

COLLISION POINT: YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AMID A CHANGING WORLD OF WORK (PART TWO)

The previous section of this report offered a window into the urgent state of affairs facing young, unemployed people in our country. As outlined, with full-time work rapidly declining and unemployment rates far higher than they appear to be, our young people are faced with a task in finding work that many are unprepared for. Yet, at the same time, young people are often blamed for a situation they had very little responsibility in creating. In a nutshell, blaming young people for being unemployed is simply a distortion of facts as far broader social issues, rather than personal failings, are responsible for the situation they are faced with as we head toward the 2020's.

What can be done to turn this situation around? Are there any solutions that could start to change the dynamics that cause this issue in the first place? Is it possible to reduce youth unemployment from, in some areas of the nation, 30 – 35% down to single digits? Are there even enough jobs to place them into - or are we doomed to see these kinds of figures on a long-term basis? These are big questions and there is no simple answer. What is clear is that change has to happen at a number of levels: individual, organisational and broader, more systemic levels.



Firstly, let's investigate some of the things that need to happen at an individual level. To do this, I'd like to share three stories of job seekers¹ from among the many that have come through our college:

PETE

Pete was a young migrant from Taiwan who had applied for a role with a NSW government authority. He had gone through the usual recruitment process of interview panels, pursuing what he believed was his ideal job, the one he'd set his heart on. Unfortunately, he wasn't offered the role. The feedback was that he'd come sixth in the overall evaluation.

For many people, that would have been it – but not for Pete. He called back to the director of the division that he'd applied to and said how much he'd enjoyed interviewing and how interested he was in the role – and could he possibly volunteer for ten hours a week in any capacity? The answer that came back was a yes. Pete started on a voluntary, unpaid basis for ten hours a week. Within two months that had turned into a paid role at ten hours a week and, within another month, into twenty hours a week. It took six months but Pete landed, in that time period, both the job he wanted and a fully-paid education scholarship.

FRED

Probably one of the most remarkable job seekers I've encountered Fred had been a successful young entrepreneur overseas. Unfortunately, a deep downturn in the economy of the country he was working in nearly bankrupted his business and he spent both the remaining company's funds and nearly all his personal savings paying off his staff. He had just enough money left to fly back to Australia, in his late twenties, with no family home to return to and no place to sleep other than the sofa in his mother's aged-care apartment. I asked Fred what he decided to do at that point that turned the situation around and he said that he decided to treat unemployment like a full-time job. He put on a business suit and tie, polished his shoes and went down to the local library every day, 9 – 5, Monday to Friday, treating the library as his new 'office' and treating unemployment as a 'job'. He spent forty hours a week either applying for jobs or researching companies and preparing for interviews. Within three months, from a standing start and with no contacts or experience here locally, he was in a new role.

¹ For privacy considerations, the names of the job seekers have been changed; however, the stories are real.



LAVINIA

Possibly the poster-child for the college, Lavinia was one of the most resourceful students we've ever seen. When Lavinia enrolled at the college she was living in an RV in the car park of the local pub. She enrolled in Cert III in Aged Care and, if it's possible to see light-bulbs lighting up around someone's head, well, the light-bulbs looked like they were turning on fairly soon into the course. Within a couple of months, insisting on taking on more work experience than she needed to so that she got exposure to several employers, job offers started to come in and, before the end of the program, she had a role. However, it didn't stop there. Lavinia figured out that, having completed one certificate course, she could fast-track her way to a Cert III in disability through credit recognition and RPL. After completing that she realised she could also complete a Cert III in childcare in the same way.

Meanwhile, she had worked out that she could earn nearly double the base rate paid to her as an employee by becoming a contractor locum, contracted in to exactly the same companies she'd been working with in exactly the same role - except via a labour-hire contractor. It meant a fair degree of strange hours and last-minute arrangements as companies called in requesting she fill in for someone who was sick, absent or on holiday – either day or night – but she persisted. She was so dedicated – and so popular – that she was never without work. Once again, it didn't stop there. Within another few months she had worked out that she could earn a significant increase yet again by moving to work in indigenous aged-care. The last time I spoke to her was by phone when she was in Brisbane, preparing to drive to Darwin to take up the same kind of arrangement in the NT as a contract aged-care worker supporting indigenous seniors - on nearly three times the money she'd been earning in Wagga. A touch of irony ends the story - because she drove there in her RV! So, within two years, Lavinia had lifted herself out of unemployment, earned three vocational training qualifications, tripled her starting salary and turned the family home that she had recently inherited in Wagga into an investment property. As she said on the phone, 'I'll never be unemployed – ever again - for the rest of my life'.

Looking for a second at the themes running through the stories above qualifications carry weight but, at the end of the day, 'core' skills such as mobility, resilience, persistence, and resourcefulness were what helped these job seekers win through. They did whatever it took – and they thought outside the box, doing things that others hadn't thought of or wouldn't consider, to get ahead. So, I guess the question is 'how do we create more Pete's, Fred's and Lavinia's'? There is no easy answer; however, here are some potential solutions:

FOCUS ON WHERE THE JOBS ARE; BE MOBILE

Before we look at where the jobs are, let's just check to see that there are actually enough jobs to cater to everyone. This is a very challenging issue. Job boards like 'SEEK' might seem like the obvious place to check for jobs statistics and growth but, unfortunately, they are no real indication as they often have the same job listed multiple times. Unfortunately too, the 'new jobs created' information that the government regularly announces is also questionable. This is a complex area but for a good overview take a look at 'The Conversation' at <http://theconversation.com/we-need-to-find-new-ways-to-measure-the-australian-labour-force-68802>

At the end of the day, there is no way to estimate how many open positions there are. Many vacant positions are wish-lists in managers' minds and may never eventuate and, even if they advertise them, there's no guarantee that they will be filled. So, estimating 'jobs creation' is a very delicate science that is done poorly at present. My guess would be that, yes, there are enough jobs for everyone that's unemployed; however, they're not necessarily in the locations that people want them to be and are certainly not all full-time.

