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Launching Successful Careers

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The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that nearly 75 million young people are unemployed in the world today. This number has increased by more than 4 million since the financial crisis of 2008/2009, and the outlook for the medium term is worsening. The global youth unemployment rate is 12.7 percent for 2012, and the ILO projects that it is likely to rise to 12.9 percent by 2017.

The bottom line is that in the current labor market situation, governments, educators, and businesses need to work together to help people in getting jobs and to provide them with the required work experience that is so valued by employers worldwide.

We all know that specific practical skills — even when closely job-related — are only part of what employers are looking for in new hires. Increasingly, employers are also looking for young people with work experience. They want to be certain, before making a hiring offer, that young people know how to function in the workplace and know how to apply their skills to concrete business tasks.

Traditionally, young people acquired these credentials in entry-level jobs with minimal or no prior experience requirements. However, a number of factors are contributing to the disappearance of these jobs, making it harder for many young people to get started in the workplace and to acquire foundational experience for their future job searches.

Thus, telephone receptionist jobs are quickly disappearing because of a combination of technical and management factors. For example, it is cheaper to install inexpensive voice-recognition software than to hire lower-skilled workers to answer phones. It is more efficient to combine receptionist duties, when they are absolutely essential, with higher-level clerical and administrative roles, which require more polished and experienced individuals.

As the complexity and skills requirements of even entry-level jobs increase in the new economy, more and more young people are shut out of first jobs with career potential; those jobs that remain available to them risk leaving them in a low-wage trap.

If policymakers and global society want to improve young people's participation in the workforce, and enable them to launch successful careers, they must help them to overcome this experience-needed syndrome. From our point of view, the following steps should be done by policymakers and global society to support career-oriented workforce entry by youth:

- Facilitate the creation of employer-sponsored apprenticeship programs.
- Support and invest in paid internship programs that provide real work experience for all young people aged 16-20.
- Leverage the roles of labor market intermediaries by creating a favorable regulatory environment for their operation, and helping them provide career guidance and training as well as access to jobs.

Apprenticeship Programs

Apprenticeship programs are the foundation of highly successful systems in Germany, Switzerland, and elsewhere in Europe to provide a clear path for young people from school into sustainable skilled trade's careers. They combine classroom training with work experience on a split-week schedule, so that training content and work tasks directly reinforce each other. Many young people will be hired directly by the companies where they trained; others will graduate from the program with skills and experience programs that are valued by employers and that help them in their search for sustainable jobs.

Unfortunately, these programs are not so easy to reproduce in other counties. The German, Swiss, and Austrian models depend on a highly evolved employment ecosystem with strong and well-defined roles for government, labor unions, and businesses. They require significant investments by both government and employers, enforced by a social bargain between relatively strong labor unions and employer associations.

But if countries cannot fully reproduce the German apprenticeship model, it may still be possible to implement key elements of that model in a way that respects fiscal and institutional limitations.

School to Work Programs

Incorporating work experience elements into high school and college education programs represents a second strategy for helping young people build initial career credentials. Internships have a key role to play at both the secondary and higher education levels; for college students, internships can be scheduled around the regular semester and summer schedule, in coordination with a student's formal education program. It is a universal goal aimed at providing all youth aged 16-20 with work experience through paid internships. A combination of classroom teaching and paid work experience would help them develop social capital, accountability, and entrepreneurial spirit and instill a sense of appreciation of the world of work in their young minds.

A Role for Private Employment Services

Employment agencies can give young people a bright opportunity to get the feel of different working environments within totally different companies through temporary employment. Temporary work can help build confidence and resilience in dealing with a flexible job marketplace, because it provides young people with a powerful experience of ready access to jobs, routine transitions between jobs, and quick rebounds from intervals of unemployment.

Because private employment services often maintain a relationship with a young person over the course of several jobs, they can also be the foundation for more ambitious workforce-entry programs. Some business people have already proposed an integrated model of youth employability services that can be used by private employment intermediaries, in partnership with employers, government, and educators.

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