



Engaging Youth In The Labour Market:

A Data Driven Approach to Youth Engagement



Workforce Planning Board
of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin



Our vision: We envision the continuous development of a leading edge workforce.

Our Mission: Engage partners to find solutions to local workforce development needs.

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Introduction/Background

Over the last few years, a common viewpoint among many employers is that “youth just don’t want to work anymore.” Even while working on this project and discussing it with employers, many would chime in with comments like “they’re all in their parent’s basements playing video games” or “they’re too busy on TikTok to worry about a job.”

With these comments in mind and following discussions with youth programs and employers across Waterloo Wellington Dufferin, the common thread was youth are absent from the labour market. The question is, “where are they going?”

With more research, we have found that this is a worldwide issue. However, according to Blue Marble, a not-for-profit organization founded by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, in 2023 more than a fifth of people worldwide between the ages of 15 and 24 years old (21.7%) were considered NEET’s (Not in employment education or training). Looking specifically at Canada however, that percentage drops to 11%.

Youth removing themselves from the workforce is not a new problem. An article published by the Financial Post in January of 2012 showed that in the United States nearly 7 million youth aged 16 to 24 were classified as “lost youth” due to not being in school and not having a steady job. Over a course of a lifetime this was estimated to have an economic impact of 1.6 trillion dollars of fiscal burden (\$170.7 thousand per year) and 4.8 trillion dollars of social burden (\$529 thousand per year). With inflation in mind, those numbers can be assumed to be even higher twelve years later in 2024.

Looking at 2024 StatsCan data around the Canadian labour market, there was a peak percentage of NEET youth in 2020 (12% across Canada and 11% in Ontario.) Since then, there has been a steady decline to pre-pandemic numbers sitting at 9% both for Canada as a whole and Ontario. The increase in NEET youth in 2020 can most likely be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic with the decrease signaling a return to “normal” life after lockdowns and restrictions were removed. Through this report we will be looking into data from employers, youth and the organizations who work with youth to see what can be done to re-engage youth in the labour market.



The Importance Of Community

Many youth, even when just beginning their career, are looking towards the future. This outlook however is not always bright. In a 2024 article by Blue Marble titled "1 In 5 Young People Around the World Are NEETs. What Does That Mean?" it was shown that half of young people who are NEET feel hopeless about their future. An internal survey done with youth by the Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin further supported this outlook. Of the 32 youth surveyed, 25% stated that they either feel hopeless or ill prepared for future work success.

This hopelessness is not only related to the job market however as factors outside the labour market are also at play. Housing costs, sense of belonging, transportation, and general affordability all play a part in this mindset that youth have. To highlight some of these factors, Statistics Canada released a document in September of 2023 titled "Navigating Socioeconomic Obstacles: Impact on the Well-being of Canadian Youth." The financial aspect surrounding housing and future planning were highlighted with key insights such as:

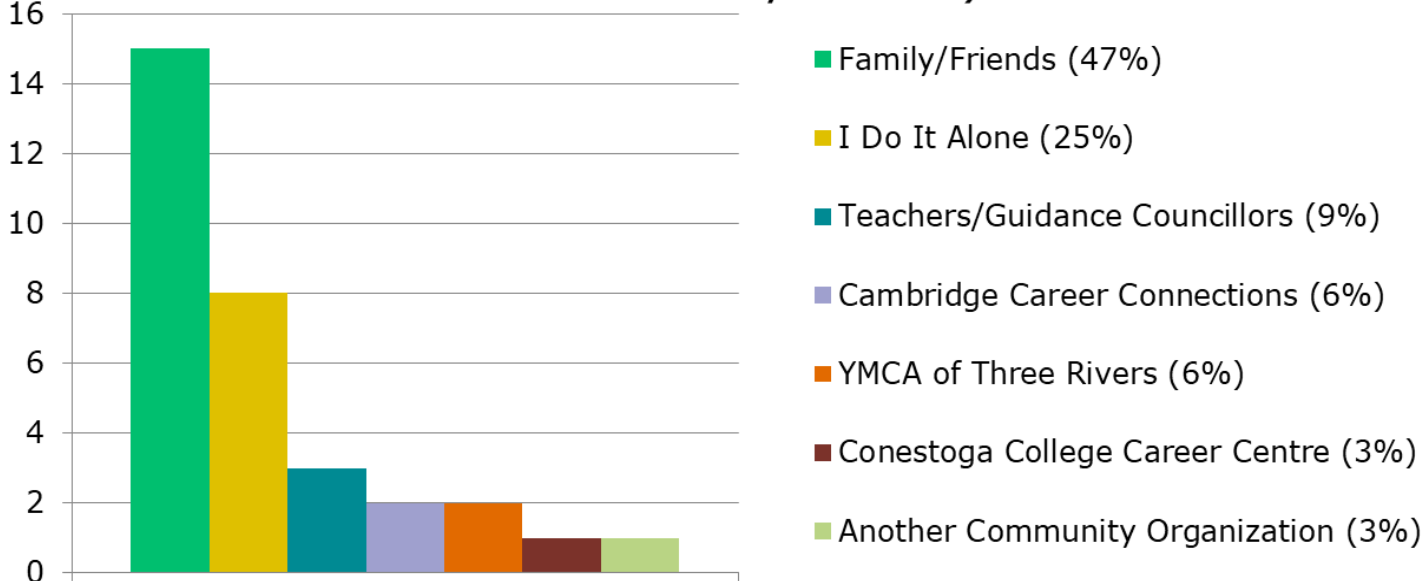
- In 2022, 32% of youth said that they wanted to buy a home or move to a new rental but decided not to because of price concerns.
- In 2022, 38% of young adults (aged 20 to 29) did not believe they could afford to have a child in the next three years, while 32% did not believe they would have access to suitable housing to start a family in that time frame (Statistics Canada, 2023).

