

## Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

### Episode 39 – Starting your career during the pandemic

Speakers: Dr Helen Hughes and Dr Emma Gritt

[00:00:00] **Helen:** Welcome to the Research and Innovation podcast. My name is Helen Hughes. I'm an associate professor and a psychologist here at Leeds University Business School.

[00:00:14] **Emma:** Hi, I'm Emma Gritt. I'm a lecturer in information management and I'm also programme director for our undergraduate business management programmes.

[00:00:22] **Helen:** And today we're going to be talking to each other about some research that we've been doing, looking at the impact of starting your career in a pandemic - so starting your career remotely or in a hybrid formation. So I guess the best place to start really is by thinking about what we, you know, the fact we've all done this haven't we for the last 20 months or so, I say "we've all", a lot of us have worked from home, or worked, at least remotely for, you know, the first of six months or so of the pandemic.

So I guess we're all pretty familiar, aren't we, with some of the challenges of working from home - these feelings around work-life balance not quite being what you want it to be. Those feelings around enjoying the fact that you're not having to commute every day, but really missing those day-to-day conversations with our peers. I guess you'll sympathize with that, Emma as well.

[00:01:11] **Emma:** Yeah, absolutely. It's been a, I think it's been a tough 20 months or so for everyone hasn't it.

[00:01:18] **Helen:** Yeah, it has and yet, I guess you and I are in quite a fortunate position because we've not started new jobs. We've not had to kind of learn a new business or learn a new role. We've kind of continued with what we've been doing. And I guess the other really important differences, compared to some of our students who have just graduated, is that we've worked before.

So, you know, if I walk into an organization, you know, I've got some prior experience to draw from and I might think, well actually, you know, what would I have done last time? What would my last manager have thought about this? How would I have approached this before? I guess our students today and our graduates and even school-leavers are entering a workforce, for the first time.

And they're kind of devoid of all of those cues that they get from wandering around the building and from having prior experience. And so I guess today we wanted to really think about, are these challenges, are they magnified for new employees who are new to the workforce altogether? And what are those, those challenges that they've been facing? So to begin that conversation, I guess, Emma, as someone who specializes in research information systems, you know a lot about digital working, I guess one of the things we've spoken about is whether actually today's graduates are maybe the best place to enter the workforce because they've grown up with Facebook and Instagram and they are the people developing digital organizations.

What's your thoughts on this, Emma?

[00:02:49] **Emma:** Yeah, thanks, Helen. I mean, I think, you know, that's a really good point. And as you've said, our students and, and I suppose students all over really, they are those kinds of digital natives - they're used to this technology. So in that sense that they are sort of best placed to be coming into this, what might be the new sort of digital workplace, as we say.

I think the thing that is something that they are having to adapt to a bit more is that social side of things. So, you know, developing those kinds of communication skills, those social norms, like what you were saying earlier about, you know, those things started a new job, or the fact that how do you, how do you know who to speak to?

And I think it's those sorts of things that, that are maybe the things that they maybe need to develop a bit more in their careers.

[00:03:38] **Helen:** Yeah. And it's interesting, isn't it? Because we've been doing over the last sort of six months or so, some research with our student interns who have just gone out into the workplace for the first time. Most of them on nine to 12 month year-in-industry placements, as we call them. And we've been interviewing them about their experiences, asking them to reflect on some of the things that they've struggled with.

And it is really interesting, as you say, that it's not so much the tasks that they've reported struggling with. They've come repeatedly saying, you know, I picked up the tasks really easily, or, you know, as easily as you might expect. They've developed the technical skills and they've been able to do that straightforwardly with things like screen-sharing and sort of learning from others. But, but what they've struggled a bit more with is kind of that broader context, like where does that fit in? You know, what is this task I'm doing, that I'm repeating over and over - how does that fit with the wider business?

They sort of maybe don't see that, I guess. Are you finding this as well Emma.

[00:04:39] **Emma:** Yeah. Sorry. Absolutely. It's those sorts of things of, like you say, where do I fit in the kind of grand scheme of the organization? How do I know who to talk to? How do I know who is best placed to maybe help me engage with a certain task goal? Who's going to introduce me to somebody else?

And it's those kind of, what we might call "corridor conversations" that are maybe missing a little bit, but actually are really important for grads and well for anyone really, to get that sense of the organization - how it works, what are the kind of norms around the ways of doing things?

So I think, yeah, absolutely. That sort of resonates with some of the things that we're hearing as well.

[00:05:26] **Helen:** Yeah, and I think what's quite interesting is this idea of, you know, what we can do to help our students, to sort of do things differently or better, or actually, are we already doing this stuff with our graduates? I think from some of the things I've spoken to some of our students about,

it's finding ways to sort of reconceptualize some of the things they're already doing. So for instance, they're already networking, they know what networking is. They're really good at developing a personal brand, as it were.

They're really good at, sort of adding people on LinkedIn and sort of reaching out, but actually networking in that broader context of when you're in work, it's really different, isn't it? It's about kind of just having everyday conversations with people, and not necessarily expecting anything from it and not seeing that networking is a very separate and distinct thing, but actually just that it will come through just knowing people and communicating and getting to sort of understand common ground

[00:06:25] **Emma:** Yeah, absolutely. It's that sort of serendipitous kind of communication that I think they could really help and develop. And like you say, they've got these sort of fantastic skills already, but it's just honing in on some of those elements that could really help in terms of them embedding into organizations.

