



From First Job to Building a Career:

Navigating Career Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth today are entering the workforce at a time of greater inequality.

The needs of the modern workforce are evolving, and the ability to retain motivation and resilience as a job-seeker through these times is difficult. These challenges are amplified by the COVID 19 pandemic, leading to the struggle of many Ontarian youth in their transition from first job-to-career.

Primary research conducted through a focus group of 11 youth participants and corresponding research indicate many youth have been moderately to severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic on their first job-to-career transitions. **Focus group participants expressed that even prior to the pandemic, the job-to-career transition was challenging, and further support through government-organized or scholarly programs would be beneficial.** Findings from the focus group indicate that mental health is a key priority for youth in 2021, and youth would benefit from a variety of interventions, both from government-led and scholarly programs-- such as accessible financial support for youth in need, as well as increased access to tools for building confidence and motivation in professional environments, and support to develop resilience throughout career progress.

Additionally, youth expressed that career support programs must be updated to modern standards, and should prioritize information on the relevant social focuses of 2021, such as race/gender/ability sensitivity and diversity awareness training.

Findings from the focus group indicate that **mental health is a key priority for youth in 2021, and youth would benefit from a variety of interventions, both from government-led and scholarly programs-- such as accessible financial support for youth in need, as well as increased access to tools for building confidence and motivation in professional environments, and support to develop resilience throughout career progress.** Additionally, youth expressed that career support programs must be updated to modern standards, and should prioritize information on the relevant social focuses of 2021, such as race/gender/ability sensitivity and diversity awareness training. Other recommendations to smooth the transition from job-to-career include increased work-based and experiential learning opportunities, and updated career information that evolves with the needs of the 2021 workforce - such as increased relevance to digital skills and social media networking. Additionally, better access to information on employment options and career support, ideally marketed through relevant channels such as social media, was a key point of interest for surveyed youth.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous papers indicate that “Youth” are an incredibly diverse group of people experiencing a series of significant changes in their lives. A number of youth are focusing on their studies. Others may be taking time off from school or work, caring for their families, or struggling with personal issues. Many youth are looking for work or seeking to improve their employment situation, yet are facing significant barriers to doing so. When it comes to finding a first job, many youth face the same fundamental challenge: **you can’t get a job without experience; and you can’t get experience without a job.** First jobs (often in retail or hospitality) might be more about financial survival or gaining an additional income, though they can be a stepping stone for meaningful careers. It has become increasingly evident that the job market into which young people are entering today is different from that experienced by their parents. In Canada and around the world, technology is not only changing the types of jobs that are available, but also, the skills that these jobs and industries require. In response, employers are organizing work in new ways, including choosing to hire workers for short-term, temporary contracts or on a part-time basis rather than for “permanent” full-time positions.

Research indicated in this report is limited to primary information obtained during an hour-long virtual focus group with 11 Ontarian youth aged 15-29 on May 21st, 2021. The research conducted was largely qualitative. The youth participants were posed with a series of questions relating to the topic and were encouraged to draw from personal experiences to offer insight on the questions. The primary research is limited by the sample size of the focus group and is not necessarily reflective of the viewpoints of all youth in Ontario. Secondary research has been included where relevant.

OBJECTIVE

This research aims to inform the construction of effective policy for youth undergoing the transition from their first job to a career. This report showcases primary research findings from First Work’s Youth Council-led focus group “From First Job to Building a Career - Navigating Career Development in 2020-21”, during which 10 youth participants virtually round-tabled a discussion on job-to-career barriers for youth in 2020-2021. The intent of this report is to highlight key topics of concern for youth navigating the transition from the first job to career during 2020 and 2021, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Topics covered include employer subsidies for youth hires, more career-specific skills training during and post-high school, better mental health support, and specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth career development.



REPORT FINDINGS

1

First Jobs: Survival Mode

For most Ontarian youth, primary exposure to the labour force consists of minimum wage service-sector jobs, and the high school Grade 10 Careers class curriculum - both of which only provide a preliminary segue to meaningful, long-term career pathways. To refine and optimize potential for career success, focus group participants expressed that these first experiences must be targeted by social and scholarly programs as important places for intervention.