With things like this in mind and the cost of living continuing to rise, it is no wonder that "the mental health of young Canadians has been slowly declining since 2003" (Statistics Canada, 2023).

This was no surprise to youth organizations. In conversations with organizations across Waterloo, Wellington, and Dufferin, it was reiterated repeatedly how important community is for not just employment opportunities but also to help create a safe space and social peer connection beyond the workplace. Without these social connections, further disconnect is bound to occur.

This is the building block of many of the organizations we spoke with. It is their first step when working with youth. Many youth that these organizations work with don't have a mentor figure or trusted adult that they are able to go to help guide them on the "smaller stuff" such as interviews, professionalism, and helping to navigate the everchanging labour market. As shown in our youth survey, 47% of respondents use friends or family to search for employment. Without that trusted mentor, almost half of respondents would be left to fend for themselves during their job search.

Who do you go to to help you find jobs? (What resources do you use?)



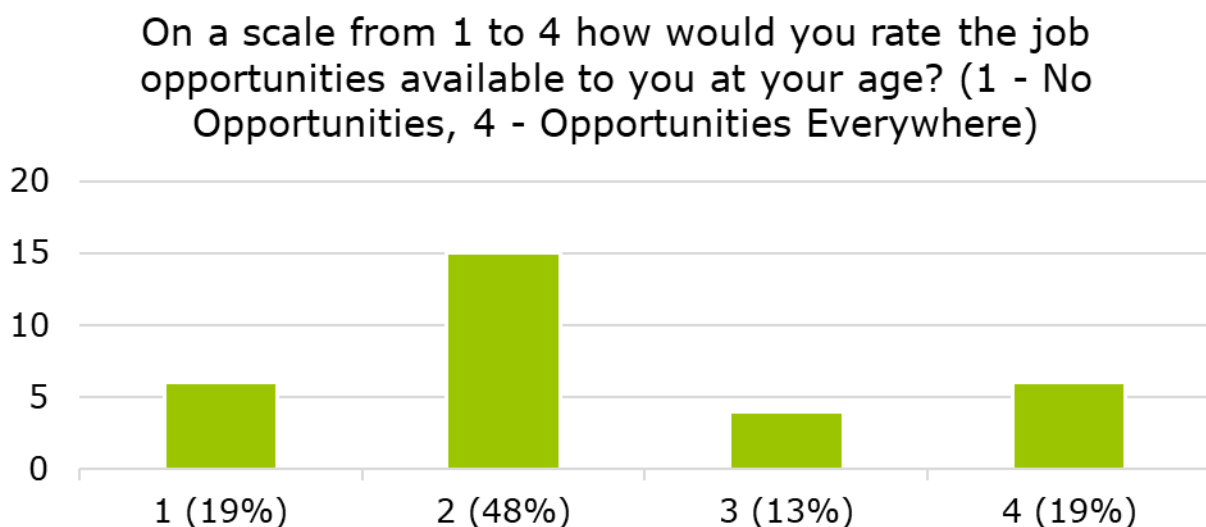
What these statistics and comments from youth and organizations show is that before you can even begin to think about the labour market or to engage youth, you need to ensure that they are connected to their communities. Yes, youth may find work without that connection, but without a strong community or mentor for support, they may struggle to gain meaningful experience. Likewise, employers seeking retention and high-quality workers will face challenges as disengagement becomes inevitable.



