10 ways for employers to break the class ceiling

"This seminal work has updated our understanding of both modern Britain and the nature of class itself. It fuses theoretical prowess, revelatory data, gripping narrative and clear prose. All of us interested in meritocracy, whether real or imagined, owe the authors an enormous debt of gratitude."
Amol Rajan, BBC Media Editor

In contemporary Britain it quite literally pays to be privileged. Even when individuals from working-class backgrounds are successful in entering the country's elite occupations they go on to earn, on average, 16% less than colleagues from more privileged backgrounds. A substantial gap remains even when we take into account a person's educational credentials, the hours they work and their level of training and experience.

Going behind the closed doors of elite firms reveals that the most powerful drivers of this pay gap are the misrecognition of classed self-presentation as 'talent', work cultures historically shaped by the privileged, the affordances of the 'Bank of Mum and Dad', and sponsored mobility premised on class-cultural similarity and familiarity.

The mechanisms that underlie such systematic inequity are in large part societal; they are about fundamental inequalities in the resources (economic, cultural and social) that ow from a person's family background. This means that however well-meaning and committed employers may be, there will always be limits to their ability to unilaterally tackle class inequality and social mobility in the workplace.

Yet this doesn't mean that change is not possible and worth fighting for.

The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged by Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison is published by Policy Press. Paperback is out Jan 2020, price £9.99

https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/the-class-ceiling

Here we outline 10 practical ways in which employers can tackle the drivers of the class ceiling.

1.   Measure and monitor class background

The first step towards meaningful change is accurate measurement. In 2018 the UK government worked with the Bridge Group to publish recommendations (details on back page) on how employers should measure class background in their workforce. This recommends data collection in four areas; parental occupation, type of schooling, free school meal eligibility and parental experience of higher education. Follow this guidance, including the precise survey questions to ask, the answer categories to provide, and how the resulting data should be presented.

2.   Find out whether your organisation has a class ceiling

I**nvestigate whether you too have a class ceiling**. Look at how socio-economic composition varies by grade or position, or investigate whether there is a pay gap by class background. If you uncover ceiling effects, undertake qualitative research to understand the factors contributing to this and attempt to find solutions.

3.   Start a conversation about talent

Interrogate how 'talent' and 'merit' are recognised within your organisation, and to what extent it can be reliably connected to demonstrable output or performance. Research in the book shows that this can be subjective and dependent on whose job it is to recognise and reward these attributes. This interrogation might take the form of a conference, online engagement via blogs and webinars (often anonymity can be useful here), a set of public events, or an internal away day. Ensure that those at all levels contribute and aim it at creating practical responses.

4.   Take intersectionality seriously

People's work lives are shaped by many axes of inequality that often work together and influence one another, or create distinct types of disadvantage that are experienced in different ways. For example, white women and people of colour from working-class backgrounds face a very clear 'double disadvantage' in earnings, which can be multiplicative rather than simply additive. **Examine intersections between different strands of diversity**, both in terms of how you analyse employee data, and also in your design of 'diversity' interventions.

5.   Publish social mobility data

For positive change individual organisations need to be bold and transparent about the issues they face. **Publish data regarding the class backgrounds of all staff, and senior leaders in particular.** This will allow for benchmarking across firms and sectors, as well as for sector-wide drivers to be identified and collective solutions sought out. Include details about what actions you are taking to drive improvements; publishing data alone could have the effect of deterring the very audience – candidates from working-class backgrounds – that you are trying to encourage.

6. Ban unpaid and unadvertised internships

Unpaid, or very low-paid, internships can often only be undertaken if one has outside financial support, but these kinds of internships remain commonplace in many elite occupations and can be important stepping stones. **Ban the practice of unpaid and unadvertised internships**, and advocate a four-week legal limit on all internships, the use of apprenticeship levy funding to generate quality placements and the publishing of accessible national guidance on the rights of interns.

7. Engage middle and senior managers

If organisations are going to take social mobility seriously there **needs to be meaningful buy-in from middle and senior managers who are often most responsible for enacting and 'socialising' dominant work cultures**. Engage this audience buy building a compelling case for change around both advancing business performance and social equality. Present internal and benchmark data to highlight the nature of the challenge and collate the voices from within the organisation that animate the issues at stake in a way that resonates.

8. Formalise the culture of informal sponsorship

Our research shows that senior staff, often operating outside of formal processes, are able to fast-track the careers of junior staff whom, crucially, they are initially drawn to on the basis of cultural similarity. **Guidelines are key to shutting down informal progression tracks that disproportionately reward the privileged**. One way to create these is to formalise (through transparently designed and communicated programmes) and democratise (by making opportunities available to all) sponsorship opportunities.

9. Support those who want it

People from working-class backgrounds often self-eliminate from pushing forward in their careers, or sort into less prestigious areas. This is rarely about a lack of ambition, but more to do with rejecting expectations to assimilate, battling feelings of 'otherness', or negotiating low-level but constant microaggressions in the workplace. These issues should be approached sensitively.

Support networks or advocacy groups may work to combat self-elimination, though recognise that coming from a working-class background is not always an 'identity' that people want to wear or own in the workplace. Less public support mechanisms may be more appropriate, such as mentoring or buddying. **Consult with staff from disadvantaged backgrounds about how to best support them.**

10. Lobby for legal protection

The Equality Act 2010 contains a section entitled the 'Socioeconomic Duty', which requires government and all public bodies to have due regard for 'reducing the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage'. Successive governments have declined to bring this into effect, but momentum is gathering around furthering this legal agenda. **Write to your MP and ask them to support the Early Day Motion,** which calls on the government to enact this duty, using a template written by #1forequality, a campaign led by Just Fair and The Equality Trust. (details overleaf).

Politicians continually tell us that anyone can get ahead. But is that really true? This important book takes readers behind the closed doors of elite employers to reveal how class affects who gets to the top.

Friedman and Laurison show that a powerful 'class pay gap' exists in Britain's elite occupations. Even when those from working-class backgrounds make it into prestigious jobs, they earn, on average, 16% less than colleagues from privileged backgrounds. But why is this the case? . Drawing on 175 interviews across four case studies - television, accountancy, architecture, and acting – they explore the complex barriers facing the upwardly mobile.

This is a rich, ambitious book that demands we take seriously not just the glass but also the class ceiling.

Sam Friedman is Associate Professor in Sociology, London School of Economics and a Commissioner at the Social Mobility Commission. He has published widely on social class, social mobility and elites. **Daniel Laurison** is Assistant Professor at Swarthmore College, USA. Previously he was at the London School of Economics & Political Science. He is Associate Editor of the British Journal of Sociology.
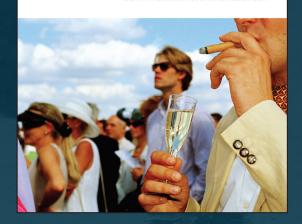
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FURTHER INFORMATION

Measuring Socio-economic Background in your Workforce: recommended measures for use by employers
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/768371/Measuring_Socio-economic_Background_in_your_Workforce__recommended_measures_for_use_by_employers.pdf

Commencement and Enforcement of the Socio-Economic Duty - s1 of the Equality Act
https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/51058

 #1forEquality campaign led by Just Fair and The Equality Trust
https://1forequality.com/

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