“My first job didn’t really prepare me for the jobs ahead, it was more-so something just to get my feet wet. I wasn’t going there to gain specific skills, and I didn’t gain specific skills because the way everything was set up was that you just needed to fulfil a role. My skills progression wasn’t really thought of, they just needed somebody to fulfil that role, and I just so happened to be that person.” - Youth participant

The participants’ insights can be categorized into **two fundamental factors**: The survival mode of looking for work and resource-based barriers. Within those themes, there are unique subcategories of findings that are centralized on the gaps in personal development that young people experience when transitioning from their first job to a career pathway.

Understanding the Importance of Transferable Skills

Most participants’ first jobs were similar: minimum-wage, service-based jobs such as servers at Tim Hortons, camp counsellors, Canada’s Wonderland employees, a Kumon tutor, and other retail/food handling positions.

- Most of the participants agreed that these jobs were “alright” starting step positions, allowing folks to become familiarized with boss-employee relationships and taught entry-level job responsibility (punctuality, money handling, customer satisfaction).
- Participants noted these first jobs did little for long-term success in setting youth up for more challenging, higher-paying positions later on in life, in fields that correlated with the youths’ desired career pathway.

Participants also noted that responsibilities in first jobs are too general: the roles are often quite transferable between individuals and most do not require specific skills nor help to grow into more advanced roles.

- This limits an employee from feeling valued and their ability to develop meaningful relationships and mentorship.

Easy-to-obtain, practical training on career-specific skills is limited for young people.

"I didn't really get anything out of my first job. I got money, but I didn't gain any skills." - Youth participant

Employers want prior relevant experience but it's difficult to get this without experience. Of this, participants stated:

- "Even for a lot of entry-level jobs, employers want a lot of technical skills and a lot of experience in those technical skills.... That's definitely putting us at a disadvantage."
- "In our first jobs, we don't really learn a lot of technical skills that are easy to market later on."
- "Many youths face the same fundamental challenge - you can't get a job without experience, but you can't get experience without a job."

Lack of Mentorship and Personal Professional Development

Youth expressed feeling a barrier between knowing how to market skills gained from first jobs to employers on resumes or in interviews. There are valuable skills such as effective communication and problem solving that may not feel transferable to bigger jobs but are in reality.

One participant stated, "We don't learn enough about how to market the skills we do have as transferable skills."

Youth want **networking opportunities that feel organic, not forced**, and they want support to build skills relevant to networking - both online and in person.

- A participant expressed that **it is easy enough to network and move up once you are inside a company, but the initial "first steps" of building a networking connection are a difficult hurdle to get past.**

Career Exploration in High School and Beyond

The youth felt they were offered limited information on potential career paths as students.

- For example, career options presented in the Ontario high school curriculum's Grade 10 Careers class are "mainstream" professions such as doctor, lawyer, journalist, teacher, plumber. **The reality is, most people's careers do not fit into these "classic" options. It's this lack of information and diversity in career paths which contributes to the stress and difficulty of choosing a pathway.**

The youth participants brought forth these suggestions to mitigate some of this pressure:

- University and college courses, no matter how rigid the discipline is, should always allow for electives so that students can get a taste for interests outside their major.
- Youth should have more frequent opportunities to see different types of jobs in high school - **for example, having "career days" once a month, instead of yearly, would be a beneficial program to increase access to employment information.**

Because high school course levels and electives determine post-secondary options, youth expressed anxiety at the pressure to choose a career course by Grade 10.

The youth felt that the pressure to choose a career path at 15 years old was too severe and premature given the lack of real-world experience and context.

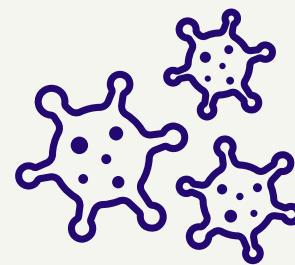
For example:

- The perceived difficulty to change career course later in life was described as stressful.
- Youth post-high school felt limited by choices they made earlier in life.

Career Information offered to youth was often perceived as “outdated or irrelevant.”

