

Youth Network

Issue 1: Insight on the big issues in
youth workforce development.

Prepared by:
Abdullah Khan, Research Assistant



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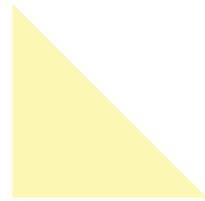
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There is no doubt that the Canadian youth have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Even in the years before the pandemic, technological and economic changes meant that the life experiences and career decisions of the Canadian youth differed vastly from their predecessors. Today's youth are more likely to spend more time in education whilst their transition towards full-time career is more fluid, rife with fluctuating work opportunities. This requires resilience in navigating these murky waters. Luckily, the Canadian social services sector has been cognizant of these issues and has attempted to support the youth in navigating their career pathways. Professionals in this sector have dedicated their energies towards imparting the youth with the tools to thrive in a 21st century economy. The following series of articles aims to explore the youth workforce development professionals' views on various issues impacting the youth and their advice for the future generation, while it incorporates the youth opinion on things that matter the most to them.

CCYP council members mostly work in executive roles in nonprofit organizations that focus on youth. In addition to these organizations employing youth in various capacities, youth workforce development makes up a major part of their work. The Council members had both converging and varying opinions on the issues impacting youth depending on the work that their organization performed.

Additionally, the CCYP Youth Council shared their own perspective on issues impacting the youth, some of which resonated with the thoughts of the council members. The following commentary shares the perspectives of the council members and the youth.

This series of commentaries aims to inform the public about youth workforce development and the issues impacting Canadian youth. This would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of the CCYP Youth Council. We would like to thank 2019/2020 Youth Council particularly Cindy Cutrao, Jushua Wiggins, Yuvraj Singh, Noor Fadel and Jathusha Mahenthirarajan for conducting interviews with CCYP council members and for providing their opinion on issues impacting Canadian youth.



Abdullah Khan
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Contributions from the Youth Development Sector

Since the CCYP council members interviewed were mostly part of non-profit organizations, working with youth was a part of each organizational mandate and for some organizations such as NPower, it was the primary focus. Adam Morrison's OTEC was focused on building skills and attracting youth to careers in the tourism sector while NPower was focused on developing skills and job placements primarily in the IT sector. While FutureFit led by Hamoon Ekhtiari aimed at utilizing technology for providing career support to the youth and Ashley Boha's Work Prep provided a plethora of services including mental health and employment support.

Lack of Youth Self - Confidence

One of the recurring themes that emerged during discussions with the council members was the lack of self-confidence exhibited by youth which inhibited their career pathways. The hesitation exhibited by the youth due to lack of confidence in their own abilities was noted by members of the CCYP council as a key issue. Moreover, since youth are conscious of the impact of their work on the community and consider it as an important consideration whilst taking up employment at an organization, they incur the risk of being misled or 'greenwashed' (given a false perception of the environmental impact of their work on the community).

This was corroborated by the youth council members who noted the difficulty in navigating careers as a potentially stressful point for the youth. The issue of 'greenwashing' was also acknowledged by the youth council who saw it differently, as they pointed towards the lack of better employment opportunities elsewhere being the reason for staying at jobs where the youth felt they were being 'greenwashed'.

Availability of Services and Governmental Support

A common theme that emerged during the discussion with the council members was the need for a continuum of services available to the youth with a focus on providing centralized services ranging from employment services to mental health support. The council members had voiced their opinion that any future spending by the government in this area should include funding for integrated programs. They were also of the opinion that government funding should be flexible which would provide more maneuverability to the recipient organizations. The focus of the council members was the navigation of different stages of life and career by the youth, which they deemed it as an important area for intervention.

The youth council members also supported the need for access to such services as they felt that lack of access to supports can have long-term and far-reaching consequences for the youth with a detrimental impact on their careers.

Skills Development

CCYP council members showed support for the development of soft skills in youth and they focused on the transferability of skills i.e. utilizing skills learned in a specific job environment in another one. For example, Adam Morrison mentioned leveraging skills developed in the tourism sector for future career opportunities. Andrew Reddin focused on the development of soft skills and adopting a skill-based approach in hiring as opposed to formal diplomas and qualifications.

The youth council members on the other hand, opined the need for increased recognition of potential as opposed to skills, a more holistic evaluation as it were. The youth council also pointed out the gap emerging because of youth graduating from the educational system without the requisite skill-set demanded by the employers in the labor market, while they noted the difficulties in navigating the hiring process to showcase their potential in front of employers.

