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A good work experience placement can give a big boost to a young journalist's career.

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A good work experience placement can give a big boost to a young journalist's career - and they help ensure that the industry encourages the development of new talent, says Sky News's Nick Pollard.

There is probably a moment in everyone's life when the sound of the clock ticking suddenly gets louder. For me, it was reading a phrase about myself in an article about possible candidates for a senior job in the television industry. It listed me as one of the runners and said: "Pollard, who is somewhat older than the other candidates ..."

I spluttered in indignation. That can't possibly be true, I thought. Hadn't I always been "a rising star", "one of the industry's best young prospects"? After all, it is only, what, 34 years since I turned up on the doorstep of the Birkenhead News for my first day at work ...

I would love to say that I always had a burning desire to be a journalist, but I didn't. Having made an ignominious exit from school at 17, I hadn't a clue as to how I might fill the years ahead, until a sympathetic teacher took pity and wangled an interview for me at the local paper. Two days later my dad was signing me up for a three-and-a-half-year indentureship as a trainee journalist.

Not surprisingly, when you are a complete novice yourself, you do not think much about the importance of nurturing new talent. You are too busy trying not to make a fool of yourself and, in those days, sweating away to get your Pitman shorthand up to 100 words a minute.

But every journalist who has moved on a bit in their career knows how much they owe to older hands who have encouraged, chivied, praised or terrorised them into doing better. I was lucky enough to work for a string of talented editors and to work alongside brilliant reporters, photographers and cameramen who helped me bathe a little in their reflected glory.

To my mind, it is much tougher getting started these days, and the pressure builds quicker. My stint on the Birkenhead News was a wonderful time of learning the trade, gaining a bit of wisdom (much of it soaked up, literally, in the pub), and scoring a few minor triumphs and disasters along the way. I moved on to a hard-as-nails news agency and then into local and national radio. It was nearly 10 years before I saw a TV newsroom for the first time, and in many ways I was still pretty clueless. I knew next to nothing about television or how its news output worked.

These days people tend to get started at a higher level much earlier. The advent of graduate training schemes and the explosion in broadcasting and journalism courses means that plenty of bright young journalists are now working in broadcast newsrooms in their early 20s. Many of them have a confidence and all-round technical skill unheard of in my day. I would like to believe that the early years I put in grinding out copy from courts and councils, weddings and funerals, police and fire calls, gave me at least as good an eye for a story as today's young stars, but even that might be wishful thinking.

Here at Sky News we are passionate about encouraging fresh talent. It is not always easy in a smallish self-contained team such as ours but, as much as possible, our attitude is "if you are good enough, you get on". We provide an incredible 100 places a year for young people to do work experience for anything from a single day to several weeks, but even then, the demand for such places hugely outstrips supply. If there is one golden rule for people looking for a work experience place at Sky News or anywhere else, it is this: apply early. I am constantly amazed by the number of ambitious people who will write or call in July pleading for a work experience placing in two weeks' time. The time to be applying for a summer placement is the previous Christmas or autumn, or even earlier. The second tip is to be available at odd times of the year - ideally when other candidates are still stuck at college.

The winner of the Guardian Student Media Awards category sponsored by Sky - best student reporter - will get a plum prize of a six-week placement with attachments to all the key departments at Sky News. A previous winner, Hugh Miles, worked on home and foreign desks, carried out interviews for the political team, did a stint in the studio, helped out at the Belfast bureau, tried his hand in the PR department and even had a stab at picture editing.

I suppose there is one further rule about work experience: managers should always go out of their way to be helpful to the students. They might just be your boss in five years' time.

Nick Pollard is head of Sky News

Pollard ... 'The golden rule is: apply for placements early'

The Guardian Student Media Awards recognise the very best student journalists, editors and photographers. To enter, call 01727 865 395 for an application form. More information at mediaguardian.co.uk/studentmediaawards.

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