- For example, the Grade 10 Careers curriculum is not updated for career success in 2021; there is a lack of training on social media marketing/networking, online literacy, and upcoming relevant career options for 2021 and beyond.
- Career skills workshops offered by the government or other avenues do not necessarily “keep up with the times,” socially - for example, with updated race/gender/ability-informed content, nor do they necessarily train all relevant skills needed for the ever-evolving modern job market.





Working in 2020-21: COVID-19 and Career Transitions

Most youth have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Physically dependent jobs - such as doulas/nannies/personal care workers/etc. - saw a major decrease in work opportunities throughout the pandemic.

- The lack of opportunity for easier-entry work opportunities can force an individual to go on government assistance such as CERB, EI, or CRB for extended periods of time.
- Employers in 2020/21 are perceived to be particularly selective, likely due to high unemployment and the mass influx of experienced applicants to posted positions.
- Youth “feel forced” into vulnerable work positions because they do not have the skillset or experience to find decent, well-paying remote work. It is mostly young and underprivileged people who must work frontline, public-facing roles (e.g. grocery store clerks, baristas, construction, retail).
- Youth have lost employment or are unable to find employment due to lay-offs and cutbacks related to COVID-19 (e.g. staff cuts at service jobs, no extra-curricular roles at camps/sports groups, freeze on hiring in some workplaces).
- Many youth have no online work experience, despite that skillset being demanded by many employers throughout the pandemic as many jobs transition to remote work.

In some ways, COVID-19 gave many youth a pause to think about and adjust their career goals. For example, many took the chance to invest in other options like side businesses, extra-curricular projects, courses/certifications or career pivots.

However,

Focus group participants noted that many youth were not lucky enough to have this opportunity and had to work hard all year long just to make ends meet.

2

Resource-Based Approaches

Access to quality employment-based resources is a priority for youth in the job-to-career transition. Participants conveyed a desire for better mental health support solutions; updated quality of social and scholarly employment support programs, and optimized marketing of programs for improved and increased access to employment-related supports.

Prioritize Mental Health in Career Growth

Unemployment is stressful and takes a toll on youth mental health - especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Good mental health is correlated with employability, and finding and remaining in a job. (Wilson & Finch, 2021)

- Mental health is a multifaceted topic. Resources tackling a variety of angles - such as confidence-building employment programs and sufficient financial support for unemployed youth - are necessary to set up young people for successful career pathways.

- In addition, there should be a priority on designing programs that support better mental health and focus on assisting youth in securing “good quality work, as well as skills training to assist underlying employment barriers (such as low qualification levels).” (2021)

Good mental health is correlated with employability, and finding/remaining in a job. (Wilson & Finch, 2021)



Increase Access and Reduce Stigma of Employment Supports

Focus group participants noted a perceived lack of relevant employment supports for young people. **Three categories could benefit from further support.**



GOVERNMENT-FUNDED EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMS

- The Youth Job Connection program (Government of Ontario) was described by participants as helpful.
- Pivot Project (Canadian Federal Government) supplied 12,000 young people with short-term jobs that had practical training and networking opportunities for a large variety of youth.
 - This opportunity was also not limited to just people who graduated from specific schools/programs/etc. It was very accessible to many people and participants noted that this was a key element of its success.
- Participants expressed that many of these programs were under-utilized by youth, perhaps due to insufficient marketing.

ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

- One participant stated that one of their high school teachers set up a "very helpful" lunch-time "resume and interview training sessions" to help students navigate practical career skills.

EXPERIENTIAL WORK-BASED OPPORTUNITIES

- The focus group expressed a need for more experiential and work-based opportunities for students and non-students.
- A participant stated, *"It's very important, in my experience, to have a co-op experience where you can actually experiment with the career you have in mind, so you can decide if you actually like it. If you do, then you can go for it - but if you don't, then at least you had the opportunity to decide before you committed fully to that course."*

Marketing Best Practices for Career-Oriented Programs



Access to information on career-oriented programs was perceived by the group as limited.

