

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY: IMPROVING YOUTH EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

A Report from the
Community Knowledge Forum
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Overview of the Foundation

The Community Foundation of Mississauga is part of one of the fastest growing charitable movements in Canada. The Foundation is a registered charitable public foundation that was launched in spring 2001. Since that time, it has grown rapidly and has over \$17 million in endowed assets (at June 2011) and cumulative grants of over \$3 million. Community foundations across Canada share three fundamental roles:

One: endowment building/personalized service. The Foundation builds endowed and other funds to provide lasting support for local priorities. It makes giving easy and effective, accepting a wide variety of gifts and providing donors with a number of charitable options. Donors can contribute cash, stocks, property and other assets. Donors may establish a fund in their name or in the name of a loved one. In most cases, a gift qualifies for maximum tax advantage under federal law.

Two: local grantmaking expertise. The Foundation's staff and volunteers have an in-depth understanding of the issues, opportunities, and resources that shape our community. It evaluates all aspects of community well being — including social services, education, the environment, health care, youth, seniors and the arts and make grants to support the broadest range of community needs. It can help donors learn more about local organizations and programs that make a difference in areas they care about most.

Three: community leadership. Because community foundations support all kinds of charities, it is well positioned to bring people and organizations together, convening diverse voices to address local issues and opportunities. The Foundation's business is building community.

Introduction

By now, many of us are familiar with the statistics and the Community Foundation of Mississauga 2011 Vital Signs report further illuminated what has become one of the most pressing issues facing our city and communities all over the world. Mississauga's Vital Signs data indicates 21% of Peel Region's citizens between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five are unemployed. We held a Community Knowledge Forum to discuss how we, as a community of educators, business people and parents, can fulfill our obligation to provide youth with sustainable jobs. This discussion centred on ways in which we might carve pathways to gainful employment for young people in Mississauga.

The Community Foundation of Mississauga assembled an impressive panel of some of our city's leading stakeholders and front line youth workers. We were very fortunate to have **Ken Dryfhout**, Executive Director of the DAM (Develop Assist Mentor) Youth Centre, **Christy Upshall**, Executive Director of Our Place Peel, **Lorenzo Vaglica**, General Manager of the YMCA Employment Centre, Dr. **Has Malik**, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science at Sheridan Institute of Technology, **Ann Gaiger**, Manager of the University of Toronto at Mississauga Career Centre, **Marc Cianfrini**, Peel District School Board Youth Apprenticeship Program Employer Recruitment Officer and **Joanne Foote**, City of Mississauga Youth Programs Director provide us with first hand insight into the challenges young people face in the world of work today. We heard the experiences of young people currently seeking employment opportunities in Mississauga and management consultants dealing with some of Mississauga's most prominent employers. The Community Foundation is grateful for the participation and generous input of these individuals.

The diverse perspectives represented at this convening are a good indicator of the complex scope of this issue. We understand that this is a topic which requires examination from a multitude of perspectives. No simple solution exists to improve employment outcomes for young people, but we can begin to examine areas which might give us insight into how the situation could be improved for the next generation of talent in Mississauga.

The Importance of Youth Employment

This forum helped us to understand how productive work helps young people improve their earning potential and make important contributions as workers, consumers and agents of positive change in our community.

We learned how those who are gainfully employed strengthen the economy and positively participate in society, reducing problems such as drug abuse and criminal activity. For many young people finding the best route to securing a job can be confusing and there are many choices in terms of training and education. We got insight into how high youth jobless rates can have a lasting impact on the quality of life in our city and how our future economy is directly dependent on what we as a community do for our young people today.

Mentorship and On the Job Training

There was shared consensus amongst the participants at this forum that Mississauga's employers need to see beyond economic dividends when making hiring decisions. There is a real need for employers to train and teach young people, to invest in their abilities and talents. Their willingness to mentor young people and allow them to develop and refine their abilities can make a real difference in the employment outcomes for those who are starting their careers. Recruiters and employment coordinators can assist employers to appreciate the vibrancy, skills and creativity young people bring to our workplaces and economy.

