

HEADLINERS

Too Much Too Young

Orrel Lawrence, investigates the problems faced by young people looking for a job and their struggles when they enter the workplace

“Had they really just told me that my new hairstyle would be costing me my job?”

Tara, 19, recalls the time when she was told to leave her casual waitressing job because of her orange hair extensions, even though she had spent more than a year in this job.

“It hadn’t been a problem before,” she explained to me, “but when a new supervisor arrived, she said my hairstyle was “offensive”.

Her experience is far from unique. My interviews with school leavers reveal a pattern of poor treatment and low pay. But before even entering this hostile working environment, young people face great difficulties in actually finding a job.

“I heard nothing back” is the depressingly familiar response of young people who had submitted their CVs.

A burning desire for a job, any job, is a common theme among young people interviewed for this article – these are keen and skilled workers, but the world of work seems less than accommodating to them. A survey carried out by the charity CSV this year revealed that unemployment is one of young Britons’ biggest fears, ranking alongside debt and violent crime.

The cost of living is rising steeply, both for necessities and the latest fashion, music and gadgets.

“Before I got my job now, I spent months looking,” says 18-year-old Ali, who has now been a sales adviser at shoe shop Barratts for a year-and-a-half. Similarly, Keara Stapleton, 17, also had a problem finding part-time work to accompany her A-level college course.

“I was looking for a job for months since I’d finished my GCSEs. When I handed out CVs, no one wanted me. The only replies I received back said that I needed more experience.”

Keara has now found a job at fashion outlet Gap and says she is generally very happy. However, like Tara, she has faced difficulties at work, this time dealing with some unpleasant customers.

“I really enjoy who I work with and you get some really nice customers. Sometimes though, you have to deal with really rude ones face to face and you think, is it worth it?”

Ali also recalled a time when a customer wasn’t satisfied with the service he had received.

“He just went ballistic! I told him it wasn’t my fault and asked if there was any other way I could have been of assistance ... he just said ‘Fxxx off’ and walked out of the shop!”

Like Ali, Lathaniel Dyer, is 18, and is working as a sales consultant at a high-end designer store. He says, “Worst of all is when a customer sends me to the stockroom to find an item of clothing; I’ve gone to collect it and returned to find them gone. It’s so frustrating.”

Alongside rude customers, money is another source of frustration.

These three young people are working in retail for multi-billion pound businesses. Yet retail sales associates on average earn £6-8 an hour in London (the national minimum wage is £4.60 an hour for workers aged 18-21 and £3.40 for those under 18.)

I asked Lathaniel how satisfied he is with his pay.

“Well, I earn my store an average of £500 an hour. I even once persuaded a buyer to spend close to £1,500 on a single transaction ... so theoretically, I should be earning at least a good few hundred more by the hour than I already do – and that’s no exaggeration.”

But it isn’t only or just the clientele which young people have to deal with in the workplace. Pressure is also applied from the inside in the form of targets from management. Despite them being the most inexperienced workers, surprisingly heavy targets are given to young workers. These targets often form part of the worker’s trial or probationary period.

“The most challenging thing about Barratts is that we have to meet a lot of targets, such as selling shoecare and other add-on sales,” Ali explained.

Often young people face discrimination within the workplace from senior members of staff.

Kai Singh, 19, is an assistant accountant at a property company. While he is very happy with his employer, he recalls one occasion when he felt he had been treated differently because of his age.

“I asked someone if they could do something for me and he turned round and asked, ‘so what’s your job then?’”

But Kai stands out among those I interviewed because he is also the only one who sees this as a career job, where he could still be in 10 years time.

“I’ve met a good few friends and everyone’s really nice. One day I want to be a senior manager with my own clients and I’m definitely on track to do so. I’m building a reputation.”

Kai is currently studying for an AAT qualification in the evening, which is paid for by the company, while doing his day job.

“Once I get this I go on to get the ACCA, which means I’ll get paid a lot more money.”



I asked him how well rewarded he was for the effort he put in.

“Very satisfied, I'd work for £4,000 less.”

Kai is unusual among the young people I interviewed in getting started on a recognised career path early on, and deciding that a vocational route is better for him than going to university first.

But the view from employers is in marked contrast to some of the comments made by these young people.

In a recent report by the Recruitment & Employment Confederation (REC) - the professional body representing the UK's private recruitment industry – recruiters cited a lack of communication skills, unrealistic expectations and a poor work ethic among school leavers looking for a job.

Also 56% of the recruiters interviewed for the REC report said school leavers had a lack of basic numeracy and literary skills.

In addition to this, once the new entrant was in a job 73% of recruiters were concerned with a poor attitude to work and their general work ethic.

And overall, 82% of recruiters believed the education system fails to prepare students with the relevant skills for the workplace.

Kevin Green, Chief Executive of REC said: “Employers and the government should work more closely to improve employability of school leavers and improve the career advice available to pupils. In today's uncertain economic climate, it is more important than ever that entrants correctly position themselves in a competitive labour market.”

No doubt schooleavers like Ali, Keara and Kai all struggled getting and maintaining their first jobs but they and others like them have to be better prepared to kick start their career.

About this story

This story was produced by Orrel Lawrence, 20

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