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Challenges and Successes of the Youth Employment Crisis: A Global Introduction for Career Development Professionals

Rebecca M. Dedmond, Annie K. Smith, and Sania Frei-Harper

Dedmond, Rebecca M., PhD, LPC, GCDI, is Director of the School Counseling Program at the George Washington University, Alexandria Center. Dedmond has extensive experience in career counseling and career development throughout the United States, the Territory of the United States Virgin Islands, and in Ghana, West Africa, where she has implemented comprehensive career development programs and career centers. Dedmond is a Trustee on the National Career Development Association Board.

Smith, Annie K., MA, CRC is a doctoral student in counseling at George Washington University. Smith has worked as an educational and vocational counselor for young adults transitioning out of the foster care system, as well a college-planning advisor for high school students.

Frei-Harper, Sania, MA, GCDI, GCDF, VWDP, is a native of Croatia with a master's degree in counseling from George Washington University. Frei-Harper purposefully travels throughout Europe in her quest to research global labor market and career development challenges and issues. Frei-Harper has worked as an employment and career counselor at a One-Stop Career Center, in Alexandria, Virginia. She has over 10 years of experience in career counseling.

Worldwide, the challenges for youth in the areas of employment, career, development, career preparation, and productivity are constantly evolving and rapidly changing. Demographics, the economy, diverse training needs, and basic education all enter the mix when thinking about preparing and hiring workers in the Information Age. The need for more and better career information for youth, at earlier ages, is critical to their preparation and success for the world that awaits them. The need to gain a global perspective of that world should be a high priority of helping professionals, employers, parents, and youth themselves. The world is full of potential employment opportunities, and careful career planning can lead to self-sufficiency and beyond. Career development professionals should invest their imaginations in global trends and successes to collaborate and to remove the barriers that young people face regarding employment.

The global ramifications of employment have certainly caught the attention of the United Nations (UN), whose member states are collaborating with international organizations to incorporate employment goals in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for 2015. The first goal listed in the MDG, a dedication "to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger," lists the need "to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people," as a central target to the completion of poverty eradication (United Nations, 2010).

This target goal is indeed an immense global challenge, as an estimated one billion young people will reach working age within the next decade (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2012). A more technologically interconnected world provides many new opportunities, but it also demands a global perspective for the attainment of productive employment for youth, many of whom feel increasingly vulnerable in their transition to adulthood due to the lack of job prospects in their region. At a rate of almost 13% in 2012, the global youth unemployment rate isn't projected to drop any time in the near future (de Weck, 2012). Due to this reality, experiencing unemployment during the early stage of a young person's career could harm his or her self-esteem and potentially ruin the fulfillment of long-term career goals. Additionally, government interest in the investment and development of education and training programs may evaporate if young people are not able to enter the workforce (ILO, 2010).

Addressing global youth unemployment requires an examination of the unique trends and challenges at play in both developing and developed countries. The breadth of economic impact on the labor market as well as training and educational deficits and successes are as diverse as nations themselves. This paper presents a brief look at this diversity on a global scale, highlighting emerging challenges as well as trends that have provided career development and employment opportunities for youth. The information gathered here also serves to present a challenge to career-focused helping professionals who wish to stay ahead of the plethora of information, and to help youth apply the knowledge of these opportunities towards their own successes, and to be an advocate for policy changes that promote youth employment.

Employment and Training in the Developed World: Challenges and Successes

Youth unemployment in developed countries has become so familiar in the last few years that it has crept its way in our languages. In the United States, youth who move back home after college are known as "boomerang kids." In the United Kingdom, the term "NEET" (not in education, employment, or training) is used, and the Japanese "freeters" and Spanish "milleuristas" have grown in number (Coy, 2011). Young people entering the labor market find it divided into jobs for which they don't quite qualify and jobs which don't quite meet the cost of living (Holzer, Lane, Rosenblum, & Andersson, 2011). And in the past two years, what at first glance appeared to be falling unemployment rates for youth eventually revealed the truth that frustrated youth were simply dropping out of the hunt for employment altogether (Coy, 2011).

