

Youth Development Work

By Karen Pittman, December 2006

Sometimes, I'm just slow. I carried around the results of two work force surveys in my head for weeks before I realized the significance of putting the two of them together.

Let me give you the background: For-profit employers are telling us, again, that young people are not ready to work. Surveys show us that youth workers are disproportionately young. Youth organizations contend that they are uniquely suited to help young people build 21st century skills and help get them ready for college, work and life. But the youth workers themselves might not have the skills that the organizations want to develop in their youth participants.

Is this a crisis or an opportunity? I vote opportunity. Before I explain why, let me give you the findings from the recent two surveys.

The first – an effort by the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the Society for Human Resource Management – netted opinions from more than 400 diverse employers about the job readiness of entry-level workers with high school diplomas, or with associate's or bachelor's degrees. On page after page, the answer to the report title – *Are They Really Ready to Work?* – was a disturbing “no.”

Employers ranked 20 skill areas in order of importance. The top skills fell into five categories: professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration, oral communications, ethics/social responsibility, and reading comprehension.

Seven in 10 employers saw these skills as critical for entry-level high school graduates. That climbed to eight in 10 for two-year college graduates and more than nine in 10 for four-year college graduates. The employers were not happy. From their experiences with youth workers, however, the employers said that four in 10 high school graduates were deficient and only one-quarter of four-year college graduates were highly qualified.

The second report – *Growing the Next Generation of Youth Work Professionals* – was funded by Cornerstones for Kids and released by the Next Generation Youth Coalition, led by the Forum for Youth Investment and the BEST network (National Training Institute for Community Youth Work). It presents new survey and focus group data from after-school and other youth workers across the country.

The data offer a rich picture of what frontline workers bring to their jobs, in terms of skills and experiences. More important, however, is what they get from, and how long they plan to be in those jobs. It is worth taking a look at the study, at www.cornerstones4kids.com.

The study's demographic profile is particularly illustrative of youth and work issues. The out-of-school-time work force is young: One-third are under 25, and 13 percent are under 21. Although many of these young people have worked part-time or in summer internships, these jobs serve as their first professional experiences.

These facts quietly co-existed in my head until late October, when I facilitated a panel and two discussion groups at the annual meeting of the Intermediaries Network in Philadelphia. Greg Roberts, head of the D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corp., jump-started my thinking with his provocative opening statement: There is a tension between work force and youth development people that needs to be named. Teens may need (and even want) to build skills, but they also want (and even need) to work.

What does “want to work” mean to teens? It means they want money; responsibility; experience; structure; challenge; chances to feel important; chances to learn, use and get credit for important skills; and interaction with adults who are teachers and parents. This list, with the exception of money, parallels the National Research Council’s summary of the characteristics of a developmentally supportive setting.

And what does it mean when teens and young adults come to youth development and work force development programs because they want jobs? Or when they want to work with children and youth in organizations that support youth development?

It means we have a packaging and marketing opportunity. We have to figure out how our efforts to train and support youth in school-to-work, after-school and out-of-school youth programs can be meshed with efforts to recruit and retain workers for these very programs. That will yield a cadre of entry-level workers who are really ready to work.

This is not a new idea in our field. But it is not a very public idea. The business community has reframed the problem of work force readiness with passion and precision. We need to join with them to reframe the solution.

Read More:

Are they Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce. 2006, Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the Society for Human Resource Management.

Corporate Voices for Working Families and three other business groups joined forces with three other business groups to survey over 400 employers on their assessments of the extent to which entry-level workers need and have 21st century skills. The sobering results are reported here.

Growing the Next Generation of Youth Work Professionals: Workforce Opportunities and Challenges. 2006, The Forum for Youth Investment.

In this research report, the Forum for Youth Investment provides a detailed and nuanced description of youth work professionals, based on a survey of youth workers and program directors in eight cities and focus groups conducted among youth workers. The data helps provide the most complete description available of this workforce, and suggests policy and practice strategies that could strengthen the field.

Pittman, K. (2006, December). "Youth. Development. Work." Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc. A version of this article appears in [Youth Today](#), 16(1), 18.

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December 1, 2006