

# ON THE FLOOR: THE EMPLOYERS' EDITION

In March 2022 the National Hair & Beauty Federation declared a recruitment and skills crisis in hairdressing. Their report, *Careers at the Cutting Edge: Tackling the Skills Shortage in the Hair and Beauty Sector*, cited multiple interlinked factors that had contributed to the situation, some over many years, including concerns over qualifications and training, challenges with recruitment and retention and financial pressures brought about by lack of adequate funding and the rising cost of living. Almost 60% of employers said at the time that they had vacancies to fill and were struggling to recruit new staff.

One year down the line, Creative HEAD brought together a group of employers for an On The Floor discussion about how they are coping – and to see if finding their future teams has gotten any easier. Here's what we found...



## Retention is possibly more problematic than recruitment – but the standard of new recruits is disappointing.

Nearly every employer we spoke to (90%) is struggling to find experienced stylists to join their team – with so many qualified staff moving to self-employment or to other industries altogether, the available talent pool has shrunk immeasurably. Many employers are responding by taking a longterm view, reporting plans to 'grow their own' by investing in more apprentices (this against a backdrop of plummeting numbers of apprenticeship starts as increasing numbers of salons swap to the self-employed model).

*"I know some people are reducing their number of apprentices, but we've realised we actually need to do the opposite. We would have nothing if we didn't build our business from within."*

*"After being stung a couple of times with senior team members, I now grow my own. I'm on my third generation of apprentices, and they're doing really well."*

However, with manpower shortages coinciding with a renewed focus on work-life balance post-pandemic, it's perhaps no surprise that employers are struggling to hire younger workers suited to life in the salon, with many bemoaning the lack of motivation from some of these Gen Z and millennial workers to work hard.

*"The new ones coming through, they all want the weekends. They don't want to work late nights. I agree with having a work/life balance, but it's like they want a nine to five, Monday to Friday. I wonder if that's going to become the norm, and then what are they going to expect next?"*

*"We are getting applicants through, but I would say that only one in 20 is worth pursuing. So, what we're doing now is to take on young stylists who we haven't trained – they may have been trained elsewhere or gone to college, and we're re-training them. We're hiring people for attitude now, knowing we can add the skills later on down the line."*

Some had experienced issues with applicants walking away when they felt too much was being asked of them – for example, when asked to do a trade test. Others also commented on the lack of passion and professionalism

by applicants, who might just send a DM on social media saying, 'Do you have any jobs?' It is also rare nowadays for anyone to attach a CV.

Employers feel offended by these lacklustre approaches, knowing what great work opportunities they can offer, but feel it's largely down to the education system that's letting down young people, leaving them ill equipped to know how to behave.

For salons in bigger towns and cities, retention is a bigger problem than recruitment, with staff being lured away into other industries or being poached by other salons. *"There's so much freedom and flexibility in retail now and trying to compete is hard. If someone offers an extra £1 an hour, they go – it's purely down to who pays the most."*

*"I've just lost two of my juniors. One's gone to another salon who said they would pay her more than what I'm paying my seniors – and she was literally putting £200 in the till each week because she was just not good enough. The other girl finished her training and went to work in her aunt's nursery because she would be paid more in two days there than she was getting on her apprenticeship. I explained her wages would go up when she qualified and she said, 'Yes, but they won't go up as much as what my aunty will pay me.'"*

But perhaps the biggest barrier to recruiting new young staff is schools – and their ongoing promotion of academic routes over technical education. *"My local school isn't particularly high-achieving but they still try to drive all their young people into colleges or universities. I remember asking them in 2019 how many of their students went into apprenticeships and it was none, which I found ridiculous. These young kids don't know what they want to do in life, they're pushed into college, keep changing courses and by the time they get to us they're 18 and that makes them more expensive to take on and train."*

*"Schools are run like businesses, especially the ones with Sixth Forms. They're going to encourage their pupils to stay on because they get more money for it."*

*Case Study*

# Ian Harrold

ATTITUDE MEN'S HAIR, LIVERPOOL



*“I’m concerned  
T Levels will let  
down a generation  
of kids”*

“I was initially open-minded about T Levels but having been part of a consultation group working with the Department for Education, now I’m not so sure.

“A big part of the messaging is that a T Level is equivalent to three A Levels. What this says to me is that at the end of their T Level in Hairdressing, Barbering & Beauty Therapy, a student may indeed progress into a career in our industry – but they will also have enough credits to get them onto a university course. Certainly, the student will not complete the course with the skills required to go out on the salon floor. So, whichever option the student chooses, the T Level does not serve either the student or the industry well.

