If you were casting Katie Daniels for a movie, she would be a lock for the sunny, can-do girl next door.

But the day I meet this 26-year-old, her brow is clouded with concern. Life has not been going according to plan.

"Do what you're told. Do the right thing, and good things will happen to you." That was her credo since she was a kid, growing up in the small town of Brighton, Ontario. When she was 14, she found a summer job. She has been earning some sort of wage ever since.

Daniels has always worked hard, she tells me. It paid off in track, soccer and rugby. She studied hard in high school, too. Four universities offered her scholarships. But she chose the only one that accepted her without offering her money, the University of Toronto.

She believed a degree from "Canada's Harvard" would give her an edge. She studied political science with an eye to a career in public policy. But on this day in 2011, two years after graduating with a B.A., she is still waiting on tables.

“I feel like I was sold a bill of goods.”

She continues: “I used to know the path.” But now she isn’t so sure.

Should she pursue a master's degree? What if that turned out to be a false promise, too?

By serving at Sapore, an upscale restaurant in Woodbridge, she has paid off a $27,000 student loan in just two years. If some people look down on her, who cares? The money is good.

And yet she yearns for something better, or at least something different.

FOUR YEARS AGO in September, Lehman Brothers, the investment bank, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

For years, U.S. lenders had sold dodgy sub-prime home mortgages. They bundled them together, packaged them like Russian dolls, tied them with a ribbon, and resold them to a market blind to risk and hungry for a quick profit.

When the band stopped playing, international credit froze. Global stock markets crashed. And consumers curled into a fetal position. For a while, the developed world teetered on the brink of a Depression.

For Canadian youth seeking work, September 2008 was the last best month before the economy tumbled into recession. The number of 15- to 24-year-olds with jobs was the highest in a generation - since March 1982, in fact. The youth

Katie Daniels, who has a B.A. from U of T, dreamed of working in public policy — but toiled as a restaurant server for more than two years instead. Now she's hopeful again doing sales for a Brampton-based document and services outsourcing company, Formost mediaOne.

The Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy is an annual award for a Canadian journalist to spend a year researching a topical public policy issue to advance social and economic justice. The Fellowship is jointly sponsored by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, The Toronto Star and its subsidiaries and the Honderich Family. This series of articles appeared in The Toronto Star in December 2012. For more information visit: www.atkinsonfoundation.ca

Neil Sandell is a senior producer at the CBC in Toronto. He has worked on many of the network's iconic radio programs: Morningside, As It Happens, Quirks & Quarks, Outfront and Ideas. Sandell's documentaries have won more than 15 radio awards, including honours from the New York Festivals, the Gabriel Awards, the URTI Radio Grand Prix (Paris), the Canadian Association of Journalists and the Third Coast International Audio Festival in Chicago. He is the author of 12 radio dramas broadcast on CBC, one of which won an Ohio State Award. Neil has a passion for mentoring younger journalists. He has taught workshops in Oslo, Chicago, Amsterdam, Alert Bay, B.C., and Nuuk, Greenland. Follow Neil on Twitter @youngnjobless
unemployment rate was 11.1 per cent, roughly what it had been for two years.
In November 2008 the Canadian economy began shedding jobs. By the following summer, the youth unemployment rate had ballooned to 16.4 per cent.
Eventually the rate settled in the 14- to 15-per-cent range. The most recent seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for 15- to 24-year-olds is 14.7 per cent.

There are a couple of important points to understand about job statistics. First, the unemployment rate is a blunt measure of the health of the labour market. If you are discouraged and have given up looking for work, you don't count as unemployed. You are deemed “not participating” in the workforce. If you are a PhD who can only find work driving a taxi, you count as employed. If you work part-time, you count as employed even if you would prefer full-time work.

Sometimes economists use a broader measure called the “R8,” or supplementary unemployment rate, to take into account some of these characteristics.
The R8 includes the unemployed plus those who have given up looking for work, those waiting to start a job and involuntary part-time workers.
The involuntarily part-time are by far the largest of these “add-on” groups. In July 2012, the supplementary unemployment rate for youth was 20.7 per cent (not seasonally adjusted). By comparison, in July 2008, just before the recession hit, it was 17.1 per cent.

The second point about the labour market is that it is dynamic. Even when the unemployment rate is stable, the individuals who are jobless keep changing.
In a recession, though, it takes longer to find work. These days roughly one in eight unemployed 15- to 19-year-olds has been looking for work for more than half a year. That is about double what the rate was four years ago.

It is easy to drown in these statistics. Believe me, I struggle myself sometimes. But here is one critical number to remember: 266,000.
There are 266,000 fewer 15- to 24-year-olds working now than in the last best month four years ago.
Almost all of those 266,000 lost jobs were in the 15- to 19-year-old group. In other words, those with little more than a high school education, and some with less.
That doesn’t mean it’s all roses for college graduates. Many better-educated twentysomethings - like server Katie Daniels - are underemployed. They have settled for jobs that pay the rent, but in no way require a university education.
It’s not that these are “bad” jobs. It is just that they usually pay poorly, are insecure,

**Precarious employment — short-term contracts, part-time, on call — has become the new normal. In 1989, 11 per cent of newly hired employees in Canada held temporary jobs. By 2004, 21 per cent of new hires were temporary.**

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unemployment rate was 11.1 per cent, roughly what it had been for two years.
In the meantime, jobs in some sections of the economy go begging because of a shortage of people with the right skills.

How did it come to this?

It’s partly the result of the recession. The young are always the first to be let go. But youth joblessness has become entrenched because of long-term structural changes in the economy and the labour market.

Globalization has exported jobs. This has unfolded in two waves. The first was driven by the low wages of Asia, the second, by the Internet.

David Ticoll is special adviser to the Canadian Coalition for Tomorrow’s ICT Skills, an organization that promotes the labour needs of the information, communications and technology sector. He notes that IT work, which he describes as “programming, call centres, legal research, even some journalism,” has moved offshore. “Even transcription of medical records might happen in India.”

This has transformed Ontario into what Zizys calls an hourglass jobs market.

In a report for the Metcalf Foundation, Zizys analyzed the changes in Ontario’s labour market from 1991 to 2006. The number of middle-tier jobs has stagnated. Job growth has come in the low-wage service economy and in the well-paying knowledge economy.

The hiring practices of corporate Canada have also changed, and they have hurt young people entering the workforce. A generation ago, large companies invested more heavily in training. This enabled entry-level employees to work their way up in an organization. Companies hired from within. That’s been replaced by just-in-time hiring of people with exactly the right credentials, training and experience. The effect is to kick out the middle rungs of the career ladder. In a hiring environment in which the currency is experience, the young are beggared.

Precarious employment - short-term contracts, part-time, on call - has become the new normal. In 1989, 11 per cent of newly hired employees in Canada held temporary jobs. By 2004, 21 per cent of new hires were temporary.

And so people like Torontoitan Eleanor Edgar, 29, cobble together a portfolio of jobs. Edgar earned her master of social work degree from York University in 2010.

When I first met her, she was working on two contracts that employed her a total of four days a week. Those came only after a long and difficult job search, a process she was girding herself for once again. One of the part-time jobs was about to end because the grant money was running out.

Of course, young adults make the best of the situation. Precarious work can be a way of trying out different occupations and work settings. They use their spare time for their passion projects.

They make a virtue out of the shabby chic lifestyle. If they have no dependents, they can survive on less. But that wears thin after a time. One twentysomething told me, “When do I get to stop living like a student?”

For employers, this no-commitment world of flexibility is a dream come true. It is their version of “friends with benefits,” but without health and dental if you’re the temp. This is cost-efficient for the boss. But long-term, it may be self-defeating.

“At the beginning there is nothing particularly wrong with hiring people on a temporary contract basis. The risk is when temporary contracts become the norm.” Stefano Scarpetta

“There’s no way the investment would be worth it because the young person might leave.”

In fact, investment in employee training is declining in this country. According to a 2011 study by the Conference Board of Canada, spending per employee on on-the-job training has declined 40 per cent since 1993.

“The worker involved in a temporary contract may be less eager to invest in specific training because he might not be able to stay in the company,” Scarpetta says.

