

Reopening an Employment Door to the Young



Most of the leaders with whom I work as a management consultant are a level-headed lot. They rarely let their personal feelings interfere with business decisions.

But recently, I've noticed some executives becoming irritated, even angry, when I tell them how important it is for companies to hire and train high-potential young people just out of school. Their emotions, I soon discover, often relate to disappointments they have experienced with their own children or grandchildren.

These executives will tell me things like, “When I was my grandson’s age, I started at the bottom and worked my way up; he’s not willing to do that.” Or, “My daughter majored in philosophy, of all things — how will that get her anywhere?” If they don’t have a personal anecdote about their own families to relate, they may remark that too many young people are entitled and self-absorbed.

The general message from these leaders is this: More young people would be hired if they had the right qualifications, but too few have the skills and discipline needed to succeed in today’s demanding workplace.

Over the last few years, I’ve interviewed more than 200 young people from diverse backgrounds of income, education, race and geography. About half told me that they had liberal arts degrees, and I was struck by how many of them regretted majoring in a discipline now seen as impractical.

Many liberal-arts graduates say they are eager to find an employer willing to train them in skills that don’t require a degree in engineering or computer science. They cite six-sigma analysis, supply-chain procedures, customer service, inventory control, quality assurance and Internet marketing. They want a chance to master one of those skills.

But their pleas appear unlikely to be answered. Most corporate training today is directed at employees who arrive with technical skills already developed — if not through their college degrees, then through specialized internships.

This puts a large swath of young people at a disadvantage. Burdened with tuition debt, many college graduates from low- and middle-income families can’t afford to serve a low-paying or unpaid internship.

I’ve been consulting for more than four decades. Twenty or 30 years ago, a hiring manager at a Fortune 500 company was much more willing to give, say, a dance major a chance. That manager would realize that such graduates were good at teamwork, acquiring new skills and practicing for long hours. Give them some corporate training and they become productive employees, was the thinking.

Now, because of a relentless focus on specialized skills, too many young people are missing out on a rite of passage: getting to a job on time, learning a craft, assuming responsibility, bringing home a paycheck. [The unemployment](#)

[rate for people age 20 to 24 is 11 percent](#), compared with an overall rate that is under 7 percent.

It's not that they aren't trying to find work. One problem is that young people are competing both with their peers and with experienced applicants willing to accept entry-level salaries.

Financially struggling boomers fill many of the jobs that young people once assumed would be theirs. And [according to a recent poll](#), nearly half of workers 50 and older expect to retire later than they had previously thought.

Rather than waiting for educational institutions or the government to bridge this generation gap, employers should consider accepting some responsibility for introducing young people into the work force. This could be the perfect time for companies to start pilot projects that enroll unskilled but promising people in corporate training programs.

And let's not forget about people without college degrees, [who make up more than two-thirds of the adult population](#). Employers can help young people who have either dropped out of college or have attended only high school, by offering apprentice programs in high-demand skills.

Hiring managers who look beyond narrowly focused credentials might uncover something even more important: energetic workers who are determined to make a mark and help their companies succeed. And businesses that gain reputations for preparing young people to become productive employees are likely to have a competitive advantage as the economy recovers and older workers can afford to retire.

More hiring managers must be willing to take a risk on people whose careers have stalled because they majored in an "impractical" discipline. Bottom lines will not suffer — and might even improve — if companies provide opportunity to a population hungry to prove its value.

ROBERT W. GOLDFARB is a management consultant and author of "What's Stopping Me From Getting Ahead?"