

# WHAT WORKS:

## Career-building strategies for people from diverse groups A COUNSELLOR RESOURCE

### Youth

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This is one of 13 chapters of an online resource for counsellors titled *What Works: Career-building strategies for people from diverse groups*. Visit [alis.alberta.ca/publications](http://alis.alberta.ca/publications) to view, download or print other chapters.

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The Province of Alberta is working in partnership with the Government of Canada to provide jointly funded employment support programs and services.

**ISBN 978-0-7785-8836-8**

This professional resource is available online only.

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# Statistics

## IN ALBERTA

Working-age population who are youth in 2008	18% <sup>1</sup>
Growth in youth population between 1998 and 2008	+22% <sup>2</sup>
Unemployment rate in 2008	3.6% working-age population 7.5% youth <sup>3</sup>
Working youth employed in service sector	nearly 75% <sup>4</sup>
Employed without certificate, degree or diploma	14.3% working-age population <sup>5</sup> 30.7% youth <sup>6</sup>
Employed with university degree	20.5% working population <sup>7</sup> 6.4% youth <sup>8</sup>
Likelihood that young workers will be injured on the job compared to workers over age 25	+33% <sup>9</sup>

# Context

## What do I wish I would have known when I first started working with youth?

“I wish I would have known to take the time up front to not rush too much into solutions, to explore with young people what they want, what their skills and abilities are. I wish I would have taken more time to get to know them, even when time frames were tight.”

Audrey Stechynsky  
Human Resources and Skills Development  
Canada

In this resource, youth refers to young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years.

Young people inhabit a world dominated by change and technology. Economically, the world is getting smaller. Information technology has broken down barriers and created global markets for local goods and services. Electronic (e-) commerce and wireless communications continue to grow. Globalization, technological change and organizational restructuring have resulted in a new world of work for experienced workers. Youth, on the other hand, have always lived in this new world. They have an “information-age mindset...[youth] have never known life without computers and the Internet. To them the computer is not technology—it is an assumed part of life.”<sup>10</sup>

### Labour market for youth

“[The] labour market [for youth] will be so different from what we see. The choices that they are making will fit for them and the labour market they will be in. Many youth are very entrepreneurial by nature, and some get squashed because they are expected to conform to ‘our’ ideas. Don’t judge their choices based on previous labour markets. And don’t judge their ideas on what we are comfortable with.”

Kristen Cumming  
Career Insight

- *Investigation.* Many seem to be interested not only in using available technology, but also in knowing how it works.
- *Immediacy.* This group lives in a real-time world where responses online are immediate, and they expect the same immediate gratification in the rest of their lives.
- *Sensitivity to corporate involvement.* These youth are accustomed to free and individual expression. They have turned away from media monopolies while developing a sensitivity to and suspicion of corporate interests.
- *Authentication and trust.* Many youth appreciate the potential for fraud, inaccuracy and deception on the Internet, reinforcing the importance for them to be aware of authenticity and trust of information.<sup>11</sup>

## The Net generation

Keep in mind the characteristics of the Net generation when working with and planning activities for them:

- *Fierce independence.* They tend to be information seekers rather than passive information recipients. They tend to like autonomy and independence.
- *Emotional and intellectual openness.* They are used to being very open about personal information, likes, dislikes and inner thoughts, as they have done this online for some time.
- *Inclusion.* With the ability to connect with others around the world, they are not bound by racial or ethnic stereotypes or geographical boundaries.
- *Free expression and strong views.* Through the Internet, they are exposed to a wide variety of beliefs and opinions. They are able to express their own beliefs strongly and anonymously, if they choose.
- *Innovation.* They are very comfortable with new technology and adopt it readily and easily.
- *Preoccupation with maturity.* They demand to be taken seriously and expect to be measured by their ideas, not their age.

### Technology as landscape

“Today’s kids are so bathed in bits that they think it’s all part of the natural landscape. To them, digital technology is no more intimidating than a VCR or a toaster. For the first time in history, children are more comfortable, knowledgeable and literate than their parents about an innovation central to society.”<sup>12</sup>

Don Tapscott, Author  
Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation

### Generation fearless

Leah McLaren, a *Globe and Mail* columnist, calls today’s youth “Generation Fearless—bold enough to want your job and brazen enough to go after it. Today’s twentysomethings have turned out to be the cockiest in recent history.”<sup>13</sup> She discusses the sense of entitlement that many youth demonstrate, having been brought up being treated as equals in relationships with their parents.

Scott Beale, the American author of *Millennial Manifesto*, cited by McLaren, also agrees that youth demonstrate a high degree of self-confidence and that they “feel that...[they] can change the world, and many young people, in fact, are changing the world. The very youth-negative culture that existed in the seventies has been replaced with one that is at times very supportive of young people.”<sup>14</sup>

## Millennials

According to Diana Oblinger, the Millennials—those born in or after the year 1982—exhibit the following characteristics that make them different from other age groups. Millennials

- gravitate toward group activity
- identify with their parents’ values
- feel close to their parents
- spend more time doing homework and housework and less time watching TV
- believe ‘it’s cool to be smart’
- are fascinated by new technologies
- are racially and ethnically diverse
- have at least one immigrant parent<sup>15</sup>

## The parent connection

### Cool parents

According to Don Tapscott, author of *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*, the generation gap has disappeared.<sup>16</sup> Many youth think their parents are cool and are quite connected with them. They see their parents as up to date regarding youth’s favourite music, and they seek their parents’ opinions on everything from questions about sex to snack foods.