“It’s not a path to building a career.”

Nor is it a path to building the skilled labour force that corporate Canada yearns for.

**WHILE SERVING**

Katie Daniels continued to aspire to something better.

A few months after we met, she wrote the Ontario civil service exams in a room with 3,000 other hopefuls. It was a reality check.

After searching for that elusive public policy job for two years, she was ready to give up.

In November 2011, she decided to act on an offer that a regular patron of Sapore had made a few months earlier, if it was still available. It was, and Daniels went to work in sales for a Brampton-based document and services outsourcing company, Formost mediaOne.

Eleven months into the new job, she earns less than she did as a waitress. But Katie Daniels, now 28, feels like she’s building a future.

But what is to become of the young who remain jobless or underemployed and frustrated? What can we do to change things?

I spent a year in the field looking for answers. Sadly, there is no magic bullet. And yet, I found all kinds of hopeful ideas and inspiring examples. I’ll be telling you about them in the pages ahead.
Storming the barriers

It isn’t all bad news; some are defying the odds and making a real difference

I thought youth unemployment was just one problem when I started out on this journey as an Atkinson Fellow. It turns out to be a tangle of problems. There is the problem of the underemployed: those who can find only part-time work; the university graduates who languish as baristas; the skilled newcomers who find their credentials are not recognized in Canada. There is the failure of career planning, the result of well-intentioned but often misguided advice from parents, a flawed career-counselling system and young people’s own indifference to their future. There is the mismatch of jobs and skilled workers to fill them. Rick Miner, the former president of Ontario’s Seneca College, sums this up as “people without jobs and jobs without people.”

The system for helping young job-seekers is a problem, too. There is a galaxy of programs staffed by well-meaning people. But it is fragmented, hard to evaluate and in need of a rethink.

The most acute problem is the cohort of young people who leave school early. Without a degree, diploma or trade it is tough to latch onto a job. These young people often face barriers to employment such as early pregnancy, disability, poverty, addiction or trauma. Adrift from the work of the world, these “left-behinds” may fall prey to criminality, mental illness and homelessness.

Some turn to the underground economy, where they are exploited. Some give up looking for work, draw social assistance over the long term, and risk their own children falling into the poverty trap.

Society pays a steep cost when it gives up on the “left-behinds.” When they give up on themselves it is sadder still. Here is both the greatest need and the greatest potential for payoff.

Let’s introduce you to some people who are making a difference.

Everywhere you look in this aging five-storey office building in downtown Boston there are rallying cries for self-improvement. Inspirational quotations stencilled on the walls. Slogans handwritten on pieces of paper pinned to bulletin boards: agree to disagree, be accountable, keep your eyes on the prize.

In one classroom, there is a poster with a stop sign. It is surrounded with Post-it notes, each with a word written on it: Dawg. Bro. Like. Y’all. Damn. Axe (ask). These are “stop” words, slang the students lean on too much, language they will have to drop if they are to fit into an office.

If these dictums bother Wanesha, Rondell, Denise and Jovanny, they never mention it. They have bought into the program. At lunch over sandwiches, they tell me Year Up is their shot at a new life.

YEAR UP is a not-for-profit program that offers disadvantaged youth from American cities life-skills training and paid internships in corporate offices.

Jovanny Ramos, 24, says he was on the street a lot. He was seeing his friends go to jail. But now, with a daughter on the way, he wants to become someone she will look up to, not visit in prison.

They tell me about the hoops they had to jump through to get into Year Up - forms, essays, school records, an interview. Ramos tells me about getting the phone call that he was accepted. He happened to be driving. When he got to the next red light, he jumped out and happy-danced right there in the intersection.

Disadvantaged youth get shot at a new life

Year Up program takes kids off the streets and provides life-skills training and paid internships

Dylan Therrien-Hollingsworth has worked the past 18 months with Toronto’s TurnAround Couriers, which employs at-risk youth.
when it’s your last best chance.

In 1999, Boston entrepreneur Gerald Chertavian sold the multimillion dollar communications firm he co-founded. He turned his attention to a project he had dreamed up years earlier while at Harvard Business School.

Chertavian had been a Big Brother in Boston. After he found a job in New York, he became a Big Brother to a boy from the crime-ridden Lower East Side, further witnessing the obstacles to success that urban youth face. He set in motion a plan to help them.

A Wall Street veteran, Chertavian recognized the financial services industry was having trouble retaining university graduates in entry-level positions. They left for greener pastures as soon as they could.

His big idea was to train young adults from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to fill these jobs. They would be paid for taking six months of life-skills and technical training, then placed in a six-month paid internship at a financial institution. Along the way, they would earn 18 college credits.

**THE FRUIT** of his thinking, Year Up, was born in 2000. Linda Swardlick Smith, now the director of student services, recalls, “We were paying them to learn . . . “(We thought) what a difference that would make because they could put the time and energy into learning new skills and not have to worry so much about putting food on the table. And they also could really develop relationships with other people in this community who had networks of support.”

Then she adds, “We weren’t sure whether this program would really work because we had nothing to prove that it would.”

Today, an A-list of corporate partners requires following individuals for years after they have left a program to see its lasting effect. It requires comparing the group of young people who receive the services to a similar group that hasn’t. This helps answer what difference the intervention made, if any.

Year Up views this painstaking measurement of outcomes as essential to keeping corporate partners satisfied, and to attracting new ones. It also speaks to its long-term commitment to its alumni, to making sure their gains are not lost.

And that means helping them deal with the stress of new success.

Swardlick Smith says pressure often comes from home. Mothers tell them, “You have to stay home and take care of your little brother. I don’t really care about this program that you’re in. You have priorities in the household, priorities in the family. I have diabetes. As your mother you need to take me to the hospital. I don’t speak English. As your mother you need to go and translate for me. Mothers feel like, ‘Where are you going with your life and I’m being left behind.’”

**KERN WILLIAMS**, 25, graduated from Year Up in 2010. Born in Trinidad, he came to Boston as a child. He told me that what held him back was getting his papers in order. After high school, he scraped by working long hours at a gas station. When he finally became a citizen in September 2008, “it was like a brick wall came down.”

He voted for Obama, whose victory inspired him. That fall, he also learned he was accepted in the Year Up session beginning in March 2009. That led to a job at State Street mutual funds, and recently a position in property management at Center Realty Group.

He wears a suit five days a week. When he goes back to his neighbourhood, he bumps into his old friends. “It’s just like, well, ‘Why you have to wear a suit? You speak differently now. You’re going to all these different places.’”

Sometimes, success at Year Up means leaving friends behind. It can be a difficult adjustment. But alumni also know there are staff they can turn to for support. They learn early that at Year Up, someone always has your back.
Boosting bottom line with diversity

The youth training organization Hi5 and its young founder are making some of the Netherlands’ biggest firms take notice

She is trusted by the Netherlands’ biggest corporations. She has street cre with its disaffected, marginalized youth. She leads an anti-racism group endorsed by the Martin Luther King Jr. Center. And Hi5, the youth training organization she founded, has the policy wonks at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development taking notice. All this, in just five years. All the brainchild of a then-22-year-old.

It all started with Dionne Abdoelhafiezkhazan trying to prove her father wrong.

For years he had told her, “Dionne, don’t nag about discrimination. Discrimination is not taking place within the Netherlands.”

Her father was an immigrant from Surinam of Persian heritage. He had risen from one of Rotterdam’s toughest neighbourhoods to become a corporate executive.

The pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps story was his, not Dionne’s, however. As a student at the HES Rotterdam School of Business, Dionne was having trouble finding an internship.

“I wrote 38 application letters to companies and all of them were rejected,” she recalls. “I was like, that’s not possible. I had really good grades. . . All my other colleague students who were native Dutch got internships very easily.

I T M A D E A bdoelhafiezkhazan angry. She asked her mother what to do.

“Dionne, if you’re playing a tennis game would you bring a hockey stick?”

“What a stupid example, of course I’m going to bring my tennis racquet.”

“OK,” continued her mother, “because then you can win the game. If you want to change the system you need to know the rules of the system, what’s behind the system, what drives companies.”

