

Meeting the Gatsby benchmarks need not be so daunting if you use your networks, curriculum and creativity.

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Sometimes I think my role is more about event planning than careers guidance. I run at least ten plus trips a year, numerous in school workshops, drama presentations, guest speakers, residential's in the UK and abroad. That is because I truly believe that in order to really inspire students in terms of their career thinking it massively pays to either bring outsiders in or get the students out. Genuinely life changing inspirational careers rarely happens in a traditional classroom setting.

If I had one top tip to achieving some Gatsby benchmarks and meeting the careers strategy 2020 vision it would be to secure a whole school non-timetabled themed day in the summer term this academic year. By then the sun will be shining and no one will be coughing and spluttering. Year 11 and 13 will have left and teaching staff might be able to eat lunch, have a toilet break and support your plans. A well planned, organised and structured day of inspiring business speakers, careers focused lessons, hands on activities and university outreach activities could easily see you meet seven of the eight benchmarks.

Be creative. Please don't do the same events that you have always done. The expertise and skillset you call on to host year 10 mock interviews is wasted on the students. It is highly unlikely that they will face an individual panel interview process as we may have done. Instead it is all group interviews, phone assessments and skype interviews. Try a networking speed dating style event. The students will be forced to speak to business people and after their first few panicked attempts will smoothly shake hands and announce "Nice to meet you. I am John and I am doing A levels in..." in a calm, confident and practiced manner. These are the vital life skills they need to succeed not to apply for a fake job with a stranger who is pretending to be an interviewer.

As the world of work is changing so must our careers programmes. Careers Fayres need to be more practical and hands on. Use stickers and prizes as an incentive to encourage conversations between students and business men and woman. Don't let year 9 just run in and steal all the freebies without a single meaningful conversation occurring between them and the amazing employers you will have worked so hard to get there.

Build your own networks. You have a massive source of professionals at your disposal in the form of all your staff. I asked every staff member to give me two email contacts of people they knew locally, nationally or globally who would be inspirational for our students. Imagine how lovely it would be to receive a personal email saying someone you know thinks you are inspirational and giving you the opportunity to give something back. People who love their job love nothing more than to inspire others. I now have over 100 business men and women who mentor my sixth formers and will come and talk to students interested in finding out more about their profession.

Networks are just that; nets that spread far and wide. I once had Eddy the Eagle visit the school to give a talk; he was a friend of the schools' electrician. This summer we have a marine biologist; a contact who has come through our science technician. Use your alumni and don't be afraid to ask people to do things. They can always say NO and sometimes they might but you will get far more yes's and no one will think any the worse of you for asking. We were fortunate to have Lara Morgan, one of the top UK female entrepreneurs talk to our year 12 about the importance of persistence. I saw her speak elsewhere with a colleague and we asked her if she would come to our school and she did!

There are some activities I do every year. I also make space for more creative activities and opportunities as and when they come up. Careers can be found in so many spaces. For example, I am running world book day events on the 1st March it is a Harry Potter inspired day. The students will wear Harry Potter inspired costumes and will have Hogwarts inspired lessons in potions and quidditch. They will also have a power point on the variety of job roles that worked on the films. There will be an owl and hawk flying display at lunch where they will meet the animal handler and the chance to meet a carpenter wood whittler. Students from a neighbouring university who are studying special effects, stage make up and costumes will also be doing a Q and A session.

On world book day, the students will debate the effects of the rise of e readers on the printing and publishing industry. That is real Labour Market Information in the curriculum in action. They will become aware that ¾ of the people who worked on the films were in visual effects. We have a growing digital media industry in Bournemouth. This is a genuine credible pathway for them local graduates have worked on numerous global films.

If you sit down and devise a careers strategy and plan that meets the Gatsby benchmarks but fails to inspire and excite the students to the opportunities around them, then you will have failed. Think of me on 1st March dressed up as Dolores Umbridge in the grey curly wig and pink suits and pearls thinking up what my next educational decree might be!

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Vicky Woodings is a qualified careers guidance practitioner and has worked with young people and their families for over fifteen years in a variety of settings such as Connexions, Education, Social care and the NHS. She currently works as a careers leader in one of the four UK schools that featured as a case study of excellent schools in the 2017 CEC State of the Nation report where her energy and commitment to achieving all eight Gatsby benchmarks was praised. She has recently been shortlisted for Careers Leader/Educator of the year by the Careers Development Institute and is passionate about innovative approaches to developing careers provision for young people in the UK. Please follow her on Twitter @Vicky Woodings