



## Meet our Board: **Louisa Harrison-Walker,** **Managing Director, Benchmark**

**Board member of the Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp), Louisa Harrison-Walker is MD of Benchmark, an employment consultancy serving predominantly Sheffield City Region but also some national clients.**

Benchmark has been established for 12 years and specialises in the creative and digital sector, sales and marketing and commercial office-based roles. Louisa is also Chair of the Sheffield Chamber of Commerce Council.

### **Why did you agree to become a Hepp Board member?**

Both my parents were teachers, as well as my brother – in fact, my Dad was a Principal of a further education college in Nottinghamshire – so I've always been really passionate about education. Working in the employment field, it's frustrated me for a long time that in this region we have a surplus of people with certain skills and a deficit of people with other skills. I'm in a unique position to use that information to be able to help inform strategic initiatives like Hepp so that we start producing the skillsets that the economy needs.

### **Why do higher education skills matter to employers?**

In this region, 87% of the businesses are micro enterprises with 10 employees or less. You often find when you're in a very small business that you do need to be a higher-skilled employee because you're doing such a broad range of duties. Also, because of improvements in technology and automation, we're losing a lot of the lower skilled jobs. We need people who can evolve and adapt as required, and that usually means higher level skills.



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## You've done a study on hard-to-fill vacancies, what did you find?

We were asked by the Local Enterprise Partnership – the LEP – to do a report on hard-to-fill vacancies across the region. We surveyed around 500 businesses and 500 job seekers. It was sector specific, covering creative and digital, manufacturing, construction, legal and financial services. It revealed a real mix of factors that cause hard-to-fill vacancies. One of the factors was a lack of people taking up the qualifications that are needed. It also identified that employers want people who have the right mindset and are receptive to learning.

## Do you struggle to fill vacancies because of lack of skills?

We get some individuals who walk in who could fill our vacancies five times over because they've got higher level creative and IT skills. Sales skills are also in high demand. People with certain skills are in high demand.

## Do you think Hepp's work has a role in social mobility?

Yes, I think so. As a region we've got a huge issue with discrepancy in opportunity between different areas. If we could educate children in areas of deprivation or that face challenges about the choices they could make, that would give them opportunity for life. In particular, if we could upskill them in areas like creative digital media and IT where we've got shortages then I think there's huge potential.

I believe in the idea, "If you can see it, you can be it". We need to create role models for young people, showing them people from similar backgrounds who have been successful in high-skill, high-demand areas. I think it makes these career paths much more achievable and attainable.

## When do you think advice to young people should start?

Really it needs to start in primary school. I've got a six-year-old and an eight-year-old and I find it really interesting to see the gender bias that is already creeping in. I know a woman who is head of an engineering company who goes into primary schools to talk to girls about engineering to start countering some of the bias they're inevitably going to face. By the time they're even 11 years old, they will start to have preconceived ideas about certain employment sectors. Also, unless you start young then you can't affect curriculum choices.

Some of the evidence from the hard-to-fill vacancies report we did showed the influence that the family has. You can do all this work with children, but unless you engage with the families it may fall on deaf ears. I think that's something to consider, how to work with families as well as individuals.

## What difference would you like to make as a Hepp Board member?

In addition to running Benchmark, I chair the Sheffield Chamber of Commerce Council. That's the 30 elected members who are business representatives for the region. I would really like to leverage that position to involve more of the businesses in the region with educational establishments – whether that is getting involved in providing placements, or work experience, or tours of their organisations, showcasing different jobs and promoting opportunities for women and those from different ethnic backgrounds.

When we went to the membership of the Sheffield Chamber of Commerce to ask what different forums and engagement groups we should have, skills and employment came out top. The number one challenge that businesses say they face in this region is skills. So there's a problem and a lot of organisations want to be part of the solution, they just don't really know how. So I'd like to show them Hepp and say, "Here's a way you can get involved that will bring the most value".



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