



What We Know About Youth Employment: Research Summary and Best Practices

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Abstract

The goal of this white paper is to bring greater attention to the issue of youth employment, and, through reviewing research, identify ways that current practice can be enhanced. We accomplish this objective by highlighting why youth employment demands more focused attention, outlining the key research findings, reporting on international similarities as well as differences, and sharing a list of best practices.

Introduction

Current evidence from around the world indicates that young workers are facing particular problems and challenges in gaining access to the labor market and to finding secure employment. Young workers include those between 15–24 years. In this report we consider the evidence regarding the issue of youth labor employment and identify why the situation might be different for young workers compared to their older counterparts. We then examine the consequences of underemployment, which seem to be a growing problem for young workers, and summarize current insight into coping strategies for young people but also their wider family and community networks. We outline the significant economic and psychological impact of failure to encourage and develop young workers and highlight how work psychology has important insights into the type of preparation for work and the development of career decisions and job search skills. Based on current research, we outline how employers, educators, and young job seekers themselves can adopt a more effective approach that will have dividends for organizations and our wider society.

Understanding the Role of Youth in the Labor Markets Across Different Regions of the World

Since 2007, in most industrialized countries, the current economic and financial crisis has produced a sharp rise in unemployment rates. Data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD [2013b]) show an increase in unemployment rates for the overall population as well as for youth ranging from 15–24%. By 2012 global unemployment had risen from 28.4 million people in 2007 to a total of more than 197 million. In contrast, the youth unemployment has increased to 73.8 million young people, resulting in an unemployment rate of 12.6% (International Labor Organization (ILO, 2013a and b). As a result, overall youth unemployment is considerably higher than the global population unemployment rates. Significantly, youth unem-

ployment numbers were increasing even before the financial crisis, challenging the effectiveness of government policies, and organizational actions towards young workers. The response to the economic crisis of many governments in different regions of the world, specifically those in developed countries, has been to introduce policies aimed at delaying the age of retirement, increasing further the difficulty for young people, with one in every four or five unemployed despite wanting to work (Peiró, Tordera & Potocnik, 2012).

In addition, during this period of economic crisis the duration of unemployment has also increased; therefore, while in 2007 28.5% of unemployed youth remained in this situation for more than 6 months, by 2012 this figure has risen to 35%. Another relevant change is in the status of young people, with a significant percentage (12.7% out of the overall youth) by 2012 not in education, employment, or training (so called NEETs). This latter situation generates severe subsequent difficulties for finding employment in the future.

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Youth unemployment rates in many countries can be at least twice as high as those of adult workers, with the ILO (2013a and b) forecasting sustained and high levels of youth unemployment above those of adults until 2017. Recently, a number of reports have been produced on the subject of unemployment from either a global perspective for the general population (OECD, 2013b) or focused more directly on the issue of youth unemployment (ILO, 2013a and b). Since 2007, in most industrialized countries, the current economic and financial crisis has produced a sharp rise in unemployment rates, but young people appear more impacted than their adult counterparts. The information provided in such reports may help us to draw some general trends of youth unemployment and to identify relevant specificities that occur within different regions.

In developed economies and EU countries, young people fared worse during the recession. For example, in the EU between 2007 and 2011, more than 22% of young workers were unemployed, and discouraged workers increased by 50% in the total

labor force, with more than 12% of NEETs and 33.6% of total job-seekers remaining unemployed for 12 months or longer. Only in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland did unemployment rates remain lower, while in the Baltic republics and in the Mediterranean countries the picture has become especially severe. In other contexts such as Latin America and the Caribbean, improvements in formal employment created more positive prospects for the young, while East Asia's deceleration of growth produced the opposite: an overall rise in unemployment levels. This can be contrasted with the impact of oil on North and Middle West African context, which causes clear differences between oil exporting and importing countries. However, in each of these contexts, the unemployment of the young was significantly higher than for older workers.

Challenges of Younger Job Seekers: An Employability Perspective

Employment challenges may be examined from a personal employability perspective, that is, by examining the “work specific active adaptability that enables workers to identify and realize career opportunities” (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004, p. 17). Employability is usually described as a multidimensional concept consisting of three to five relatively broad components centering around workers' human and social capital, their work related identity, and their personal adaptability (Fugate et al., 2004). Although youth unemployment is directly connected to national unemployment rates and therefore reflects the national context in which it emerges, young job seekers around the world also share certain barriers and challenges regarding their employability.

