

Keeping a generation from getting lost

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Surging youth unemployment could leave long-term scars on young job seekers. It's not just the economy's fault. A coddled generation also needs to rein in expectations, some experts say.

At 23, brimming with enthusiasm, new university graduate Sophie Bifield hit the ground running in search of a full-time job.

But 18 months later, after contacting more than 300 employers, the Queen's University psychology major was unemployed and disillusioned, her dream of a career in marketing derailed by the global economic crisis.

Ms. Bifield's lengthy bout of joblessness mirrors the predicament facing thousands of young job seekers as another school year ends: surging youth unemployment.

The jobless rate for those in the 15-to-24-year-old age group in 2009 jumped to almost 19 per cent in industrialized countries from about 13 per cent in mid-2008, before the recession hit, according to an April report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. It was the largest year-over-year rise in at least 10 years, the group said. OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría said youth joblessness is likely to stay high for the next two years, creating the potential for a "lost generation."

In Canada, where the downturn was milder, youth joblessness hit 15.1 per cent in May, a slight improvement over April – but still near an 11-year high.

Such rates don't bode well for young Canadians looking for full- or part-time work this summer and beyond, says Nancy Schaefer, president of Toronto-based Youth Employment Services (YES), one of the largest centres for jobless youth in Canada.

"In my 21 years here, things are as hard for young people as I have ever seen," Ms. Schaefer says. "If this economy doesn't pick up soon, this generation is going to lose hope."

It's not just summer earnings that are at risk. The potential for long-term career "scarring" is significant, experts say, ranging from lower-than-expected salaries to delayed career progression to a lack of overall job satisfaction in ensuing years.

And it's not just the economy that is at fault. A coddled generation that was promised it all – and never imagined or prepared for things to go in the opposite direction – will also need to rein in their expectations, the pros say.

Among the repercussions of high youth unemployment:

Stalled career development

To make ends meet, many young people may be forced to take lower-skilled, lower-paying jobs that don't make use of or develop their talents, says Janice Rudkowski, director of marketing and communications for Career Edge Organization in Toronto, a not-for-profit group that works with employers to arrange internships for graduates.

Given the jobs shortage, keen competition for fewer positions, and baby boomers who are reluctant to retire, younger workers may be stuck on the lower rungs for much longer than in the past, impeding their progress up the career ladder.

As a result, they may "miss out on early career lessons, from how organizations work to how to get along with different types of people," says career expert Barbara Moses, author of *What Next? Find the Work That's Right for You*. They may also miss out on developing critical skills associated with more senior jobs, Dr. Moses says.

Falling off the radar

If they remain unemployed or underemployed for too long, younger workers may find the skills they learned in college or university gathering dust, and they risk becoming stale in the eyes of employers and being passed over in favour of the next crop of fresh graduates, Ms. Rudkowski says.

"Employers want new talent ... so these people are often overlooked, especially if they have been out of school for a year or more," she says.

Slow career advancement

Upward moves that happened within a year in better days now take two to three years, says Adwoa Buahene, managing partner at n-gen People Performance Inc. in Toronto.

“Unless they can figure out what value they have and what the expectations are of companies, they need to understand that progression in a career will be much slower, and they will be frustrated,” Ms. Buahene says.

Smaller paycheques

Lower and slower career progress will also mean lower and slower pay increases. Many young people won't bring home what they'd been hoping for early in their careers, says Sean Lyons, an assistant professor of business at the University of Guelph, who co-wrote a recent study on the career expectations and priorities of the generation born in and after 1980.

His research found that more than two-thirds of those surveyed expected to be promoted within the first 18 months in their first job. And they expected their paycheques to climb rapidly within five years of graduation.

“They have absolutely no realistic expectation about what their advancement opportunities are going to be, or what their pay increase possibilities are likely to be,” Prof. Lyons says.

Job hopping

Because many are landing in positions they don't want, they will hop from job to job and employer to employer, predicts Lauren Friese, founder of Toronto-based TalentEgg.ca. And that won't help them look like loyal and desirable employees, she says. “If I am a recruiter, three to five different jobs does not look great on a résumé, and it could impact a person's career path,” she says.

Long-term disillusionment

All of this could dampen the ambitions of an entire generation, Dr. Moses says. “If this generation is denied, either by being stuck in the wrong entry-level jobs or not being able to get up the ladder, they may become disappointed, which could turn to bitterness and simply giving up,” she says.

To avoid such a thing, young people will have to adjust their career expectations, Prof. Lyons says.

“We are hearing that many are going in with the attitude that ‘the employer has to convince me that this is the place I should be working,’ which is especially off-putting when it is clear the market does not support that kind of attitude,” he says.

This generation needs to shift its attitudes and accept the fact that their first job after graduation is likely to be near the bottom of the totem pole, he says.

Dianne Hunnam-Jones, president of the Toronto district of staffing and placement firm Robert Half International, agrees, saying they should start with a “head check.”

“They need to be flexible and adjust their expectations to reflect what is available and what they are qualified for. They should be prepared to pay their dues with entry-level jobs. ... Once they get a foot in the door, the opportunities will eventually come,” Ms. Hunnam-Jones says.

There are no magic wands. Getting jobs will involve following time-tested job-search basics, from cold calling to networking to drafting error-free résumés to being well-prepared for interviews, Ms. Schaefer says. Young workers will also need to take some more novel approaches, such as creating their own internships and developing their own jobs, she says.

Some companies have set up programs especially targeted at helping young people get those precious first jobs. Last year, for instance, Toronto-based Loblaw Cos. Ltd. launched its national grad@Loblaw program, which provides recent postsecondary grads with full-time jobs and the opportunity to kick-start their careers.

Kraft Canada Inc. is hiring students through its summer internship program. Designed for students still in university, it offers work in the summer months and often links them with full-time jobs after graduation, at the same time helping the company find new talent.

Toronto-based Career Edge Organization, a national not-for-profit, has worked with more than 1,000 employers across Canada to place approximately 9,800 young people in paid internships. For Ms. Bifield, the route to full-time work came in creating her own job.

When her lengthy job search failed to land a position in marketing or advertising, Ms. Bifield decided to put her self-taught social media skills to work. Early last year, she began pounding on the doors of companies that wanted to use social-networking sites in their own recruiting efforts and, in a matter of weeks, she lined up several short-term contracts. She soon made a name for herself as a social networking consultant.

In April, she landed a full-time job with Toronto advertising and communications agency TMP Worldwide as a digital strategist, helping TMP clients with their use of social networking tools for their own recruiting.

“Once I established myself around my social networking skills, people came to me,” Ms. Bifield says. “In the end, I realized that companies ... want to hire you for something you know and are good at.”