Teens also use parents for career advice. Kerry Bernes and Kris Magnusson point out that “students turn to their parents as the primary source of career planning help.”<sup>17</sup>

## Over-functioning parents

Clearly, parents are an extremely influential force in the lives of youth. So much so, in some cases, that Karyn Gordon, a psychotherapist and parent/teen coach, refers to the over-functioning parent<sup>18</sup> to describe parents who, in her words, overindulge their children. Such parents may drive their children everywhere, may be over-involved in the youth’s activities and may be overly protective. As a result, these youth may not develop healthy self-esteem and are at risk of not learning to self-initiate.

### The importance of parents

“I never realized how critical parents are. They are our co-clients. They co-purchase (along with the student) education, housing and other services. Ultimately, it is so important to include parents.”

Kristen Cumming  
Career Insight

## Youth staying home longer or moving back home

Fluctuations in economic activities and the rising costs in education and cost of living keep many young people living with their parents while they go to school. They also return home to go to school or to gain support during a major life transition.

## Education

### High school completion

A longitudinal study by Alberta Education in 2009 points to key factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of high school completion. Some of these factors include

- the average family income
- the average total years of mother’s education
- the student’s mobility (school changes) during high school years
- how close the student’s school is to specific economic regions (for example, oil and gas industries)

- how close the student's school is to post-secondary institutions
- whether the student lives in a single or dual parent family<sup>19</sup>

### Barriers to post-secondary education

About half of the youth who participated in a Human Resources Development Canada/Statistics Canada study by Jeffrey Bowlby and Kathryn McMullen reported facing barriers to post-secondary education.<sup>20</sup>

Some of the barriers identified in the study include

- financial concerns
- inability to gain acceptance in a preferred program
- not enough interest or motivation
- wanting to work
- caring for their own children<sup>21</sup>

### Education and employment prospects

There is a clear connection between level of education and employment prospects. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study on conditions in 25 OECD countries examined the impact of low levels of education on young people and the difficulties they may experience connecting to the labour market.<sup>22</sup> These findings reinforce the importance of the relationship between education and employment prospects.

Some of the conclusions reported in the study were

- *Unemployment risks.* Young adults with low levels of education face a greater risk of unemployment and the likelihood of being unemployed for longer or multiple periods of time. This group may not benefit from positive turns in the economy.
- *Impact of educational deficits.* Experience in the labour market does not compensate for low levels of education. A longer presence in the labour market does not make up for an initial deficit of educational credentials.
- *Vocational training.* Vocational training leading to credentials recognized by employers appear effective in leading to immediate opportunities to hold skilled jobs.<sup>23</sup>

## Career maturity

Career maturity can be defined as “the individual’s ability (and will) to do what others expect one to do regarding career advancement.”<sup>24</sup> Career maturity is a developmental concept that examines the realism of hopes and dreams for the future.

A study completed in southern Alberta collected the following feedback from junior and senior high school students on their views of careers:

- “*Occupation* tended to be defined primarily as a short-term job that was necessary in order to make a living.
- *Career* tended to be defined as a lifelong job that people chose or aspired to perform in a specific field.
- As students got older, the term *career* was increasingly associated with themes such as ‘life roles,’ ‘history of occupations,’ and ‘contribution to society.’<sup>25</sup>

## School-to-work transitions

A young person’s career development process tends to be dominated by the school-to-work transition. Like all major life transitions, this one takes time. Each person responds individually, with the ability to manage the transition depending on many factors, including self-confidence, resourcefulness, resilience and access to support systems.

With limited life experience, youth have not had the same opportunity as adults to develop in many areas that relate to career building and employment. They may have limited self-awareness. They may also have limited information regarding the career-building process and how they might move forward most effectively.

## Employability

Employability factors, including personal (attitudinal), technical and transferable skills, are important to all workers including youth. Youth may face a number of employability barriers relating to these factors.

## Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices

### Job adjustment barriers

Employability involves being able to do the job to the satisfaction of the employer. Young people may face adjustments in the following areas:

- reaching and maintaining satisfactory job performance
- fitting into the organization
- adapting to co-workers
- proving to be a responsible worker
- maintaining a good attitude<sup>26</sup>

### Additional barriers for youth at risk

Disadvantaged youth face additional employability and employment barriers, including

- the need for child care and transportation
- social and interpersonal conflicts
- financial problems
- legal problems
- emotional/personal problems, which may lead to health problems
- substance abuse
- discrimination<sup>27</sup>

#### Challenges for youth in care

“Youth in care also face unique challenges on the road to adulthood. Transitioning to independence is expected at an earlier age and supports are often cut off when a young person turns 18...youth who grow up in foster care have typically experienced minimal control over their lives and by the time they reach 18 have had little practice making decisions for themselves...They need more rather than fewer resources, yet are most likely to lack access to family members or other caring adults who would typically serve as support to a struggling young adult.”<sup>28</sup>

Diane McGregor and Rita Coleman  
Transitions Project, University of Calgary

Counsellors may want to plan strategies to help students with personal challenges, such as low self-esteem or the need for a broader support system. Counsellors may also want to focus on helping youth with education and training. Youth want to focus on the future and to imagine a successful transition to adulthood.

### Planning intervention strategies

The key set of barriers affecting youth employment appears to be a lack of general and job-specific skills and low self-esteem with its resultant feeling of lack of control over one's life.<sup>29</sup> Many intervention programs aimed at youth now focus on the empowerment of youth. These programs build on the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values and interests that young people already possess. The programs also facilitate learning of basic life management skills and career planning.

#### Theory of hierarchy of self-directed adaptation

Practitioners delivering such intervention programs and those working with youth individually may benefit from the approaches in the theory of hierarchy of self-directed adaptation.<sup>30</sup>

The theory identifies varying levels of intervention that are effective with individuals, depending on the degree to which they demonstrate self-direction, independence and the ability to adapt. Effective intervention strategies involve providing intensive support for individuals who are less self-directed, less independent and less adaptable. Effective strategies for individuals demonstrating higher levels of self-direction, independence and adaptability involve less intense support. The strategies include advising or guiding. As the individual becomes more self-directed, coaching becomes an effective strategy. Specific intervention strategies, such as formal instruction and self-help, are effective as the individual becomes more self-directed and adaptable.

The following is a brief discussion of the three levels of intervention strategies effective with less self-directed individuals: intensive support, advising/guiding and coaching.

## Intensive support

The beginning of a transition is frequently a very uncertain time. Individuals are entering new environments and may be less self-directed and adaptable. Effective interventions include

- providing one-on-one assistance, including advocacy
- involving trained peers to provide peer advocacy
- facilitating client awareness of skills, values, beliefs, strengths and knowledge
- helping clients build a vision for their preferred future
- facilitating client awareness of transferability of skills<sup>31</sup>

### Establishing rapport and trust with individuals

“Ensure that youth have ownership in the interview and that they are guiding the process. If I open the door (by building rapport initially), they are more likely to invite the information in.”

Holly Sorgen  
Youth Connections

## Advising/guiding

Because the move to independence may be gradual, intervention at the advising/guiding stage monitors and guides clients' actions rather than engaging in action on their behalf. During this stage, it is helpful to

- continue to facilitate learning of life management skills
- encourage clients to begin to make connections between their vision, their assets and the opportunities in the labour market
- assign tasks for clients to undertake independently
- encourage clients to begin identifying areas in which they need help, thus taking on increased responsibility for their own career development<sup>32</sup>

### Building initial trust and rapport

“We used to just give workshops. Now we are one-on-one more than anything in the beginning, especially to develop initial trust and rapport and to discuss any personal information. Then we move into a group setting and they are more ready for it.”

Holly Sorgen  
Youth Connections

## Coaching

At the coaching stage the emphasis moves from one-on-one counselling to group instruction and counselling. Some characteristics of interventions that are effective at this stage include the following:

- The intervention is still relatively directive, but clients make more choices and engage in independent actions.
- The emphasis continues on life management skills, with increased focus on decision making and career planning.
- Counsellors participate in the role of coach, while clients develop career-building strategies, including educational and financial plans.
- Peer coaching may be introduced as a valuable intervention.<sup>33</sup>

### Peer advocacy and coaching

Traditional approaches to youth employment counselling often do not address the many initial barriers and needs that youth experience in their daily lives. In addition, many young people are wary of “the system” and may have difficulty relating to the professionals who are there to help them.

Young people often find it less intimidating or threatening to seek help from their equals. Peers have the natural advantage of “having been there.” Peer helpers are traditionally trained to listen and provide support. The role of peer advocacy takes support to another level. For example, the peer advocate may initially give strong support while they both tackle the problems and issues the client is dealing with.



However, the goal of a peer advocacy/coaching relationship or program is to shift the responsibility to clients as their self-confidence and self-reliance grows, empowering them to effectively use services available to them.

## Helping youth build self-esteem

Some youth who have not experienced many successes may have lower self-esteem. Following are some time-tested suggestions for programs using discussion and activities to help youth build self-esteem:

- Assess the client's current levels of self-esteem.
- Examine the origins of the client's self-esteem.
- Examine the messages clients received as children.
- Help clients create opportunities to initiate and develop independent successes.
- Help clients use affirmations or journal exercises.<sup>34</sup>

Counsellors are in a position to help clients work through self-esteem development effectively. At the same time, it is important to recognize challenges that emerge that require professional intervention and to refer such clients to appropriate resources.

