



A Place to Land: Addressing Barriers to Youth Employment

Reflection Note

As young people prepare for the world of employment, they have access to many services designed to help them to “take-off” into this stage of life. These services often emphasize job readiness, exposing young people to available options, training them as they prepare resumes and attend interviews, and highlighting the various soft skills needed to keep a job over time. Despite this support, however, employment success rates remain low among those youth who are the target of these services.ⁱ One observation of a diverse representation of employment service-providers is that even among those youth that successfully find work, there are low rates of job retention over time.

This observation suggests that it is not only “take-off” that requires attention, but also a successful “landing” in secure work. The question of youth employment, therefore, involves not only individual youth themselves, but the structures and systems that do – or do not – support them as they transition into employment and adulthood. A gathering convened by the Youth Research and Evaluation Exchange (YouthREX) and the Bahá'í Community of Canada's Office of Public Affairs, brought together some two dozen youth workers to examine barriers and potential solutions to these challenges.

Barriers

For many youth, a high school education does not lead naturally to employment they would choose for their life; there are hurdles and obstacles to overcome. Facing the question of “now what?” after high school is often too late; many decisions (made by them and others) up to that point have already had their effect, generating real and perceived barriers to desired careers.

At the individual level, youth are influenced by a culture that emphasizes short-term benefits over long-term planning. Young people are often encouraged to accept jobs that do little to translate their talents and interests into a career path and do not expose them to a vision of future fulfilling and meaningful work. Educators draw conclusions about their aptitudes at a young age, “streaming” them into educational pathways that can close off academic and career possibilities later down the line. Youth are not always guided to seek out community-service opportunities that help them develop their communication, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills. In a working world where employers increasingly seek out employees with “soft skills,” how are youth being assisted to develop these capacities and competencies from their adolescent years?

At a social level, many youth navigate stigma and prejudice as they take their first steps in the workforce. Those who access youth employment services are also often those who are most affected by prejudice; whether for reasons of homelessness, addiction, criminal history, or immigration status, young people who are taking practical steps to enter into the workforce still confront misconceptions by employers that can prevent them from moving forward. Those who overcome these barriers can find themselves out of work for the slightest infraction.

For many young people, getting a job does not always mean keeping that job. This dynamic suggests that initial steps are likely to falter if not met with resources that equip a young person to effectively navigate the professional environment. Much more can be learned about the environment encountered by youth when they enter the workforce. What barriers result in cohorts of recently employed youth losing or leaving their jobs in short order? Articulating this problem more clearly and describing its characteristics could help identify potential solutions.

Solutions

Those working in the employment sector with a focus on youth are drawing insights from their experience to identify steps that can be taken to help youth overcome barriers and build new paths to long term job success. At the level of the individual, they ask how they can help youth to gradually develop and practice diverse skills, attitudes, qualities, habits, and areas of knowledge. They note that young people's confidence can be buttressed with a focus on developing knowledge of the skills and opportunities that open doors, to replace fatalistic attitudes of "me against the world". Effort is needed and it is worthwhile to consider what supports could help young people sustain effort and motivation over time.

The diverse experiences of youth suggest that many would benefit from opportunities to reflect frequently on their talents, interests, and capacities, to consider what "work" is to them, and what is needed to achieve their vision of a good life. Many community-level systems and structures can support such exploration – families, mentors, schools, and employment services, to name a few – and can do much to assist a young person to overcome hesitation and take initial steps. Personal encouragement and support is often essential. Identifying milestones that indicate progress toward a long-term vision can help avoid distraction and overcome feelings of discouragement or apathy along the way, and help youth take purposeful steps towards developing their careers over time.

Several opportunities at the institutional level are also apparent. If employment services were to focus on an individual's desired destination – their idea of the good life – could services more effectively bridge young people to a range of feasible and desirable possibilities in their communities? For employers, mentorship is a promising approach. How can a mentorship relationship become more intentional and mindful of creating sustainable opportunities for young peoples' success in the workplace? Such approaches could yield rich insight into the structural supports that are needed to provide youth with a safe place to land and thrive.

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On 28 March 2019, more than two dozen people from various agencies and organizations concerned with youth and work gathered in Toronto to consider vital questions facing their organizations and the young people they serve. This space was created as a component of the YouthREX communities of practice initiative and was co-organized and hosted by the Bahá'í community. For more information, read: https://news.bahai.ca/en_articles/041614/

ⁱ See underutilization rates at <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-employment-report-july-september-2018> and further discussion at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/youth-employment-jobs-1.4731868>