Way Forward

Overall, there is some convergence between the opinions of the CCYP council members and the youth council. The COVID-19 pandemic and the preceding decade that followed the Great Recession, along with changes brought about by globalization and automation, have significantly altered the labor market, with career pathways for youth significantly differing from pathways adopted previously.

The views of the youth council relating to the terms of employment and the skills gap reflect the rising sense of discontentment among the youth who have been one of the most adversely affected groups during the pandemic. Over the past few decades, youth employment has experienced a shift with increasingly larger numbers of youth being employed in temporary, precarious work. There have been multiple proposals floated



aimed at ameliorating the conditions of the youth. These include developing micro-credential modules focused on specializing in a specific skill-set as a possible substitute for university programs. At the same time, evidence suggests labor shortages in certain areas such as skilled trades and increased demand for college diplomas due to their practical nature and aging industry employment. Moreover, co-ops and work integrated learning programs have been a successful tool for increasing the employability of students and young graduates. Going forward, there is a need for evidence-based interventions in areas such as co-op programs and diverting youth attention to sectors with skills shortages, which can improve the employability of youth in the labor market. Moreover, there is a strong need for focusing on improving the quality of employment (i.e. shift away from precarious, temporary work) for youth which can reduce the sense of disgruntlement in the youth. The federal government has already started the process for making changes in the labor code for the federally regulated industries. However, that represents a small portion of the Canadian workforce and even a smaller portion of the youth labor force. There is a need for working with the provinces to better regulate the labor market, particularly the 'gig economy', to generate better labor market outcomes for the youth.

The following sections cover the individual perspective of CCYP council members who are actively engaged in youth workforce development.

Mr. Adam Morrison

With an educational background in international development & capacity development and work experience in community work and consulting, Adam Morrison melds these experiences in his role in Ontario Tourism Education Corporation (OTEC), where he leads the organization in supporting workforce development in the tourism and hospitality sector.



OTEC's Work and Impact of COVID-19

OTEC has a multipronged approach to supporting youth workforce development. They work with school boards to reach high school students, particularly those in programs tailored towards business administration or the tourism sector, and create 'industry attachment' by informing them of their employment prospects in the tourism sector. For those who are unaware, the accommodation and food services sector is a tremendously important employer of youth. Infact,

“27% of Canadian population have their first job in the tourism and hospitality sector.”

Before the pandemic, the tourism and hospitality sector were said to suffer from a labor shortage.. When the pandemic initially started, it was mostly young people, a lot of whom were employed in casual and part-time positions, who were hit hard in the tourism and hospitality sector. However, with time and the prolonging of the restrictions, the economic impact has progressed to middle management positions as well.

One of the major impacts of the pandemic that Adam noted was on the mental health of people across all age groups. The task of dealing with the mental stress and anxiety repercussions of the pandemic is a challenge that needs to be dealt with.

Future of Work and New Interventions

According to Adam, in the future there will be much more fluidity in the labor market and there will be much more focus on skills rather than qualifications which is something that is already taking place in the technology sector. Young people need to learn ways to use their education and their skill set acquired from work experiences to find new opportunities which might be in a different organization or a different industry than the sector of their choice. In short, there will be much more focus on the transferability of skills. One of the suggested interventions was to work with workers displaced by the pandemic to identify their skills and competencies, and using technological tools like AI to identify which industry and role(s) these skills might be applicable in. Thereby, creating a pathway for people to get employment in those positions.

Some of the key skills that will be required in the future will be social and emotional skills. From Adam's perspective, the work done in the tourism and hospitality sector which involves providing customer service, sales, relationship management and conflict resolution, can provide the necessary soft skills required for the jobs of the future. This is also a part of OTEC's awareness campaign with the youth.. OTEC informs youth that by beginning their career in this sector, they can gain valuable skills which can be useful in the ever-changing labor markets and can be beneficial to their future career aspirations.

According to Adam, one of the issues with the youths' approach is that they are so fixated on finding a career in specific organizations that they do not look at the plethora of opportunities available in other industries and organizations. There is an acute frustration when youth are unable to find a career in their preferred sector or industry.

The youth should be more flexible and should focus on how they can take their skillset to another industry or sector, because there are still many opportunities available for the youth. At the same time, the industry needs to shift its focus and make entry-level roles more lucrative for youth.