- There is not enough done in high school to promote these opportunities, or even to promote interest in them.
 - Many high school students **do not consider career fairs, participation incentives, career skills workshops, etc. as engaging, viable career planning tools.**
 - Lack of interest may be due to irrelevant and/or outdated focus topics.
- Better marketing tools could utilize monetary incentives or advertising on Instagram.
- Universities hosting workshops for career building/networking/resume building are not well-advertised or incentivized.
 - A lot of information gained at university centres or high school classes seems outdated and has not “kept up with the times,” as is needed by the modern workforce.
 - For example, Instagram/social media competence is important for a lot of jobs.
- High school Careers classes often only promote careers that require college or university education. Meanwhile, careers such as being a doula or working in skilled trades are also worthwhile, meaningful career options which cannot be ignored in programming.



INSIGHTS

Insufficient Career Exploration for Youth

Many youth resonated with the idea that insufficient career exploration during foundational high school years hindered them from taking advantage of career-advancing opportunities during later stages, i.e., in pursuing higher education, entering the workforce etc.

This lack of career exploration at a young age creates a ripple effect which impacts youth at later stages when building their career.

Additional work-based and experiential learning opportunities for youth would be beneficial to support youth in this stage. Career exploration and personal development opportunities are essential for youth to be able to explore the different career paths available to them before committing to a path they may not necessarily be satisfied with.

To build on that point, **a participant expressed during the session that she chose to attend university primarily because of a perceived “typical path” - grade school, post-secondary, career.** This demonstrates the lack of personal and career exploration in early years, as far too often, youth pursue higher education solely because of the fact that ‘everyone else is doing it, and then later express feelings of ‘being lost’ and ‘out of place.’

This exemplifies the lack of diversity in career options presented/displayed to youth in secondary school. Oftentimes, the career options displayed are those that require college/university, limiting access to information on careers that stem from the trades, personal entrepreneurship, etc.

Personal Development and Mental Health

Mental health declines and stress were cited as a major barrier to participants’ confidence in seeking networking opportunities and searching for employment - this should be addressed by employers/career programs/government supports.

Networking is growingly becoming a widespread phenomenon that is deemed by many essential to establish a successful career in many fields.

There are three primary issues discussed related to networking. First, youth are not taught what networking is or “how” to network - both in-person and online. Second, mental health issues, such as anxiety and stress, withhold young people from gaining the advantages of growing their network. Lastly, youth need tools to aid in their resilience in the search for rewarding job opportunities; it was recommended by the participants that this problem be addressed with a multifaceted approach from employers, schools and government support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus group participants were clear in their need for stronger, more relevant and modernized career exploration opportunities in high school and beyond. Soft skills such as confidence and effective communication are crucial for youth to develop to retain meaningful employment. Job shadowing opportunities for high school students allow for organic soft skill development while exploring potential career pathways. Participants cited a lack of awareness of social programs, limiting their access to employment and skills training. Interestingly, the majority of focus group participants found this study through social media, indicating a potential need to expand the promotion of employment programs through modern methods.

Mandated Experiential and/or Work-Based Learning opportunities for Youth aged 15-29.

Governments should mandate work-based learning opportunities prior to graduation. Increasing experiential work opportunities for youth will allow them to gain experience before entering into the workforce full-time, by providing greater attachment to the workforce. Gaining work experience increases the potential for access to careers aligned with youths' goals. Soft skill development which takes place at the workplace - such as conflict resolution and dealing with adversity - are critical for successful job retention. A focus group participant stated, "Many youth face the same fundamental challenge - you can't get a job without experience, but you can't get experience without a job. Government and educational institutions should increase work-integrated learning opportunities because they can provide more opportunities for high school students, and increase access to opportunities for youth post-high school, whether they are in a post-secondary program or not.

Career Exploration opportunities should be enhanced and updated for 2021 standards.

