

Who'd be a graduate trainee?

Online team-building exercises have not satisfied the class of 2020. Graduates miss the chance to network, says *Anna Menin*

YanWen Chong worked at PwC for two months before she went into the office. Instead of bonding with her new colleagues over lunch or after-work drinks, the 23-year-old trainee management consultant, who joined the accountancy giant in October, got to know them over Zoom – and by playing *Among Us*, the spaceship survival game that has gone viral during the Covid-19 crisis.

"Initially, it was a bit difficult to connect with people because talking on video makes me feel very self-conscious," the University College London graduate said. "But after a while you get used to it."

She finally met her workmates in person last week, when she went into PwC's headquarters beside London's Charing Cross station for the first time.

Chong's cohort of graduates has had an introduction to corporate life like no other because of the government's work-from-home edicts. Most big companies did not cut graduate recruitment despite the pandemic, but competition became fierce as smaller employers stopped hiring. There was a 12% fall in graduate recruitment this year – the biggest since the financial crisis in 2008-9 – with the average company receiving 60 applications for each vacancy, according to the Institute of Student Employers.

Postings for graduate vacancies were 61% lower in November compared to the previous year, according to job search engine Adzuna. Overall vacancies were down 36%, indicating that graduates have been harder hit than other jobseekers.

Like Chong, many trainees have begun their professional lives without setting foot in an office. Some feel isolated, others worry they are missing out on opportunities to learn on the job from senior colleagues. It is a far cry from the partying depicted in *Industry*, the hit BBC series about investment bank recruits.

A trainee solicitor who joined a prestigious "silver circle" law firm before Covid struck said the atmosphere became "very different" with remote working. "You're expected to be online for them 24/7," said the 24-year-old. "Without the visibility [of being in the office], expectations have slowly crept up and up." Also, the work

had become more intense. "Whereas you were maybe having one conversation at a time, people are now expecting you to have four or five at once," she said.

Some employers have sought to keep up morale through online team-building events. EY has offered trainees virtual escape rooms – immersive experiences where they solve puzzles together. Interns on Goldman Sachs's summer programme were invited to cook Indian food alongside senior staff on a video call.

"We were very conscious that interns were missing out on social interactions," said Janine Glasenberg, Goldman's head of graduate recruitment in Europe.

Not everyone is eager to participate in organised fun. A 21-year-old trainee at a big-four accounting firm had to organise a quiz event for 60 people. Most turned off their cameras and microphones. "I was trying to make it conversational, but no one spoke back," said the graduate.

She worries about the impact this strange start to her career will have in the long term: "It's just so much harder to make connections or network."

Employers, too, are concerned about the future. Tanya de Grunwald of the Good + Fair Employers Club, a coalition of firms aiming to promote best practice in graduate hiring, said they feared that a "skills gap" would emerge. "Video calls can give a slightly too casual idea of what the world of work is like," said de Grunwald, whose club's members include BT, Astra Zeneca, KPMG and Accenture.

PwC's UK chairman, Kevin Ellis, is mindful of potential problems for the 1,800 graduates and school-leavers it took on this year. "A lot of professional services training is personal observation – you can't replace that online," he said, adding that employers had a responsibility to get staff, especially graduates, back into the office. "We have to explain the importance of coming together to observe and learn and create networks."

As well as a skills gap, there may be an issue over the social divide between recruits. "For those from disadvantaged backgrounds, there's a period where you are learning how to work in a professional environment," said John Craven of social mobility charity UpReach. "If you're not actually working alongside colleagues, you cannot learn as well from them."



JACK HILL

YanWen Chong bonded with fellow graduate trainees over Zoom and online games – a far cry from the pre-Covid hedonism of *Industry*, below



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Graduates on UpReach's alumni programme, who receive career support, have struggled with remote working, he said. "They are often on a laptop in a bedroom without a fast internet connection."

Employers have no intention of shifting graduate schemes online permanently, but PwC for one plans to increase its outreach remotely instead of relying on the "milk round" – the costly process of woo-

ing students at career fairs. "The wider the establishments we connect with, the more socially diverse we will be," said Ellis.

That will not change anything for the current cohort, who will still be working from home for months – and some of the habits learnt in lockdown may stick. Chong would welcome the chance to log in remotely some of the time: "I would love to have a blended way of working."