“I was like, OK, what can I do?”

“You’re smart enough, just figure it out yourself.”

Abdoelhafiezkhazan devised an experiment. With the help of friends, she sent out more than 1,500 job applications using the same cover letter and resume. “The only things that we changed were our economic parameters: zip codes, last name, religion, age, gender.”

The results were shocking - though not to Abdoelhafiezkhazan. They showed a strong bias based on nationality, gender and zip code.

She took her findings to the press.

Suddenly, “the media were talking about it,” Abdoelhafiezkhazan recalls. “I was like, yes. Now something was going to change. And then the next day nobody was talking about it anymore.” Dionne thought, “Nothing is going to be changed.”
But then Abdoolhafiezkhkh remembered what her mother had said. She came up with another guerrilla experiment. She had friends pose as young, wealthy, would-be customers with foreign backgrounds. They phoned 40 of Holland’s biggest corporations, offering them business. When they approached banks, they asked for large loans. When they phoned manufacturers, they tried to place large orders. As they were rebuffed, one after another, Dionne’s team recorded every conversation.

Using her father’s network, she invited the directors of 10 of the companies to come to a party at the family home. “I showed them how much money they missed out because their organization was not handling (the calls) correctly.” Suddenly she had their attention. And she seized the moment. She founded Hi5.

Its mission was to bridge the gap between employers and young job seekers, especially those from minority backgrounds. It would build the business case for diverse hiring. At the same time, it would prepare migrant youth to take advantage of these new opportunities through training and support networks.

Hi5’s training academy boasts a job placement rate of 86 per cent for at-risk youth, compared to a 17 per cent rate for government-funded programs. FIVE YEARS on, Hi5’s influence among youth is growing. It has partnered with community organizers and star athletes to reach out to the poorest neighbourhoods. It attracts youth with a radio program on Fun-X, a hip Dutch music station. It publishes a monthly magazine with an online version in six languages.

Hi5 preaches self-reliance. Abdoolhafiezkhkh’s mantra is “you can’t determine where you are from. You can determine where you are heading to.”

The organization has never asked for government money. Instead, it has won the backing of three corporate giants - global employment agency Ranstad, Dutch bank ABN AMRO and Achmea, an insurance company.

Hi5’s pitch to business has never been, do this out of the goodness of your heart. Rather, Hi5 makes the case that diverse hiring and tapping the youth market is good for the bottom line.

In effect, Dionne Abdoolhafiezkhkh has done what her mother told her. She’s mastered the rules of the game and turned them to her advantage.

A new breed of social entrepreneur

Hamilton man launches Social Capital Partners to help people with employment barriers connect with businesses

“In the total employment scheme of things, (it was) hardly even a rounding error.”

Bill Young is talking about the 500 jobs he created for people with barriers to employment - street kids, urban First Nations people, battered women and welfare recipients. He had made a difference in 500 lives. Yet his self-assessment was harsh, if realistic.

“It made us ask ourselves the question, how do we change the landscape?”

By the late 1990s, the Hamilton businessman had become wealthy. He had built a computer business and then sold it to GE Capital. An early investment in the tech start-up Red Hat had gone through the roof. At 47, he was set for life.

“Rather than thinking, ‘Why don’t I become a philanthropist in any kind of traditional way?’ I was thinking, ‘I’ve got all this business experience. Why have we separated this world? Why can’t business and doing good be linked in some way, shape or form?’ ”

People in the social justice movement and political progressives have long mistrusted
the corporate world. Business practices were part of the problem, the thinking went. When a business did engage in socially responsible conduct, it was dismissed as window dressing.

AS ONE of a new breed of social entrepreneurs, Bill Young saw it differently. If he could find the sweet spot where doing good and commercial self-interest intersected, there was hope of making a real impact in solving social problems.

In 2001, he founded a non-profit called Social Capital Partners in Toronto. Young wasn’t just interested in analyzing social problems. He wanted to create a real-life research and development lab for solving them. Not a think-tank, but a “do-tank.”

Five years into the mission, Young had created four self-sustaining enterprises from scratch. TurnAround Couriers in Toronto, for example, recruits only at-risk youth for its bike courier and back office positions. It operates as a competitive business.

But doing “only one deal a year and then having to take so long to get them to be actually profitable was hard,” Young says. He wondered, “Could we find a more cookie-cutter way to do this?”

If he could find the sweet spot where no community service agency can play. They are playing a very important function. And it stymies into the pool of people with employment barriers.

The agencies compete for grants, for clients (the jobless), and for employers who will give them a chance.

Three levels of government also offer employment services. It is a chaotic system. And it stymies large employers who want to engage in community hiring. It is so fragmented, they don’t know whom to turn to and give up trying. They resort to placement agencies to do their hiring.

Bill Young wants to build the business case so that placement companies will tap into the pool of people with employment barriers.

“Those organizations are seen as the ‘bad guys’ by community service agencies because there are some bad actors, frankly, in the placement business. But the large ones, the Manpowers or the Adeccos or the Randstads have these relationships at very strategic levels of the companies (with jobs). They are playing a very important function that no community service agency can play.”

He is pitching to one of those placement firms to participate in a pilot project. “We want to show that we can deliver a person who is grateful for this opportunity as opposed to entitled to it for the entry-level jobs.” If that works, Young’s thinking goes, community service agencies can concentrate on getting people job-ready and bow out of the placement function.

It is early days in this latest experiment. Social Capital Partners will test its assumptions, make mistakes and learn along the way. But Young says the beauty of being a non-profit “do-tank” is this. When a commercial enterprise figures out how to do something better, it guards the secret. Bill Young wants to give it away.

Profile

Pamila Jesuthasan, 26
Nunavut
York University, B.A., B.Ed.
Unemployed for one year
Now teaching Grade 7

• On her job search:
  “I volunteered at Toronto public schools and Toronto Catholic schools and I’m not getting anything. People that don’t have as many qualifications and experience are on the supply list. I’m asking myself, ‘Why did I go to school? Why did I do all this when someone that’s not as qualified as me can teach?’”

• On working in Nunavut:
  “I’m wishing I had done this two years ago.”
Using own experiences to inspire others

At Winnipeg’s Pathways to Education, the director offers more than just professional expertise

When Darlene Klyne looks at me, she locks eyes. Listen to my story, she seems to be saying. Don’t look away. I think to myself, I have been looking away for too long.

Klyne is the program director of Winnipeg’s Pathways to Education program.

She is a 56-year-old status Cree. We’re sitting in a modest, three-storey community centre on Stella Ave., a few blocks from the CP rail yard, an industrial gash that defines one border of Winnipeg’s North End.

I grew up in the North End. Proudly so. Its grit has always appealed to me. For more than a century, it was an area where immigrants settled. In my day it was Poles, Ukrainians and Jews. Today, many First Nations people call it home.

I lived on a leafy, middle-class street, a world away from the hardscrabble neighbourhood where I sit today.

When I was in Grade 10, we moved to a bungalow a mile away, still in the North End. My father thought the old neighbourhood was getting run down. “Indians are starting to move in,” he told me. He feared property values would decline.

It has always surprised me how someone who has suffered the sting of prejudice can be so oblivious to it in himself. Our family name, Sandell, was adopted to conceal our Jewish identity and avoid prejudice. It was my grandfather’s doing when he came to Canada.

I knew the family move was for all the wrong reasons. But whatever objection I voiced was weak and futile. I feel shame recalling the episode now as I listen to Darlene Klyne.

THE BUILDING where I meet Klyne was constructed in 1909 as one of J.S. Wordsworth’s social gospel missions. It has served as a centre for the First Nations community since the 1970s. Recently, it became the headquarters of Pathways to Education’s most ambitious project yet - boosting the graduation rate of aboriginal youth. In this neighbourhood, only one in five finishes high school.

“When you live in poverty, when you live in a family where there are addictions, it’s all about survival,” Klyne tells me.

Pathways to Education began as an after-school program in Toronto’s Regent Park housing project more than a decade ago. Pathways took a 56 per cent dropout rate and turned it into a graduation rate that surpasses the Ontario average. Now it has spread to 12 communities in four provinces. But inner-city Winnipeg may be its steepest challenge.

