



Do We Need to Think 'Beyond the Box'?

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As conversations about social mobility grow, so does the challenge of collecting socioeconomic (SEB) data. It may be time to consider new and more flexible approaches to understanding the role of class background in shaping workforce experiences.

The complexities of collecting SEB Data

Defining identity and background by 'ticking a box' has been widely reported as failing to reflect lived experiences and the nuances of identity. For many, identity and background cannot be easily captured in a single box and this remains true for class background.

Organisations Face Low Response Rates in SEB Data Collection

Many organisations face the same challenge: low response rates when collecting socioeconomic background data. For employees, hesitation often stems from:

- *Concerns about career impact* – a worry that sharing SEB data might influence role opportunities, promotions, or progression.
- *Uncertainty about data use* – not knowing exactly how the information will be stored, analysed, or whether this will be acted upon.
- *Lack of clear communication* – limited understanding of why SEB data matters, often links back to insufficient messaging around the purpose and value of this in the context of social mobility.



The Impact of Low Response Rates

When response rates are low, organisations are left with gaps in their data, which in turn creates challenges such as:

- *Limited insights into socioeconomic diversity* – making it difficult to establish a representative baseline, set meaningful targets, and track progress over time.
- *Connections between SEB and outcomes* – without a complete dataset, organisations cannot fully understand how socioeconomic background influences entry points, retention, progression and overall employee experience.

One reason is that SEB/class background is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act. In practice, this means there is no legal protection for someone denied an opportunity based on their background or related assumptions such as accent, postcode, or school attended. For example, characteristics like sex and race have clear, established frameworks for measurement, whereas SEB does not. Organisations are therefore left to navigate limited guidance from the Social Mobility Commission, which still relies heavily on standardised survey questions.

The result? Many employees are reluctant to declare their SEB data, leaving organisations with gaps in understanding.

The Limits of the Tick-Box Approach

Social class backgrounds and social mobility journeys are layered and deeply personal shaped by financial, social, and environmental factors. A standardised set of SEB indicators often fails to capture this complexity. For example, two individuals with parents in similar occupations may have had vastly different access to networks, resources, or opportunities depending on where and how they grew up.

At The Ladder Group, we've learned that gathering SEB data requires a more creative, people-centred approach. One that acknowledges the sensitive, identity-based nature of class background and encourages people to share their stories beyond the tick-box.

Thinking Beyond the Box – Practical Steps

Using contextual questions can add depth to SEB data collection by highlighting the lived experiences that shape socioeconomic background, offering a fuller picture than income or education alone. These could include:

- *How many adults and dependents lived in their household growing up?*

This can reveal insights into household earning potential as well as the costs associated with raising children.

- *The type(s) of housing people lived in across their childhood?*

This acknowledges that socioeconomic experiences are varied and non-linear. For example, someone may move from social housing to private rental or home ownership.

Explore Social Capital

Social capital refers to the connections, networks and insights that people have access to play a powerful role in social mobility. Why not ask about:

- *Connections from education: did they have connections from school or university to develop professional relationships?*

This allows for recognition of how access to networks can shape early career opportunities. For example, someone with school or university contacts in professional fields may find it easier to secure internships or graduate roles. Social capital often starts forming early, and this question helps capture that influence.

- *Sector familiarity – before starting work, did they know anyone in their circle?*

This highlights how exposure to career paths offers advantages. For instance, someone whose family or friends already worked in a sector may enter with insider knowledge and confidence. Access to informal guidance is a subtle but powerful driver of social mobility.

- *Experience of career development – This gives insight into how individuals have built progression pathways over time.*

For example, one person may have benefited from structured mentorship and transparent promotion processes, while another may have faced barriers in accessing such support. Experiences of career development are rarely uniform, and this question helps uncover those differences and experiences.

