

Youth in the Workplace

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Do you remember what you were like at 13 years old? Most of us were anxious to prove our worth and desperately wanted nothing more than to fit in or impress others. When I was 13 years old, friends of mine got their first job in the paid labour force working at a fast food establishment. They came to school with burns from the deep-frying machine and probably didn't know that what they were doing was unsafe. Youth workers, aged 13 to 24 — who include students who are most likely to be hired in the informal labour market (Kelloway & Barling, 1999) and young workers just establishing themselves in the adult world of work— face very specific challenges owing to their lack of prior workplace knowledge, skills to do the job and emotional maturity. Unscrupulous employers may take advantage of or neglect the vulnerabilities and undeveloped judgments of youth workers, which can result in work that is physically or mentally unsafe.

As a youth worker, I am not always aware of workers' rights. It's crucial to inform myself. Youth workers are likely to be reluctant to raise concerns in the workplace, lack understanding of their rights, are often unwilling to ask questions, do not recognize the need for preparation to do the work, and too often accept to do dangerous jobs that nobody else wants to do (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2012). Unions serve to promote fair working conditions and to ensure that protections are in place. Nowadays, youth worker union committees provide insights so that youth workers are better taken care of and work more safely.

Many of my school friends in Yellowknife went into the paid workforce hoping to get 10-15 hours of work. They often wound up getting many more hours than they wanted and were always one or two hours away from the full-time work designation for which they would have reaped benefits. No previous experience in unionized workforce made them unaware of basic

rights and their lack of maturity dealing with such issues made them unlikely to enter into a discussion with their employer. The existing power advantage of employers over employees worsens for younger employees, such that having laws if workplace violations were to arise (Bowal, Craig & Keindorfer, 2014) would be beneficial.

Since the 1980s, youth workers in North America have been hired into positions in the lower-level service (Kelloway & Barling, 1999, p.164) like my friends in the food and beverage services and my first job as a sales clerk. These and other positions were actually created for adults; this in and of itself creates additional challenges for youth workers. Less skilled by adult standards, the inadequate skill sets of youth workers can be overcome so that everyone benefits. To address skill gaps, initial competencies need to be identified and training needs to be geared for young people. Additionally, there has to be follow up which allows for further training as needed. Youth workers may be more willing to believe they have to know it all but they are the most vulnerable workers who need opportunities for further training and permission to admit when they have forgotten something they were trained on or oriented to. Therefore, it is crucial that the employer provides an evaluation following the training, so the worker can identify areas of need and it is equally critical to develop healthy honest relationships to ensure that young workers can name their needs. Ultimately, this also benefits the employer in the quality of work that gets done, and even in the speed of implementation because there will be less loss of time and more overall productivity.

Youth employees are at greater risk of being injured on the job than any other group of workers. Statistics showing the rate of youth worker injuries (400 according to WSCC Annual Report), are likely not accurate (Workers' Safety and Compensation Commission, 2017) owing to

youth workers reluctance to report. They may be frightened or embarrassed or perhaps they do not think the injury is serious enough to report. Sometimes workplace accidents are fatal as in the well-known case, in the NWT, of 19-year old, David John Vinnicombe who was killed on a job site in 2016 when a piece of heavy equipment fell on him (CBC, 2018). “Research on the work-related deaths of young people has suggested that the vast majority of such fatalities involve a violation of established practice (Suruda & Halperin 1991).” Lack of supervision was one deficit mentioned by the coroner; the company Vinnicombe worked for had failed to ensure that workers were properly supervised. I suspect it is challenging to comprehensively evaluate one’s skill sets at the outset of a job so supervision can be a pivotal way to overcome this kind of challenge. Furthermore, youth workers need to be adequately educated on three basic rights for workers in Canada: the right to know; the right to participate; and the right to refuse unsafe work (Canadian Centre for occupational Health and Safety). If I could go back to being 13 years old, I would tell my friends that they have the right to refuse unsafe work and that it is absolutely necessary that they request proper personal protective equipment (and wear it even if it is uncool!).

There is hope for youth workers. Youths have a stronger preference than adults for unionization (Gunderson et. Al., 2002). Perhaps, as youth workers become unionized, the challenges they face owing to their lack of workplace awareness and skills as well as emotional immaturity can result in better working conditions. They can help create a culture of workers’ rights that helps those even in informal work arrangements. In the end society benefits because the work values, attitudes and behaviours that are shaped by early work experiences during impressionable years become the dispositions and actions of future adult workers.

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