Human capital refers to the skill set of job seekers, including abilities, knowledge, experience and education. Young job seekers who have higher levels of schooling are at an advantage compared to early school leavers (Vallejo & Dooly, 2013). In relation to human capital, the good news is that in many countries, levels of formal education have increased in the past decades (e.g. Levinson, 2010) and more people are participating in education than ever before: Thus, the rate of university level education across 36 OECD countries has increased by almost 10% since 2000, with 25- to 34-year-olds showing an increase of 15% in university level education compared to workers 30 years older (OECD, 2013); a similar pattern emerges with regard to upper secondary education, which is now attained by more than 80% of young workers in the OECD countries.

On the other hand, only 42% of recruiters believe that college graduates are adequately prepared to enter the job market, with some form of work experience required to improve their employability (McKinsey, 2012). In research on a representative sample of 4828 graduates from a Spanish university (graduated between 2002 and 2006), work experience during academic study predicted the quality of graduation employment, with academic area moderating the levels of this relationship (Yeves, Gamboa & Peiró, 2009). This may explain why during the recent economic crisis, countries with a strong tradition of vocationally oriented programs (e.g., Austria and

Germany) fared better in curbing unemployment among young adults (OECD, 2013). Abstaining from work while in school is fairly common in many countries around the world, due to factors such as free education, living with parents while in school, parental encouragement to focus on studies, lack of availability of part time work suitable to students, and the failure of university schedules to also accommodate work schedules. A study of Australian graduates revealed how during their studies, college students regarded going to college and getting good grades as their path to a good job, only realizing later that their college degree was simply the price of admission but by no means sufficient to acquire high quality employment (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011). Yet the relationship between work experience and employability is not straightforward. For example, those studying social sciences gained better quality jobs if they had some work experience acquired during their studies, while such work experience negatively predicted the quality of the job placement (up to 5 years later) for those graduating from health sciences, natural sciences, and technology (Yeves, et al., 2009).

Social capital refers to the sum of relational resources a person has and includes both the size of one's social network and its strength and quality. It is linked to the idea that "who you know" matters when looking for a job. Although family and connections through school will be part of youths' network, they are less likely to have access to actual recruitment decision makers, resulting in limited access to information about organizational opportunities. It is reasonable to expect that young job seekers will have reduced social capital due to their limited experience and connections to organizational insiders. Often young people tend to engage with their peers—other unemployed youth—and although this provides them with valuable emotional support, such contacts are of more limited value in supporting their job search process. For example, a study of Chinese youth showed how, due to limited financial resources and face saving motives, the unemployed were more likely to limit their interactions to others who were also unemployed (Zeng, 2012). Limited social



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Adaptability is the willingness and ability to change personal factors (e.g., knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions and behavior) to meet the demands of the situation, either by proactive anticipation or by reactive flexibility.

capital serves as a barrier to employment, and at the same time the depleting effects of unemployment on social capital of youth can become compounded over time.

Identity concerns “who I am” or “who I want to be” and helps people integrate their past, present, and future, providing them with personal goals and aspirations. For example, a longitudinal study on youth indicated how having a positive attitude and being optimistic predicted continued efforts to seek a job and actual success in finding a job (Mohanty, 2012), with their confidence during job search and level of proactivity associated with more positive outcomes for young job seekers (Brown, Cober, Kane, Levy, & Shalhoop, 2006). A study of workers 20 to 34 years old, indicated that 40% of the sample were identified as “shifters,” (i.e., as people with fractured career trajectories who moved constantly between jobs, often across occupational categories and between employment statuses, such as between work, unemployment, and traveling; Bradley & Devadason, 2008). Young job seekers, particularly those without prior job experience, may lack confidence in their job search and interview skills, or the resilience to help them sustain their search process. Hence, they are more likely to get frustrated and feel hopeless when they are faced with obstacles (Feldman, 2003), further eroding their work chances. Work experience during school years, targeted mentoring and training in job search processes, as well as direct interventions aimed at increasing psychological capital (e.g., Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, & Combs, 2006), appear to be particularly useful to young job seekers.

Adaptability is the willingness and ability to change personal factors (e.g., knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions and behavior) to meet the demands of the situation (Fugate et al., 2004), either by proactive anticipation or by reactive flexibility (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Qualitative data suggest that many younger workers not only accept insecure working conditions as part of their career but that they have actually come to embrace the need to adapt and to continue learning (Bradley & Devadason, 2008). Indeed, in a large scale survey among Canadian undergraduate students, only half of the respondents reported that they would like to spend their whole career with one single organization (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010) and placed a value on good training opportunities

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and work variety above those of job security. Although recent reports usually refer to Millennials when voicing such concerns (e.g., Hill, 2002; see also Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008), it is worth noting that similar concerns have always troubled researchers when looking at young people (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). It has been argued that young job seekers will have lower career resilience and are more likely to get frustrated and feel hopeless when they are faced with obstacles (Feldman, 2003), further eroding their chances.