When investigating the trends in the youth transition from school to work, one finds that the internship is the most common of practical training for students in developed nations during or after the completion of their studies. One unique form of internship popular in Europe, one that addresses the global divide and incorporates growing technology, is the "visual internship," which allows students and mentors to meet via video link once a week to discuss work collaborations and future projects (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2009). In some European countries, like the United Kingdom, Spain, and France, internships serve the purpose of allowing non-native students to improve their English skills. Unfortunately, the stark reality for native and non-native students is that many placements are unpaid or offer only very little compensation. Also, due to the high demand for experience, companies are able to take advantage of young, skilled workers through unpaid internships or volunteer experiences, which save the companies money (ETF, 2009).

While promoted as a passport to career success, internships and other non-standard jobs can often lead youth in developed countries to feel stuck and unable to make the transition to full-time employment. The increase in part-time employment is largely due to the impact of the global economic crisis, and countries like Spain and Ireland have seen their part-time employment rates grow above 10% since 2008 (ILO, 2012). Though this employment option obviously can be appealing to those completing their education, in the European Union more than 30% of young adults have reported that they have sought a permanent job and could not obtain one (ILO, 2012).

Facing these trends, how can career development professionals and educators impact youth success? One such approach might be to address the inefficient systems of vocational education in developing countries. For example, in the European Union, skills taught in vocational education do not match the current labor market needs. A system that can identify changes in technology, labor market demands, and organizational challenges in both national and global economies would serve the youth population well (Franicevic, 2008).

One European success story comes from Germany, where youth unemployment remained a full seven percent below the United States' and Europe's rates. Training roughly two thirds of its employees through partnerships between companies and vocational programs, Germany has a history of valuing a blue collar apprenticeship system. Last year, German companies trained over 600,000 paid apprentices, and German companies, which are based in the United States, have taken great strides in persuading Americans to buy into the successful system (SC Digest Editorial Staff, 2012). Youth unemployment in the Netherlands has also remained steady at a relatively low 11.2%, where students are expected to be gaining work experience while they complete a secondary degree. In response to the 2009 economic crisis, the Dutch government launched Actieplan Jeugdwerkloosheid, a program aimed to keep youth in school and offer apprenticeships to those who opt out of continued education. On average, about three-fourths of Dutch youth ages 20-24 are involved in some sort of employment experience (Bekker, 2010).

Examining the successes in these two nations, it becomes apparent that expedited and direct government investment in the topic of youth employment is key to addressing the impact of the global economic crisis. Also, the willingness to let private businesses dictate the preparation and training of young people provides a solid solution to the issue of potential discrepancy between vocational training and employer demand.

Employment and Training in the Developing World: Challenges and Successes

Youth in the developing world face their own unique set of challenges, and they are certainly not to be overlooked, considering that 87% of the world's youth live in developing nations (UN, 2007). Over half of the population in these nations are engaged in what is known as vulnerable employment, defined as work that is performed as an informal arrangement or family work that goes unpaid (The World Bank, 2012). Vulnerable employment usually implies very little pay and the increased chance of physical harm while performing the work. In some Asian and African nations, this rate can reach higher than 75% (ILO, 2012). Youth make up the majority of family-related work, often frustrated by the increasingly drawn out period of time between their completion of school and less vulnerable employment (Coenjaerts, Ernst, Fortuny, & Rei, 2009).

In the past decade, education alone has not always proven to be the solution for youth employment. Educational training programs that does not incorporate the skills which employers

demand will fall short at preparing youth for employment. For example, the increase in post-secondary degrees in Iran, Egypt, and Tunisia has turned their university systems into “diploma mills” that offer no job prospects upon graduation, particularly for women who have more difficulty finding opportunities for employment (Coy, 2011, p. 4). In China, where the number of college graduates has increased fivefold since 2000, graduates of technical schools are earning equal to or more than college graduates (Zakaria, 2010). In China and other Asian countries such as South Korea, this education boom has preceded the structural changes in the private sector that lead to job creation. The end result is a mass of overeducated youth who struggle to be patient while the labor market structure adjusts to the growth of education (Nübler, 2012).