After the pandemic, OTEC has started a credentials wallet initiative in collaboration with school boards, which contains certifications of the training that the youth have undertaken. Basically, it helps people in showcasing their credentials to employers during the hiring process. OTEC recently launched a test initiative in partnership with social media influencers, to reach and interact with youth directly and also inform them about their labor market prospects and opportunities. Moreover, OTEC is working with students and recent graduates to inform them about the latest developments in the industry, particularly reopening and employers that are hiring.

Challenges

The small and medium enterprises sometimes lack the capacity for proper onboarding or training of youth. This is particularly important for youth with employment barriers, as neglect of these youth by their employers can further marginalize them. Secondly, the number of NEET (not in employment, education or training) youth has increased in the wake of the pandemic. As such, engaging with and supporting them needs to be a priority in the youth employment space. There is also a need for the corporate sector and government to focus more on systematic changes. Traditionally, the corporate sector has focused on corporate social responsibility and governments' agenda have been focused on achieving their metrics. However, there should be a bigger focus on making systematic changes and directly reaching out to the communities and hearing directly from the youth on what their issues are and what they want.

Mr. Andrew Reddin

Having worked in the employment and training field since 2007, Andrew Reddin worked with NPower Canada's CEO, Julia Blackburn, and Board Chair, Stephen Gardiner, to launch the charity's youth-focused workforce development program in 2014, spurred by his passion for helping youth find opportunities and navigate through their career pathways.



Focus On Skills

One of the focuses of NPower Canada's work is shifting the focus of employers from formal degrees to skills and aptitude. While there is growing support for skills-based hiring in the technology sector, some resistance remains. Over the years, NPower Canada has worked with employers on modifying their approach and has encouraged skills-based hiring over an exclusive focus on formal credentials. Through these efforts and constant engagement with employers, NPower Canada has been able to place its graduates in roles in large organizations that would otherwise require a formal postsecondary degree. According to Andrew, partly due to its diverse base of public and private sector funding, NPower Canada also has access to industry insights which helps inform the design and delivery of its programs. Andrew also mentioned that the organization integrates employer feedback into its curriculum to ensure its programming is tailored towards meeting the requirements of those jobs.

NPower Canada's Engagement with Youth

Andrew mentioned that to solicit youth opinion, NPower Canada administers focus group sessions and surveys to its youth clientele. Moreover, it has formed a Youth Advisory Council consisting of NPower Canada graduates, which is representative of the populations whom the organization serves. The Chair of the Council is a full-voting member of NPower Canada's board. These measures ensure that youth are involved in the decision-making process and give feedback on service delivery and provide input on program design.

The lack of self-confidence among the youth was pointed out as a key issue which can affect their growth and prospects. This can also persist after graduation, with Andrew noting that NPower Canada alumni sometimes need additional support and encouragement to embrace leadership opportunities like joining the Youth Advisory Council

Expectations for the Future

Andrew thinks that there is a need for better coordination among different programs and services helping the youth. Since there is no centralized referral system to help the youth, some youth feel bounced around in the system and develop 'program fatigue'.

Going forward, there is a need to reduce the fragmentation in the system, and NPower Canada has held roundtables with other organizations on how to best deal with this issue. Andrew believes that youth feedback should be at the center of design of such strategies and that youth feedback and user experience testing are required to make this a success.

Advice for Youth

For youth interested in working in the youth development sector, Andrew suggested that the sector contains all sorts of various roles depending upon an individual's skillset. There are career pathways for nearly everyone who wants to start a career in this sector. Anyone with skills ranging from project management to business development can find their niche in this sector and navigate their way.

Attracting Youth

Youth outreach has been NPower Canada's biggest challenge so far. Right now, its partner employers have employment opportunities exceeding the number of available applicants.

Former alumni of NPower have been a good source of referrals. Currently, more than 35% of enrollment comes from word-of-mouth referrals, while NPower Canada works with partner organizations to cross-promote each other's services. However, there is a need for a multi-pronged approach for reaching marginalized youth. Since the in-person work of partner organizations has been hampered due to the COVID-19 pandemic, NPower Canada has increased focus on social media and online outreach. It has also begun connecting with faith-based and cultural networks and the translation of its work in different languages to reach broader audiences.

Benchmark

Andrew thinks that there is a need for scaling the impact of work done in the youth employment sphere. Even with the expansion in NPower Canada's work, it still reaches out to a small portion of the unemployed youth. Moreover, there is a need for a continuum of services provided by different organizations. At the same time, the standards of services provided should be defined which service providers should be expected to meet.

