

Take a Look at That Teenager--He's Your Future Employee

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by Paula Santonocito.

The U.S. population currently includes almost 32 million teenagers. While the number itself is staggering, consider the following: today's teens are members of Generation Y, a generation that, depending on the parameters for inclusion, represents between 60 and 72 million people. Even though, overall, Generation Y is second in size to the Baby Boom generation, in less than 10 years its members will account for more than 40 percent of the U.S. population. Furthermore, by 2010, when its core population begins to come of age, this generation will give the country its all-time largest teen population ever -- surpassing even the teen population of the Baby Boom generation, which was at its peak during the 1960s.

What does this mean to employers? It's time to take a look at teenagers. They are the future workforce.

Technology & Teens: What the Surveys Say

There's no doubt about it: young people today are apt to be technologically adept. Teenagers are more at home online than any segment of the population. They use the Internet regularly, and consider it an integral part of their everyday lives.

In fact, according to a study entitled "Findings of How Children Use Media Technology" conducted by Knowledge Networks/Statistical Research (KN/SRI), among children surveyed, ages 8 to 17, the largest percentage, 33 percent, would choose the Internet over television, telephone, and radio if they could only have one medium.

They're not just downloading music. They use the Internet as a research tool for personal matters. According to another study, this one by the Kaiser Family Foundation entitled "Generation Rx.com: How Young People Use the Internet," 44 percent of 15- to 24-year-olds have researched health information online.

It's likely the Internet is integrated in some way with their formal education as well. A study by Interactive Educational Systems Design (IESD) finds that more than 50 percent of U.S. high schools are currently offering online courses or are in the process of exploring e-learning for future courses.

Although today's teens may be Internet savvy, another survey of 2,500 eighth- and eleventh-grade students by Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network reveals only 42 percent of boys and 23 percent of girls are interested in technology careers. Among the reasons given for lack of interest in high-tech jobs are that they are boring, intimidating, or stressful.

Work Issues

Nevertheless, careers of some kind are in the rapidly approaching future for these tens of millions of teens, approximately 25 percent of whom, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, will not go directly to college.

To support exploration and growth, there are programs like job shadowing. However, despite the efforts of such programs, according to the recent "School-to-Work Programs Survey" by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), a majority of human resource professionals do not feel that high school graduates are qualified to enter the workforce.

Be that as it may, chances are it's not going to be easy for some of them to acquire knowledge, skills, and work experience. Many have older siblings who have just graduated college, and they see them saddled with student loans and unable to find employment.

The Media Is Giving Teens a Bleak Message

The New York Times reports that, according to the State Public Interest Research Groups, in 2000, the average graduate left college owing \$17,000 in educational loans, and points out how students must opt for high paying jobs.

On the other hand, NBC reports that college graduates face tremendous competition.

Meanwhile, The Washington Post indicates that, according to a report by Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies, young people ages 16 to 24 suffered 95 percent of job losses reported in September and October of last year.

Telling the Story

Moreover, 95 percent of job losses is only one daunting statistic from the Center's report entitled "The National Economic Recession and Its Impacts on Employment Among the Nation's Young Adults (16-24 Years Old): The Untold Story of Rising Youth Joblessness."

It points out that the 16- to 24-age group accounts for approximately 53 percent of total job losses in the past year, but makes up only 15 percent of the overall working population. What's more, young adults are still six times more likely to be out of work than older Americans, despite what is perceived as an improving national employment picture.

"The recession has been like a depression for young people," says Andrew Sum, director of Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies and an author of the study.

Given the fact that this age group will increase in the coming years, Sum says the lack of jobs for young people is particularly serious.

Ready, Willing, and Able

It's not only the analysts who see it this way. Teens themselves understand the difficulties of finding employment.

"The demand from their point of view is especially grave," says Renee Ward, founder and executive director of Teens4Hire, a site billing itself as "a home for teens looking for a job and employers who hire them."

Ward, a former vice president of business development for TMP Worldwide Recruitment Advertising, the parent company of Monster.com, is no stranger to connecting people with jobs. She tells HRWire that her background led to the idea for the recently launched Teens4Hire.

"There's nothing targeted toward this niche," she says, indicating that most sites for young people are aimed at college students.

Apparently, Teens4Hire has found a niche with teens. There are approximately 50,000 completed profiles of teens at the site, and every state is represented, including Alaska and Hawaii. Additionally, Ward says 2 million teenagers have signed on to the email list.

Yet, while profiles are intended to serve as resumes for hiring companies, Teens4Hire does more than post profiles and jobs.

"These young people are struggling. They need a lot of different things," Ward explains.

As such, Teens4Hire provides a variety of services, including personal assistance in preparing profiles. Preparation involves everything from teaching teens how to write in complete sentences to explaining how extra-curricular activities like team sports can demonstrate transferable skills. Other assistance, including career assessment and information about interviewing, will soon be available at no charge to job-seeking teenagers.

Ward indicates that young people are eager to do what it takes to find employment, and she points out that Teens4Hire has conducted 107,000 user sessions since February 15.

"Everyone talks about this new Generation Y," she says, citing what has been said about lack of motivation and focus. "In terms of working with them, they've been really responsible. And they have a lot of moxie."

Companies Hesitate

However, she tells HRWire that, while many teens are actively seeking and are qualified for jobs traditionally held by young people, they can't find employment. It's not that older workers are filling the jobs, Ward explains. Companies are simply not hiring.

"The economy is still where people are hedging their bets," she says.

According to Ward the problem is widespread, and even typical seasonal employers like camps and amusement parks are not hiring as many people as usual.

In an effort to match teens with jobs, Ward says Teens4Hire has reached out to more than 1,000 national employers. The answer to advertising at the site hasn't been no, Ward tells HRWire; rather, it's been "not yet."

There are promising signs, though. Approximately 12 major employers are scheduled to post jobs for teens in mid May.

Long-Term Objectives

Still, while these efforts may lead to summer employment for some young people, Ward says companies need to think long-term.

In order to prepare for the future, they should start grooming store managers, take a "grow your own" approach, and provide more on-the-job training, she says.

Ward explains that the profiles teenagers create at Teens4Hire are in-depth and the kind of information included can be beneficial to companies.

"I've got the audience, I've got requested employers," she says, indicating that among the applicants are teens who list the retail establishments where they want to work. Noting that interests run the gamut and are often specific, she says there are young people looking for careers in the trades, as well as teens whose technical skills "would floor you."

With assistance from hiring companies, the future workforce can begin to make its contribution, Ward says.

Experience is the Best Teacher

Offering teenagers job opportunities, she points out, will pay off for employers. In theory, at least, employers seem to agree.

According to SHRM survey data, a majority of organizations indicate that paid work experience and workplace mentoring, at 57 and 50 percent respectively, are the most effective means of addressing the skills gap issues within their industries.

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