The formula is tailored to each community, but the consistent elements are tutoring, mentoring and, crucially, support workers who advocate at school for both students and parents.

David Hughes, the president and CEO of Pathways to Education Canada, says barriers such as not having bus fare to get to school and no help with homework are relatively easy to overcome.

“The biggest barrier is the fact that there is no one else in the family that’s gone on to school.”

Klyne tells me she dropped out of school when she became pregnant. Then she needed to earn a living. In job after job, she started at the bottom and worked her way into a position of authority.

AT THE AGE of 44, she earned her high school diploma. She was only the third member of her family to do so.

Her mentors at the adult education program pushed her further. She considered going for a counselling certificate at a community college. Why aim so low, they asked. So Klyne became the first in her family to enrol in university. One of her daughters, Megan, enrolled, too. Four years later, they graduated together, both with their bachelor of social work. That set off a chain reaction.

Her second daughter, Sheila, enrolled in university. She is one year away from earning her human ecology degree. Klyne’s two sisters signed up for BSW programs and graduated. Her two grandchildren completed high school and, without hesitation, they headed to university.

“What was not even a dream for us . . . is now a reality and it is firmly entrenched in our family,” Klyne says. “When you graduate - and you will graduate - you go to university and you do something with your life. Not only your life but in a profession that gives back.” The trail that Klyne blazed had turned into a highway.
Young, educated and adrift

Career education in Canada needs to improve - parents and their children deserve much better

There are three dirty little secrets when it comes to young people and their career choices.

The first is that parents sometimes steer their kids wrong. Not intentionally. After all, they want the best for their children. But some parents give career advice that is ill informed or misguided.

The second is that career education in Canadian schools is patchy and needs improvement, despite some laudable policies from ministries of education, and some exceptional local programs.

The third secret is that too many of the young and jobless have given more thought to what brand of jeans to buy than their career plan. The question is, why?

These statements are provocative, of course.

My apologies to the parents, professionals and struggling young adults who are doing all the right things. This is not about you.

I’ve lobbed a grenade deliberately. If we tiptoe around the shortcomings of career education, it won’t get better.

HERE’S A LITTLE EXPERIMENT: write down every different kind of job you can think of. Then, count the number of jobs on your list. Is it dozens? Hundreds?

Now consider this: the National Occupation Classification, a federal government publication, describes 923 distinct occupations encompassing 25,000 job titles.

Who can blame parents for not grasping all the possibilities? However, the problem is not what they don’t know.

It is their not realizing what they don’t know, and how that narrows their children’s options.

I met Kanchan “Kenny” Singla, 24, at a job fair in Scarborough. She was a newcomer to Canada with a master’s in science and information technology from Punjab Technical University. She hadn’t turned up any job prospects in Toronto after months of looking.

Had she considered looking in western Canada, I asked her. No, her father, a wealthy businessman in India, had warned her against looking there. Too cold, and too much crime, he said. He had steered her away from the hottest job market in the country.

Imran Fancy, 27, told me about a day shortly after he graduated from high school. He was sitting at home in Toronto when a woman from the Ontario government called, selling him on the benefits of going into a trade. Would he be interested?

He asked his mother. She shook her head no. She was determined that he get a university education. So he earned a degree, and then a college diploma in human resources. When I met him, the only work he had found was a job at The Keg (he has since added part-time teaching at a community college). That phone call? Fancy told me, “I would definitely take that route now and do an apprenticeship or do a skilled trade. I could have been supporting myself and learning.”

Study after study shows that teenagers rely on their parents as their primary source of career advice. A survey conducted by Environics in 2010 found that 33 per cent of Canadians described their parents as “wonderfully supportive of their jobs search and career path.” However, 19 per cent of respondents said their parents were “supportive but didn’t know how to help,” and 5 per cent said their parents were “overbearing and wouldn’t let me pursue my own career wishes.”

So, what is the best way for parents to support their child’s career development given that they are not experts?

Frans Meijers is a Dutch social scientist
who has spent a lifetime researching how people arrive at their career decisions and what makes effective career counselling. He is a professor of education at The Hague University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. He is also the father of two adult daughters.

On how to support a child’s career development, his advice to parents is “first of all, never, ever get angry. (Second,) always ask what they are passionate about, what they want to do, and give them the opportunity to do it. Third, always talk to them. Always ask them, not lecture them. Ask them about what they did today, how they felt about it. Value their emotions.”

In his view, the goal is to encourage teenagers “to become self-directed, to make their own choices about what they want to learn and be able to articulate why they want to learn it.”

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO

Jeff Harris stood on the threshold of adulthood and felt lost. He had studied economics at university and loved it. But he knew he didn’t want to be a professor.

“I was finishing up university and I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do next. I looked around and realized I wasn’t alone. There were a lot of people in the same boat.”

Then came his light-bulb moment. Why not create a tool that offered better career information for high-school students? He and his friend Matt McQuillen founded Career Cruising, a Toronto-based company devoted to creating interactive software to guide teenagers through their career options. That was 1997.

Today, Career Cruising has grown to 45 employees. High-school students in every province and U.S. state use its software. In Kentucky, Career Cruising has been fully integrated into the curriculum. Students from Grade 6 to 12 develop a plan that will weave their career interests into their academic learning. They are accountable for following the plan.

Last year, Career Cruising teamed up with another Canadian success story, The Real Game. It is a role-playing exercise geared toward middle-school students. They assume characters in make-believe scenarios, playing out the consequences of their career choices.

Phil Jarvis, a longtime career educator, has refined and promoted The Real Game for many years. He says it gives children permission to dream about their future and imagine themselves as adults.

“It becomes very clear to them that if any of these things they would really like to have in the future are going to be possible, there are some things they’re going to have to do in the present to get there.”

If The Real Game is about self-discovery, Career Cruising gets down to actual jobs. It connects teens’ interests with up-to-date career information. A 15-year-old who is curious about working as an aircraft mechanic can read an interview with one, learn about the skills required, working conditions, earnings and the career path to becoming one.

“One once someone knows what they want to do, once they see a future for themselves that they’re excited about, they’re a different person,” says Harris. “You can give them purpose in school - right now.”

The question is, does good information alone launch a teenager on a career path? Meijers believes information is useful, but only when young people are ready for it.

“They make use of the information but only after they have made the choice on a gut level.”

Meijers says the indispensable ingredient is experience.

He compares making a career choice to finding a romantic partner. We don’t begin by reading up on the conditions of the relationship market. We start by dating, by gaining experience. For a student to make a career decision that is “heartfelt and lasting, you need to create opportunities for experiential learning - especially in the workplace.”

High school students crave hands-on experience, according to the research of Peter Dietsche of the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). He recently conducted focus groups with Grade 10 students in Ontario. “Once they identified potential career opportunities, they wanted to be able to validate their interest and the reality of that career by actually going out and experiencing it.”

This is known as “work tasting.” It might be job-shadowing, workplace visits, volunteering or talking to somebody who is actually employed in an occupation to get an insider’s view.

The most effective work tasting is a co-op placement of many weeks on a job site. It is a chance to try things out, to solve problems posed by adults who are neither teachers nor parents. It is also an opportunity to learn the soft skills that employers value highly, such as punctuality, comportment and clear communication.

The beauty of a co-op program is that it gives teenagers a chance to find out what they don’t want as much as what they do.
Co-op placements act as bridges to a larger world at a time when adolescents yearn for independence. That may account for the high rating that co-op students give their experience. Unfortunately fewer than 20 per cent of high school students enrol in co-op or youth apprenticeship programs, according to a national survey of guidance counsellors.

There are some common explanations for this. There is a stigma attached to co-op programs. Parents, fellow students and teachers dismiss them as an easy credit for low academic achievers.

The course-credit system also poses an obstacle. Students meeting the course requirements for university entrance often find it difficult to fit a co-op into their timetable.

All this is a lost opportunity, one that would lead to clearer career decisions.

But there is a remedy. Make co-ops a compulsory credit. Education ministries might set a series of intermediate targets for schools to meet as a transitional step, but the goal should be full participation.