As far as NPower Canada is concerned, its target is to ensure that 80% of its graduates end up with employment opportunities or start higher education. Currently, it has been meeting its targets and 85% of its graduates fall in this category. Additionally, Andrew stated that NPower Canada provides post-graduation support to its graduates for five (5) years post-graduation, including access to continued part-time online education at no cost, ongoing job placement support, mentoring from industry partners and other professional development opportunities to support career advancement.

Government Support

Andrew opines that over the past 4-5 years, the federal government has become more engaged in supported industry-informed programming and has strengthened its approach to outcome measurement. The federal government also seeks to work with service providers to develop more coordination between programs and services.

This is particularly evident through the Youth Employment & Success Strategy (YESS). The strategy has devoted a great deal of focus towards providing a continuum of services and supporting pathways that the youth take, more outcome based. The government will benefit from continuing to strengthen partnerships with industry and holding service providers accountable to achieve measurable outcomes.

Ms. Ashley Boha

With a background in youth empowerment and public service, Ashley Boha is the executive director of **Regina Work Prep**, in a role that combines aspects of economics, business and sociology. Since childhood, Ashley has had a passion for volunteering and community development, which led to her pursuing a career at Work Prep.

Issues for Youth

Even before the pandemic, Saskatchewan was struggling economically. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation and added to the pool of unemployed youth. The lack of work experience and the changing nature of labor markets due to technological changes like automation, have complicated career navigation for youth. At the same time, COVID has also exacerbated mental health issues for youth and complicated their career navigation.

Nearly all of the youth that Work Prep works with face multiple employment barriers. 50-60% of Work Prep's youth clients are from Indigenous communities, while 16% are visible minorities and a substantial portion suffers from mental health issues. On the other hand, there is some discrepancy between youth unemployment and unemployment in general as youth experience higher levels of unemployment compared to the rest of the population.. As such, there is a need for a holistic approach in the ecosystem i.e. government, educational institutions and ESPs, in supporting youth given they are less likely than older age cohorts to stay in one job for a long period of time. Moreover, there is a need for a change in hiring mindset to allow for hiring based on competencies and attitude as hard skills could be later on gained during the course of employment. Importantly, youth are also concerned about their values alignment with their employers' values and the impact of their work.



Work Prep

Work Prep works with various age groups including youth. It provides holistic support to individuals not only focused on employment but on other facets of life. The type of services provided include one-on-one sessions, group sessions, work placements, walk-in computer labs etc. Ashley believes that career development needs an all-encompassing approach that supports youth in navigating their careers and developing the necessary self-confidence to succeed.

In the early stages of the pandemic, Work Prep received funding from the federal government for a youth-centric programme. The programme adopts a holistic approach involving mental health and wellness sessions administered by certified social workers, as well as a focus on cultural competencies as well. The RFP for the programme was developed with input from former youth clients of Work Prep. Work Prep's vision is to support youth in navigating their career paths and empowering them to make independent, autonomous decisions. Additionally, Work Prep adopts a strength-based approach on utilizing and emphasising the strong points of the youth.

Employment of Youth at Work Prep

While the staffing at Work Prep is increasingly young, the level of young staff is still below ideal. Before the pandemic, Work Prep used to hire students for summer internships and used to build their capacity through professional assignments. The curiosity and the creativity of those young employees was found to be an impressive component of their employment.

Engagement with Youth & Successful Practices

Work Prep employs a plethora of methods to access youth. These include walk-ins, referral from partner organizations and social media and online marketing. However, remaining in contact with former clients was noted as a challenge.

Work placements were noted as a successful method of enhancing youth employment as it helps get the youth a foot in the door. A key piece of advice that Ashley has for youth is to pursue volunteering opportunities as it supports distinguishing them from other job seekers, while focusing on one's transferable skills, also ultimately increases youth's employment prospects.

Gold Standard

Ashley thinks that career development of youth needs to have a more integrative, long-term approach, catering towards different aspects of their life and providing appropriate support according to the needs of the youth at each stage of their career progress. Additionally, there is a need to ensure the accessibility of services and ease of navigation between multiple services. Moreover, Ashley urges that all the relevant stakeholders in the ecosystem i.e. employers, educational institutions and employment service providers, pool in their efforts to tackle systematic issues impacting youth unemployment including racism.