The Availability of Opportunities for Youth and How to Attract Youth to Your Workplace

When thinking about attracting youth into the workplace, there are a few different schools of thought. On one side are the naysayers who in many cases are not looking at internal problems that their organization may have and have landed on the mindset that “youth don’t want to work anymore.” Without a mindset change from those employers, attraction is impossible as they have a defined bias against youth, intentional or not, before outreach has even occurred. On the other hand, you have employers who are genuinely trying to attract youth but unsure of how to start or what to focus on. This is a positive step and, with insight, they can begin the process of drawing youth into not just the labour market but to specific businesses and industries.

With the correct mindset from employers, the question then is “how many opportunities are actually available for youth currently?” Speaking with organizations and youth alike the results were not promising. From the 32 youth surveyed and asked “On a scale from 1 to 4 how would you rate the job opportunities available to you at your age (1 – No Opportunities, 4 – Opportunities everywhere)” 21 (67%) of them rated the opportunities available as a 1 or 2.



This was echoed by organizations with none of them rating opportunities for youth over a 2. Despite this, some organizations did say that they do see the trend moving in a positive direction. They think that the opportunities available will increase and hope that in the coming years more roles will be available for youth. Some went further saying that for this to occur employers need to redefine “summer job” or entry level job requirements. The requirements, both educational and skill based, should be aligned with what is accessible for the youth at the time and that these roles are meant to engage them.

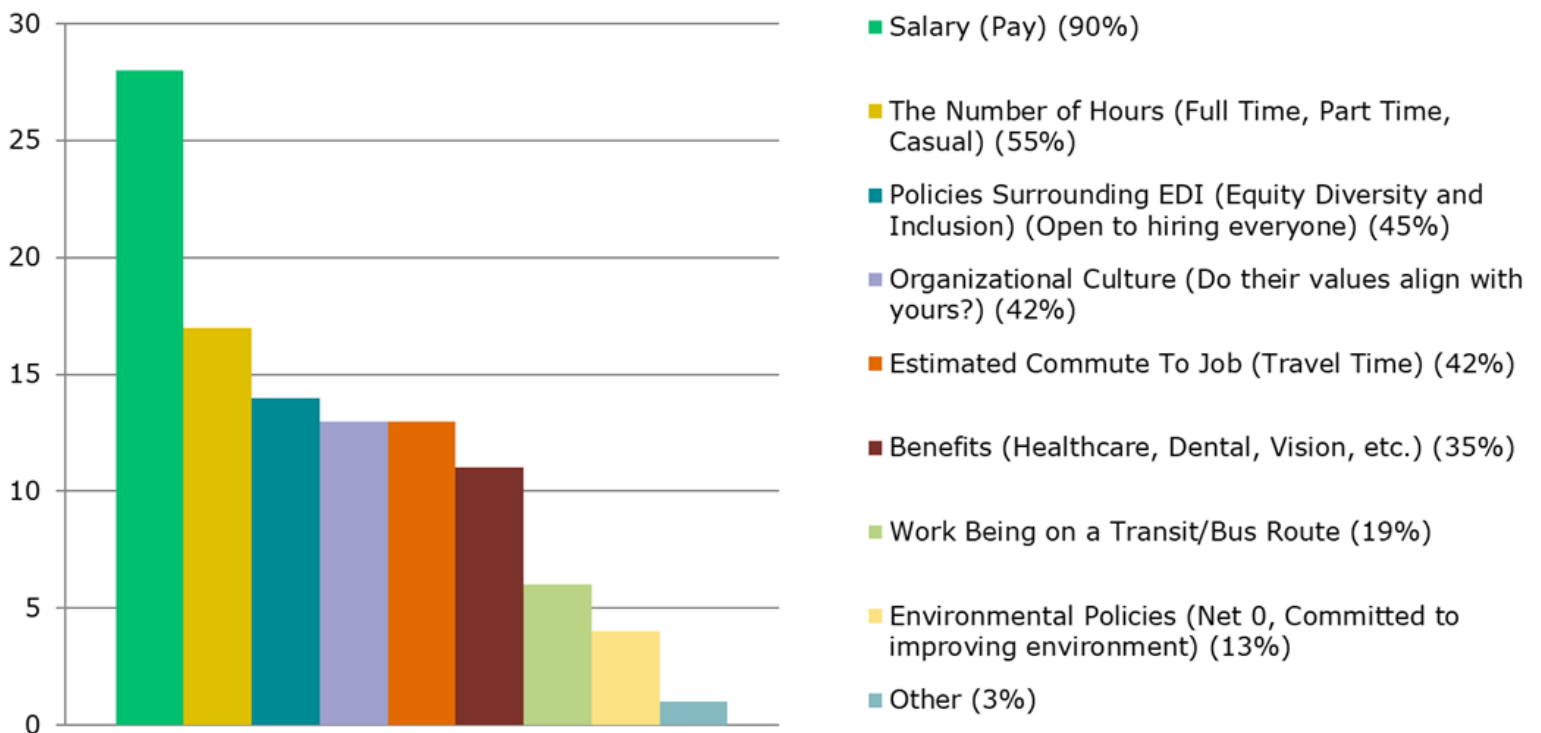
Along with pay scales for these entry level roles, employers could post where different levels of experience would fall within it. For example, a young high schooler entering the labour market for the first time would be at the bottom end of the pay scale versus someone who has graduated and worked part-time for a couple of years and thus may be eligible for a slightly higher rate. This progression would continue as more skills, education and experience are gained by job seekers allowing for both more opportunities for youth to enter the labour market and incentivising those with prior experience to apply for these entry level roles.