However, for many young persons in the developing world, education still remains the most certain ticket out of vulnerable employment; though it may not promise the certainty of employment, it certainly opens the door to jobs previously unattainable without the necessary education (Sparreboom & Shahnaz, 2007). In Argentina, Programa Jóvenes con Mas y Mejor Trabajo has shown great success in targeting unemployed youth with little to no education. The multifaceted program allows for them to complete their education, build a professional profile, and choose between a multitude of training and entrepreneurship-oriented opportunities (Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social, 2012). Tight connections with employers allow for interns to receive life skills training along with vocational training.

The Organization for Economic and Co-operation and Development notes that young people’s personal investment and interest in energy conservation and environmentalism can also serve as a powerful impetus to job creation in developing nations. For example, in the Indian state of Goa, government investment and private business partnerships have led to the creation of more than 2,000 jobs for young people in the areas of waste management and recycling (Coenjaerts, Ernst, Fortuny, & Rei, 2009).

These are just a few of the countless examples of innovative employment programs in the developing world. Among all successes, there appear to be a clear trend of a select few factors found in programs: encouragement of the entrepreneurial spirit of young people, support for the completion and continuation of education, and willingness to rely on employers rather than independent vocational programs to dictate what skills a young person should seek to gain.

Implications for Career Development Professionals

When considering these global trends as a professional, one should be careful not to assume that all trends are universally applicable. Compared to youth in developing countries, youth with less education in the United States are over four times as likely to be unemployed when compared with their post-secondary educated peers. The unfortunate reality for the United States is that its rate of college graduation has fallen short compared to other nations at a time when knowledge is perhaps the most powerful resource in the global economy. Only roughly 60% of college students graduate with a bachelor’s degree within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Despite the educational disparity, many of the challenges and successes in other nations can serve as excellent learning examples for professionals in the U.S. Perhaps the most universal challenge is the state of vocational and technical training programs, traditionally viewed to be the best alternative for youth who opt out of college. The structure of many of these programs remains out of tune with the developments in the world of employment, a fact largely attributable to lack of funding and out of practice staff who teach dated skills with obsolete technology (Coy,

2011). When working with youth considering vocational training, professionals should encourage them to be proactive and investigate whether the curriculum of a program matches the skills which companies demand. If youth are unable to attain this information on their own, then it is recommended that a professional work to connect them with potential mentors with valuable insight into the demands of their chosen field.

Career development professionals can also serve as advocates for policy changes in the labor market that impact youth employment. In this year's report, the ILO recommends several avenues for this type of advocacy. As mentioned above, one is to address the discrepancy between the skills that the labor market demands and the skills taught in vocational training programs. A potential solution for this discrepancy is to encourage the development of apprenticeship and entrepreneurship programs and also to promote life skills training for underprivileged youth who may be at risk for not maintaining long-term employment (ILO, 2012).

Another relevant policy issue is the promotion of government programs and policies that encourage direct employment opportunities like self-employment. Professionals employed in academic settings can also serve as advocates for the development of university programs that encourage entrepreneurial efforts of students. One increasingly lauded program, known as Launch Pad, is based out of the University of Miami. Believing that the entrepreneurial spirit should be fostered in students, Launch Pad connects youth with local experts who can provide the guidance and connection to resources for the development of non-profit and for-profit enterprises, and the program has seen the launch of 45 companies since it began in 2008 (The Launch Pad, 2010).

Considering the level of youth unemployment from a global level can be an intimidating process at first glance for the career development professional. But clearly an advantage of living in a global society is the sheer breadth of knowledge that can be gained by examining the challenges and successes of other nations and imagining how these tools might be applied in the context of one's own locale. A career development professional can serve as resource for students seeking the most effective educational and employment training programs, an advocate for lawmakers who wish to address the national impact of youth unemployment, and a mind to make creative and impactful interventions a reality.

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