

Employer Perspectives on Youth Employability in Rural Areas

Les perspectives des employeurs sur l'employabilité des jeunes en régions rurales

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Canadian transition-age youth, ages 15 to 25, can benefit from relevant work experience and the chance to develop transferable skills before graduating secondary school. However, marginalized or disadvantaged youth may not have equitable access to work experience opportunities, and this may also apply to youth in rural areas who often face geographic, financial, and social barriers during their early career development (Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Moazzami, 2015). Rural youth are also more likely than their urban counterparts to enter the labour market directly after graduating secondary school, but a lack of local employment prospects often pushes them to leave their home community (ManpowerGroup, 2012). Rural communities can ensure their youth are well prepared for the modern labour market and improve retention through the development of local education, training and work opportunities.

Our Study

The Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities is the University of Alberta's rural research centre that is mandated to work not only for but with rural communities to support improved sustainability and resiliency. Since 2015, the centre has collaborated with a rural region to identify feasible strategies for improved youth engagement and retention. As part of our Youth Engagement Initiative, our research asks

employers, "What employability challenges and opportunities exist for transition-age youth in rural areas?" We conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with employers and volunteer leaders and asked them for their perspectives on various aspects of youth employability, including individual, workplace, and community dynamics. Other socio-demographic factors such as employee gender did emerge during the interviews, but this report will focus on general perceptions of the youth population as a whole.

Summary of Results

Fourteen employers and two volunteer leaders participated in this study. Interviewees came from a variety of sectors: retail (3); service (3); recreation (3); municipal service (2); manufacturing (2); healthcare (1); government (1) and media (1).

Challenges

Participants described their rural area as a family-oriented farming community boasting many active sports programs, accessible healthcare facilities, and close proximity to an urban centre. When asked about the challenges local youth face in finding employment, the vast majority (93%) of employers discussed economic barriers, such as a limited number of positions and low wages. Over half (60%) recognized that many youth in secondary school must cope with transportation issues and scheduling conflicts

when they seek employment. One employer struggled for 18 months to find a work experienced student because her business hours conflicted with class times. Employers (60%) also discussed social barriers to youth employment such as a lack of guidance from adult mentors (31%) and intergenerational conflicts over work attire and cellphone use (25%). One interviewee believed other employers in her area held a "pretty negative perspective" of local youth. Another employer stated: "I think word does travel, because, I've even seen...people that I know who have been, basically, blacklisted from a lot of places here because of their work ethic".

Key Actors

Employers most commonly cited families (50%) as being responsible for youth employability. One employer stated: "I think it all starts with the home. The structure, the foundation of where these kids come from". Another employer had observed that if parents were disengaged from the community, their children would likely behave the same way. Schools (44%) were also seen as having the necessary resources, such as staff and social networks, to assist youth along their career paths. Just under half of our interviewees (44%) had taken on at least one work experience student.

Applying to funding programs can also be a burdensome task for a small business owner, and so efforts should be made to ensure they receive guidance throughout the process.

Recruitment Methods

Most participants (75%) relied on informal recruitment networks. Although over half (56%) had used some form of advertising in the past (print or online), some (14%) spoke about the method's inefficacies. One employer perceived online job applications to be impersonal and exclusive. For entry-level positions, employers desired friendly and enthusiastic (44%), dependable and mature (31%) candidates. One employer of 14 years stated: "I've never read a resume. I prefer to meet them and talk to them. And just kind of get that physical, one-on-one contact first". Over a third of interviewees (37%) encouraged youth to "take initiative" and make themselves known in the community to improve their employment prospects, whether they enter businesses to strike up a conversation with the owner or participate in local events. Some employers said: "You get out what you put in" and "it is what you make it" in reference to their community.

Training Opportunities

Employers may offer *informal training* (i.e., unstructured, conversational education), *non-formal training* (i.e., workshops, group activities) and *formal training* (i.e., registered courses) to employees. Over half (56%) of participants stated they offer informal training to employees. Fifty percent of participants stated they offer formal training, with 25% out-sourcing the service to nearby urban centres. A few employers (18%) stated they offer non-formal training. Non-formal training is more easily included on a resume than informal training and, unlike most formal training opportunities, it can be offered at a minimal cost to the employer.