Support from CCYP

The opportunity to engage with other organizations and to share best practices was one of the key advantages of working with CCYP. The siloed nature of work in youth workforce development across different administrative regions inhibits sharing of knowledge, and resources and access to industry best practices through CCYP has been a crucial support.

Role of Government

According to Ashley, youth workforce development requires the support of all stakeholders including not only the government, but the whole community such as employers and non-profit organizations. Although the different layers of government can allocate fiscal resources in some areas, it will take the whole community to make systemic changes. However, the changing nature of labor markets, accelerated by automation and the pandemic, requires a flexible approach on the part of the government, which is often a rigid organization.

Mr. Hamoon Ekhtiari

Coming from a diverse academic and professional background involving consulting and stints with large organizations in the corporate sector, Mr. Hamoon Ekhtiari heads **FutureFit AI**, which aims to utilize technology for youth empowerment.

Issues for Youth

Hamoon identified access to dignified work as one of the issues impacting youth today. The need to inculcate and develop self-reliance in youth is also quite important. At the same time, age discrimination impacts youth employment including youth.

While surveys have shown that youth consider the impact of their job as an important factor, Hamoon was concerned if the youth were knowledgeable enough to understand if employers were 'greenwashing' them i.e. using fake promises of impact. Moreover, technology and social media have made feeding different types of information to the youth easier and generated the need for instant gratification which was creating a negative impact on youth.

Hamoon is particularly interested in how youth navigate their careers and how equitable the outcomes of different youth groups are.

FutureFit AI

FutureFit aims to serve as a GPS for youth careers, by supporting their career navigation using technology. The purpose is to use AI to support people who would otherwise suffer from a reduction in opportunities as a result of AI and increased automation.



Engagement with Youth

FutureFit carries out direct engagement with youth through paid surveys and design and learning sessions. The main objective is to understand and compute the needs of different groups. Whereas FutureFit hires youth through direct job postings and youth tech networks and community organizations. Currently, a substantial portion of FutureFit's workforce is composed of young people who according to Hamoon bring the hunger to succeed and digital literacy.

Requirement for the Future

Hamoon thinks that for the future, the focus should be on finding solutions to key issues and measuring the outcomes of the interventions launched. The NPower model of helping marginalized youth is a strong example in this regard. Hamoon believes that despite the potential benefits of technology, it is still not used enough in the social impact realm. CCYP's PNN is also an example of an approach that Hamoon thought met the requirements of the evolving labor market because of its focus at the individual level and its individual centric approach.

He also believes that the formation, development and implementation of solutions should be done through a 'rapid sandbox' model whereby new solutions are designed, tested and scaled with the involvement and support of the youth.

Role of Government

Government funding should be less restrictive, with more focus on the outcomes of the activities that will be carried out with the government funding as opposed to focusing on the design of the activities themselves. The government should not concern themselves too much with the design of activities, according to Hamoon. This will provide organizations with much needed flexibility while allowing the desired outcomes to be achieved.

About the CCYP Council

Name	Organization	Focus of Organization	Target age group	Issues affecting youth	Organization activities	Advice for youth
Ashley Boha	Regina Work Preparation	Skills training, work placement, mental health support Key Project: Youth On their Way to Work(YOWW) provides paid training, mental health support, case management etc	All age groups	Changing labor markets due to automation, COVID-19, mental health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training • Mental health session • cultural competency training • 1-1 and group sessions 	Pursuing volunteer opportunities and focusing on transferable skills
Andrew Reddin	NPower Canada	Skills training, work placement Key project: Junior IT Analyst Program provides Google IT support certificate	Youth	Too much emphasis on formal degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills training • work placement • post-graduation mentorship • youth feedback incorporated 	(for youth in workforce development) Youth can navigate their career based on their skillset as workforce development has multiple types of roles
Hamoon Ekhtiari	Future Fit AI	Career navigation technology	All age groups	Access to dignified work, exposure to negative messaging, 'greenwashing', age discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GPS for careers i.e. support career navigation 	Utilize their hunger and drive for career progress

Adam Morrison	O TEC	Workforce development, career awareness Key Project: Tourism & Hospitality Emergency Recovery: linking workers with businesses and supporting businesses in tourism and hospitality	All age groups	Lack of opportunities due to pandemic, youth fixated on specific career choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Awareness about career in tourism, co-ops, support in training	Be more flexible in career choices
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