## Helping youth build personal support systems

Understanding how to develop and access a personal support network is vital to the maintenance of a satisfactory career path. Young people, especially, need the day-to-day assistance and emotional balance that an effective support system can provide. Sources for developing personal support systems include:

- parents
- family and friends
- peers
- professionals
- community organizations

### Parents

Many parents are very involved in the lives of their youth. Tap into this involvement by including both parents and youth in career-related activities. Provide them with information on current approaches to career building, new ways of working and current labour market information. Help youth and parents to improve their communication skills.

### The parent connection

"There is a trend to very hands-on parent involvement. Parents have a different role now where they are paying more and providing more support in many ways to their kids. We've found the best way to capitalize on the high involvement of parents is to include them. And, one of the best ways of including them is to bring them in to workshops where they are given information about the career-building process and the labour market. They even bring their kids and the kids are engaged!"

Dale Gullekson

Elk Island Public Schools

### Family and friends

Young people may have unsupportive family relationships or may be distanced from their families. It may be helpful to explore relationships within the family, including extended family and friends, to determine who might be sources of support. When the immediate family is not available for support, sometimes grandparents, aunts or uncles and even old friends of the family are able and willing to step in. The responsibility to ask for support may fall to the young person. If so, youth may be reluctant to make this request. Some youth may require support to seek help from family and friends.

### Peers

Encourage youth who are experiencing difficulties to develop relationships with peers who have successfully managed similar difficulties. You may want to help youth find someone who can act as a model and perhaps even as an informal mentor. This relationship could be developed through an established program or it could be one that you help your client establish.

## Professionals

Young people may be mistrustful of “the system.” Be clear about your role as a professional. Identify what you may be able to do for them and what they can expect from you. Be authentic. Do what you say you will do. Your interaction with youth may shape how they perceive and act toward other professionals. Help clients to

- develop an understanding of services that professionals can provide
- learn how to select the appropriate professional
- learn how to communicate their needs

## Community resources

Community organizations may provide continuing growth experiences for clients, as well as an increased network of contacts and friends. Connections to support systems, such as schools, religious organizations, cultural communities and youth groups are known to help youth become more resilient and overcome their challenges. Youth need opportunities to build trusting relationships with adults.

If appropriate, encourage clients to consider volunteering in their community. The common experience of volunteers is that they frequently gain as much as they give. The possibilities for volunteering are endless: literacy programs, sports and cultural activities, and seniors’ programs. In addition to broadening their network, youth frequently find that volunteering builds both self-esteem and skills.

## Introducing youth to mentorship

“Mentoring is a powerful and popular way for people to learn a variety of personal and professional skills. In fact, mentoring is one of the oldest forms of influence... Most adults can identify a person who, at some time in their life, had a significant and positive impact on them. Mentors can be friends, relatives, co-workers, teachers, as well as historic or contemporary personalities. Most often, a mentor is a more experienced or older person who acts as a role model, compatriot, challenger, guide or cheerleader.”<sup>35</sup>

Here are some common examples of mentoring relationships:

- “Business managers take new employees ‘under their wings.’
- Volunteers partner with students at risk of dropping out of school.
- People managing life challenges provide support and wisdom to others.
- Older students help younger students cope with peer pressure.
- University graduates provide guidance to students seeking business careers.
- Successful business people help new entrepreneurs starting out.”<sup>36</sup>

## Finding a mentor

Youth may benefit from establishing mentoring relationships with experienced individuals from whom they can learn. Counsellors can encourage youth to identify the type of help they might need or areas they would value learning more about. Counsellors can also help youth to locate an appropriate mentor.

Peer Resources, a Canadian organization that is a recognized expert in mentoring, offers these tips for youth looking for a mentor:

- “Check with local businesses or organizations to determine whether they have a formal mentor program you can access.
- Contact businesses or organizations to find out if they can provide you the names of any retired executives who might be willing to act as volunteer mentors.
- Ask your local Chamber of Commerce whether they have a mentor program or service.
- If you are enrolled in a college or university, make an appointment with student career services to find out if they have a list of volunteer mentors.
- Connect with exhibit areas of conferences and conventions associated with your field; these are often free admission events staffed by experienced persons who could be potential mentors.

- Use your network of friends and relatives to let them know what kind of person you want as a mentor. Ask them to keep alert to someone who could help you.
- Visit a retirement or senior citizen center and let them know you are looking for a mentor in a certain area.”<sup>37</sup>

Young people who use social networking sites may also want to ask friends about suitable mentors.