The employment recruiters we heard from indicated that for many employers, there is a tremendous need to find the "right" talent. We talked about today's working world where many jobs are very specific, with emphasis placed upon particular skill sets and technological knowledge. Educational institutions can help ensure young people are prepared for jobs which actually exist by keeping lines of communication open with the corporate sector and facilitating opportunities for internships and volunteerism for students. If organizations hiring young people play a role in programming what will help equip students for work once they graduate, Mississauga may see an improvement in youth employment outcomes.

Education

Experts on the panel said awareness at the secondary school level has resulted in career apprenticeship and cooperative education programs which can be of great benefit to students as they navigate the world of work and begin to make important career decisions, particularly since young people are making these decisions earlier in life with the elimination of Grade 13 in Ontario.

For example, secondary schools in Mississauga which have programs to help students gain work experience and match them with employers, through co-op placements, pathway fairs and apprenticeship programs are a step in the right direction. Insight was provided into the reciprocal benefits of these programs, as students obtain valuable working experience, and employers see the benefits of working with young people.

Youth need help setting realistic expectations around education and employability. Society can send very mixed messages to young people about what is required to begin and progress in their work. We heard how for many, the assumption that a formal education at the university level will automatically result in high paid employment results in disappointment when the reality of working life sets in. Students need to understand the role universities and colleges play in their career planning as they learn about themselves and the labour market. Educational hybrids which emphasize both theoretical learning and practical experience were discussed. We explored how allowing transferable credits between colleges and universities could provide the flexibility students need to obtain the right training and credentials for decent, well paying work. Competency based training done in collaboration with industries is the next step in many of Mississauga's educational institutions.

The shared agreement at the forum was that centralized information hubs which help young people to navigate the choices around education, and counsellors/employment advisors who work with students to help direct their skills and abilities could be instrumental in career planning.

Additionally, ensuring the completion of pre-requisite education for entry into college or university, particularly for students who are gravitating toward trade schools due to learning disabilities or premature decisions around their careers, is considered essential as the economy contracts and employers become more selective about those they are willing to hire. Without the completion of secondary school, choices for young people can become very limited.

“At Risk” Youth

There are those in our city who may miss the opportunity to obtain post secondary education or participate in job training programs, often due to unstable home lives or unidentified mental health and addiction issues. This group of “at risk” youth have specific needs when it comes to securing employment.

The benefits of providing this segment of our population with guidance and opportunities through job placement programs and skills matching initiatives were made clear at the forum. There was emphasis placed on finding the balance between individual and society's responsibility in caring for these vulnerable young people, helping to avoid the risks to society when large numbers of young people feel discouraged about their future. Our youth are living in a complex world, but as a community, we can greatly enhance their ability to find suitable work. We can positively impact all corners of Mississauga by providing young people with stability and optimism about their futures. While some youth may not see their job as their life purpose, healthy relationships can provide meaning they need beyond their job, giving them a sense of self confidence and belonging.

Competition for Jobs

We heard how high jobless rates among youth can have a lasting impact on the quality of life for a generation of people. Typically, those who go through long periods of unemployment or underemployment at the beginning of their working lives face a lifelong risk of earning less than the rest of the population. Many spend their entire working lives attempting to excel in industries which are not suitable for them, never fully capitalizing on their skills and education.

The discussion illuminated issues related to youth employment outcomes which touch on many other factors, including competition for entry level positions. Matching newcomers with jobs that meet their skill level and experience takes on added importance as qualified workers who are new to Mississauga, trying to get started and support their families, are filling entry level jobs which were traditionally suitable for young people.

Access to Work

We were made aware of the challenges of finding employment which are significantly increased when there are accessibility issues due to physical disabilities. The unemployment rate is very high for this group of young people. Those with physical/cognitive disabilities need a dedicated effort from the community to bridge the gap to their employment opportunities. Life skills training, as well as reliable and affordable public transportation were identified as solutions which can help open up their futures and allow them to lead fulfilling independent lives.

Conclusion

What became very clear at this forum is the way youth employment outcomes touch both individuals and economies. We got a first-hand look at how we can help to create opportunities for youth by building relationships with employers in each corner of Mississauga and understanding their expectations, training and educating young people for jobs which actually exist, providing a sense of belonging and stability for the “at risk” youth of our city and matching people with jobs that suit their education, skills and abilities. Working together today we can capitalize on the benefits of having our young people employed in productive work, and that helps all of us both now and in the future.