

It's time to change how we hire young people

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The next generation is entering the work force at a time of profound change – economic, social, technological and demographic. While the desire to get a good first job remains the same, the path to get there will look different.

This generation deserves to realize their full potential, and our economy needs them to. The problem is that too many young people are being overlooked and left on the ground floor. Here in Canada, with almost 900,000 youth not in employment, education or training (sometimes called NEET), huge economic potential is being removed from our country.

As a society, we continue to invest in preparing young people for the work force, including those who face multiple barriers to employment. That said, many employers still aren't able to attract and hire the talent they need, including for entry-level roles. In fact, 70 per cent of employers in a survey by CivicAction and the Human Resources Professionals Association say their biggest challenge to filling entry-level roles was finding applicants. How can we close that gap?

As someone who spent two decades in human resources, I learned that we need to continually evolve how and where we invest. It's now time for a change if we want to connect young people to the opportunities we know exist, and do it at scale.

We found from our research and consultations at CivicAction that if all employers – small and large, private and public sector – refine their recruitment processes, we can start to bring in young people at scale into our work force where they will learn and contribute. This is especially true for those who have traditionally been left out of the labour market.

Why wouldn't we? According to work by LeadersUp, companies that employ people who mirror their broad customer base are 45 per cent more likely to grow thanks to a better understanding of their clients. This is a win-win.

A small change in process can have a big impact in the outcome for a young person. Here are some examples of youth-inclusive practices that employers can adopt:

1. Keep the language and tone youth-friendly in job descriptions. Use words such as "entry-level" or "junior" and highlight the essential skills (e.g.: communications, teamwork, problem solving) they will build.

2. Be flexible on the application format. For example, résumés don't have to be a Word document any more. Answering short essay questions or video submissions allow young people to tell their story in a more natural, creative way.

3. De-emphasize educational requirements if they aren't actually required and be honest about what's really needed for the role. For example, in a U.S. study of the technology sector, 72 per cent of recruiters reported that they weed out otherwise qualified candidates because of unnecessarily high standards related to technical experience.

4. Screen for skills or traits such as openness and ability to learn through job simulations. If you have a low interview-to-successful-hire ratio, try changing your format. Job simulations over a traditional interview help identify the candidate's ability to do the job and learn versus the value of prior experience.

5. Mentoring isn't just for people on the leadership track – it can play a pivotal role for young people as they join an organization. Mentorship helps build comfort in a new environment, self-confidence and networks.

6. Recruit where youth are – on social media, at community centres. Work with a community organization to source candidates. Community organizations largely service the NEET demographic and partnering with them can help reduce the costs and time associated with screening and interviewing.

Recently, CivicAction and a coalition of committed employers launched HireNext. It is a set of tools for employers to recruit, select and retain the young, diverse talent they need in their organizations. It's an employer GPS of sorts. Check it out.

Executives, educators and human resources experts contribute to the ongoing Leadership Lab series.