### Tips for learning from mentors

Once a mentor relationship has been established, it is important to maximize the learning experiences available. The following tips from Peer Resources may be helpful for youth:

- *“Planning ahead.* Prior to your first meeting with your mentor, write down at least three things you would like to achieve through mentoring. Rank the three items in order of importance to you. Also write down three things that concern you most about meeting with your mentor. Rank these three things in order of importance.
- *Reflecting on your role.* If not included in either of the lists created above, write down at least three attitudes or perspectives you will be able to provide during the mentoring sessions. If possible, write down three things about yourself that might get in the way of you being able to make the most of the mentoring opportunity.
- *Anticipating success.* If not included in your lists, write down at least three things you would like your mentor to provide.
- *Introducing yourself.* Prepare a brief autobiography based on the above lists that you can share with your mentor when you first meet. Be sure to also include your own vision, mission or life goals.
- *Managing time.* It is likely that you selected your mentor or were matched with your mentor because of the mentor’s resources. This typically means that your mentor has both considerable gifts and a tight time schedule. Dealing with time is a key aspect of the success of mentoring. Make sure you are clear about your needs.

- *Mutual learning.* The focus of most successful mentoring is mutual learning. Feel free to explore what you have to offer the mentor. A sense of humour and a sense of enjoyment of your time together are essential as well. If your needs are not being met, discuss this with your mentor. Terminating a mentoring relationship or switching to a different mentor are not signs of failure. Recognizing your changing needs and finding a respectful way to meet your learning goals are keys to successful executive mentoring.”<sup>38</sup>

## Helping youth through group programming

Group work can be successful with unemployed youth because it establishes peer support and helps youth overcome isolation. Group work also helps youth develop social skills and expand contacts.

### Creating a youth-friendly group environment

Consider the following suggestions to create a youth-friendly environment:

- *Flexible timing.* Be open to meeting times that suit the schedules of youth participants.
- *Transportation.* Schedule group get-togethers in accessible locations. If possible, provide travel vouchers or immediate reimbursements for travel costs.
- *Food.* Provide food at meetings where possible. Snacks help establish an inviting and warm atmosphere. Food is an added bonus for youth who may not be receiving adequate nutrition.
- *Equipment.* Provide access to computers, telephones and other equipment to support clients in their career-building process.<sup>39</sup>

The following are some time-tested strategies to use in groups for youth and in one-on-one counselling situations:

- *Behaviour expectations.* Facilitate a process through which group members identify group behaviour expectations and consequences for breaking those guidelines. Youth can then take ownership in the group and enforce the expectations they set.

- *Attendance.* Ask that group members be honest about their absences and make contact when they cannot attend. Demanding perfect attendance may be unrealistic. When members are allowed to return to the group after absences, they often display increased motivation and commitment.
- *Trust.* Build trust with sincerity, honesty, objectivity and a non-judgmental attitude rather than through specific activities.
- *Group goals.* Have the group set small, achievable goals. Even if you, as the counsellor, have ideas you feel are more appropriate, try to ensure that the group establishes the goals. When these goals are achieved together, the counsellor's credibility grows.
- *Consequences.* Demonstrate support and belief in group members even when they fail to achieve their set goals. Follow through on individual agreements to apply consequences for unacceptable behaviour.
- *Planning.* When planning activities, have the group identify what interests them. Counsellors should consult the group first to prevent setting themselves up for disaster. Group members can take responsibility to plan many group activities, particularly those of a social nature.
- *Role models.* Lead by example. Counsellors shouldn't be afraid to get their hands dirty. Counsellors should never ask a client to do something that they would feel uncomfortable doing themselves.
- *Discussion starters.* To generate discussion, try storytelling, role playing and/or game playing. The more creative counsellors are, the more they will succeed with this client group.
- *Teachable moments.* Often issues and feelings important to youth come up unexpectedly. For counsellors, this frequently means setting aside their agenda to deal with the issue of the moment. When issues arise in the group, the issues are meaningful and often offer outstanding learning opportunities. Seize them as teachable moments.
- *Cautions.* Be aware of personal limitations. Issues such as sexual abuse, physical abuse and suicide often come up with individuals and in groups. If counsellors do not have a group therapy background, it is not advisable to enter this territory. Know where to draw the line and refer to outside help. In addition, it is important

for counsellors to be aware of their ethical and legal obligations regarding the reporting of their knowledge of these issues.<sup>40</sup>

If there isn't an appropriate group in the area to whom you can refer young clients, you may want to establish one.

### The importance of patience

"One of the most important things that I have learned regarding career development and youth is patience; all good things will happen within their own time frame. The best ideas, strategies, resources and interventions cannot be forced upon people. When the clients are 'ready,' the best ideas and services will make sense and move forward."

Dale Gullekson  
Elk Island Public Schools

## Helping youth explore education options

Education has become an increasingly important prerequisite to employment. An important responsibility for counsellors working with youth who have limited education is to help them see that there are many ways, both formal and informal, to learn.

### Education and training

The following excerpt from Circuit Coach, an online resource for counsellors working with youth, identifies some routes to learning:

- "Alternatives to regular high school include distance learning or correspondence, Internet-based schooling, private or group tutoring, and co-operative education programs involving work experience. A popular combination of alternatives is computer-based high school courses supported by a teacher or tutor.
- Short-term courses are usually just a few months long and focus on specific skills needed to enter particular workplaces or a particular industry (for example, building maintenance).

