

GENERATION WORK

Young Adult Critiques of Workplace Practices



PURPOSE

Port Jobs has conducted interviews with sixty-one young adults, ages 18-29, who were previously engaged in training, college and job search and placement programs and had entered employment. This is the second briefing report emerging from these interviews.

The first briefing paper, completed in the spring of 2019, described the challenges young adults faced regarding workplace engagement and inclusion. This report asks young people to share observations about why they were hired and what actions it would take to advance in companies. Young people were also invited to provide recommendations that would increase the effectiveness of workforce development or college programs.

These papers are intended to showcase the voice of young adults and inform the work of Generation Work workforce and education partners in a “just in time” manner at Generation Work meetings. A third briefing paper will be issued in the fall of 2019, followed by an end of year report summarizing the 2019 interviews.

APPROACH

The interviews were conducted by Business Government Community Connections, under contract to Port Jobs. Each of the young adults was interviewed by phone or in person. Interviewees (called Young Adult Advisors) were compensated for sharing stories about their work experiences. All were invited to include this work experience on their resumes. Each Young Adult Advisor had participated in a first interview conducted between March 2017 and June 2019, and subsequently entered employment in one or more companies between the first and second interview. All 61 second interviews were conducted during the first half of 2019.

Most young adults were employed in entry level jobs in manufacturing, construction, aviation, trades, hospitality, retail and security. Nine also worked second jobs as Uber drivers, landscapers, restaurant and warehouse workers.

The interview sample and findings are deepened with each briefing report to incorporate the results of additional interviews conducted during the previous quarter. Each briefing paper showcases selected findings that may be of particular interest to Generation Work-connected providers and partners.

SELECTED FINDINGS

The top ten most frequent themes, in order of frequency that were mentioned by young adults are cited below under each question. Their responses shed light on some of the main reasons young adults felt they were hired, as well as their recommendations for actions needed to advance. Workforce partners may want to share this information with young adults enrolled in their programs.

Looking back on your own experiences, what were the main reasons you got hired?

GENERATION Z	MILLENNIALS
I said I knew and felt comfortable with technology	Previous employment experience
I said I liked multi-tasking	Positive attitude
I said I wanted to have a chance to learn new things	Recommended by instructors/previous employers
I said I like getting feedback especially if it is geared towards helping me advance at work	Specialized training certificates listed on resume
My certificates and training	Said I expected to stay with the company for a while
I was young and they thought they could teach me	Talked about wanting to learn
My previous employment experience	Said I liked being part of a team
My interest in working with others on the same team	Said I was very responsible, and always had good attendance
My emphasis on how I would be energetic and enthusiastic	Said I was self-directed, and reliable
My promise to represent their company well by being positive	Told them I was ambitious and would like to keep building my skills

In your company what are the most important actions you need to take to advance in a job?

GENERATION Z	MILLENNIALS
Build a network of friends at work	Be a willing problem solver
Step up to learn new skills	Be collaborative
Try to be relatable and get along with supervisors	Take advantage of cross training
Ask questions about products and company practices	Have great attendance
Show you can take direction but like to work yourself (autonomously)	Ask to learn new skills
Know what websites or places that training or jobs are being posted	If there is a need to work extra hours offer to do so
Think ahead to what might be changing and make recommendations about how to be more ready	Consolidate questions and schedule time to ask, rather than continually pestering supervisors
Show that you are not distracted (by cell phones or anything like that) so they see you are serious about your job	Always know what training or advancement opportunities are available
Have good attendance	Talk to people who have the kinds of jobs that you would like to have to see what they did to get there
Show that you like and are not bored by your work	Take every type of training offered, even if it is at hours or times that are not convenient

The responses of Generation Z (post-millennials), ages 18-22, and millennials, ages 23-29 to a few questions are presented separately below as the comments from these groups were significantly different. The recommendations section focuses on two selected areas: workplace environment and safety.