Career education in Canada needs to improve. It is on the radar of most provincial departments of education. But like all things educational in Canada, it is a patchwork - fragmented by provincial jurisdiction.

In some provinces, career studies courses are mandatory. However, an estimated one-third of schools across the country do not require students to take a career studies course.

Even where courses are mandatory, a good policy may get lost through poor execution. Take Ontario, for example. Grade 10 high school students must take a half-credit career studies course. But according to Greg Murray, a career educator with the Halton Industry Education Council, the course is “often delivered by teachers filling out their timetables, rounding it out. They don’t have real expertise in it.”

The lack of expertise may also be true for the person most responsible for delivering career services in schools - the guidance counsellor. Only in Quebec must guidance counsellors meet certified standards in the field of career development.

Generally speaking, professions adopt standards to ensure clients a level of competence, knowledge and ethical behaviour. Canadian career development professionals, that is, those who operate outside the school system, are moving in this direction. It is time guidance counsellors did the same.

In 2009, a study for the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation found other unsettling gaps in the delivery of career education in schools.

Guidance counsellors spent too much time on non-guidance activities such as administration. In the worst case, Saskatchewan guidance teachers reported that they spent 47 per cent of their time on paperwork.

Even when guidance counsellors found time to help students, they were spread thin. In Ontario, each guidance counsellor serves about 400 students. In some provinces, the number is higher. Students told OISE’s Dietsche that they went to guidance counsellors for course selection, but rarely for career guidance.

“A lot of students had difficulty accessing counsellors,” Dietsche says.

The Millennium study also found that schools were falling short in helping parents understand career choices. Only one-third of schools offered career education workshops for parents.

Parents and their children deserve better on every count.

**THERE ARE PLENTY** of places to put the blame for young adults who find themselves adrift, without a career plan, once they’ve completed their education. Some of it must rest squarely on the shoulders of the young. Chalk up some of it to early adulthood being a time of tasting what life has to offer, a time when young adults try on different roles and experiences to learn about themselves.

But there are two other possibilities for career drift: paralysis and not wanting to repeat their parents’ mistakes.

Linda Duxbury says young adults are recoiling from their parents’ lives. Duxbury is a professor at the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University and a keen observer of the generational differences in the workplace.

The way young adults see it, she says, “my mother’s got a drinking problem. My dad’s on psychotropic drugs. My parents got divorced. Why would I want their life? Why would I want to give my soul to you so that you can downsize me in six months? I don’t think so.”

Meanwhile, Mark Franklin, a career-development practitioner in Toronto, has spoken to hundreds of young adults who are paralyzed because they feel, incorrectly, that they have to make a decision “for the rest of their life.”
Trades often treated as second best

But vocational training facilities in Europe are credited with lowering youth unemployment

In a corner of my woodworking shop hangs a monument to futility - my failed attempt to cut a dovetail joint.

A finished dovetail joint looks deceptively simple. It’s an interlocking wedge-shaped pattern used to fasten two boards. But cutting and chiselling the two boards so that they lock together in a right angle is devilishly difficult. It’s a test of patience and precision.

On a morning in April at Carpenters Local 27 Training Centre in Woodbridge, a class of Grade 12 vocational students is cutting dovetails.

“Pretty hard,” says Nas Malek. But he’s not deterred. He has travelled here by bus from downtown Toronto. “Two hours here, two hours home.” When he graduates from Central Tech in June, he wants to return here for his carpentry apprenticeship. This high school program gives him a head start.

Lindon McQuilkin, a Grade 12 student from Archbishop Romero Catholic Secondary School in Toronto, also wants to earn his carpenter’s papers. But McQuilkin has other ambitions. He figures that three years learning how to build a house will make him better at designing one. He wants to become an architect.

Malek and McQuilkin are drawn to this facility by its up-to-date equipment, excellent teachers and a construction workshop as spacious as an aircraft hangar. Later on, they will benefit from office staff who act like den mothers, coaching them through the detailed record-keeping required of every apprentice. All this is special for the students.

You would think there are many training facilities like Carpenters Local 27 in Canada. There aren’t, but there should be.

In Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands, the kind of co-operation between union and employers seen at Carpenters Local 27 is commonplace. The seamless transition from training to the workplace is the norm. Though it has its flaws, the vocational education training system in these countries has been given a large share of the credit for low youth unemployment.

The Woodbridge centre was started in 1986 by Carpenters Local 27 and the Toronto Construction Association, which represents contractors. Unhappy with the quality of carpenters’ training at community colleges, they took matters into their own
hands, building and funding the training centre jointly.

That collaboration between two groups that are usually at odds - a union and its employers - was remarkable. Deceptively simple, like a dovetail.

Cristina Selva, executive director of the Carpenters Local 27 Joint Apprenticeship and Training Trust Fund, says that today “when you look at the speed and the efficiency with which construction crews in Ontario put up a 30-storey building, compared with their counterparts elsewhere, it is quite staggering.

“The only way they’re able to do that is by having very highly trained productive people. That’s the bottom line for (contractors), right? If they can have the best of the best working for them, it means money.”

Safety is critical too, she says. “If you have people working for you that are not trained to the highest standards of health and safety practices, that’s going to affect your bottom line because you’re going to have increased injuries and accidents.” Accidents also mean employers pay higher workers compensation premiums.

The union members benefit, too, adds Selva. “The wider the breadth of skills that they have, the better able they are to work safely and efficiently. It enhances their employability. It’s (also) going to decrease, if not eliminate, the times they might be unemployed due to injury or illness.”

In other words, it is a win-win for carpenters, apprentices and their employers.

In Germany’s “dual system,” schools and employers share responsibility for credentialed training of about 360 occupations, from carpenter to bank clerk to event planner. (In Switzerland and Austria, the credentialed occupations number 270 and 215.) Employers treat the credential as a prerequisite for hiring. Because they do, it sends a clear signal to students: if you want to become a bank clerk or event planner, here’s the path to getting hired.

Colleges play a subordinate role. Employers take the lead with on-the-job training. Unions, employers and the state set training standards for students and their teachers. However, employers design the curriculum to fit their needs. When new technology arrives in the workplace, trainees learn to use it right away. Employers also pay trainees. This “earning and learning” keeps students motivated.

Most critically, German employers control how many young people are admitted into training. Before a student is accepted into a credential-granting institution, he or she must land a trainee contract with an employer. Employers train only enough to fill their staffing needs. This means young people are being trained for jobs that actually exist.

This is something Canadian colleges aspire to, but with mixed success. In Ontario, for example, the province surveys students six months after they graduate. In 2009-10, one-third of college graduates reported that they were employed in a job not related to their program of study. Canadian colleges try to be attuned to the labour market, but they can never be as responsive to the needs of employers as employers themselves.

Most Canadian students go to college to learn skills that will land them a job in their chosen field. When they don’t, they feel betrayed and frustrated at their loss of time and money.

The German system avoids this scenario by obliging students to connect with an employer before they enter training. It works to their mutual benefit. For students, the training contract is a foot in the door, though not a job guarantee. For employers, it is a chance to get to know the trainee’s capabilities, and to teach her their way of doing things.

One of the most striking examples of company-driven training is run by Siemens, the engineering giant. The Siemens Technical Academy in Berlin trains 200 engineering technicians and professional engineers at any one time. The teaching of skills and problem-solving is top of the agenda. But close behind is winning the students’ loyalty. Siemens wants a return on its investment.

Tall, bespectacled, his grey beard close-cropped, Wilfrid Lammers headed the academy until his recent retirement.

“Maybe at the entrance there should be a sign that says, ‘nobody gets lost,’” he told me when I went to visit. “We attract them. We select them. We try to find out if they have a team spirit and then we rely on the self-fulfilling prophecy. You are good, so you must be good… You’re not allowed to leave our program, so to speak. We’ll help you in any way so that you will be successful with our program.”

A few years ago, the Siemens Technical Academy switched its language of instruction to English. With a presence in 190 countries, Siemens employees are deployed around the globe. A common language means a flexible workforce. It also sends an implicit message: stick with us and we’re your ticket to see the world.