Imagine though that there was an abundance of jobs available for youth. The next step is ensuring that you are appealing to job seekers through your job postings and touching on the topics that are important to them. For youth, this covers a variety of things. From our survey, 28 of the 32 respondents (90%) stated that the salary or pay was important to them. Youth further stated that though pay is important to them, it is not important in the sense of “I need to make as much money as possible.” Rather, pay is important for survival. Youth want to ensure that they can pay their bills and not have to worry. They want to ensure that they are “working to live and not living to work.”

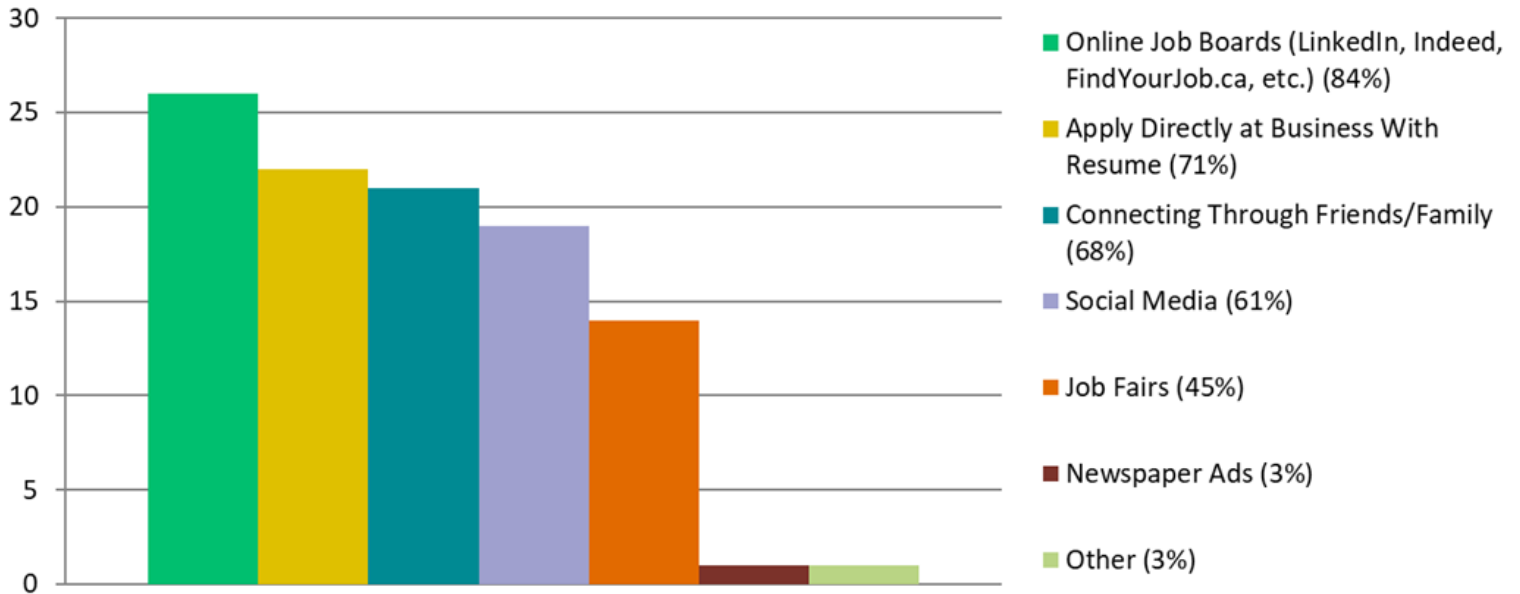
Other factors that 40% or more of youth surveyed spoke about being important to them when looking for a job were the number of hours (55%), Policies surrounding EDI (45%), Organizational Culture (42%) and Estimated commute to the job (42%).

When looking for a job what is important to you?



Just as important as what you are putting in a job description to attract youth is where you are putting those postings and attraction strategies into place. 84% of youth use online job boards such as Indeed, LinkedIn and FindYourJob.ca. This was followed by applying directly at the business (70%) and connecting with the organization through friends and family (67%).

If you were to search for employment how would you do it?