External Factors

Beyond local and regional trends, employers also noted macroeconomic and societal factors that influence youth employability. The upcoming provincial increase in minimum wage, in one

employer's eyes, will further hurt a youth's chance of attaining employment: "Say I was somebody that was going to hire an adult or a kid, I'd have to choose the adult, because I'm paying them the same amount of money. I'm going to get better work from the adult – nine times out of ten, not all the time". Another employer noticed effects of the movement towards double-income households and overscheduled families: "I mean moms and dads are just too busy trying to pay bills to really have their kids out there working".

The Next Steps: Recommendations from Rural Employers

1) Strengthen and expand business-school-community networks.

For rural public schools, offering a wide variety of hands-on learning credited courses may not be financially or logistically feasible. Instead, schools can expand and diversify the experiences they offer to students by collaborating with local businesses and community members.

2) Diversify recruitment methods.

Reliance upon informal networking to advertise available work excludes youth from the labour market who have not yet entered the local "grapevine". If employers can make the effort to advertise through channels that will reach a wider audience, newcomers and new entrants to the labour market will have a better chance of gaining desirable employment in rural areas.

3) Target families, not only individuals.

With the majority of our interviewees pointing to families as a key player in youth employability, strategies that promote family engagement may be more effective in integrating youth with the general community than strategies that target youth alone.

4) Provide youth with the opportunity to lead.

Many rural youth participate in volunteer activities, but are rarely assigned leadership roles. By giving youth more

responsibility, they will take greater pride in the results of their work and be more likely to feel engaged and appreciated within their community (Davidson, Schwartz & Noam, 2008). Positive volunteer experiences may also foster confidence and other social skills that benefit youth as they begin to search for their first paid position.

5) Ensure rural employers have the necessary support to apply for funding to hire and formally train youth employees.

Our interviewees cited financial constraints as a reason for not hiring or training youth. Beyond popular apprenticeship and work experience programs, employers did not explicitly state their awareness of other federal and provincial funding programs. Applying to funding programs can also be a burdensome task for a small business owner, and so efforts should be made to ensure they receive guidance throughout the process.

6) Work with rural employers to create useful and affordable non-formal training opportunities for underage employees.

Some formal education and training opportunities may be inaccessible for underage employees, but their employer can help to build a strong resume in other ways, such as through non-formal training opportunities.

7) Support demand-driven training and explore local job creation strategies.

Similar work opportunities should be available for all Canadian youth while remaining responsive to local conditions. In Saskatchewan, some training centres align their courses with their region's needs and give nearby employers the first pick of their graduates (OECD, 2016). Employers can also be encouraged to hire youth through employer award systems or collaboration with organizations already connected to disadvantaged youth.

References

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Obstacles to Aboriginal Youth Employment in Northern Canada

Les obstacles à l'emploi chez les jeunes Autochtones du Nord canadien

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In this article, we provide an overview of findings from our knowledge synthesis report (Abele and Delic, 2014) in which we examined existing research to draw lessons that enable us to better understand the challenges experienced by northern Aboriginal youth in finding and keeping a job in the northern Canadian labour market. In our overview, we focus on discussing key challenges and possible solutions to those challenges that policy developers and decision makers can apply to derive new insights that can be used to strengthen the basis for informed policy and decision making. We also indicate key areas where further research is required for an accurate assessment of some of the key challenges we identified in our research.

Our research was based on an observation that the northern Canadian labour market seems to be characterized by an apparent mismatch of young people and employment opportunities:

on one hand, statistical findings indicate that young Aboriginal people in northern Canada are less likely to find paid employment than are other young people in the North or in the rest of country, while on the other hand, many employers in the North report having difficulties developing a stable local workforce. Our research was set to investigate possible reasons behind this “mismatch” and our investigation focused on four specific areas: (1) educational foundation and career aspirations of northern Aboriginal youth; (2) recruitment and retention practices of employers operating in the North; (3) the effectiveness of targeted government intervention; and (4) the quality of the available labour market information.

Our synthesis of existing research suggests that although the reasons for the mismatch of young people and employment opportunities in the northern Canadian labour market are not fully understood, there are several factors that surface as important barriers to the full participation of northern Aboriginal youth. The first highly important factor is educational attainment (Abele and Delic, 2014; Government of Canada, 2008). Statistical evidence consistently shows that northern Aboriginal youth are more likely to leave school early. As shown in the chart below, in 2006 the proportions of Aboriginal youth with less than high school education were significantly larger than the proportions of non-Aboriginal youth with less than high

Proportions (%) of female youth with less than high school education, by identity and region, 2006