Relevant to employability is also a notion of career identity (see Gunz and Peiperl, 2007), whether it is the more self-centered career identity (Fugate et al., 2004) or the more employer-centered corporate sense (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006). A frequent theme among respondents was the pursuit of some basic training opportunity in order to end the “revolving-door” existence between intermitted unskilled labor and unemployment they found themselves in, but others who were shifters had higher academic training and had chosen to take some “time out” after their graduations to travel, taking miscellaneous jobs or pursuing further training part time while they essentially figured out where they wanted to go with their lives. On average, subsequent generations of younger workers have reported a somewhat lower centrality of intrinsic work values compared to leisure values than earlier generations (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010).

Career Challenge and Coping Strategies for Young People

Individual responses to unemployment are not homogeneous; instead “people vary their coping strategies to accomplish different coping goals” (McKee-Ryan, & Kinicki, 2002 p.14). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage, [i.e., master, tolerate, reduce, minimize], specific external and/or internal demands, [and conflicts among them], that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). In this context, it is important to take into account the meanings that individuals give to their unemployment as such appraisals influence their experiences of future situations and can determine the choice of coping strategies (Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995).

Individual Coping Strategies

Key to effective coping are two factors: job search behaviors and the skills and attitudes that contribute to their quality. Wanberg (2012) reviewed empirical evidence about job search behaviors and found individual differences play an important role in job search behaviors in terms of reemployment and the quality of jobs obtained. A recent meta-analysis showed the positive influence of job search interventions in creating more effective job search practices (Liu, Huang, & Wang 2014). This analysis found the importance of the combined factors of individual agency together with the support of their local community for effective coping. Proactive coping, together with career adaptability, have been shown to mitigate the negative effects of unemployment (Klehe, Zikic, van Vianen, Koen, & Buyken, 2012). Four components define career adaptability: concern

about the future as a worker, control about the vocational future, curiosity by exploring future scenarios, and confidence to pursue their own goals (Savickas, 2005). Time structure can also be used to maintain a sense of purpose, structured routine, present orientation, effective organization, and persistence (Bond & Feather, 1988) to cope with some of the consequences of unemployment.

In contrast, disengagement strategies, such as escape and avoidance strategies, are characteristics of futile searches, often producing discouragement or passivity. Unemployment has been found to be accompanied by periods of elevated alcohol consumption, drug abuse, and smoking (Paul, Hassel, & Moser, in press; Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). Importantly these studies suggest that some disengagement strategies, such as actively trying not to think about the situation or believing that the situation will resolve itself may become imperative in helping to cope with frustrating situations where goals become unattainable. Indeed, Lin and Leung (2010) suggested that those who employ a combination of both engagement and disengagement strategies cope better with prolonged unemployment.

However, the studies conducted point out the problematic causality issue: Alcohol misuse may reduce productivity and may lead to unemployment, and also limit the employment opportunities later. More research is needed about disengagement coping strategies and how they are used for different contexts and by different groups in order to cope with unemployment.

Collective Coping Strategies

In the past, unemployment has been positioned as an individual experience, but increasingly it is being viewed as a collective one, requiring more comprehensive attention on the social aspects (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Some coping strategies involve seeking or utilizing social support, and some types of social support involve coping efforts (Revenson & Lepore, 2012, 201). Supportive relationship with others is an important resource for individual coping. Family members can help those without work by identifying job leads, managing time and interactions, dealing with emotional contagion, and palliating negative effects (Hanisch, 1999). Finally, a healthy collective response to unemployment is collective activism in which laid-off employees create new jobs in their communities to cope with job loss (Leana & Feldman, 1995). Those



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Entrepreneurship as Coping Strategy

Despite the growth of employment opportunities in sectors such as tourism and IT, an important employment option for many young people is self-employment (Gough, Langevang, & Owusu, 2013). Indeed young people are reported to have higher values and levels of ambitions regarding entrepreneurship (Bosma & Levie, 2010). The vicious circle concerning young peoples' "lack of experience" is a potential catalyst in starting to shift perceptions of self-generated enterprise activities as an increasingly attractive but also necessary route into employment (Ryan, 2003). In countries such as Greece, Spain, and Ireland, this may be the only option for those who complete education, and yet the enormity of the task is apparent with the current recession requiring young entrepreneurs to be able to identify and tap not into their home but more buoyant international markets. This is not necessarily a route for all. For example, a recent nine country study showed distinct differences in the goals of many young graduates with those from Italy aspiring to work for a multinational and not for small or self-developed businesses (Limonta, Manzini, Nastri, Quarnatino, & Searle, 2014). Importantly entrepreneurship might be a more viable option for those from minority groups who are more likely to be discriminated against in other work options.

