



# MATCHING CEOS WITH HIGH-PERFORMING STUDENTS—THE REMARKABLE MUTUAL BENEFITS OF THE CEOXIDAY PROGRAM

At Odgers Berndtson, we run an impactful program that connects high-achieving university and college students with CEOs for a mentorship opportunity. It's called CEOx1Day. One thing that strikes me about the program is that it benefits the CEOs as much as it does the students.

## **A Unique and Valuable Program**

CEOx1Day was introduced 14 years ago in Germany, and now runs in over 10 countries around the world and in five regions across Canada, including Quebec. Since Odgers Berndtson launched the program in Canada in 2013, 161 high-powered CEOs have been matched with as many student finalists, including 35 CEOs in the province.

The student finalists in Quebec participate in two full days of programming. The first, attended by all regional semi-finalists, is a Career Development Day in our Montréal office, which includes:

- A group debrief of a Hogan Leadership Assessment, a valuable evaluation tool used in our executive hiring process. This assessment is completed by the semi-finalist students to increase their self-awareness and support their leadership development. Hogan, a CEOx1Day Program Partner, has tailored the assessment to give undergraduate students a better understanding of their inherent strengths and potential blind spots, and help guide them in their future career plans.

- A candid conversation with a Chief Human Resources Officer who discusses their professional journey and shares career advice, insights into leadership, and nuggets of wisdom. The conversation is followed by a Q&A, where students can ask anything they want about the world of work—job searching, interviewing, networking, what to expect in an organization, etc.
- A speed-interview session with Odgers Berndtson’s executive search professionals, to give students a real-life interview experience and which helps us to select the ultimate finalists who will be matched with a CEO.
- A unique opportunity to network with a senior human resources leader, Odgers Berndtson’s professionals, and other high-achieving students.

The finalists spend the second day with their designated CEO, following a structured agenda. Depending on the organization, this can include meeting other C-level executives, attending townhall, leadership, and board meetings, having lunch with the CEO and other members of the leadership team, and spending one-on-one time with the CEO, allowing both the CEO and student to learn from one another.

The program offers a great opportunity to promote a CEO’s and an organization’s brand to the talent market and particularly to new graduates. It visibly demonstrates that they are invested in their community and in developing talent, which can be a great employee attraction and retention tool. CEOs also appreciate that their involvement is concentrated into a single day, allowing them to make an impact on a student’s future in a short amount of time.

Beyond that, CEOs tell us that they find this an incredibly rewarding experience in several ways.

### **Opportunity to “Pay It Forward”**

The CEOs who have participated in this program all recognize that they didn’t get to where they are on their own. Many, if not all, had a lot of help along the way, and they appreciate the chance to pay it forward, to help give a career boost to one of tomorrow’s leaders. They know that the first connections we make in a career setting can often determine our professional trajectory.

My very first job was a two-month rotational program at CN where I worked in all the different areas of the Human Resources department. I was assigned a mentor, the head of HR at the time. In weekly coffee meetings, she gave me a safe space to ask questions and talk about how I felt about each of my rotations. She opened my eyes to the world beyond industrial relations, which is what I'd studied and what I assumed I'd do my entire career. Those discussions set me on the path of an HR generalist. I have always been grateful that I had that mentorship opportunity, and in turn, I have tried to give back to young people who are starting out.

CEOx1Day provides a great way to do that. Students don't always have a network that can help guide them, whether through family, friends or school, and it's not easy to find a mentor when embarking on a career. The possibility of spending quality time with a CEO can help jump-start their network, which we know is key to career success.

### **Connection with Top Talent, Identified Through a Rigorous Selection Process**

Given that the hiring environment is incredibly tough right now, this program is a great way to pre-vet some exceptional young people who will soon be entering the workforce, and many of our participating companies end up hiring the students that their CEOs are matched with. We saw a perfect example in Montréal just last year, when a student was paired with the CEO of Héma-Québec—they hit it off immediately, made a great professional match, and the student was hired for a summer internship.