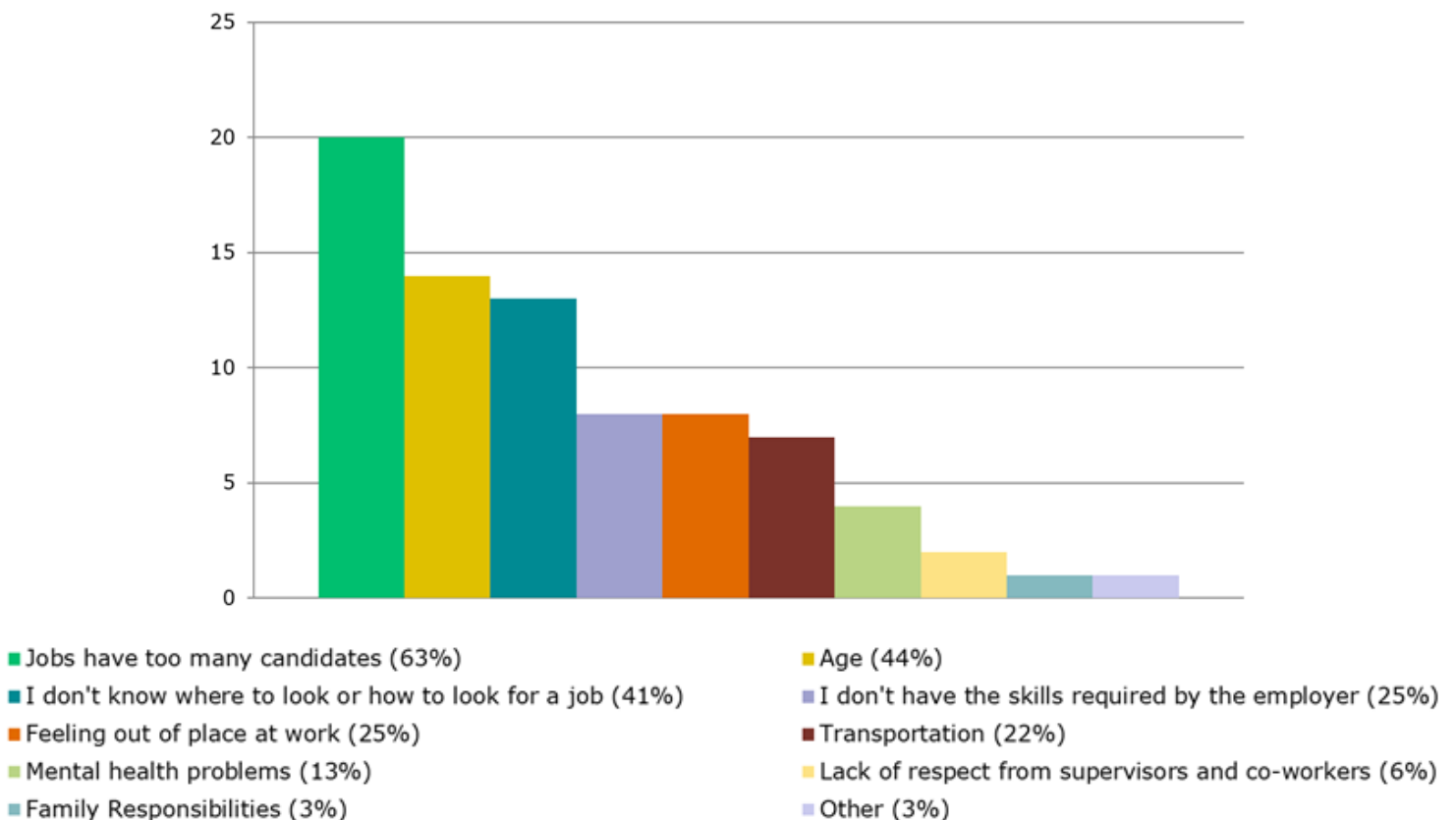


In speaking with organizations, this approach was reinforced. Many of the youth are pointed in the direction of social media and digital resources when they cannot be directly connected through word of mouth by the practitioners they are working with. This again shows the importance of community for youth employment. Without the initial connection point into this "hidden labour market" through connections, youth are throwing resumes at a "digital wall" and hoping that one of them makes it through the void and lands on a hiring manager's desk.

