

Job Quality: The Missing Link Between School and Work

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One anxiety that haunts parents these days is the lack of jobs for their children – the dark image of a lost generation of young people.

Youth unemployment is the most visible sign of this bleak scenario unfolding. But there is also the risk of "under" employment – well qualified young people in low quality jobs.

Consider the experience of recent grads in Alberta, a province with a fast-growing economy and one of the lowest provincial rates of unemployment. Most of the university class of '94 had found well paid, full-time jobs by 1997, when we conducted a survey. Very few were jobless. However, one-third of the grads were in jobs that did not require a university degree and one-quarter felt overqualified for their job, given their education and experience.

The result: diminished quality of work life, lost productivity, and untapped creative potential.

The litmus test for a "knowledge economy" is how well students make the school to work transition. Even if schools, technical institutes, colleges and universities meet rigorous standards of excellence fulfilling their mandates – as many do – there is clear evidence that employers are underutilizing the "human capital" embodied in these grads as they venture out into the world of work.

A trio of forces explain the constricted job market for youth in the 1990s – deficit reduction, employer downsizing and labour cost reductions, and industrial restructuring. In that environment, many young people decided to stay in school longer or to return to school. They started to become life-long learners by necessity.

These young people have been acting on a deeply rooted "education ethic" in Canadian society: the belief that education is the best way to get ahead. They have been investing years of their lives and their own and their parents' money in building human capital.

Policy experts and business elites have called for investment in human capital – or intellectual capital, as some call it – as the key to Canada's global competitiveness. Somehow, we imply that if education and training programs produce capable workers, then high quality employment will naturally follow. But even in the strong Alberta economy of the mid-90s, this has not been the case for one-third of new university graduates.

This creates a field of dreams trap, and we seem to be falling into it. We now have more skilled young people than the economy is capable of absorbing.

As the job situation for youth deteriorated in the 1990s, it's not surprising that under-employment became a defining characteristic of new graduates' work experience. Surely this is not the signal we want to give to young people today.

Decisive action is needed to increase the quantity and quality of work available to young people. As a start, we need to rethink what it means to create job opportunities for young graduates. The first crucial priority is to set targets for entry-level positions.

Employers in each community, supported by all levels of government and educational institutions, could pledge to lower the local youth unemployment rate by 10 percent over a 24-month period. Nationally, this translates into 36,000 youth jobs.

Equally important, the emphasis must be on creating skilled jobs that provide opportunities to build a solid layer of practical experience. So the quality of jobs for youth matters as much as the quantity.

Also, it's high time that we cast aside the myths that young people are work shy or lack the right attitudes. Research I've conducted with my University of Alberta colleague Harvey Krahn shows beyond a doubt that high school and post-secondary grads in the 1980s and 1990s are strongly committed to the work ethic. More than anything, they want challenging and interesting jobs in which they can further develop their skills and abilities. This is good news indeed for the Canadian economy.

Employers must commit themselves to designing jobs that will nurture the fresh talent and energy offered by Canadian youth. These opportunities can only be created if employers in both private and public set a high priority on creating entry-level jobs, jobs that give new grads a chance to show their stuff and get a decent start in the world of work.

Creating quality entry-level jobs is not an act of charity. It is clearly in the interests of all employers, small and large, to begin to invest in the work force needed to take over from the baby boom generation as they reach retirement. No graduate can move instantly into a job now occupied by a fifty-year-old. They need a chance to do a lot of learning about work life, and a lot of skill building. Now is the time to begin.