“To qualify with a T Level the student must complete a compulsory 45-day unpaid work placement. Initially the Government wanted salons to take in students free of charge – their thinking was the employer would be getting free labour in return for offering training. However, once it was pointed out that employers have enough on their hands training their own staff, the Government are now talking about salons getting paid. This isn’t necessarily a good outcome, though; the colleges will put these students anywhere they can, and that will include low-grade salons who’ll use them to make tea and sweep floors, therefore giving these kids a really bad impression of the industry.

“The work placement hasn’t been thought through. There are no measurable tasks involved, so nobody will have a clue if students are making progress. Equally, as the 45 days don’t have to be in a continuous block, there is no guarantee for the employer that they’ll get the same child back. So, it’s a problem.

“The only place where I see the T Level gains traction is, as independent colleges are struggling to get apprentices and more salon spaces are becoming allegedly self-employed, there is nowhere for our next generation to come. An awful lot of people are trying to escape paying the right taxes and that then doesn’t allow anybody to take on the next generation of staff. So unless we get this T Level right, or the NVQ system evolves, then we’re stuck.”

*Case Study*

## Melenie Tudor

EN ROUTE HAIR &amp; BEAUTY, WAKEFIELD



*“Schools aren’t supportive of students who want to be hairdressers”*

“Even though they often get a bad press I’ve always been committed to young people, and I believe the only way forward in business is to invest in your team. When clients come to the salon they expect a certain level of service, which they’re prepared to pay for. I put up my prices this year and I wouldn’t have been able to do that if I didn’t have the right level of staff in my salon to ensure every client has the best service possible.

“I don’t get my apprentices from colleges – I’ve always found them a little half-hearted. Schools are where I find most of my youngsters; I was an Enterprise Advisor at my local school, which was hard work, but it’s paid off in that I have three apprentices currently who are absolutely brilliant. One came to me at age 14 and she had a reputation for being a little wild but I’ve had absolutely no problems with her – she works hard, she stays late, she’s super-keen and enthusiastic. Her mum wrote me a letter thanking me for helping to turn things around.

“But what annoys me is that the schools are constantly telling students that hairdressing is a low-pay, sub-standard career. All they want is to drive all their youngsters into colleges. They told one of my Saturday girls, who is still at school, that hairdressing is a ‘lower class job’ and she should really consider doing something different. I said, ‘Go back and tell that teacher that your boss probably earns more than they do’. It was a bit childish but I was so cross, I couldn’t help myself.”

## Colleges are neither serving the needs of hairdressing employers nor their students.

There is a clear mis-match between college education and industry needs, with almost every employer we spoke to complaining about the mediocre standard of students who qualify via the college route; others questioned the competence and relevance of college educators. Criticism was particularly acute when it came to college-taught colour skills, with students seemingly unable to deliver the more complex services and the level of personalisation required to meet the needs of the market.

*"I took on a student who'd applied for a graduate stylist job with a qualification she'd done in college. She took two hours to do a blow-dry, couldn't cut hair in a straight line – but they'd given her this qualification! The same tutors are there who taught my husband 18 years ago. They're not up to date, they don't work in salons, so when all these new techniques are coming out, like air balayage, they're not able to teach them because they don't know how to do it themselves."*

*"These kids can't choose colours, they can't mix colours. What colleges teach students is to show the client the colour chart, the client picks a colour and that's the colour they get. Students have no understanding of anything. They come to us saying they can do highlights, but when I ask them which toner they'd use on yellow hair they say, 'Whatever the client wants.' That's not right!"*

*"I think there's a miscommunication between the colleges and the practical side of working in a salon today. The type of work that clients expect now is at quite a high level, especially when it comes to colour. Techniques are complex and you need information and experience. The kids are not coming in with the necessary tools to do this work."*

What makes employers angry is that despite the inferior

quality of education they produce, colleges receive huge amounts of Government funding and attract many students who might have had a better outcome with an apprenticeship.

