

**Precarious work, external threats, and limiting stereotypes:
Challenges that face our future leaders**

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Due to people living and working longer, today's workforce is comprised of more distinct generations than ever seen before, from 'Traditionalists' born before 1945 to 'Generation Z' born after 1996. As such, leaders must consider individuals' varying preferences, priorities, and motivations in order to attain and retain an effective workforce. Youth workers, aged 35 years or younger and newest in the workforce, face a myriad of challenges unique to their age group, including, but not limited to precarious work, external threats, and limiting stereotypes. These specific challenges are highlighted to encourage urgency around developing creative solutions, not only to improve organizational success, but also because I believe that today's engaged youth workers are our future's strong and capable leaders.

Most work that is outside of traditional and stable, full-time employment can be considered precarious (e.g. contract or temporary work, involuntary part-time). Low wages, zero or few benefits, and unsafe working conditions also tend to characterize 'precarious work' (International Labor Rights Forum, n.d.). Youth workers in Canada have been subject to precarious work since the 1970s, where 17 to 24 year olds with and without a university degree experienced declines in full-time employment and rising involuntary part-time employment (Statistics Canada, 2018). My first job was in retail and involved working long shifts on my feet, for little pay, no benefits, a partially unpaid lunch break, and 15-minute breaks that were only granted if the shift exceeded 6 hours. Another time in my life, I worked 3 part-time jobs without a day off in about 40 days. Based on discussions with peers, precarious work is typical for youth workers. As a teenager, one of my peers was made to work a trial shift, consisting of 4 hours on her feet in a fast-food setting that went unpaid when the company decided not to hire her for summer employment. Oftentimes, unpaid and demanding shift work is entertained by youth

workers out of necessity to pay off debts, such as student loans, and due to a lack of other options.

According to Henley Business School (n.d.), “the age of the side hustle is upon us,” where a “side-hustle” is a secondary business or job that brings in, or has the potential to bring in, extra income (e.g. craft businesses, buying and selling online, blogging and vlogging, baristas, Lyft and Uber drivers, subcontractors, etc.). It is reported that 1 in 2 millennials have side-hustles compared to 1 in 4 boomers, where millennials spend double the hours a week on this type of work (New York Post, 2017). Despite this, a third of workers with side-hustles still fail to make ends meet (CNBC, 2019). This type of economy can be exploitative through its glorification of long work hours and claims of developing experienced, valiant, and nimble workers, when the reality is that informal work outside of one’s main job is usually due to an absence of a legitimate economy and can lead to stress, anxiety, and early burn-out (Quart, 2019)

Statistics Canada reports higher rates of monthly lay-offs amongst 15 to 24 year olds than other workers since 1977 (Bernard, 2013). The higher likelihood of youth workers becoming unemployed may be due to lower seniority, where employers are more inclined to replace new-hires because it is less costly (Chan, Morissette, and Frenette, 2011). Even for employed youth, work may not be well-paid or well-matched to one’s education (Chan et al., 2011).

Also contributing to the precarious nature of work for young people are the technological advances in artificial intelligence (A.I.). While self-driving cars, grocery store self-checkouts, and fast food ordering screens are already here, A.I. is said to have the ability to also replace jobs with non-repetitive tasks, such as data entry clerks, journalists, and lawyers (Dormehl, 2018). This may lead to a more competitive job market with higher entry-level qualifications in the near future, adding to the barriers already experienced by youth workers.

Twitter user @DanaVivianWhite (2018) went viral, stating ““Millennials”” is used in the media to infantilize, discredit, and instill distrust of an educated, hard-working, low-earning, fed up generation of 30-somethings living through the worst of capitalism, police brutality, government corruption, and a resurgence of hate violence.” This statement may be justified when we examine the limiting stereotypes youth are subject to. Youth workers are stereotyped as difficult to manage, self-interested, lazy, entitled, and unable to form genuine relationships at work due to overreliance on technology (*Simon Sinek on Millennials in the Workplace*, 2016). Even favourable beliefs, such as millennials’ desire to work in organizations that have a purpose, can be used to misrepresent millennials as being disloyal if ever they choose to leave an organization. These limiting stereotypes are barriers for youth workers in attaining and retaining jobs, especially when hiring managers of a different generation believe this empty rhetoric.

Within communities, engagement with youth workers and establishment of committees may create safe forums to discuss shared challenges and potential solutions, as well as provide opportunities to build relationships and advocate for collective interests and rights. Policies and initiatives, such as those related to wage minimums, student financial assistance, and educational reform, must be reviewed to ensure they are supportive of youth workers. Unions must continue to play a lead role for advocacy of adequate pay, safe working conditions, job security, and fair treatment and respect in the workplace, as well as capacity-building through free resources and training opportunities to continually enhance skills and knowledge. Any solution must have youth at the forefront. As a youth worker myself, I am confident that we have many strengths that can be leveraged to ensure the workplace is a setting for equal opportunity, working with purpose and meaning, continuous learning and growth, and genuine enjoyment of one’s work.

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