Government should invest in enhancing career exploration opportunities throughout education, regularly updating the skills and career pathways which are most in-demand. Career exploration opportunities currently available are perceived to be inaccessible in leading to successful, career-track employment. Insights provided by guidance counsellors is often narrow and does not address modern-day issues like hiring bias through artificial intelligence. Focus group participants cited a lack of relevance in the career exploration opportunities provided to them through schools and social programs. Some participants specifically cited they found the focus group opportunity through Instagram and suggested there should be better marketing of these social programs through modern tools such as social media. **"Social media is a really good tool for reaching youth," stated a focus group participant. Another participant stated, "I feel like if you do get any advice in university it's kind of outdated and it's not based on what employers are saying they're looking for."**

Government-funded career exploration through education, in partnership with social programs, should be improved through updated career skills training that includes social media marketing (LinkedIn, Instagram). Exploration should also be modernized to include the relevant skills needed for 2021, which could include social media skills development, an increased focus on mental health, and race-, gender-, ability-sensitivity and diversity training. Governments could explore partnership opportunities with networking platforms, such as LinkedIn, to support the uptake of digital skills needed in the modern workplace, while enhancing the professionalize of youth. Additionally, the marketing of employment programs should utilize relevant social media - such as Instagram and Facebook - to access as many participants as possible.

Mental health supports must be prioritized in order to develop a healthy, lasting labour force.

Governments must continue to fund and prioritize accessible mental health supports for young people to ensure a sustainable labour pipeline. Motivation and confidence are critical skills for advancing one's career; and "good mental health is indicative of one's employability," (Wilson and Finch). Therefore, governments should prioritize strengthening mental health support to ensure a healthy, sustainable labour force. Of their mental health challenges, one focus group participant stated, **"I got basically no support from my university. It was basically like you graduate, and hope you can find something."** Another participant shared,



"I didn't finish post-secondary because it was way too hard on my mental health... I think a lot of people equate degrees and certificates to having a career and having success, but that's not true for a lot of people." - Youth participant

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting effect on youth mental health during the job-to-career transition. One participant stated that **"Trying to network and grow your career in a pandemic ends up feeling more damaging than helpful; seeing people score these big internships on LinkedIn, etc. just makes you feel even worse about yourself."** Key suggestions to prioritize mental health include increased financial assistance to serving a multitude of ends - such as access to therapy, support for mental health days/breaks, and mitigating overall financial stress/anxiety while job searching. Income insecurity breeds stress and anxiety, as well as associated stigma.

Career support counsellors and employers should be trained to support employee mental health and should prioritize training that includes a diversity and trauma sensitivity focus. Developing employment programs that foster confidence and resilience could help youth secure good, lasting jobs; this would ultimately foster increased mental wellbeing in the modern labour force. Governments could also explore partnership opportunities with modern mental health resources like Headspace to enhance accessibility of these supports.

CONCLUSION

Youth in 2021 face unprecedented challenges in transitioning from their first job to successful careers. The difficulty of choosing a career course, gaining confidence in professional environments, and accessing opportunities that support career growth is challenging in any generation, but the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified the anxiety and pressure on youth to build meaningful, lasting career pathways. Research indicated in this report suggests three potential pathways for smoothing the transition from youths' first jobs to meaningful careers. First, increased experiential and work-based learning opportunities for youth would greatly benefit the personal and professional advancement of youth. Second, career exploration opportunities should be updated to 2021 standards - this must include relevant, social-media-based marketing of career support programs, updated employment training curriculum that reflects 2021 societal values, and career information that evolves with the needs of the modern workforce - such as tools for online literacy and networking in the digital age. Lastly, mental health must be prioritized as a key element in building a healthy, lasting, and sustainable labour force.



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ABOUT FIRST WORK

First Work is Ontario's employment network: a leading membership organization bringing together the best providers of employment programming and services, business leaders, academia, and government to develop and advance evidence-led solutions for employment. Our membership community positions us at the bridge between job seekers and employment, bringing innovative partnerships with industry partners to the workforce development space. Our direct engagement with job seekers, youth and employment services providers ensures our services are relevant, timely and apply an intersectional lens. Our continued advocacy at all levels of government supports progressive policy development for the benefit of all job seekers.

ABOUT FIRST WORK'S YOUTH COUNCIL

First Work's Youth Council is comprised of a diverse group of young people (under 30) from across Ontario. This council convenes bi-monthly to ensure First Work's dedication and work for young jobseekers is reflective of their wants and needs. This cohort has supported the development of First Work's first ever full-day Youth Summit, which took place at Futures: National Workforce Development Conference in 2020. This cohort has also supported the development and design of career exploration events through First Work's youth-voice, Aspire.



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