So, let's look at where the jobs really are and what you need to acquire in terms of qualifications to secure a role. In terms of sectors, many of the jobs that will be in demand in Australia in the near future are in areas such as hospitality and community services. Take a look for a moment at company jobs boards such as Compass Group or Sodexo – large, multinational organisations working in outsourcing for hospitality, security and cleaning at major facilities such as hospitals and military bases. There are not just dozens of jobs, there are hundreds of jobs available right now for someone willing to be mobile and possessing culinary skills. Bottom line: if you can cook and if you're willing to relocate, it'd be hard not to remain employed. <http://careers.compass-group.com.au/cw/en/listing/> And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

INDUSTRY AND EDUCATION NEED TO COLLABORATE MORE EFFECTIVELY:

Perhaps a better question than whether there are enough jobs is what you need to do to acquire one. This often comes down to the type of core skills that the three job seekers displayed in the stories above. So, one of the biggest questions we have to tackle is, why aren't our young people necessarily acquiring them?

Probably one of the biggest reasons is, as we saw in the previous article, that companies have moved towards short-term commitment to their staff through contracting, rather than hiring staff full-time. They believe it cuts costs, avoids unionisation and gives them the flexibility to avoid longer-term commitment to unproductive employees. Regardless of whether any of those things are true, one of the unforeseen results of this lack of longer-term commitment is the dwindling away of internships – a key stepping-stone approach to careers that has been dying a slow death for the last forty years.

Slowly - and almost unnoticeably - the responsibility for nurturing young people's skills has been shifted, in the last thirty years, from industry to the tertiary education sector. A major, almost invisible transfer of risk – and costs – has occurred, with the education sector taking the fall for industry often abnegating responsibility for the cost of developing junior staff. Whereas companies in the seventies or eighties would take hundreds of staff into paid, one to two year internships nowadays organisations simply want young people to arrive 'work ready' and blame tertiary education if they don't. 'Employability' is seen predominantly as the responsibility of educators – yet the skills mentioned above (resilience, persistence etc.) aren't easily taught in a classroom and come from experience at the coal face, experience such as in internships and training-for-work programs.

The point here is, industry can't have it both ways: they can't cut commitment to employees, provide them with no training because they are only going to be with them for six months or a year – and then blame the education sector that modern staff lack the core skills that companies really need. Industry needs to share the burden, collaboratively working with education providers to provide ongoing employability skills development for staff regardless of their tenure – whether six months or six decades.

OUTSOURCE SCHOOL-BASED CAREERS COUNSELLING

I believe that if we're to really aid our young people acquire lifelong employment – to smoothly transition to work and to navigate their way through the minefield of the modern working environment – then that has to start by the outsourcing of school-based careers counselling. The days of the maths teacher filling in part-time as a career counsellor because the principal just wants to get this particular to-do item out of the way have to go. And the days of telling students they have to go to university if they want to get ahead need to fade away. Informed, sensitive and accurate careers advice for our 15 -17 year olds is something that urgently needs to be taken more seriously. And if schools aren't going to take this seriously – or they do but can't find a qualified and experienced counsellor – then let's change the equation.

First, I believe that school-based careers counselling should be put out by government tender to industry. A key point here would be that labour-hire companies, recruitment organisations and other larger intermediary companies that already have multiple inroads to industry and hundreds of job openings could be encouraged to bid. Second, it may be a radical idea but I believe we need to consider the creation of a new 'Army' – much along the lines of the Green Army initiative – made up of suitably trained, qualified school-based counsellors constituted, in part anyway, by mature-aged staff. Hiring suitable people from among the over-55's would certainly be a logical option to include in any strategy of this type, retraining and rehiring them as industry-focused, skilled counsellors, providing an array of services such as one-on-one and one-on-group mentoring to youth, forging industry alliances and

building up a detailed database of information on job pathways and career options in their local area. As a cohort, the over-55's as a group, have as bad a time and, in some instances, a worse time of finding work than do young people. Prejudice, indifference and workplace bullying towards the over-55's are, unfortunately, still rife in our society yet which group out of all the age-groups in the working world have more experience and more knowledge of jobs, careers and of what it takes to survive in the working world?



Creating a new national 'corps' of this nature is a huge shift in thinking and would require a major, nationally coordinated effort but the end result could potentially be a national initiative that would replace absent or part-time career counselling with informed, industry-savvy mentors who had access to hundreds of available job positions.

In the previous section of this report I mentioned that I thought community colleges have a key role in changing the landscape of unemployment in this country. I believe that the colleges' key position as an interface between school, further education and employment positions them perfectly for what I believe would be another game-changer in the scenario outlined above. Along with the outsourcing of counselling there also needs to be a far greater emphasis on developing what our school system tends not to be able to develop, the qualities outlined above in the stories of the three job seekers: resilience, persistence and resourcefulness. These are the aptitudes and qualities that are going to see our young people able to take on the challenges that navigating a changing world of work involves. And even though they seem quite abstract, education in these types of skills can be accomplished. Take a look for a moment at the resources available from Esher House, their resilience workshops and the stories of participants' experiences at the link below. <http://www.viacharacter.org/blog/a-strengths-based-approach-helps-unemployed-find-success/>

We will explore the development of these types of skills and aptitudes in subsequent instalments; however, before we do this, the third instalment of this report will focus on mature-aged unemployment, which, alongside youth unemployment, is also growing exponentially.