*"There's a ridiculous amount of money in education – that's where all the Government funding goes. Go into a college and look at their salon set-ups, they're fabulous! And how can we compete with a college telling the kids in school, 'Oh, you can get the bus in with your mates, have lunch with your mates, learn how to be a hairdresser here?'"*

*"What's not explained to these kids is that you get paid if you do an apprenticeship – it doesn't matter that it's an apprenticeship wage, you're still getting paid. That doesn't happen in a college. I just think the Government have got it completely wrong. Why are they not funding apprenticeships, particularly in our sector, in the way they fund college positions?"*

*"I would love to know how many college-trained students actually go on to be a hairdresser or barber. I bet it's really low, like 4%. We've just taken on two people who did their Level 3 at college and we're completely re-training them as apprentices, which is a massive cost to the business because of course they're older. Talking to some of these students, they say that the college tells them they won't be a hairdresser when they finish the course, they'll then need to get some in-salon experience. So the tutors obviously know they're not preparing students for the workplace, but then that leaves the student in a kind of No Man's Land because they're not ready to be employed as a stylist, the college has used up all the funding, and all you can do is hope there's a salon out there who might take you on at their own cost."*

*Case Study***Barbara Khattri**

ELEMENTS LIFESTYLE SALON, OXTED



*“What we’re up against is people trying to get around loopholes that shouldn’t be loopholes in our industry”*

“Someone was telling me the other day about a new self-employed business model, where the owner of the premises employs assistants, rather than apprentices, and then they subtract the hours those assistants work from the money earned by the self-employed stylists. And it felt draining even to listen to this conversation. I find it exhausting that this is what we’re up against – people trying to get around loopholes that shouldn’t be loopholes in our industry.

“It shouldn’t be the case that people who’ve been in business for a long time are in competition with people who are simply trying to get out of paying tax but that’s where we find ourselves. I have mixed race children, and this situation brings the same feeling of injustice that we’ve experienced with racism, of being completely unheard and unappreciated.

“I think something has to happen from all parties. You can’t have employers being almost bullied by people who simply want a new business model. We’re seen as aggressors, as not supportive of either our own employees or those who want to be self-employed. And in fact, all we want is fairness.

“It should just be the case that if you’re properly trained and certified – good lord, let’s hope that one day you’ll have to be certified as a hairdresser in the UK! – then you pay the relevant tax, whatever your employment status. I think that’s the only start point the industry can heal from and grow.”

*Case Study*

# Louise Howard-Long

ARCHITECT HAIR, LEEDS



*“Am I just a slave to a concept of hairdressing that actually doesn’t exist anymore?”*

“The whole rent-a-chair and self-employment thing has made me wonder if I’m training apprentices for the good of the industry, and not for the good of my own business. Am I employing team members and paying VAT and all the rest of it because I’m a slave to a concept of hairdressing that actually doesn’t exist anymore? The margins in hairdressing are so small nowadays if you’re an employer and invest in training for your team to benefit your clients.

“I feel you can split the industry now into three different groups: high quality salons, whether they offer employment or self-employment; the middle ground, which is being squeezed from all sides and which is struggling; and then you have the bottom end of the market, which is almost like subsistence work. The college system is feeding into this black economy; they’re producing semi-skilled students whose level of training is appalling. Where can they go? Not to salons – they’re not good enough. No, they work from home, they’re not proper businesses and they don’t pay taxes.

“I’m cross about T Levels because it’s all about ticking boxes. The Government don’t understand our industry and they don’t get that hairdressing is a craft and that crafts need to be practiced. That’s why we’re going to be one of the last T Levels to be launched, because the Government like industries that can be easily quantified, and we don’t fit that mould.”

## The now-delayed T Level in Hairdressing, Barbering and Beauty Therapy is viewed with scepticism and suspicion.

T Levels are new, Government-backed, career focused qualifications for 16- to 19-year olds that have been developed in conjunction with employers to help young people develop the technical skills they'll need in the workplace. Equivalent in size to three A Levels, a T Level take two years to complete, with students spending 80% of their time at college and 20% of their time on a 45-day work placement. The T Level for Hairdressing, Barbering & Beauty Therapy was due to launch in September this year, ultimately replacing the old NVQ framework, but shortly after our On the Floor discussions it was announced that it would be delayed until September 2024 at the earliest. At the time of our discussions there was fairly widespread awareness of the T Level, with only 20% saying they hadn't heard of it; however, only one employer out of the entire group thought it was a good idea.

*"In my opinion, T Levels aren't worth the paper they're written on. You cannot learn to be a hairstylist if you only have 45 days face-to-face time in a salon. Hairdressing students, in particular, need to learn about working and communicating with people and even more so in this digital age, where kids don't even talk to each other anymore."*

*"Hairdressing is a craft and a craft needs to be practiced. But with T Levels the Government is trying to put us in a box that conveniently fits their funding model, and that just doesn't work. It won't be good value for money and it won't serve the industry."*

Despite their misgivings, the majority of employers we spoke to would offer work placements to T Level students – if only to make sure they didn't end up in a sub-standard salon.