Challenges youth face in the labour market and how to increase the probability of retention

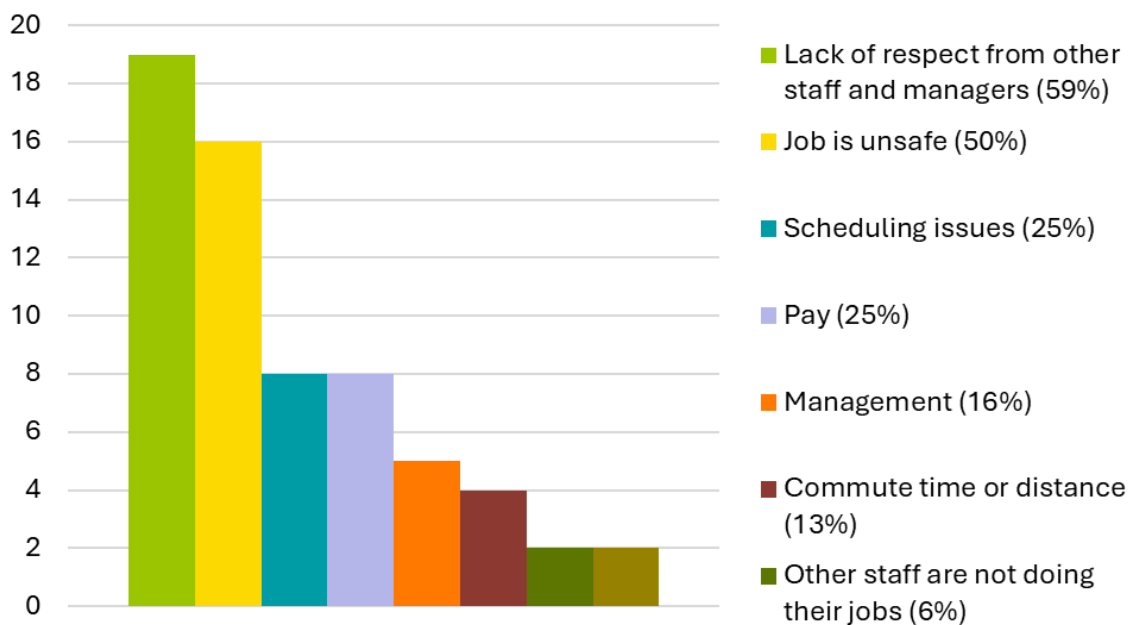
This “digital wall” is not the only challenge that youth face in the labour market. In relation to the lack of opportunities available for youth now, 20 of the 32 youth (63%) said that one of the largest challenges to finding and keeping a job is due to job postings having too many applicants. This makes sense with the data received. If there are only a handful of postings, the competition for those roles continues to grow. Another key point brought up by the surveyed youth was 13 of 32 (41%) stated that they were unsure where to look or how to properly jobseek. This point is in tandem with what was discussed by organizations in that “job seeking is habit not rhythm” and that there are proper and improper ways to search effectively.

What are the challenges of finding and keeping a job?



Once youth overcome these challenges and they land themselves in a role then the challenges shift to the employer who must begin to ask, “how do I retain them?” Though the idea of a “career hire” is no longer the norm and turnover must be expected, finding the ways that you can retain workers, especially youth, is becoming increasingly important. When speaking with youth, we asked them what some of the things are that would cause them to leave a job or the challenges of keeping a job. One thing that came up consistently was the feeling of respect from their supervisors and colleagues with 19 survey participants (59%) stating that feeling respected by their co-workers and management is of the utmost importance to them and that they would leave a job if it was not present.

What Would Cause You to Quit a Job?



So, what this data highlights to employers is that if you hire youth you must ensure that they are feeling respected within the workplace. This can take many forms but one of the most consistent that we heard from organizations and youth alike is ensuring that you are not ostracizing or excluding them due to factors such as age, religion, etc. Ensuring that they are treated the same as any other employee and that they feel supported through open communication will help to retain these youth for a longer period and aid with retention in the long run.

When asked some of the reasons youth would quit a job, organizations said:

- When there is not respect between the employer and the youth (agism, bullying, harassment, etc.)
- Communication breakdowns after something occurs such as missing work for illness leading youth to be unsure how to reconnect or proceed due to feeling like they won't be accepted back
- The feeling that quitting is the "easier path" and thus they "retreat back to what is comfortable rather than opening themselves to hurt."

So, as an employer, consider looking at the overall work culture of your workplace rather than just the individual role.

- Is it a community setting where people are treated fairly and respected for their work?
- Is it safe and do people feel they can express themselves and their perspectives without judgement?
- Are staff concerns being addressed by management in a timely manner?

Ensuring that your organization continues to evolve alongside factors important to incoming generations such as social policies will not only attract young workers but also help retain them.



