

Work quality experience and engagement among young workers

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Executive Summary

In recent years, young people have faced difficulties in the labour market. Pandemic lockdowns impacted school and work for most young people, alongside accelerated technological change and the increasing prevalence of gig work (characterized by short-term, on-demand, and task-based labour) have all had negative impacts on quality of work for young people.

This research explored the quality of work for young people (age 16–29), in Ontario, through their own experiences and words. The project surveyed over 1100 young people and conducted in-depth work history interviews with 43 young people.

The findings show that the young people surveyed considered good work to include good pay, being treated fairly, feeling respected and having job security. Unfortunately, too many of the young people who participated in the research reported experiences of discrimination and harassment at work, typically from managers or supervisors. Many young people report resisting poor-quality work by quitting, expressing individual or group complaints to management, matching minimal pay with minimal work effort, or supporting unionization.

Employers looking to attract and retain young workers can look to improve quality of work for this group, focusing on offering competitive wages and ensuring managers and supervisors are trained to be fair and respectful towards youth. Worker advocates and organized labour can expand educational efforts about workers' rights that target youth, and ensure these reflect recent changes in the labour market.

KEY INSIGHTS

81% of young people surveyed considered good pay and being treated fairly extremely important in their perception of what makes work “good”.

45% of young people surveyed had quit a previous job because of bad working conditions. Young people from groups who have been historically marginalized in the labour force were more likely than others to report quitting a job.

One-third of young people surveyed reported having been discriminated against at their current or previous work – typically by an employer or supervisor.

The Issue

Young workers are the future of Canada’s workforce, currently comprising one-quarter of the labour force. Few previous generations have entered as volatile and adverse a labour market as young people today.

Existing research identifies youth as disproportionately employed in poor-quality jobs. People’s early labour market experiences can set in place lifelong work norms and trajectories, both positive and negative. Improving young people’s work quality can therefore yield long-term employment and economic benefits.



What We Investigated

This research explored the quality of work experienced by young people (age 16-29), in Ontario, through their own experiences and words. An intentionally broad definition of ‘work’ was used, including all forms of work for remuneration – including formal employment, gig work, side hustles, self-employment and entrepreneurship.

This project addressed several key questions:

- How do young workers evaluate the quality of their past and current paid work?
- What – in their view – distinguishes ‘good work’ from ‘bad work’?
- What avenues do young workers identify and exercise to influence their employment quality?

- Is there anything distinctive about the work expectations/experiences of young workers compared to older workers?
- What skills and resources would assist young workers to improve the quality of their work environments?

The project used the following methods to respond to these research questions:

Development of social media assets as educational resources for young workers to better understand their rights at work and to understand common experiences.

Literature review on work quality

Analyses of Statistics Canada data to develop a profile of young people's work and how it compares to the entire workforce.

A survey of young workers – 16-29, currently living in Ontario and working for pay, implemented using a survey panel provider and through public availability on social media.

Individual interviews with young workers, 16-29 living in Ontario

What We're Learning

This project surveyed over 1,121 young workers and conducted in depth work history interviews with 43 young people. The social media campaign produced [17 animated Youtube videos](#) (2-3 minutes each), Tiktok-optimized 'trailers' for each video (9-10 seconds each), and a resource guide for young workers across Canada.

Definitions of good vs. bad work

The young people surveyed placed the most importance on good pay, being treated fairly, feeling respected and job security in their definitions of good work. These factors were ranked as extremely important by more than 70% of youth surveyed. 'Bad work' was characterized by young people as including bad managers, discrimination and low pay. The two most recurring complaints about bad work were related to poor pay and, even more frequently, bad (often abusive) managers or supervisors.

Too many young people experience discrimination and harassment at work. 52% of the young people surveyed experienced age discrimination at work typically from managers or supervisors. 38% reported experiencing discrimination based on their sex and/or gender identity and 34% experienced discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Young people participating in the one-to-one interviews disclosed a number of abusive and traumatic work-related experiences. This included accounts of overt racism, sexual assault, and other blatantly discriminatory and humiliating experiences.

Responding to and resisting poor quality work

Young people used both individual and collective strategies to respond to bad work. Some young workers resigned themselves to work being unrewarding, but 45% of young people surveyed reported quitting a job because of bad working conditions. Young people who had a disability, were Indigenous or racialized were more likely than others to report quitting a job.

Another common response to poor-quality work was resistance, either individually or collectively. This entailed expressing individual or group discontents to management, matching minimal pay with minimal work effort, or supporting unionization. Many young people stressed the importance of learning about worker rights and advocating for change. Narratives of individual resistance relied strongly on workers' knowledge of the law, awareness of their rights, and their confidence to speak out.

Young people know too little about their rights

Many young people reported knowing relatively little about their rights as workers, or about what unions do. Relatively few young people know 'a lot' about what labour unions do, but those who did were generally positive in their assessments. produce training at the cutting edge of technology while being appropriate for mid-career professionals.

Why It Matters

Young people's experiences of lower-quality employment is often attributed to their inexperience and recent entry into the labour force. Measures commonly recommended for improving this include: enhancing education and skills training, expanding on-the-job experience through work-integrated learning (i.e. student placements or internships), promoting young people's entrepreneurialism, and/or modifying young people's personal lifestyles or outlooks. While such initiatives can be fruitful for some, the findings suggest that poor work quality is pervasive in many young people's experience of work.

Poor pay and poor treatment from supervisors are the two chief complaints of young workers. Young people's willingness to quit (or quit engaging) because of poor working conditions have implications for employers' retention rates and productivity. In particular, managers/supervisors who do not treat all workers fairly or with respect may prompt high turnover rates. Employers should be particularly attentive to these dynamics in their workplaces.

It is clear that there is an 'information gap' for some young workers. Many have low expectations or assume that poor treatment, including racism, sexual harassment and other forms of abuse, is normal in the workplace. Educating young people about their legal rights and avenues for redress is important for ensuring their successful transitions into the labour force. A similar information gap exists regarding labour unions and their benefits for workers. Many young people know little about unions, or don't think that unions are relevant to the type of work that they do (e.g. part-time or temporary). However, in Canada and the U.S. today, there is considerable momentum among young workers in support of unionization. They are increasingly turning to collective action to amplify their call for better quality work. This has included successful waves of worker organizing, strikes, and lobbying in sectors with a substantial reliance on young workers, including retail, food service, gig work, and minimum-wage work.

What's Next

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