*"I don't think 45 days is enough, but I would make sure any placement with me would be completely worthwhile. I worry that the majority would end up sweeping floors, and you can see the student thinking, 'I don't want to do this, it's crap'. So, it's hard because on the one hand you don't think it's right, but on the other hand I wouldn't want the student going somewhere that just doesn't help at all."*

## False self-employment poses an increasing threat to the employed business model.

More than 60% of the hairdressing workforce is now self-employed, but there is increasing evidence that a large proportion of these workers aren't fully aware of the tax expectations that come with self-employed and rent a chair models – or are deliberately flouting them. Since 2020 the hair sector has seen numerous court and tribunal rulings against individuals working in salons who are not genuinely self-employed.

'False self-employment' is causing widespread anger amongst the employers we spoke to, who see their businesses being put at a disadvantage, not just financially but in their ability to recruit.

*"I believe that 95% of self-employed businesses are trading illegally. And at the end of the day, if you're having to pay twice as much tax as other businesses in your area, it's impossible to pay the salaries that you want to pay, to make it a worthwhile career. And we get given absolutely nothing by the Government. And unless we get a level playing field, where every business is treated the same, and that includes working self-employed or working in your garden shed, then this industry is literally dead. I'm not joking. I give it three years unless something changes."*

*"The reason people leave, more than anything, is because of money. It's not because they don't want to work in a salon. And it's not because of our flexibility, because we are all very flexible. It's because they believe they will earn more and that they won't have to pay tax. It's as simple as that. And the Government continue to allow this to happen. Recruitment is absolutely and fundamentally tied to how unfair things are. Give us an opportunity and I'm sure every single one of us will invest in the future and bring young people through."*



*Case Study*

# Emmanuelle Montague-Sayers

SALLY MONTAGUE HAIR GROUP, DERBY



*“Finding new staff takes so much time I feel like I work in recruitment!”*

“We have seven salons and on a daily basis I spend around half my time either placing recruitment ads or sifting through applications – most of which are simply not good enough. But we have to do it because finding new staff is so difficult nowadays and if someone good comes along you have to be ready to pounce.

“For every applicant there are interviews to arrange, followed by trade tests (not that we use the word ‘test’ anymore because it freaks people out) and then, if they’re successful, you have to organise a start date and an induction that takes up a whole day of my time. It is endless and it means your focus is not on your existing team, but Gen Z stay in jobs for such a short time nowadays, I can only see this becoming an even bigger part of my life.

“We recently took on a stylist from a salon we know, and he had his induction day, then the next day we heard him making inappropriate comments to clients and so on the third day we sacked him. What upset me most was how much of my time had been wasted. I was gutted.

“We have an IG account that’s client focused, but because I didn’t want to clog that up with job ads, I’ve recently started @sallymontaguecareers, to give an insight into life as a hairdresser in one of our salons – it shows everything from what will happen on your first day with us, to the events we get involved in outside of the salon. I want people to see all the different parts of our industry and to understand what an exciting career hairdressing can be. People are already giving feedback and asking questions, so it’s definitely working.”

*Case Study*

# Emma Simmons

SALON 54, THIRSK



*“College training is inferior and irrelevant”*

“I used to be an assessor for our local college and they told me I was too strict. I said I was just looking for the standard that I know they’re going to need to work as a hairdresser – and the colleges aren’t delivering that at all. The teachers are out of touch with salon life and the class sizes are just too big for students to get the right amount of attention. I was assessing a student once and she looked really uncomfortable and I spotted straight away that she was holding her scissors wrong – she was holding them with her thumb and index finger. And her tutors hadn’t even picked up on it; nobody was paying enough attention.

“For me, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is about attending events and learning new skills; at college, watching YouTube videos and flicking through magazines qualify as CPD. One girl came to me with a qualification she’d got after one year at college with no in-salon experience at all and she’d only ever worked on dolls heads. And it’s sad because all these students want to do is to start their careers but put them on the floor and they panic.

“Years ago, I didn’t have to take on college students because they just weren’t good enough and there were plenty of other applicants to choose from. Today I don’t have that same talent pool to choose from but I still won’t take on anyone who’s trained purely at a college because they’re still not good enough. So something needs to change. I think colleges should regularly host guest artists so the students can learn from someone who actually who works in a salon. And the teachers should be made to go on courses so that their skills are up to date – after all, that’s what I have to do as a hairdresser and employer.”

