewis, and during the first year at Bristol, I just noticed something was a bit off and I couldn't put my finger on it, but I suddenly felt really uncomfortable in my own skin, which was an experience I'd never had before. I realised that the percentage of people who had gone to state school was only 60 per cent at the University of Bristol when I was there, so 40 per cent private school, it's almost 50/50, despite the fact that 93 per cent of the population make up state schools. So the 93% Club really started as a place to try and find people that were similar to me. Over the years, it's just exploded into what is now, you know, the UK's largest network of state-educated people, which is insane.

Isabel Berwick
How does the network work now? Are there events? Is there a membership fee? Or, you know, is it like a private members' club?

Sophie Pender
Yeah. (Laughter) No, absolutely not. We are a network of around 40 different clubs at universities and what we do is we put on events, careers panel socials, essentially just building a big community for the students. And we help loads of students get top jobs in amazing industries like law, journalism, finance, places they never thought they'd get a job in.

Isabel Berwick
Could you tell us some of the ways in which class discrimination holds people back at work? Because it has been invisible traditionally, hasn't it?

Sophie Pender
It's not only invisible, but it's not spoken about because I think there's a lot of shame associated with it. When I think about being working class, it's not just about money, it's about all the other things that came with it. For me, it was about, you know, losing my dad at age 12 because of alcoholism. It was having to work multiple part-time jobs, you know, support my family. There's so much that is tied up in class and being working class that actually it's not an easy subject to talk about. And so I think a lot of people, you know, once they become socially mobile or they ascend the ranks, they just sort of compartmentalise it and assimilate. And so I think that's what makes it very difficult to tackle it in the workplace to start with, is that people don't want to speak about it.

Isabel Berwick
And when you're in a workplace, you know, what sort of characteristics or habits or behaviours do you think are targeted and what could be called class discrimination? You know, is it the way people speak? Is it the way they behave? What have you found from your members and your own experience?

Sophie Pender
I've had comments from people commenting on the way that someone's suit looks or the fact that they're wearing brown shoes or the fact that they could make eye contact or they were sort of not very confident. And so there are loads of, you know, prejudice that can come out there, and that's the recruitment level. And then I think there's a real psychological element, which is this sort of otherness that comes with being in the workplace. I think for me, one of the biggest issues in classism in the workplace are the hidden things. So it's not knowing how to navigate the workplace. You do things, you slip up, you make faux pas. All these really nuanced things that if you've had parents who work in the workplace, they can teach you. And if you haven't had parents who have that background, they can't teach you.

Isabel Berwick
So what could employers do to make sure their workplaces are more welcoming and we could say inclusive, but also to make people feel they belong there if they come from less privileged backgrounds?

Sophie Pender
So there are lots of things that employers can do and are already doing. There's been a huge push on the recruitment front to get more people through the door because, you know, it's sort of it's basic maths. You get more people from the majority of the population, the more your workplace will start to feel like the majority of the population. There's lots on that front and the 93% Club does loads with employers who are wanting to recruit. So we have recruitment fairs, we get the employers to meet the students in really intimate situations where the students don't feel overwhelmed and they can ask silly questions and things like that. I also think internally spotlighting people from lower socio-economic backgrounds or working-class backgrounds is really important. You know, you can't relate to what you can't see. So I think spotlighting is a very important part and something that we are encouraging employers to do at the moment is to build those networks internally, because I really do believe that the network is one of the single most influential thing in someone's career. And it's been proven in studies that sponsorship and having someone scaffolding your career can really, really help. And unfortunately, those sponsorship relationships are built very subtly through common ground and association. So it's about building the framework internally for people to find common ground in situations where they feel like they have none.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Isabel Berwick
Sophie, thanks so much for coming on the podcast.

Sophie Pender
Thank you very much for having me.

Isabel Berwick
I thought what Sophie said about shame was really powerful. Coming from a lower socio-economic background can bring with it all kinds of invisible difficulties. No wonder people don't jump at the chance to talk about it. Sophie went to a top university and it changed her life. But in a sense, stories like hers are all too rare. University is one of the great engines of social mobility, but young people who already have significant advantages are over-represented at the best educational institutions, both here in the UK and in the US. I spoke to Professor John Friedman to find out. His research looks at how inequality affects people at a young age and how society can redress that imbalance. I started by asking John to tell me a little more about the research he works on.

John Friedman
So we're interested in why there seem to be so few students from low- and middle-income backgrounds attending America's most elite schools — schools like Harvard that are in the Ivy League or like Stanford and MIT that are of similarly high selectivity. And what we found was, contrary to much prior work, it wasn't so much that high-income applicants applied more or were more likely to attend once they got in. Much of what was going on was just simply these colleges were admitting those students from high-income families at higher rates.