Back in Canada, enrolment in apprenticeships is rising. Forecasts project strong demand for the construction trades (such as carpenters, electricians, plumbers, welders, crane operators), machinists, heavy-equipment operators and auto mechanics, among others.

Cristina Selva laments that, despite these opportunities, we value the trades so little in Canada. Official Ontario Ministry of Education policy is to treat the post-secondary options - college, university and trades - as equal. But many parents and teachers still treat the trades as second best, despite the employment opportunities.

Selva has observed a boomerang effect. The average age of apprentices at the training centre is 28.

“They have always had a passion for working with their hands or working with wood,” she says of her students. “But because of parental and teacher pressures, because they were academically strong, (they) were always encouraged to pursue college and university. A lot of our people come to us once they have the confidence to say, ‘You know what, this is really what I’d rather be doing.’”

Better late than never. But young people would spare themselves some grief if it were earlier.
My impossible quest for the perfect job

Searching for work I loved, I had become my own worst enemy

This past year, whether I was interviewing an expert whose career was in full bloom or a young adult struggling to find his or her first real job, at some point I usually asked the question: How did you get here from there? What brought you to this point in your working life? I never tired of their answers.

Every story was its own rich broth of luck and timing, of family circumstance, of mistakes made and learned from, of dozens of choices both wise and regretted along the way.

A parent figured in most stories, too. No surprise there. Young people turn to their parents first for career advice. But parents also send their children unspoken messages about ambition, achievement, status and happiness. And so it was with me.

Having asked the question of so many others, I began to contemplate the trajectory of my own working life and try to make some sense of it.

ON AN OCTOBER morning when I was 32, my assignment editor at CBC called me over to his desk.

"The police are on the phone for you." I raced to my parents’ house. Two squad cars were parked outside. An officer steered me away from the back door, which led to the kitchen. My mother met me at the front door.

"He's dead."

Never sick a day in his life, just turned 64, my father had collapsed on the kitchen floor. His body was still sprawled on the linoleum. He had died of a heart attack.

When death strikes suddenly and so close, it is disorienting. Time is out of joint. Routines are broken. You are numb one moment, and then grief crashes like a wave, and you are left gasping for air. Burial arrangements, endless phone calls, the lamentations of family and friends. There is little time to reflect.

After the funeral, after the mourners had left my parents’ home, there was, at last, silence. I sat quietly with my mother. She gathered her thoughts. After a time, she said, “Well, He was a good provider.”

This was her summing up. I was stunned. It was not, “He was a loving man,” or, “He was a good father,” but “a good provider.” She meant it as a high compliment. He had provided for his family - not with luxury, but with a roof over our heads and food on the table. He had been steadfast despite a job that ground him down for more than two decades.

If that was what she had distilled from his life, what had I?

MY PARENTS had grown up on the Prairies during the Great Depression. Work was scarce. Any job really was a good job. If they dreamed about careers, it must surely have been a yearning for security. Achievement or fulfilment would have ranked a distant second.

My father served in the Royal Canadian Navy during the war. After he was demobilized, he worked at a fur factory, and then as a Fuller Brush salesman. Soon he was married with two small children. He found a job selling life insurance door to door. He hated the job, but he did it for 25 years.

Could he have aspired to something greater? The economy was booming after the war. There was opportunity, had he seized it. But the Depression had taught him not to take risks, not when it came to work. He held onto his job for dear life.

My father was tight with a dollar. But he bestowed many gifts on me that I fully appreciated only later. A stable home life. Frugality. An ease with numbers. A love
of baseball. He refused, in his words, to “chauffeur” me to lessons or organized sports. But every week he drove me to the public library. I think, at some level, he was sending a message: your brains are your ticket to success.

His unhappiness at work sent another message, unintentionally. Work at something you love. Do better than me. When he died, I had already found my passion - journalism and radio. But it took me eight years of trial and error to get there. It was never a waste of time except for one nine-month period. I was unemployed, and it seemed like an eternity. I looked for jobs, but in retrospect, I was too picky. I was holding out for the perfect job. I lashed myself for not finding it. I fell into depression for the only time in my life.

I suppose a social historian would fit my story into the grand narrative of the '60s and '70s - baby boomers coming of age desperate not to become like their parents, feeling entitled to a job with meaning. But I did not think of myself as being swept along by the currents of history. It was simply my life. And the universe was taking its sweet time to unfold as it should.

I see now that looking for work I loved had morphed into an impossible quest for perfection. I had become my own worst enemy, just as my father had been his own worst enemy when he stayed at a job he hated. I was indeed my father’s son. Once I escaped my depression, I decided it was better to get some experience - any experience - than sit paralyzed on the sidelines. As the years unfolded, what seemed like settling at the time led to something better down the road.

A few years after my father retired from selling life insurance, he grew bored. He returned to selling, this time at a carriage-trade furniture store. He told me it was easy because the people who walked through the door were at least thinking of buying. He became one of the company’s top salesmen.

He loved the job. But I think he harboured regret. Why had he not tried something different earlier? It was another lesson I took to heart.

IT WAS SAID of George H. W. Bush that he was born on third base but went through life thinking he had hit a triple. He had been born into privilege without acknowledging that privilege. He had had the wisdom to choose the right parents, just as some of us have the foresight to be born in a province endowed with oil, or a country blessed with peace. We rarely credit our success to the hand we are dealt at birth. And that is understandable. We want to see ourselves as masters of our destiny. But that isn’t the whole story.

In his book Outliers, Malcolm Gladwell explains how success is not just a result of hard work and intelligence. Good timing and cultural influences are at play. If you were born in the 1930s in Canada, for example, you avoided the risk of dying in the Second World War. You came of age in the 1950s when the supply of good jobs tilted in your favour. Finding your first real job was easy compared to now. Or maybe you came of age later, in a recession, and you struggled.

Here’s the thing: we all feel entitled to judge others when it comes to work, and we judge none so quickly as the young. We use our own experience as our guide. My father could have said to me, “I sucked it up, kid. You should, too.” But he didn’t, and that was a gift. He let me work it out myself, without imposing his own sour experience.

So here is my plea to you who are no longer young adults. Consider how you got here from there. Consider your missteps, and what help you got along the way. Keep an open mind about 20-somethings. Don’t rush to judgment.

Towards the end of this series, I’ll lay out what I think public policy can do to ease the problem of the young and jobless. That’s the big picture.

But on an individual level, every young adult and parent I speak to asks me a simple question: What’s your best advice for me or my kid? Indeed, I’ve pondered what I would tell my own teenager or 20-something if I had one.

Here’s what I would say, in no particular order.

**Tips for boosting job search success**

*From networking to seeking professional advice, there are ways to improve your chances of finding work*

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Here’s what I would say, in no particular order.
• Check out Alberta and Saskatchewan. Their economies are booming. The unemployment rate is low. The demand for workers is high. Do your homework before you pull up stakes, but don’t be afraid to move to find work.

• Don’t wait on the sidelines for the perfect job. You can learn something from every job. Besides, what seems perfect may turn out not to be. And what seems like a so-so job may surprise you, or open the door to something better.

• Don’t get hung up on the status of a particular occupation. There is satisfaction in doing any job well, however humble it is. Your employer will usually notice your pride in the work. And this may open up opportunities.

• Broaden your life experience. Employers value that. It speaks to maturity and perspective. Consider taking a gap year. Research shows that it doesn’t hurt your chances of finding work, as long as you return to post-secondary education. Volunteer. Get out of your comfort zone. All this will build your confidence.

• Don’t rely solely on advertised postings for your job search. Sixty-five per cent of Canadians report that the “hidden job market” was important in finding employment. The hidden job market refers to job openings that are never advertised, but are filled internally, or through the employer’s family, friends or contacts. Bottom line: to find work, network. Do independent research and summon the courage to make cold calls to prospective employers.

• Learn the basic principles of marketing. In a job search, ask yourself, “How can I add value to my prospective employer? What do they need?” Appeal to the self-interest of the person you want something from. Remember, it’s not about pleasing you. It’s about pleasing them.