- Training-on-the-job may be ad hoc or formal and can range from learning the role of cook's helper while working in a busy kitchen to learning how to service vending machines.
- Apprenticeship programs combine formalized on-the-job training, formal classroom instruction and standardized examinations. Established by provincial/territorial governments in consultation with industry, people sign on with employers as apprentices and work towards becoming a journeyman in that trade. There are around 50 trades registered in each jurisdiction across Canada.
- Some provinces have created another entrance into the trades to encourage teens to consider the trades. For example, the Alberta Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) allows youth to get credit for the hours they work while still in high school.
- Some post-secondary studies include work experience components such as practicums and co-operative programs that allow students to alternate periods in the classroom with periods of work with an employer registered by the institution.
- Certificate programs are usually one year or less at a college or some other post-secondary institution. They are primarily used to prepare students for gateway or portal roles in various sectors of the economy. Examples might be turf grass management, home care attendant or glasscutter.
- Diploma programs are two years in length and prepare students for employment in particular groups of occupations. For example, a diploma in computer programming or computer systems technology from a technical institution prepares students to work in a variety of roles in the information technology or software industries.
- Bachelor degree programs prepare students for entry-level professional positions across a wide range of sectors. These could range from rehabilitation therapist to commerce.<sup>41</sup>

### Helping students stay motivated

“When they [youth] return to school, December can be a dark month, and they get really discouraged...I ask them, ‘What were you doing, what was your vision, when you decided to return to school?’ to help them remember why they’re there, why they chose to return to school, how it relates to their vision, their hopes or goals. We also talk about their family, especially if they have children, what their hopes are for them. Or, they write letters to themselves before they go back to school and then open them later. It all helps them remember why they chose to go back to school.”

Holly Sorgen  
Youth Connections

### Informal learning

It may be worthwhile to help youth clients become more aware of informal ways to learn. Research indicates that people who experience difficulty learning often benefit from trying different approaches.

Here are some suggestions for informal learning experiences:

- watching DVDs or television programs
- using the Internet for research
- attending a weekend or evening seminar
- shadowing someone at work
- reading books, manuals, magazines and newspapers
- asking a friend to show how to do something
- working as a volunteer

Young people will be able to suggest more strategies.

### Prior learning assessment and recognition

Informal learning may be recognized through prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), which is a process of “identifying what a person knows and can do. The results can certainly be useful to someone

who wishes to have skills recognized, even if that person doesn't have related formal education. In the end, most employers want proof that you have the skills they require. As long as you can demonstrate you've mastered them, the way you learned them is secondary. Prior learning assessments also occur regularly at post-secondary institutions. The admissions officers or registrars determine how much credit potential students will receive for previous training or work experience."<sup>42</sup>

## Helping youth make the transition to adulthood

The most successful youth career programs address life issues as an integral part of facilitating the career-building process. Youth in transition to adulthood face a variety of challenges and benefit from support for managing the transition process.

Youth participating in focus groups organized by Diane McGregor and Rita Coleman identified a variety of information and resources that would be helpful to them as they make the transition to adulthood. An adaptation of their list follows:

- finding affordable housing
- gaining effective job skills
- managing money
- learning about landlord/tenant responsibilities
- finding options for school for those over 18
- finding help when kicked out and homeless
- balancing developing your own morals/values and those of family without offending family members
- dealing with stress
- learning to be goal oriented
- learning organizational skills
- managing going to work and going to school at the same time while living on your own
- having a heightened awareness of the world (locally/globally)
- hearing motivational speakers on drugs and alcohol issues
- managing inner turmoil/stressful situations that limit success in employment or school
- building self-confidence<sup>43</sup>

## Focusing on Employment

The goal in career counselling young clients is to teach them how to take control of their careers. The desired result is a clearer sense of direction and a greater sense of control over their destiny.

In order to manage the constant change and the socio-economic conditions we all face, career planning continues to be a lifelong process. "Young people in Canada are likely to experience an average of 17 employment transitions in their working lifetime."<sup>44</sup> Each change brings with it the demand for new skills and/or knowledge. Remind clients to remember these key ideas:

- Many career choices are available to them.
- Career decisions can be made rationally using effective approaches.
- Career development is a continual process.

This information will help dispel the myth, still common among some youth and often their parents, about having to make a one-time daunting decision on what they want to be when they grow up.

### The microwave approach to careers

"Youth have a microwave mentality. They just want to pop all their skills, interests and values into the oven, hit 'go' and expect their occupational choice to come out fully cooked."