Insight into this topic is limited as there has been a tendency to either subsume young entrepreneurs as part of the general adult population or to simply ignore such proactive efforts by young people. Overall, there is a lack of adequate understanding of the potential benefits of youth entrepreneurship as a means of improving livelihoods but also in how best to direct support specifically for young people (Cassia, Criaco, & Minola, 2012). As with other studies in the area of work, there are differences between distinct categories of young people, which reflect the value of adopting a more bespoke and nuanced approach rather than seeing solutions here as simple. Young entrepreneurs' activities can be separated into three distinct phases: formative, developmental, and start up stages (Chigunta, 2002). This distinction can be helpful in identifying and attending more directly to supporting the distinct training needs of young people. For example, the formative stage attention focuses on the factors influencing the early desire to become an entrepreneur, whereas the developmental phase is more concerned with the acquisition of key skills, with value from differentiating between learning and strategic skills. A recent study of Australian women at the top of organizations highlighted the importance of early exposure to the world of business for their subsequent entrepreneurship, with discussions around family dining tables of the realities of running small firms offering important learning (Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, in press). Knowledge, information, and learning from the world around them are clearly important in determining what area of work young people should choose. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa there are striking differences in the impact of globalization affecting the viability of distinct self-employment options,

making hairdressing a more lucrative choice than making clothes (Langevang & Gough, 2012). In the last phase, the start-up, the skills emphasis shifts to the acquiring skills that enable entrepreneurs to better consolidate and expand their businesses, with access to credit or finance central. Access to funding can be a key barrier for many young people in achieving their goals (Schoof, 2006).

Entrepreneurship needs to be considered as a far more significant option for young people, with evidence showing the importance of early experiences in shaping awareness and later positive attitudes towards this activity. Psychological factors, such as self-efficacy and personal initiative but also social support and effective training (Glaub, Frese, Fischer, & Hoppe, in press) are significant factors in making individuals more able to withstand the failures that are a necessary part of this route to successful employment. Resilience and tenacity are required as most entrepreneurs experience a number of setbacks and challenges in their life journeys. The role of educators, employers, psychologists, and career professionals remains under developed for young entrepreneurs.

The Role of Education

In looking at the evidence a mismatch is clear between what employers require from their new staff and the current vocational education that is being delivered. Organizations require new starters to have more knowledge, skills, and be more intrinsically motivated than in previous decades (Bailey, Hughes, & Moore, 2004), yet, vocational education is falling short of these demands (e.g. Billett, 2009). Instead schools are often repeating ineffective approaches that do not include the creation of a career wish, the first step towards a career identity. Studies of vocational training have identified the effectiveness of utilizing training which comprises three career-related competencies including: career reflection (reflective behavior), career forming (proactive behavior), and networking (interactive behavior; Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011). An important ingredient in such education is the role of a dialogue, with career guidance methods and instruments significantly enhanced by conversations which were future focused and concerned with concrete experiences. Such conversations appear very useful in getting students who would more typically drop out to become more reflective, identify meaningful actions they could undertake, and identify useful interactions for them to pursue. Thus, simply substituting technology in place of these interactions does not enhance its impact.

Teachers have a significant role especially for those from lower socio-economic groups in helping both children and their parents become more aware and understand how to best achieve their concrete and obtainable goals (St. Clair, Kintrea, & Houston, 2013). In the absence of others' support, they can offer a significant support for parents in helping to deliver early promise for talented young people from less privileged backgrounds; in particular supporting key issues, such as subject choices and university options (Koshy, Brown, Jones, & Portman Smith, 2013). In a school career context attention towards clarifying career goals can be especially effective for helping young women from lower academic attainment groups into training (Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008).