• Ask a professional. Consulting a career-development professional can help you clarify your options, improve your job search skills and focus your goals.

• Don’t fret about your friends’ and parents’ opinions. Listen to them, but in the end, remember, it’s your life.

• If you are shopping for a college or university program, look for one with a co-op work experience component. You will graduate further ahead because you have on-the-job training and the beginnings of a network of contacts.

Profiles

Victor MacDiarmid, 26
Toronto
University of Toronto, M.A., history of international relations. Became unemployed when a contract research job in his field ended. Eventually found work at a market research firm.

• On looking for work:
  “It’s incredibly depressing. It can make you feel like you don’t have value, especially when you’re applying to all these places and no one is responding to you.”

• On a life lesson:
  “A lot of the times, it’s just circumstances, not necessarily your qualities, that get you the job. Fortune plays a huge part.”

Ryan Connors, 21
Boston
University of Massachusetts, B.A. Social media and marketing at Continental Resources

• On looking for work:
  “It’s daunting. I certainly had the mindset that, ‘Oh ... I have my degree and I’m smart, so I can find a job. It’s not a problem.’ But the more I sent out my resume the more I realized I wasn’t getting the responses I expected.”

• On his big insight:
  “When you’re looking for a job, it is important to understand what the hirer is looking for.”

Maricel Diez, 29
Madrid
Self-employed graphic designer

• On government austerity:
  “A couple of weeks ago, the government announced they’re going to be announcing reforms every single Friday. Among my friends, instead of thinking, ‘Great, Friday, the weekend is here,’ you’re thinking, ‘Oh my God, what bad news is coming?’”

• On being self-employed:
  “I’ve got a lot of friends in these kinds of temporary contract jobs. They feel that they’re being done a favour if the contract is made permanent. But the salary goes down and the taxes go up, and they’re really struggling to reach the end of the month.”
Unemployment solution? Start up a RIM and win

For some struggling to find meaningful work, taking entrepreneurial risks is the best option

In a world where young job-seekers feel powerless, a growing number are taking matters into their own hands, and handhelds.

They are starting their own businesses. Many will fail. A few will keep trying until they succeed. Along the way, they will create jobs not just for themselves but for others, too.

It is one answer for the young and jobless. And, in fact, researchers at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development found that among all new enterprises that survived after three years, the highest employment growth was in companies started by people under 30.

Here’s a look at two vastly different programs trying to build the next generation of entrepreneurs.

**FRIDAY EVENING** in Toronto. Queen Street West is buzzing with 20-somethings primed for a night out. I pause to check the invitation for a young entrepreneurs event called Startup Weekend. I imagine a dull affair, a haven for a dozen dateless commerce students. How smug I am, and how wrong.

I walk up two flights in a building more shabby than chic. The room is a wall of noise. A crush of 25- to 35-year-olds are laughing, swapping business cards and sketching their ideas on iPads. They are software developers, designers, marketers and, yes, commerce grads. Three hundred of them. And they have paid $99 to be here.

Soon they will have 1 ½ minutes to take the open mike, pitch their business concept and rally a team around them.

This evening, more than 90 make a pitch. Judges choose the 20 most promising ideas. The 300 attendees then join a team to develop one of those 20 ideas.

And in the next, sleep-deprived 54 hours, they will try to create the next killer app, taking it from drawing board to demo. The prize is $60,000 worth of free services - a marketing video, legal advice, office space

Chris Eben (with mentors Francis Yanga, left, and Rob Domagala) is the organizer of Toronto’s Startup Weekend. Eben says the program allows young people “to dip their toe” into entrepreneurship.
and mentoring.

This is Alyssa Richard’s second Startup Weekend. She tells me it is a place to spot talent, what organizers call “co-founder dating.” Working under the pressure of a tight deadline you quickly find out who you can work with. At an earlier Startup Weekend she met a designer who is now a colleague.

Richard, 26, strains over her laptop. With a bachelor’s degree in commerce from Queen’s University, she has already founded a business called RateHub. It connects home buyers to the best mortgage rates. At the Startup event she's trying to launch MyClosingCosts, a one-stop shop offering buyers home inspections, legal advice and online tools for calculating costs.

Richard says entrepreneurship is not for everyone. “You have to be very comfortable with ambiguity, (with) taking on risks. You have to be confident. But you also have to allow yourself to be turned on to entrepreneurship. Once you've lived through the process from idea to product creation to money in the bank, you start to believe in the system a little more.”

Chris Eben organizes Toronto’s Startup Weekend in co-operation with a non-profit organization in Seattle. Launched in 2007, Startup Weekends have attracted 56,000 attendees in more than 300 cities worldwide. Sometimes viable businesses are created. However, Eben sees the weekends’ primary purpose as offering the curious a chance “to dip their toe” into entrepreneurship. “They are getting to experience a condensed version of start-up life.”

This explosion of energy in startups is driven by two things. Recent technology has dramatically lowered the entry costs. Building an app is not that expensive. Second, according to Richard, “people have always been passionate about feeling the results of their work, and building products. For some people, that’s been lost in big corporations where you specialize in one thing.”

Robert Jackiewicz, a 26-year-old engineer, is one such person. After he finished a consulting job at a corporate giant, he was in no hurry to return.

“Big companies don’t make you matter,” he says. “You don’t feel like you’re making a difference.”

Now he’s here working all weekend without sleep because he wants to gain new skills, and to pursue something other than a profit.

“I don’t care if I make millions of dollars. I want to work on something that changes the world.”

ONE WEEK LATER, the first stage of another young entrepreneurs’ event reaches its climax in downtown Toronto. If Startup Weekend was take-all-comers populist, this one is unabashedly elite.

At 8:59 a.m. this Saturday, the Earth moves for 36 of Canada’s brightest and best. Having sweated through eight intense, one-on-one interviews the previous day, they have been selected for The Next 36, a program designed to forge Canada’s next generation of entrepreneurial leaders.

They were chosen from 1,003 applicants, all university undergraduates. Seventy-three of them had been flown to Toronto for the final round of interviews.

The next morning, after a nervous breakfast, the 73 finalists were asked to find their names on one of two lists, and to file into their designated room.

One group is thanked, offered some words of encouragement, and sent home. Behind closed doors in the second room, the group puzzles over what it means to be in the company of the 21- and 22-year-olds around them.

That girl over there is a star athlete. The one at the next table has two patents pending.

They are commerce, marketing and engineering students mostly, with a sprinkling from pharmacy, architecture and history. They wonder, is this the final selection or yet another test. Then they hear it.

“You’re in.”

The room erupts in applause, then hugs and handshakes. They are The Next 36. They will become friends and business partners. They will be lavished with CEO mentors, start-up capital and an entrée into a network of movers and shakers.

It is a moment to savour. But it is short-lived. After lunch they are placed in teams of four and given a pressure-cooker assignment: create a viable business concept, then pitch it to a room peppered with Canada’s top business leaders the next morning.

They pull the first of countless caffeinated all-nighters.

As it turns out, the pitches are polished, but the business leaders ask tough questions. Only a handful of the original
business ideas will survive in the months ahead. By design, The Next 36 will taste repeated failure.

From December to April, the 36 juggle their university studies while working long distance on their businesses. In May, they take up residence at Innis College at the University of Toronto, forgoing a summer job.

In exchange, they get an exclusive three-month entrepreneur’s boot camp that includes lectures by business faculty drawn from Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, Western University and the University of Toronto.

All the while, the teams work with their CEO mentors to get their venture off the ground and raise seed capital.

This is no academic exercise, no game of pretend. Without financial backing, their startups will fold. And by the end of the summer, some do. But then, building resilience to failure is part of the vision.

Reza Satchu, co-founder of The Next 36, believes that in Canada there is “the absolute fear of failure and the stigma around failure.”

“If you go to Silicon Valley, most entrepreneurs have failed six times before they hit it big. People who have failed here six times may as well have a big red balloon on them saying that they should never do anything.

“The Next 36 is all about finding high-potential students who are used to succeeding and showing them failure, with the hopes that they’ll learn from it and be stronger.”

