

Youth unemployment: the pandemic has knocked young workers' confidence in the job market

Young people have been hit hard by unemployment in the last 18 months. In the first six months of the pandemic, the rate of youth unemployment increased by 14%, while the number of 18-24 year-olds claiming universal credit is still 66% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

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What we are seeing now is a generation overflowing with potential, skills, qualifications and a drive to work hard being turned away as industries favour those with more industry experience, something young people have barely had the chance to grasp.

Young people are squeezed out because their position is less secure in an increasingly competitive job market. They are still exploring career opportunities, while pursuing part time work, studies and other formal commitments and qualifications. And without deep roots in any job and extensive experience in employment, young people are more susceptible to being knocked back.

“Tragically, young people are just easier to get rid of,” said Robin Lanfear, communications manager at UK youth charity, Impetus. “They're not tied down to long contracts, and they're less economically difficult to lose. Whenever there's any kind of economic downturn, it's almost always young people who are the worst impacted: there's almost a last in, first

out unofficial rule.”

Now the UK’s largest coalition targeting youth unemployment, Impetus joined with other organisations last year not only to tackle the crisis of unemployment, but also employment inequalities between young people. The pandemic is likely to have widened the gap between the young people able to secure stable employment, which is also determined by factors such as geography. Despite government talk of “levelling up” and a pledge to introduce an “opportunity guarantee” last year to ensure that every young person would have access to a further education, work or a training placement, this has yet to be fulfilled.

"This hasn't been delivered," said Robin. "Thousands of young people have lost their jobs and over 200,000 have been out of work for 6 months. We need to help those furthest from the labour market back into work."

He added: “The system wasn't perfect before the pandemic - young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were 50% more likely to be NEET (not in education, employment or training) than their similarly qualified but better off-peers."

“Problems from before the pandemic have gotten worse. To what degree? I’m not entirely sure. But considering how badly young people have been hit by this pandemic, I shudder to think.”

Another reason for the fall in youth employment is that young people are disproportionately employed in the ‘shut down sectors.’ The largest sector employing young people, hospitality, has been hit hardest by the pandemic. The *Office of National Statistics (ONS)* says that consumer spending in the industry is still at less than 70% of pre-pandemic levels.

Jack Parsons, the UK’s chief youth officer and chief executive officer of The Youth Group, said that the blow to this industry would likely impact the wellbeing of young people long-term.

“With one of the largest industries containing a large portion of young people sliced in half, many young people feel hopeless and valueless,” he said. “Covid has stripped years off careers for young people.”

Those with the most potential are the least confident

While the number of unemployed young people is now returning to pre-pandemic levels, a positive outlook on the job market remains low. This is despite the fact that all industries are becoming increasingly saturated with digitally driven initiatives and hybrid working models, which are environments young people need no adaptation to.

“In the media industry, disruption is occurring, leading to broadcasting companies feeling compelled to adapt to the rise in popularity of online streaming,” said Jack. “In large part, this change has become pronounced and more so than expected thanks to the attention young people have expressed.”

Still, we are now seeing a generation that is perhaps the most qualified but the least confident in securing a job, even in tech. Since graduate opportunities, work placements and entry-level recruitment programmes were the first to be shut down, young people are now brimming with potential, but lacking in confidence.

“Confidence begins with access to opportunity,” continued Jack. “With Covid-19 wiping out the job landscape, many young people are feeling hopeless, directionless and lonely. Securing any job in any industry is always going to be a challenge if young people are feeling these three emotions.”

Compromise must be made

Young people today are not only more qualified, with more attending university and pursuing other further education courses and training opportunities than ever before, but they are also more economically and socially conscious. Young people are increasingly conscious of the companies they work for, the job they do, and their long-term impact on people and planet.

“Young people are more likely than older generations to donate their time and their money. This seems to be a generation that is a lot more cause-driven, and you want people within your organisation that are motivated by your cause,” said Robin. “That’s something older people just can’t give.”

But the lack of opportunity is driving feelings of low morale and ill-confidence among young people in the job market. In a recent *census* by Youth Employment UK, 81.9% of young people taking part didn’t think there were enough opportunities to share their views on important issues within their communities. Only 25.9% were confident employers were supportive of hiring young people.

This means that a generation that is more ethically and environmentally conscious is now having to make compromises both in their values and their skill sets, and are competing for jobs they wouldn’t normally strive for because they don’t have the necessary experience.

“A young person who studied chemical engineering – unfairly – might not have received the necessary experience with the tools that the previous generation had,” said Jack. “This means that we now have young people who are swimming in potential, overflowing with energy and yet lack the physical know-how to conduct the work that many companies are now searching for.”

A new versatility

But today's inhospitable job market means young people are creating opportunities for themselves in other ways, as both an outlet for their skills and another route in. This means that this generation is likely to host one of the UK's most versatile workforces yet.

According to LinkedIn's most recent *Workplace Learning Report*, Gen Z spent more time watching online courses than any other generation in 2020.

"Those who already have qualifications are under an extreme amount of pressure to adapt and match those who, rather than focussing on one skill and perfecting it, diversified their portfolio learning a multitude of important skills," explained Jack.

"Now more than ever, young people are awakening to the possibilities of online learning. This is why we'll see more and more youth having a greater set of diverse skills, which I find thrilling."

Their versatile skills will be essential for a recovering job market, but young people need opportunities to put these into practice in the workplace. Only then will confidence in the job market begin to grow.