

Opinion: Teen friendly workplaces - the next diversity frontier?

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For teenagers, having a paid job during high school is extremely common. Some have more than one paid job in food and hospitality, fast food, and supermarket and/or retail and sales positions. Many, it should be noted, are having to work within the new ‘gig economy’ of short-term contracts and last-minute scheduling, making it tricky to combine the regular activities of teenage years - study, sport and essential socialising with friends and family – with a casual job.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows the number of teenagers aged 15–19 years in employment in 2023 was at the highest level it has been since the ABS started collecting this data 45 years ago. A strong labour market post pandemic, cheaper labour costs for young people, and the growth in casual jobs have combined to cause this. Rising cost-of-living pressures have also meant a growing number of teenagers are seeking entry into the workforce from a younger age. It is increasingly common for children aged 12 and 13 years to be working casual jobs, not only as babysitters or doing ‘odd jobs’, but also in business and hospitality roles.

Despite the large numbers of teenagers who are working, South Australia has no legislation specific to child employment laws, and very little is known about their experiences of work, including relationships with supervisors and co-workers, job satisfaction, and the many challenges they face around time management and scheduling. Most young workers don’t

know their rights in relation to work, or whether the working conditions they're entitled to are being met, let alone how they might join or make use of a union membership.

This points to a need for us as adults to have a much better understanding of what it takes to make a workplace 'teen-friendly'. But I can hear a resounding 'why should we differentiate teenagers from other groups of workers?' Because these first experiences lay down the foundations for a young person's work mindset. It impacts their post-school plans, what decisions they will make about completing their school education, what further education they will consider, and the type of work they will seek and move into once they have completed their education and joined the workforce fulltime.

First impressions have a huge impact on the way young people see themselves and others. Having a positive experience in your teenage job can set you up for a great working life. It can teach you to balance other aspects of becoming an adult; your finances, your relaxation and recreation time, and how to meet the demands of study, family, and other commitments outside of work.

If we allow teenagers to have a poor first work experience, they're unlikely to be filled with enthusiasm for work over the longer term. They may approach work with a sense of trepidation or fear, with an expectation that it will always be dull or just a duty, prematurely cut off from options and aspirations, with no idea how to make their working lives more fulfilling in ways they can and should be.

Many young people tell me their first experiences of work were definitely 'not teen friendly'. Employers didn't acknowledge the juggling act teenagers face around meeting commitments for school, sport, friends, and family, while also trying to fit in work. They tell me they're concerned about the stress of having to go to work, of not being trained to do the job, of managing fatigue from late night shifts, and of being injured or feeling unsafe. Many said they were too scared to report an injury or incident at work for fear of negative consequences.

Teenagers also told me they often experience pressure to work after they've told their employer they're unavailable, or sick. They describe instances of bullying, discrimination or sexual harassment, of disrespect from coworkers, supervisors, and customers, and workplaces that are neither welcoming, encouraging, or physically and emotionally safe.

Teenagers really aren't asking for much - just employers that consider their best interests and needs as well as those of older workers, and who are willing to provide them with opportunities to learn with 'space to make mistakes', supportive and professional management in supportive environments, and fair and flexible work conditions that take their lives into account.

Surely it is not too much to ask to ensure teenagers are protected at work, that they have clear information about their rights and responsibilities, and feel empowered to act when things go wrong. We may pay them less, but this doesn't mean they should be made to feel of lesser value than an adult worker. Let 2024 be the year we realise and do something about how our youngest workers are treated – a year in which we embrace the creation of teen friendly workplaces as the next diversity frontier.

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