Youth post secondary education challenges

According to the Labour Market Insights Report tool on FindYourJob.ca, over half of careers in the labour market now require some form of postsecondary education apprenticeship or training with 54% of posted roles in Waterloo, Wellington, Dufferin in January 2025 being defined as TEER 1,2 or 3. According to the Government of Canada, jobs in these TEERs usually require:

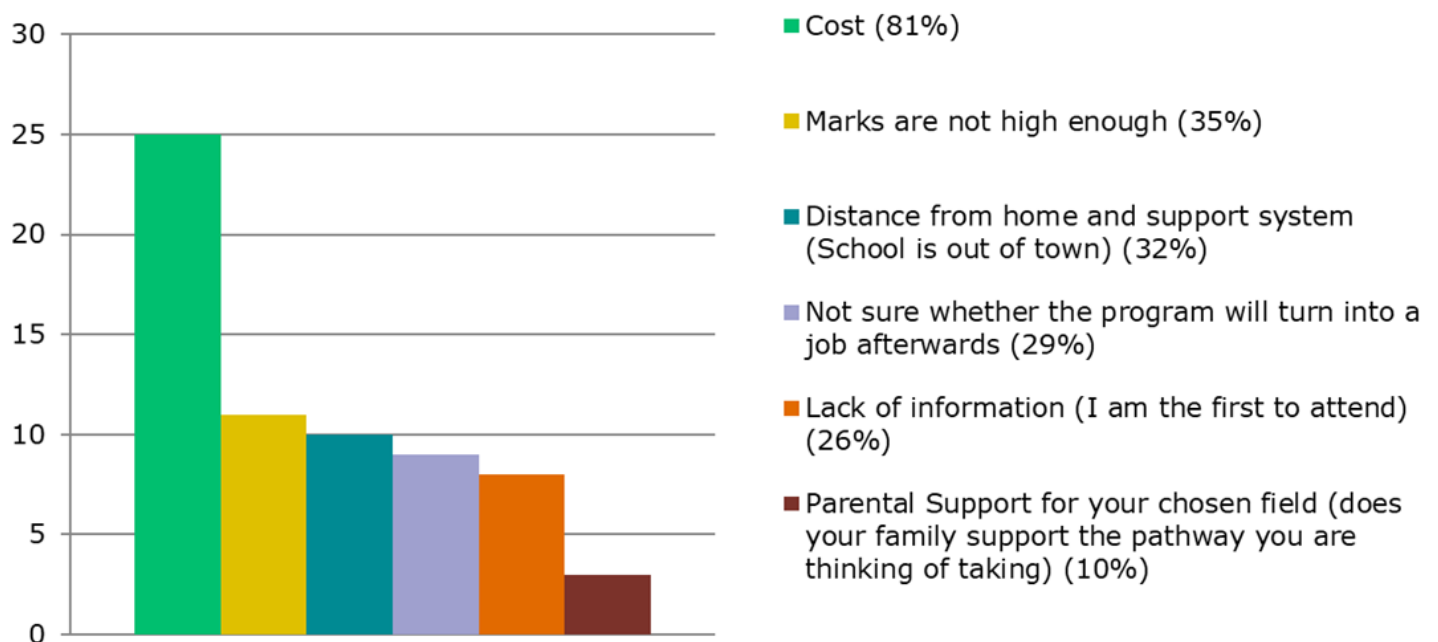
TEER Level	Educational and Experience Requirements
TEER 1 (EX: Financial Advisor, Software Engineer)	A university degree
TEER 2 (EX: Computer Network and Web Technicians, Laboratory Technologists)	A college diploma
	Apprenticeship training of 2 or more years
	Supervisory occupations
TEER 3 (EX: Bakers, Dental Assistants and Dental Laboratory Assistants)	A college diploma
	Apprenticeship training of less than 2 years
	More Than 6 Months of on-the-job training

Ensuring that there are as few barriers as possible is more important than ever for youth and the future workforce. Despite the growing need for this level of education and training, many things still stand in the way.

Of the 32 youth surveyed during this project, only 1 stated that they were not planning to go to postsecondary school, apprenticeship, or training. Youth are trying to engage in higher education and skills training.

One of the overarching barriers to postsecondary education is simply cost. Of the 32 survey respondents, 25 of them (81%) stated that cost was or is one of the challenges that they face in pursuing postsecondary education, apprenticeship, or training. This cost is not strictly tuition as costs begin for youth the moment they decide to apply with fees per application. They may also lose eligibility to certain social programs and, for those who may have not attended school for years, they need to purchase transcripts. Other notable challenges include marks not being high enough to attend (35%) and the distance from their home or support system, such as the school is out of town (32%).

What are some of the challenges that you face in going to post secondary education, apprenticeship or training?



In speaking with youth organizations, many of these same challenges were echoed as key factors they are focused on for youth re-engagement with the education system. For some, the challenges faced are not strictly educational. There are additional barriers created by the traditional education model (in-class lectures), parental pressure due to stigma around certain industries, and the need to be at a point that they are ready to “fly solo.” Some need to be confident enough to independently handle the challenges ahead because some clients in certain programs are disqualified from supportive programming once they are no longer NEET. These factors, alongside many more are why many of these organizations focus on care management and growing soft skills. As well, they help with funding some of the costs associated with post- secondary education such as application fees or transcript retrieval.