[00:06:45] **Helen:** Yeah. So in universities like ours, we have a huge employability agendas, don't we. We embedded it into all of our programs. We think about this, we have really, you know, our career services are really serious business. And our students really value that, I know. And so are we doing enough already or is this slightly different? Emma, what's your take as a program director?

[00:07:08] **Emma:** Yeah and that's a really good point. And I think, you know, that there probably are some things that we could help to do to, to better prepare maybe our students going into these workforces. And as you say, we've got, we've got a lot of things that they are already doing. I mean, even just in our day-to-day interactions that we have with students where we're using digital technologies, they're engaging with those things, but I think there are, quite a few things we could maybe start to think about to build into our programmes to help them in what will be this kind of new workplace that they're going into.

[00:07:43] **Helen:** Yeah, I think it's things like, you know, just helping people to improve their visibility so that they're not just working remotely. They're not just sort of sat at home thinking, you know, and assuming, I guess, you know, that people know what they're doing. Sort of helping them to sort of ask those questions at the right time, and know who the right people, and as you say, there are challenges.

If you don't know who the right people are, you know, you can't go to people if you don't know that they are there. I guess it's those kinds of things, it's that osmosis learning that you get when you're in a physical work environment that we have to find ways as a university to kind of fabricate, I guess, in our university infrastructures too.

[00:08:25] **Emma:** Yeah, absolutely. And it's those sort of, it's the social etiquette as well, isn't it, around things as well. Like how do you behave in an online meeting? How does that, how is that different to if you are face-to-face, and how can you, like you say, how can you be seen? How can you be much more visible in...

And I think, I think we've talked about this as well before Helen, this idea of learning as well and how, you know, I think, I think what if I remember thinking in some of your research, you found that actually that kind of learning process was often a little bit hidden. So I think, you know, I think students had sort of said that they were never really put on the spot with certain things and they kind of had this idea where they could give this really good impression that they're really good at something and they know lots and lots about it, but actually, trying to manage that process was, was sometimes quite tricky for them. And I think trying to maybe, for them to sort of realize that at this point as well, they don't have to have all of the answers. And I think sometimes they maybe feel like they do.

[00:09:34] **Helen:** Yeah.

[00:09:35] **Emma:** But learning that process as well throughout their roles, is also something that I think came out quite strongly.

[00:09:42] **Helen:** Yeah, you're right. It's so important. So a lot of our students have said that, that when they go out on placement, they can have their notes, they can do a presentation and remotely, it doesn't feel scary, whereas they still felt, even a year into their placement, that they wanted those opportunities to do a face-to-face presentation, because for whatever reason, they felt that that was a really different thing, a really different kind of skillset.

And I guess. One of the last things to sort of just touch on here is that, you know, there are wider implications, aren't there, then just employability. But I think we've talked about, outside of this podcast, the issues around, that this raises for things like social mobility of our students and diversity and inclusion, because one of the things that our interns have reported back to us is just how important their home role models have been for helping them to learn, to navigate the workplace in a remote environment.

So those people, without those role models at home, you know, people whose parents or siblings are not in the professional services or the financial services that they can sort of role model. It's going to be a potentially disadvantage and I guess we need to think about, as universities and higher education providers, how we support that to make sure that everybody is sort of included as they move forward on this journey into a hybrid future.

[00:11:04] **Emma:** Absolutely. I think the idea of, of role models is something that is really key here, as you say. And for those, for those students that, you know, can actually learn quite a lot from being on the job and they may be have those role models if they're physically in the workplace.

But how do we make sure that they're also supported as you say, outside of that? So maybe having, you know, more kind of digital role models that are there to help students to make them feel a bit more confident and build their skills around that so that they can transition into this a bit easier.

[00:11:41] **Helen:** Yeah. And I, and I think mentoring and, and internships, you know, summer placements, mentoring, but all of these things have a place. And I guess we have to help our students to realize that they're not going into an internship as the finished article, as it were, that, you know, they are there to learn and that they won't leave their internship as experts and that's

okay. That's normal and fine. And then throughout that, I think as universities, we can help them to, you know, support them, not just sort of wave them off on their internship and “all the best, goodbye”, and “we'll see you in a year”, but actually, you know, help them to sort of mentor them during the year to help them to sort of navigate those challenges and uncomfortable moments as they arise.

Okay. There's absolutely tonnes. We could talk forever on this. So I think, thanks ever so much, Emma, it's so interesting to hear your experiences on this as well today.

[00:12:31] **Emma:** Thanks, Helen.

[00:12:32] **Helen:** And I guess really just to kind of wrap up, to say that, you know, Emma and I are both working together on this project and we're also working together on projects looking at adapting offices for the future. And I think this fits really nicely with, with that as well. So thank you very much for listening to today's episode. And if you'd like to find out more about this research and also the Adapting Offices project as well, our website and contact details are in the show notes.

So thanks very much.