Kristen Cumming  
Career Insight

## Being a successful worker

Characteristics of today's successful workers include

- high level of initiative and imagination
- high degree of flexibility
- focus on innovation and creative solutions to problems
- constantly questioning mind
- entrepreneurial nature<sup>45</sup>

They will also need to be

- multifunctional
- accountable
- good communicators
- literate in technology and communications
- self-directed team players
- willing to learn, to upgrade skills and to accept accountability
- willing to propose ideas for a healthy work environment<sup>46</sup>

### Employability skills 2000+

The Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills 2000+ is a nationally recognized list of skills needed "to enter, stay in and progress in the world of work—whether you work on your own or as part of a team."<sup>47</sup>

The Conference Board skills list includes three general skill areas with related specific skills:

- *Fundamental skills.* These skills are needed as a base for further development. Specific skills include the ability to
  - communicate
  - manage information
  - use numbers
  - think and solve problems
- *Personal management skills.* These are personal skills, attitudes and behaviours that drive one's potential for growth. Specific skills include the ability to
  - demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours
  - be responsible
  - be adaptable
  - learn continuously
  - work safely
- *Teamwork skills.* These skills and attributes are needed to contribute productively. Specific skills include the ability to
  - work with others
  - participate in projects and tasks<sup>48</sup>

## Beginning the career-building process

### The preferred future and reality

"A key element in assisting youth with their future is to assist them in developing a vision or *preferred future*. This is a statement or description of the life the youth would like to live, a best of all worlds of one's ideal life."<sup>49</sup>

"It is important to realize that you can inhibit the free flow thinking of clients engaged in the preferred future activities if you suggest that they think about the future in realistic terms. Your role is not to try and protect your clients from failure. By advising them to be realistic, you are squelching any creative juices that your clients may have.

"Since the preferred future is such a long way down the road, your clients will have time for plenty of confrontations with reality. To impose it now is to further deny clients the chance to explore a myriad of opportunities that exist within workplaces today. By getting real, clients tend to focus on specific jobs or occupational roles...thereby closing off thoughts of desired activities and plans. The purpose of establishing a narrative or personal story is to generate a North Star for your clients. This will allow them to focus on multiple pathways, rather than specific destinations. The personal development of a dream future is a sign that clients have begun to lift from their shoulders the burden that is suppressing hope—hope for a better future."<sup>50</sup>

Counsellors can use many approaches to help youth create their visions or preferred futures. Circuit Coach, an online resource, provides a variety of ideas for facilitating this process.

### Creating self-portraits

Creating self-portraits is one process that facilitates exploration of a variety of life roles, both work and non-work, and assists youth to see the transferability of their skills. This approach, also supported by Circuit Coach,<sup>51</sup> is particularly valuable for youth who have had limited or no work experience and who may have difficulty identifying specific skills they possess. There is great value in recognizing one's strengths, which combine one's passion and ability.

### Teaching youth self-care

“An important skill that counsellors can teach youth is how to advocate and negotiate for themselves.”

Audrey Stechynsky

Human Resources and Skill Development  
Canada

## Building employment skills

Wherever possible, encourage young people to consider the following skill-building experiences that allow them to become involved directly in the world of work. Some of these learning experiences may be structured and attached to specific school or training programs. Others may be initiated by youth with counsellor support.

Consider health and safety when arranging skill-building experiences for youth. Ensure that your young clients understand safety requirements and responsibilities in the workplace. Youth should be also be aware of workers' compensation plans and how they are covered when they are on a worksite.

### Encouraging youth to do the research

“The research component is crucial and it's hard to get youth to complete it. Try this:

Pair up youth, so that each partner is interested in a different sector/industry.

Have youth complete the research for their partner's interest area (no less than five completed calls), then report back. It takes the pressure off, they are accountable to someone else to complete and they can be more objective. It works!”

Kristen Cumming

Career Insight

## Skill-building experiences

Here are some examples of how youth can gain hands-on skill-building experiences in the workplace:

- Through volunteer work, youth can
  - learn new skills
  - receive free training, build relationships and gain potential references while contributing to the community
  - gain job experience that employers value
- Through work experience, youth can
  - gain job experience
  - an employer reference
  - sometimes a job offer
- Through job shadowing, youth can
  - follow a worker in a job of interest
  - observe first-hand what the work involves
  - gain information that helps with career decisions
- Through internships and co-ops, youth can
  - gain on-the-job experience related to an area of training/education.
- Through a part-time position, youth can
  - gain on-the-job experience related to a preferred future
  - experience new work environments and build new skills<sup>52</sup>

Youth may also want to consider a gateway job, which is an entry-level job that requires little experience or training.<sup>53</sup>



### Job shadowing

“One of the most effective ways to engage youth in their career planning and to validate the potential career option[s] is to job shadow a portion of a workday with a qualified worker in the chosen field of work. Parents are very well networked to a vast array of people and occupations within their communities. Employers may also be parents and are quite willing to embrace these experiences in the workplace for youth.”

Dale Gullekson  
Elk Island Public Schools

### About portfolios

“I highly recommend that youth develop portfolios. A portfolio is almost essential for a student.”

Audrey Stechynsky  
Human Resources and Skills Development  
Canada

## Helping youth use portfolios

Employers agree that a portfolio gives job seekers an edge in an interview. A portfolio represents the individual. It is like a living resumé. It might be a collection of items in a portable case, a binder or a CD. Whatever form a portfolio takes, it should highlight important events and skills built to the date it was created. The items in the portfolio provide solid proof of what the individual can do.

