

# Meet Pollen Careers, showcasing talented individuals ready to make an impact

*As part of our quick founder questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Sophie O'Brien, Founder of Pollen Careers about making an impact, the entry-level job market and investing in people.*

Temps de lecture : minute

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## What was the catalyst for launching Pollen Careers?

It's astonishing to me that 40% of young graduates are in low-skilled jobs or unemployed. For young non-graduates, this figure is almost 80%. Yet recruitment and retention is employers' hardest problem to solve.

Having recruited, mentored and tutored many young people over the last decade, I've seen firsthand the barriers and flaws that exist within the traditional hiring process. I wanted to address these issues and make the hiring process a better experience for job hunters and employers alike.

From this experience, Pollen Careers was born.

## Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

Pollen Careers is doing things differently. The traditional CV screening

method has often led to ineffective and biased hiring processes that disadvantage those without elite qualifications or extensive work experience. In turn, employers struggle to hire diversely.

Pollen is changing this by innovating how young job seekers access personalised support, skills and opportunities they need to thrive, and provide employers with access to a diverse pool of talented individuals ready to make an impact.

We have a wonderful community of over 2,500 entry-level candidates and work with some great employers across all kinds of industries, including B Corps like Cawston Press, Mobsta and december19 - two of which have just been featured in Campaign's Best Places to Work 2024 list.

## How does Pollen Careers intend to transform the entry-level job market into a more inclusive and equitable space?

When we work with businesses, we have a specific set of hiring standards to ensure that it's a positive experience for everyone involved and ensure the hiring process is effective.

We do this by making sure that employers are offering fair pay, at least the real living wage, and we require complete clarity and transparency over working arrangements, flexibility, and role and responsibilities so candidates can really assess whether this is the right role for them.

We make sure that when hiring entry level talent, employers aren't looking for previous experience, specific experience, or a degree. Instead, they assess a candidate on capabilities, attributes and values.

We also work with companies to improve their hiring process to make it more efficient, which is key for a positive candidate experience. Failing to

provide feedback within a reasonable timeframe or endless rounds of interviews can often put candidates off, and unnecessarily holds up the process. We advise the companies we work with to communicate how many rounds of interviews are needed in advance, and that feedback is provided at every stage.

## How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

The business was launched just last year, so we're still pretty new! However, we've grown quite quickly in the space of a year. So far we're now a team of seven, raised over £100K in funding, and worked with some amazing companies helping them to fill over 20 roles.

We've also launched some community initiatives designed to support them in their journey to finding the right entry-level career, including our podcast which offers insights and advice from seasoned professionals, our mentor directory, a resource hub, a Slack channel offering support and guidance, as well as our Hidden Jobs newsletter which has helped our community to access over 300 hidden jobs!

## Tell us about the working culture at Pollen Careers

At Pollen Careers we want people to do their best work and we do that through offering a really relaxed working environment. We believe in working smarter not harder and place a lot of importance on work life balance and wellbeing.

We want to be proud of our accomplishments and the journey to achieving them, not putting unnecessary pressure on ourselves that can lead to burnout and poor decision making. We work a 4.5 day week

because let's face it, nobody is productive on a Friday afternoon!

We're also super flexible, it's not about when or where you work but how you work. As we grow our culture we'll be defined by our values, and our policies influenced by the people who work here. Ultimately we want to epitomise the type of culture we promote as being healthy and consequently more productive to our employer partners.

## How are you funded?

We have bootstrapped until recently, when we completed our first funding round, raising £112,000 which we're incredibly proud of. As we're already a revenue generating business, our plan is to focus on scaling operations to accommodate more employers and meet growing demand.

Following this, we'll direct investments towards automating processes and product design, paving the way for future scalability.

## What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

It might sound ridiculous but we haven't really encountered any major challenges! I'm not professing that it's been easy, but it has been really fun. I guess they say that if you love what you do you never work a day in your life!

I've been blown away by the level of support I've received from individuals and like-minded organisations who really understand the issues we're seeking to address, and want to help. Our mentor scheme was created from a single LinkedIn post with people approaching me asking to help individuals from our community, and now we have a database of almost 100 eager professionals who want to help young job seekers. It's experiences like this that make me realise just how needed

Pollen is, and just how much potential there is for us to scale our offering and help so many people.

What's also been amazing is the team that supports me - just how emotionally invested they are in our work and how committed they are to making an impact. They genuinely go above and beyond to support our community and give employers an amazing experience, and that's how the world of recruitment should be.

## How does Pollen Careers answer an unmet need?

The way that entry-level candidates traditionally secure a job is no longer working. Too often they're asked for relevant experience (but often don't have that experience or have to work unpaid internships to get it) or a formal degree for a job that doesn't really need a university education.

We want to fix that by making sure employers focus on a candidate's values, behaviours, and capabilities. We're making the entry-level job market fairer and a more enjoyable process for both candidate and employer.

The entry-level hiring process is tough for employers, too and we're here to address that unmet need. Usually hiring managers are either overwhelmed with low-quality or irrelevant applications, or they're struggling with low demand for the roles they post, especially if they're regional. We often find that when hiring managers are overwhelmed they become reliant on connections or recommendations to bring in new talent, which contributes to lack of diversity in the team and can lead to them missing out on some fantastic entry-level candidates.

Considering the disparity between employers and Gen Z at the moment, our offering is needed more than ever before.

# What's in store for the future?

For the short-term, we want to hire more members of the team to support demand and grow our Pollen Careers community of mentors and candidates.

Excitingly, we're about to launch a new product that will help companies boost their exposure by offering a membership where companies of all sizes can promote their roles to the Pollen Careers community, and gain an accreditation that they have met our fair hiring standards.

Long-term, we really want to establish Pollen Careers as the go-to for employers to hire brilliant entry-level talent. We want to change the way that companies hire to make it a more fair and equitable process. We also want to introduce more innovation in this space, by enhancing our CV-less match-making tool to scale our offering.

# What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

It's hard to just pick one! When I first set up Pollen some of the most effective steps I took were:

- Join a coworking space - Even if you're starting out and it's just you, joining a co-working space can help you stay focussed and get more done, and it's also a great way to network!
- Build a network - I never really used LinkedIn before I started my own business but I can't emphasise enough just how powerful it has been. I pushed through the social media anxiety and started posting about issues in the job market, and the response has been incredible! People

have reached out to me, wanting to chat and provide support.

- Invest in people - When I first had money to put behind the business and wasn't sure of the direction, someone said something to me that really stuck: "doing something is better than doing nothing". So I decided to meet as many job seekers as I could to figure out how I could help them, and incidentally, that helped me to find two amazing young job seekers who have been instrumental in getting Pollen to where it is now.

## And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

I have two young kids so my daily routine outside of Pollen very much revolves around their schedules! The one thing I do for me which I am religiously committed to is hot yoga and pilates. When working from home I always have a class booked. Some of the best ideas and greatest clarity I've had is after doing exercise - it might sound cliché but the mental benefits are very real!

Sophie O'Brien is the Founder of *Pollen Careers*.