Recommendations and Considerations

For Job Seekers:

- Be proactive in building your employability profile by furthering your formal education, work experience, professional skills, and confidence that will help you gain employment
- Build and maintain a social network with peers or others who are working to learn vicariously what organizations are looking for; find out about opportunities and gain a foothold to organizations during the job search
- Keep energy levels high and hold on to a routine where you have goals about how many organizations you will contact, how you will spend your days productively, and what the failsafe plan is after a certain period of unemployment, including options such as going overseas, starting your own business, and working with family members

For Parents:

- Encourage and support youth to pursue internships or work opportunities during school years to gain critical skills that improve their employability
- Encourage young people to work part time during holidays and their studies
- Support young people to help them identify job leads and skill development opportunities

For Educators:

- Inform and support both parents and students about options and their implications, particularly those in lower socioeconomic and migrant communities who may not be aware of wider choices and possibilities
- Devote time to conversations with young people to help them think about careers and work from elementary school onwards
- Design educational programs to extend young peoples' social capital such as targeted mentoring; for example with women and minority groups, science, technology, engineering, and math opportunities are critical
- Devote educational resources towards developing skills training that includes job search skills, self-presentation abilities, self-efficacy, proactivity, goal setting, and how to enlist social support
- Manage young people's expectations to view careers as life-long journeys,



framed around ongoing learning and development rather than as a final destination. This is significant in shifting mind sets and enhancing resilience

- Design university programs with the view to improve young people's employability and become pathways to work
- Offering internships where students have easy access to corporate partners would be a start, but also developing projects and other pieces of work that link clearly into work would be helpful
- Improve career advice and young people's opportunities for interaction with people from the industry
- Enable young people to continue working during studies
- Encourage nontraditional employment options, such as start-ups by providing business incubators. Young entrepreneurs would benefit from access to mentorship and dedicated space, and they can be the role model to students as well

For Employers:

- Create links with schools and universities in order to develop projects and exercises that tackle real organizational issues
- Design engagements that offer students the chance to ask questions and gain insight into work matters
- Make educators and organizations reflect on the skills being provided and the relevance of learning more apparent
- Create apprenticeship opportunities and other routes into work that deliberately target young workers and do not disadvantage applicants who do not have connections
- Train recruiters to provide developmental feedback not to dishearten job seekers

For Policy Makers:

- Boost youth employment via growth-oriented policies that will provide job creation
- Provide incentives for organizations, especially smaller workplaces, to take part in apprenticeship programs and provide more incentives for partnerships between schools and work organizations
- Enrich employability programs to include job search and interview skills alongside work experience, work relevant training, and unemployment coping skills

Conclusion

In this summary, it is clear that young people face unprecedented levels of challenge around the world in accessing the careers they want to pursue. Human capital is a vital area in which employers, educators, and young people need to focus in order to ensure that the skill set of job seekers are related to the world of work. Evidence shows some levels of exposure and experience of work during secondary education is of value, as are discussions about careers and aspirations. Clearly education plays an important role providing an advantage to young job seekers with higher levels of schooling. Social capital includes the relational resources available to a person, with both the size and strength and quality of social networks playing important roles. Therefore, those with limited social capital can be effectively barred from some options of employment. In addition, periods of unemployment can result in young people spending time with their peers rather than those who can offer them work opportunities. Thus, there are clear depleting effects of youth unemployment which become compounded over time. In looking at coping strategies, we can identify both engagement and disengagement strategies that are important to young people. The first ones are more clearly functional and effective though under given circumstance, although it may also be useful to utilize some temporary disengagement strategies too. There is a wide array of potential engagement coping strategies that may be effective to increase reemployment not only in quantitative terms but also according to quality criteria. Many of those coping strategies have been researched, and a number of evidence-based interventions have been developed and evaluated that may enrich the coping strategies to make them more effective. It is important, however, to pay attention to the boundary conditions both in terms of the context and the personal characteristics. Enhancing employability, improving job search abilities and practices, building and strengthening adaptive career strategies, and promoting proactive coping behaviors are just a few coping strategies that can be improved and made more effective with the support and guidance of well-designed and evaluated programs. Finally, it is important to emphasize that even if the active role of youth is crucial in dealing with unemployment it should not lead to an agentic assumption that blames the individual if he or she is not successful in coping with unemployment. It is important to realize that this is a multilevel phenomenon with important contextual and structural factors that cannot be dealt with just by an individual. Coping needs to be enacted at different levels and requires also collective action. Indeed, for young people their families are often actively involved in helping them find work. Moreover, it is important that governments, education institutions, companies, and other organizations design and implement interventions that facilitate resources for the youngsters to effectively cope with unemployment experiences and profit from them to grow and flourish in the broader context of their career development.

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