Creating a portfolio can help in some important ways:

- Building a portfolio will remind youth of all the great skills they have developed and their collection of strengths.
- Portfolios showcase skills and abilities to employers, post-secondary institutions and anyone else who might need this information. Portfolios give youth some concrete examples to show they have the skills they claim to have in their resumé.
- Portfolios give youth a chance to describe their skills and provide evidence of them. People remember best what they've seen and heard.<sup>54</sup>

## Alternatives to full-time employment

Full-time, permanent employment is only one way of working. Alternatives include the following:

- *Part-time.* Part-time workers working less than 30 hours a week fulfill a job description for a single employer.
- *Multi-tracking.* Workers hold two or more jobs at the same time.
- *Job sharing.* Workers share a job with one or more workers to fulfill a single job description for a single employer.
- *Contracting.* Contractors work within a specific job or project description for a specific, contracted period of time for a single employer or client.
- *Talent pooling.* Workers join with a group of individuals with complementary but different talents. Frequently the talent pool changes with varying projects requiring different talents.
- *Consulting.* Consultants work to complete specific tasks within specific time frames on a number of projects simultaneously, often for a number of different clients.
- *Self-employment.* A self-employed worker develops, produces and markets services and/or products in a one-person operation.
- *Entrepreneurship.* Entrepreneurs develop, produce and market services and/or products in an operation that involves managing others.

The alternative of entrepreneurship, along with self-employment, has become increasingly viable for youth. “In a survey of university students... Ipsos-Reid recently [2005] found that 40 per cent would like to be their own bosses by becoming entrepreneurs or consultants.”<sup>55</sup> Many programs offer support and funding to young entrepreneurs. Encourage youth with entrepreneurial dreams to pursue them by thoroughly researching and testing them for viability.

Each work alternative has its advantages and disadvantages. The one big advantage they offer is increased flexibility in how we approach work. This flexibility may be very appealing to youth. It is important that youth view these options for what they are—alternatives to the traditional ways of working—and not as simply representing failure to achieve traditional full-time, permanent employment. Experience reflects that youth are much more accepting of these different ways of working than many adults, especially their parents.

## Gap year options

Another option for youth is to take a gap year, the period of time taken between completing high school and attending college or university. This time can be used to acquire new skills and experiences or explore and make some career decisions. It can be spent locally or abroad. In our global economy, a whole world awaits youth with opportunities, particularly in developing countries. These opportunities take a variety of forms, from volunteer assistance in developing infrastructure to well-paid positions of considerable responsibility in a variety of sectors. Many initiatives backed through the public and private sectors support youth in pursuit of international work experience.<sup>56</sup>

## Worker rights and responsibilities

Many youth may have little or no exposure to the world of work. In fact, they may be entering the workforce for the first time. Some youth, such as those who have not had the benefit of previous experience and who have limited decision-making skills, may lack the confidence to challenge employers and are at risk of exploitation.

It will be helpful for these young people to be aware of their rights that are protected by provincial legislation. Some of the provincial employment standards include

- wages and deductions
- overtime, vacations and general holidays
- maternity, parental and reservist leave
- layoffs and termination
- special rules for workers under 18 years of age

Counsellors are in a position to assist youth who believe their rights have been infringed upon and who lack confidence to deal directly with situations.

## Safety at work

Workers aged 15 to 24 are one-third more likely to be injured on the job than those over 25.<sup>57</sup> From 2004 to 2008, 43 young Alberta workers, aged 15 to 24, were killed by work-related fatalities.<sup>58</sup> No matter what the work role, there is always an element of risk.

If a worker has an injury, coverage in Alberta might be available through Workers' Compensation Board (WCB). The WCB supports injured workers with compensation and rehabilitative services to help them to return to work. Youth should be aware of their responsibility to report any injury, no matter how insignificant, to their employer and WCB.

Counsellors may want to locate worker safety information to provide to their young clients.<sup>59</sup>

## Helping youth stay positive

Remaining positive throughout a job search is key to being successful. It is important to remind youth to focus positively on their strengths. Help youth understand what they have to offer an employer. They may, indeed, possess the perfect combination of skills, experience, personality and attitude for a prospective employer.

As job applicants, young people can help prospective employers make decisions in their favour by

- demonstrating an understanding of the company's goals and current situation
- presenting positive reasons for wanting to work for the employer

- describing how they can increase the employer’s productivity
- demonstrating acceptance or accommodation of company structure
- being willing to work for a reasonable wage
- being genuine in the interview<sup>60</sup>

## In Conclusion

Education remains the biggest impact on employment success. It is so important to encourage and support youth in completing their education. Many youth, particularly those at risk, have not had successful experiences in the school system. Many alternatives to traditional schooling exist, particularly at the secondary level. Encourage and help youth explore educational alternatives to the traditional classroom. Alternatively, some youth will find success in one or more of the many non-school training programs that are available.

Ongoing learning is a fact of life and an essential ingredient in a successful career. Counsellors play an important role in helping youth discover and pursue the learning that works best for them.

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