

BUSINESS AND YOUTH: WORKING TOGETHER

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Why has youth unemployment remained at a persistently high level for more than twenty years? Are schools and businesses not making the grade, or are youth failing themselves? Most likely, as a study by the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses concludes, the problem of youth unemployment is complex and requires a comprehensive solution involving many partners and all players.

This article draws on the findings of the CFIB study on youth unemployment in 1998. The study uncovered many issues and identified opportunities and reasons for businesses to take responsibility for employing young people.

The goal of the CFIB study was to get beyond “over-generalized observations or statements such as small business being the ‘engine of the economy’ and youths as ‘Canada's future’.” Such statements, the CFIB points out, “only serve to oversimplify the issue and prevent the relevant questions from being asked.”

The reality of the situation is apparent. We know first hand that too many youth entering the labour market for the first time have little or no work experience. On the other hand, youth overwhelmingly believe that further education and upgrading their skills is the best way to improve their opportunities at finding work. When the CFIB asked what youth could be doing, they selected schools as the ‘best solution’ to better prepare themselves for future employment.

“This is a worrisome trend,” the CFIB notes, “as youth going back to school are more likely to take on more debt, rather than participating in the work force and developing their employment related skills and qualities.” The study also indicated “that students may be too quick to abandon their job search and return to school as an alternative career choice, rather than build the needed work experience.” Clearly, businesses can create better options for young people, other than going back to school.

The CFIB proposes a combination of approaches aimed at youth themselves and at business. “These approaches,” the CFIB states, “could take the form of providing guidance to prepare youth for that first contact and enhancing their life skills, in combination with an approach that removes barriers to small businesses hiring youth, or targeting specific small business sectors to encourage them to train youth for the skills they need.”

An additional aim of CFIB’s research was to help employers and youth find the appropriate employment match. Through follow-up discussions with their members, they found a number of creative measures businesses use to attract and retain quality young employees. For example, rather than focus on raw skills, employers want to see employee qualities and interest in building a good working relationship. Interestingly, CFIB members hire young people as a result of tapping into the informal referral

network. They find this approach extremely cost effective for employers, reasonably reliable, and they can use it as an effective pre-screening method.

If businesses are to accept a role in addressing youth unemployment they must first entertain the option of hiring youth. The primary recommendation of the CFIB encourages businesses to take a chance on youth and become their mentor. “Their lack of experience may be more than offset by their energy and willingness to learn.”

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