YOUNG ADULT RECOMMENDATIONS

HELP YOUNG ADULTS ENVISION THE ENVIRONMENT WHERE THEY MOST WANT TO WORK

The comments of thirty-five young adults suggest that college and job preparation programs may want to spend more time talking with young people about factors which could influence their job choices, or help prepare them better for their first job. One young adult said it was important to “really consider what kind of company to work in”, while others reported “that it is good to think about the kind of boss or supervisor you want.” One young man cautioned, “If you don’t think hard about what you really want in a job ahead of time, chances are you won’t stay in the same job for long.” Some noted that their company’s approach to making workplace improvements was particularly important, and for a handful

this was a “deal breaker”, influencing their decision to begin looking for, or even getting another job.

Nine young adults had left their first jobs. All had changed companies, but remained in jobs related to their training or job placement. All said that they had made a job change because they realized that their personality and job expectations and values were not a good match with their first job placement. A retail worker said, “I learned that I wanted to be in a company that put customers first, not how much you sell each day, so I made a job change.” Another young person said that he realized that he wanted to work in a manufacturing company that was “more about designing new products and innovation, and where even entry level workers were asked to recommend new product ideas.” When he





found himself working in a company that devalued worker input and pushed consistency and uniformity over creativity, he decided to make a job change. He was happier after he got a job in a start-up company, even though his job security was more tenuous.

An additional group of twelve young people were still working, but beginning to explore other options, in large part because of workplace environment issues. One young adult who was an airport fueler said he realized he wanted to work in a less formalized and structured work environment, while another, who was a customer service representative said her top priority was to work in a friendly, family environment where teamwork was the most important feature. Both kept these jobs, but were busy planning their next career

moves with these kinds of criteria in mind. Both intended to stay in aviation-related careers, and the fueler was already making plans to return to school to become an airplane mechanic. One young woman added, “All jobs are good for you – they help you grow and see who you might be next. I have improved my English and my confidence in this job and will be even more ready to work well in my next job.” Another young person emphasized the importance of knowing what kind of workplace you think will help you advance the most. She said she really wanted to work in a company that promoted mentoring and advice, but instead was in one that mainly talked about profit and seemed to pit the workers against each other. For this person being in a competitive environment was not a comfortable or good job fit. Despite this she said, “I still support my company but know that in the future I will keep looking for an employer that is able to give me more attention.”

Another factor that was important to many young adults was how a company made improvements in workplace practices. Several realized that they were not as likely to stay in a company where improvements were made without employee involvement. This group of young adults wanted to work in environments where changes were less reactive, and more transparent and ongoing. One said she thought

work improvements would be better received by workers “if they were part of our everyday process, and not primarily as a means to detect problems or errors.”

- Who Am I ?**
- What kind of job do I really want?**
- Bosses who act as– Mentors?
Team Builders? Innovators?
Producers? Competitors? Monitors?**
- Companies that value the
importance of– Communication?
Transformation? Profitability?
Timeliness? Efficiency?**
- Improvements that are focused
on– Employee Involvement?
Creating Solutions? Promoting new
practices? Improving Productivity?
Error Detection?**

In addition, 14 young people raised the above issues from a different vantage point, and most were very pragmatic. One said, “There just needs to be more discussion or thought when you are applying for, getting trained or ready for any job to make sure that young people are grounded in reality – even if that reality is hard to hear. For example, if the job is all about efficiency and predictability then don’t be surprised when you get in trouble for not producing according

to the goals they set.” This theme was reinforced by several young people. A machine assembler said, “Look, if procedures are going to dictate your work, then expect that your boss is going to want you to know and follow procedures. If you don’t want to do this then pick a different career path. Efficiency and competition are not for everyone. For me, I like it – I like to compete against myself and others.” Some of the above young adults liked working in environments where they were more independent, and/or were held to strict production quotas. For them, mentoring was not necessary, and most felt that extra communication from supervisors was not something they particularly needed or wanted.



“Safety problems cause people to lose jobs. Also, because some people are afraid to call in absent, they come to work when they are ill, and put the health of others at risk. So the safety problems sometimes really come from being short-staffed, because if you are overtired you might be less careful. And if you are sick you might put others or yourself at risk.”