High-income students indirectly benefited from three different non-academic priorities: priorities for legacy students — these are students who are children of alumni — students who were recruited athletes, and then they benefited from a focus on non-academic aspects of applications like your extracurricular activities or your personality. And what we also found was that changing these policies would really just have enormous impacts on the diversity of students who get into these very influential leadership positions in society. And that's because attending these schools seems to be very impactful on students' trajectories. It's really transformational.

Isabel Berwick
This idea of legacy admissions is quite extraordinary. Could you explain to listeners who are not American how that works? Because it is . . . it does seem like it should be illegal.

John Friedman

So I think, you know, as many people point out, there are legacy admissions in all sorts of things, right? How many people have been helped in getting a job by the fact that their parent worked at a firm? So it's not like this is a crazy thing in the history of human endeavour, but the benefits are extraordinarily large. The average student who is a child of an alumni parent, they're admitted at something like four times the rate of a student who looks otherwise similar but is not a legacy applicant. So these are really very strong preferences in admissions, and it's not surprising that students from more affluent backgrounds are the ones who are legacies, and so they're the ones who are primarily benefiting from this particular practice.

Isabel Berwick

Could you generalise about how the prospects of an American student compare now to how they might have looked 10 years ago or even 50 years ago? Across the board, has social mobility increased or decreased, or is it stable?

John Friedman

What people call relative mobility — that's the chance that a student born at the bottom of the income distribution will grow up to achieve incomes at the top of the income distribution — that has been pretty stable over the past 40 or 50 years in the US, you know, at least as far as we can measure. What's been happening in the US over that time period, though, is that inequality has grown tremendously. And so what that's led to from a different perspective, so-called absolute mobility — that's the chance that a child born into poverty will achieve kind of a given level of standard of living when they grow up — that's fallen quite dramatically. And one statistic that encompasses this is just what's the chance that you grow up as a child to have a better standard of living than your parents did? A generation ago, almost all children in the US did that, and now it's really no better than a coin flip. Only 50 per cent of children will grow up to have a higher standard of living than their parents do.

Isabel Berwick

Looking ahead, what are the ultimate results on a national level of poor social mobility? You know, looking five or 10 years out, if things don't improve, what will the US look like?

John Friedman

I don't think we need to look five or 10 years ahead to see the costs of low social mobility, because social mobility is not only an economic problem, it is a social problem as well. A lot of the frustration and hopelessness that families feel, I believe, stems from the belief that there's no opportunities for them and especially for their children.

Isabel Berwick

I wanted to just touch on employers and business. You know, if you're an employer interested in encouraging social mobility and, you know, encouraging more staff from more disadvantaged backgrounds, are there particular steps they can take?

John Friedman

So this is all about investing in the human capital and social capital of potential workers. And so we've seen a lot of really productive partnerships in the US between businesses and communities that both increase upward mobility by investing in those typically young adults, but that also generate exactly the type of skilled workers that businesses are craving.

So just to give you one example, Charlotte, North Carolina, it's really been a just a booming city over the last generation. But all that economic growth hasn't resulted in better pathways out of poverty for children that grow up in disadvantaged circumstances in Charlotte.

In fact, by one measure, Charlotte is the worst mobility city out of the top 50 cities in the US. The city was kind of shocked when we initially published this statistic, but they responded by really trying to ask, why was it that all of these local strong businesses weren't leading to more opportunity for children growing up in Charlotte, and what could those businesses do?

And the way they've responded is kind of through a bunch of sectorally specific job training programs. And businesses in Charlotte, like Bank of America, have been investing in this really with a specific focus on local communities. It's not investing so much in the physical infrastructure of a neighbourhood; it's investing in the human infrastructure of the neighbourhood, investing in the individuals in the neighbourhood. Once they have those skills, both kind of social, professional, that's really what leads to a change of circumstance, and it benefits the businesses too.

Isabel Berwick
Is there anything in your research or any hunches you have about the ways in which class holds people back, you know, once they've started work? You know, let's say you've been to a top university, but often those people, I think data from this country shows they don't progress as quickly in their careers. Is there anything that can be done about that?

John Friedman
So my instinct is that the same types of barriers that limit students and children in their pathways to upward mobility while in elementary and secondary school, while in university limited social capital, which also potentially leads to limited aspirations. You don't quite know what you're supposed to go after, and you don't know the right people to help you go after those things. My instinct is that could limit people's career trajectories even once they're in the workforce.

And so I think the same types of approaches, making sure that there is mentorship so that people feel included in, in this case, you know, a business community or in an occupational community, making sure that they understand what are the possibilities for them and that they then have the resources in order to go after those possibilities — my instinct is that's gonna matter there, too.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Isabel Berwick
There's a massive opportunity here for workplaces because they will all benefit from having staff who come from all areas of the population, not just the parts of the population that talk about wine and skiing. So what can managers do? The idea that we should pay expenses to attend interviews, that's a small thing, but it could be a huge thing to people. And be mindful of people's different backgrounds and expectations in a way that perhaps we never have before. And honestly, keep the in-group chat to a minimum.

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