CEOx1Day attracts highly impressive undergraduates. We promote the program to all universities and colleges across Canada, and it's open to anyone entering their third or fourth year. A dedicated selection committee at Odgers Berndtson guides the process, and the list of applicants is narrowed down into several stages. Applicants answer essay questions on leadership and submit a video interview along with their application and resume. Then, during the Career Development Day, we conduct a series of speed interviews to help identify our ultimate list of top students.

## **Opportunity to Meet Students with Diverse Abilities and Interests**

In today's challenging talent environment, organizations are looking beyond their traditional avenues to find candidates. Similarly, a positive shift we have made to the CEOx1Day program over the years has been to widen our outreach efforts to encourage participation from students from all disciplines, not only those majoring in business. This has led us to select some truly fantastic candidates who are interested in business and management and who have diverse skills, education, and interests.

In the same vein, we've also broadened the profile of the CEOs who participate. We've seen over the years that it's important for students to see themselves in the organizations they're paired with and identify with the CEOs. We've had CEOs who are medical doctors or engineers and have matched students with non-profit organizations and social enterprises.

Because of this diversity, the CEOx1Day program can truly change the trajectory of a student's career. In one example, a student was facing intense family pressure to become a doctor. He was paired with a CEO whose parents had also wanted him to go to medical school when he was younger, and the two connected instantly. Meeting a successful CEO who'd had the courage to face up to his family and follow his own path gave the student the same confidence. Today he has a rewarding career in politics, he's making an impact, and he's happy.

## **Valuable Insights Through Reverse Mentoring**

Something we hear again and again from our CEO participants is how much they learn from the students. Leaders don't often have the opportunity to speak with upcoming grads and find out what they expect from the corporate world. This gives CEOs a window into the next generation of leaders. They gain great insights from the questions the students ask and learn what interests them about business and entrepreneurship.

For instance, a company was struggling with retaining millennial and Gen Z talent. As part of the CEOx1Day program, the CEO asked the mentee what they were looking for in a potential employer and workplace. The CEO was surprised to learn what her mentee cared about most and was impressed by their insights. She came away with real ideas for addressing his company's talent issues.

## **CEOx1Day Is a Great Opportunity for Today's High-Achieving Youth**

I'd like to also mention one of the biggest benefits of the program is to the students themselves. Besides shadowing a CEO for an entire day, they build a network with one another and program alumni. They meet during the Career Development Day and create connections with other high-performing participants from and around Montréal and across Canada.

To give you an inspiring example the positive impact networking can have, [Maxwell Nicholson](#) and [Annika Ng](#) met as finalists during the CEOx1Day program. Together, they went on to found [Blossom Social](#), which has become a top-50 app with a community of over 25,000 Canadian investors. They've since hosted sold-out events, been guest speakers at the Collision Conference, been named a top-25 fintech startup in Calgary, and in 2022 [they raised \\$750,000 in a pre-seed investment round](#).

## **My First-Hand View of Today's Students**

As an executive search leader, former HR practitioner, and a father of three, two of whom are in university, I know how crucial it is for young adults to navigate the transition from being a student to entering the professional world. It's so important for them to see what a successful career path can look like, and to connect with people who can help guide them through what can be a very challenging time in their lives.

The road from graduation to the C-Suite is never a straight line as anyone at the peak of their career can attest. Last year, our CHRO session featured the Vice-President, People and Culture of CBC/Radio-Canada. He shared his career journey with the students—he came from a small community, started out at CBC/Radio-Canada as a news reporter, and now leads the public broadcaster's human resources services after holding positions in news, programming, and public affairs. The students were very interested in learning about his untraditional career path and the advice he had for them. They started to see the pathways to new and exciting opportunities for their own careers.

I'm very proud to be part of a firm that values and supports the next generation of leaders and which runs such an impactful program. I'm looking forward to meeting this year's participants, both students and leaders, and to seeing the remarkable benefits it brings to them all.

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