To fill the many jobs requiring post-secondary education, apprenticeships, or training and ensure workforce succession, employers and job seekers must work together to make education accessible to those who pursue it.

Youth Organization Engagement

In speaking with youth organizations regarding their programming, many important points were raised. These conversations were had in a less formal manner than a survey, but base questions were developed which allowed for expansion and clarification about how their programs specifically aid and work with youth.

From all the organizations, the key point that they brought forward was the importance of community and being a trusted person for the youth that they work with. In many of the cases they discussed, barriers are created when youth do not have a mentor or trusted adult that they can go to with questions, issues, or learn from regarding workplace culture or general help in overcoming specific barriers. One organization mentioned how their program is geared to life stabilization to ensure that the youth have a trusted source who can help them with everything including employment,

housing, food, school, etc. Only after this process has begun does the focus shift to an action plan which this organization stated includes transportation needs 9 out of 10 times. When asked why this is so important, organizations mentioned how their work is to help build confidence both in employment and in life and to ensure that these youth, many of whom face barriers, know that there is someone with whom they can connect. This connection in many of these programs continues even after the cohorts concluded. Program managers remain a trusted source of information and conversation as the youth continue their journey.

When asked about what challenges stakeholders were seeing regarding youth entering the workforce or keeping a job, they all spoke about respect. This is not only about the value being given to the employee for the job they are doing but also about ensuring that workplaces are free from bias or discrimination. This takes many forms including, agism, sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. One organization stated that youth are more open in many cases about these topics. One program cohort had 71% of the youth identifying as a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. These youth are wholeheartedly being themselves despite the barriers they may face in life. They strive to work for an employer who aligns with their lives both socially and financially.

Finally, all the organizations discussed how there is no “one size fits all” formula to help engage youth back into the labour market. Every youth, especially those that they work with, comes from a different background, and has their own story. The main consistencies are the need to continue to connect them to their communities and developing soft skills that allow for them to have transferrable skills. With these key program goals, local organizations help to ensure that youth are prepared not just for the labour market but for the adult world.

Conclusion and Best Practices for Employers and Interested Parties

With all this information in mind, there are two key things as an employer or interested party that can help get youth back into the labour market.

Firstly, connection to community is everything. Without this starting point and a connection to the community around them, the drive of “living to work” becomes more ingrained in youth. This eventually can lead to disengagement from the workforce. Youth will question “why am I working these hours instead of doing something for me?” What this means for employers is they must:

- Provide an environment in which life can be prioritized through flexibility for items like appointments, pre-planned trips, etc. There is a societal shift to time off requests are letting the employer know they will not be there and not asking for permission. This goes beyond youth workers.
- Make sure that the youth know that you see them as a person and not just a cog in the machine or a number on a paystub.
- Ensure that youth know that they are valued at your organization just the same as someone else and that there is no bias based on age or being “just a kid.”

For organizations:

- Ensure that your programs are built with community in mind.
- Cohort models where the youth involved can interact and not be isolated to 1 on 1 work, except when necessary (sensitive topics, medical, etc.) Youth do well at supporting peers which can further aid them beyond the program. This further allows them to develop their own networks.

Secondly, ensure that your job posting gives a realistic depiction of the role. Many youth, like others in the market will leave a role if it is not what they expected. Take the time to ensure that your postings are not only attracting the correct candidates in terms of skill sets but also allowing for a full understanding of what that day to day may look like. As well, ensure that if it is an entry level role that it is not being listed as something requiring years of experience or a specific level of education. The point of these roles is that if you have the soft skills where you can learn on the job and work your way up that skills ladder. Many of the traditional youth roles are now not in that sphere of entry level, and, without them, the barriers to the workforce are large. For organizations, ensure that your programs continue to develop these key soft skills such as communication so that no matter where the youth may end up, they have transferable skills.

Generations continue to change what is important to them when entering the labour market. If the future of the workforce is shifting, then the labour market they enter needs to shift alongside it. It is often easy for experienced workers and employers to get stuck in the way that it was when they first entered the labour market. However, those who truly succeed in hiring and retention continue to adapt as succession occurs ensuring that the business is not stuck in outdated thought processes. This can be done in a variety of ways. One easy way is if you work with the future generations to develop cross-generational relationships and allow for youth to provide expertise about some of their experiences so that processes can evolve. Though they may not know the ins and outs of the organization or workforce, perspective is still brought to the table which can help continue to grow your organization. Continue to learn from them as they learn from you.

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