Young Adult Advisor working in a warehouse and as a forklift operator.

The potential lesson from the young people who shared their thoughts about their work environments was that talking and thinking in advance about workplace environment issues above could potentially lead to better job satisfaction, longer job placement and retention, or to a mindset that was ready to meet the demands of the workplace. A young man who worked in manufacturing said he felt badly that he had changed jobs because he did not want the employer to be upset with his training program. “I am still using all the skills I earned in that program and in my first job, but since found a job at a manufacturing company that better met my goals and values.”

PROVIDE YOUNG ADULTS WITH MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HOW TO RESPOND TO SAFETY ISSUES

Fifteen young people talked about safety hazards at their workplace (construction, manufacturing, retail, food service). They suggested that young adults get more information about how to respond to potential work environment issues. Examples of the ones they cited included: the presence of noisy and vibrating equipment; the need to lift or avoid heavy objects falling; the requirement to use strident chemicals or cleaning solvents; stress caused by working long hours that make accidents more likely to happen; the necessity to work in environments with poor lighting; the need to enter poorly lit or seldom monitored parking garages at odd hours of the day; and discrimination-related concerns described below. One person said, “We need more help practicing what we can or should do when we confront safety situations, as much as learning about topics such as fall protection, the importance of guarding machines, wearing protective clothing, flammable liquids – all that is important, but so is what to do about those problems when management does not step up.” One woman who worked at a construction site said she was hesitant to complain about safety issues at the male-dominated sites, and thought doing so



would jeopardize her employment. In her case the protective clothing she was given was ill-fitting. Also, she reported that the bathrooms at one of her sites were unusable as they were so unsanitary. She also noted that because she was a small woman the tool grips did not fit her as well, and she wished she had learned different techniques to deal with this situation. Three young adults connected safety problems to staff shortages, extended shifts, and work environments which were based on unreasonable quotas and tight timelines, causing workers to be stressed and not as mindful of safety precautions. One young person who was working three different jobs said, “If so many young adults didn’t need to work more than one job because wages are so low there would be fewer accidents. It is hard, even if you are young to work at top speed, if you are working 18 hours a day.”

NEXT STEPS

The input of the Young Adult Advisors contributes to the understanding of how to prepare young adults for the workforce. Their insights and recommendations are greatly appreciated and will be shared broadly with Generation Work partners, employers, and others in the community who are supporting the development of equitable and inclusive job pipelines for young adults.

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Business Government Community Connections

PORT JOBS

“When employers know you are willing to be part of a team, and are interested in learning new skills, and ready to take on new challenges, you will be considered first for advancement. Somehow you need to stand out. You also need to make connections to people who can teach or mentor you so you can learn from them because they know what it takes to progress in your career. All this will take some time, and won’t be easy, but I feel like I am doing most of the right things”

Young Adult Advisor

Port Jobs is supporting local efforts which connect young adults to good jobs and career pathways in King County. Port Jobs is the local lead for the Seattle Generation Work partnership. The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched Generation Work in 2016 to explore new ways of connecting young Americans with the knowledge and experience they need to succeed in the job market. The initiative includes partnerships in Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia and Seattle. All are dedicated to weaving together best practices from the adult education and training field. The particular focus is on demand-driven workforce development strategies which integrate and are driven by positive youth development practices, such as mentoring and work-based learning, to better prepare young people ages 18-29 for work.

Port Jobs regularly convenes Seattle Generation Work partners to share what they are learning and brainstorm ways to align, coordinate and leverage resources. In support of these efforts, Port Jobs engaged Business Government Community Connections (BGCC) to interview young adults served by Seattle Generation Work partners. The interviews garner young adult feedback about their experiences prior, during and after receiving services into Generation Work learning community meetings and planning. Results are shared to ensure young adult voice informs the work of all partners.

Port Jobs would like to thank the young adults who shared their experiences and offered their feedback. Your valuable input will help our partnerships and programs more effectively support the career and educational goals of young people living in the King County region.

For more information about Generation Work please visit <http://portjobs.org/index.php>