

*Written for Bridges.com, a Canadian-based educational information website for North American high school students.

Youth Work Experience Programs by Adam Shandler

You know the old saying, "You can't get a job without experience, and you can't get experience without a job." So how does one crack this age-old riddle without driving himself totally insane?

Fear not. There are work opportunities designed specifically for young adults. Some of these "work experience programs" might even match your current interests and career goals.

What is a youth work experience program?

Youth work experience programs help young adults gain practical on-the-job experience.

Many local, regional and national governments will team up with employers, high schools and colleges and offer programs in a whole host of career fields.

Gilbert Romero is an area director for the New Mexico Department of Labor's One-Stop Youth Career Center in Santa Fe. Gilbert says, "We have all kinds of jobs with all kinds of salaries, or work-study internships where we pay the employer for the student to work. Students can work at a car wash, in a restaurant, or pick up career skills at a bank or a law firm."

Who are these programs designed for?

Like an all-you-can eat buffet, there seems to be something for everyone. Whether you're a high school dropout or a straight-A student with your heart set on law school, there is a program out there for you.

Paul Rollin is the team leader of Canada's Youth Employment Strategy (YES). Some YES programs assist underemployed or unemployed 15- to 30-year-old candidates and young adults out of school.

Note that to be unemployed means you don't hold any kind of job whatsoever, while being underemployed means you aren't getting full-time hours.

YES also helps students find jobs related to their career goals. Programs range from science and technology internships to work initiatives for First Nations and Inuit youth.

Paul says, "These initiatives are delivered at the community level in order to meet the needs of today's young Canadians and to ensure that youth facing

barriers have the work experience and tools they need to make the transition to the labour market."

Ask your guidance counselor about the regional or local youth work program office that best fits your needs and interests.

Why would I want to participate?

Well, a youth work experience program looks good on a resume, and it couldn't hurt an application for scholarships or competitive education programs. You might actually learn something, too.

"(Our program) addresses the skills gap that is being experienced by employers in certain sectors," Paul says. "YES provides young workers with the tools they will need to adapt to emerging employer requirements."

You might also earn some money by participating in youth work experience programs.

Gilbert says, "Students can go with the work-study, which is like an unpaid internship, or a salaried job."

It's a good idea not to be too money-hungry, at least not in the early going. If you can afford to go without pay for an extended period, work-study programs or unpaid internships are great ways to make contacts and learn about your field of interest.

How long do these programs run for?

The length of a youth work experience program varies. For instance, a summer program lasts -- you guessed it -- for the summer. That may mean two months if it's designed for high school students or four months for college kids.

Paul adds, "The duration of most [of our] internship programs is normally 12 months. Youth should participate full time, at least 30 hours per week, for a minimum of six months."

How can I make the most of these programs?

While a youth work experience program won't make you a CEO overnight, you'll have taken the first step towards that goal simply by participating. The next step is to take ownership of your opportunity.

Ask yourself what you need to do to gain more information about your career goal. Are there skills that you haven't picked up yet? Did you introduce

yourself to all the people at the company? Are they aware of your efforts?

Also, consider your impact on the employer. Are you being helpful? Are you an asset? It's important that your work experience benefits the employer and not just yourself.

"One of my greatest success stories was this high school student who wanted to learn more about accounting," says Gilbert. "She did a work-study program at the local credit union and she's still there today, working through college."

And don't forget to take a look at the big picture. Did you enjoy the work experience enough that you could see yourself finding lasting happiness in a similar job?

Do youth work experience programs really work?

*(Canadian answer)

Surveys of young participants show that 83% of Youth Internships participants, for example, remain employed or return to school for further education in the six- to 12-month period following their placement.

Paul of YES says, "Since 1997, the Government of Canada has helped over 3 million young Canadians through the Youth Employment Strategy and other programs and internships. In 2001-2002 alone, they helped 86,000 young men and women obtain internships and placements."

*(American answer)

Programs like the Department of Labor's Job Corps and Youth Opportunities are highly successful. Job Corps recently reported that their post-program placement rate for economically disadvantaged kids is over 75 percent. And thanks to the Workforce Investment Act's \$2.8 Billion 2002 budget, more job-seeking students will be able to receive grants and gain employment.

Our friend Gilbert in New Mexico says that it's the students' passion and motivation that are making these programs work. "We have a partnership with a high school here in Santa Fe. They're getting 300 to 450 [interested students] a week looking for work."

Think About It

1. Make a list of all the places you could go to find out about work experience programs in your area.

2. Name two careers you're interested in and research all the places in which people in those jobs might work. In many cases, you'll have more than one possible workplace. For instance, pharmacists can work in hospitals,

pharmacies, retail stores and pharmaceutical companies. List what you think you'd like and dislike about each workplace.

3. If there are no programs for you to participate in, what else could you do to get some work experience in a career you're interested in?

-30-

Adam Shandler
Writer