After graduating from McGill University in 1991, Satchu landed a job on Wall Street. He recalls “being surrounded by all these kids from Harvard, Stanford and Yale and being completely intimidated, thinking these kids must be so much smarter.

“What I realized after a few months was that they weren’t any smarter but they had two critical advantages. Throughout their undergraduate career, early in their lives, they had tremendous exposure to leaders. Not just academic leaders, but business leaders, entrepreneurial leaders, civic leaders, political leaders.

“What this gave them was the second great thing - an expanded set of expectations. They didn’t want to just write a book, they wanted to win the Pulitzer Prize. They didn’t want to be vice-president of engineering in a company. They wanted to start the next Google.”

Satchu wanted to give that edge to entrepreneurs in Canada early in their career.

A few years ago he teamed up with Tim Hodgson, then CEO of Goldman Sachs Canada, University of Toronto business professor Ajay Agrawal, and Claudia Hepburn, a social entrepreneur with an interest in education. They founded The Next 36.

Canada’s corporate leaders bought in with financial support. Galen Weston, Jim Pattison and Paul Desmarais were early supporters. The business community volunteered its time as mentors and advisers. In these youth many saw themselves. And they were sold on the long-term goal - nurturing a group of high achievers who might move the needle on prosperity.

Satchu himself has founded four successful businesses, including StorageNow, a self-storage company, and Alignvest Capital Management.

He wants to imprint The Next 36 with his vision of entrepreneurship.

“It’s the ability to say - what do I want to achieve, figuring out what the opportunity is and making it happen without thinking about what I have in my pocket today. Or how much experience do I have? If you had to calculate that, no one would ever do anything because the answer would be, not enough. The hallmark of entrepreneurship is not letting that stop you.”

Over the summer, while living in their self-paid lodgings at Innis College, the nine teams beaver away, creating their own businesses.

Among the promising startups this year: StrokeLink, an app aimed at helping stroke victims gain their independence by allowing therapists to remotely communicate with their patients. PenyoPal is creating a set of interactive games that help children learn Mandarin. Kira fuses video-based interview technology with social media to help managers in the hiring process. The Next 36 are encouraged to think big.

In the short term, Satchu will be happy if a couple of the startups become commercially viable. In the long term the program will be a success if alumni build “organizations of national and global significance,” and if they trace that back to “the confidence, the experience and the relationships” they developed early at The Next 36.

There are strings attached to this privileged opportunity: the weight of expectation. Much is given to The Next 36. But as Satchu often reminds them, much is expected.

Reza Satchu is the co-founder of The Next 36, a program designed to turn 36 young Canadians into the next generation of entrepreneurial leaders.
Spain’s lost, jobless generation

Facing an unemployment rate of almost 56 per cent, Spanish youth are losing hope

I had read the statistic a hundred times and still couldn’t fathom it. The youth unemployment rate in Spain was 52 per cent.

In this year of searching for best practices, I felt compelled to learn what I could from a worst case. So in May I travelled to Madrid.

I don’t speak Spanish or know the culture. And so, as foreign journalists often do, I hire a local fixer - Vicky Hayward, translator, author, journalist, flamenco expert and British expat. She has lived and worked in Madrid for 20 years.

One morning, we are standing outside an unemployment office, approaching young people as they leave. Jose, 26, agrees to speak to us. Embarrassed by their joblessness, most young Spaniards would speak only on a first-name basis. We walk to a quiet side street.

Jose is tall, thin and well-dressed. He wears aviator sunglasses. He tells me he lost his job at a call centre only six weeks before. The wound is still raw.

Jose lives in a flat with two friends, but Madrid is expensive, he tells me. His rent money will run out in a few months. And then what, I ask?

Then he will have to move back home with his parents.

Out of the corner of my eye I see that Vicky is tearing up. I have missed something. As soon as Jose walks away, I ask, “What just happened?”

Vicky is still struggling to compose herself.

“You realize he was gay, right?”

“You had no idea.”

“Oh yes. Clear as day. A Spaniard would see that right away. When he said he was sharing a flat with two boyfriends, well . . . When he moves back home with his parents ... he’ll have to go back in the closet.”

The economic crisis has turned Spain into a land of a thousand cruelties, many of them hidden.

I meet a man whose girlfriend is a dentist. He tells me her patients can no longer afford routine procedures. They may need a filling or a root canal, but they ask her to just pull the tooth. Her practice is barely breaking even. But if she closes it, she’ll throw her staff out of work.

I meet a bureaucrat from the unemployment office taking a smoke break outside. He says the unemployed regularly faint, perhaps from the stress, perhaps from hunger. The government no longer pays when someone calls an ambulance. The staff must pay themselves.

At a soup kitchen called Cachito de Cielo (“little piece of heaven”), I meet Mother Superior Sister Almudena. The energetic, elderly nun tells me the ranks of the hungry have swollen during the economic crisis. The nuns in her charge serve 300 people, mostly males and, increasingly, young men.

“They come in from the provinces assuming that they can get work here in the city, and then they discover what it’s like to be without a family. They don’t have a flat to live in. What we really notice is how they deteriorate. It’s the street life that does that. It’s not the hunger because, fortunately, in Madrid we make sure they don’t go hungry.”

Sister Almudena describes one 30-year-old man she met at the soup kitchen. He had come from rural Spain in search of a job. She noticed that he had been drinking and told him, “It’s really worrying because it suggests that you don’t have any love for yourself.”

He replied, “I’ll be truthful with you, Sister. I realize that, but I have absolutely nobody waiting for me for anything. I have nobody who loves me in any way, nobody who wants me, nobody who is using me for anything, and this is a way in which I cover my solitude.”

Sister Almudena continues: “We give them underwear. We give them razors to shave with and often we given them sleeping bags and blankets so that they at least can sleep without being cold at night.” But what they need the most is “affection, attention, time and, above all, people who can guide them.”

As we leave, I thank her for talking to a journalist. Sister Almudena’s parting words to me: “As long as it doesn’t make Spain look bad.”

And that is the thing. The Spanish, fiercely proud of their country, keep up appearances, and that conceals much from the casual observer. Madrid’s new airport terminal is an architectural marvel, tiled with acres of marble. It is vast but nearly empty. On the streets of Madrid, people dress stylishly. Decent clothes are inexpensive, one young
jobless woman explained.

The Spanish authorities try to hide the homeless from view. In a smoke-filled squat in the heart of Madrid, I meet Pablo, a 38-year-old unemployed construction worker. He tells me he used to sleep in the historic Plaza Mayor along with others. But when tourist season arrived, the police turned a fire hose on them in the morning to chase them away.

BACK AT THE unemployment centre, I meet Miguel, 23, an unemployed electrician. He lost his job when the housing bubble burst. He hasn’t worked for two years. He comes from a middle-class family that helps him out. It is his best friend, jobless for five years, he worries about. The friend’s mother has become seriously ill. They live on 300 euros ($385) a month.

There are commentators who dismiss the high youth unemployment rate as not nearly as bad as it seems. They say the official rate, now at 55.9 per cent, doesn’t count youth working in the underground economy. But these pundits are blind to what that means.

Miguel tells me his friend, desperate for money, worked two days setting up a bumper car circuit at a fun fair. “He gets 10 euros for the whole day and another 60 euros for taking it down the next day. It’s dreadful, but it’s something.”

It is said that when a country can’t devalue its currency it is forced to devalue its labour. For two full days of work Miguel’s friend has earned the equivalent of about $90.

Who is to blame? Miguel does not follow politics but says government “fills up the time on television with football to keep us happy and they treat us like easy little glove puppets they can manipulate. They come out with one law after another and each one is more stupid.”

By the second day of staking out the unemployment centre, Vicky and I have become familiar to the security guard. He smiles at us as he keeps busy oiling the door. I walk inside, and I see a middle-aged couple, both dressed in suits. They sag as they wait in line, humbled. Their expression seems to say, how did we fall so far? And then, in a fleeting gesture, he touches her arm, as if to say, we can get through this.

THE REASONS FOR the economic collapse of Spain are complex. It was triggered when the housing bubble burst. It was compounded by too many shaky loans, corruption, cronyism and lavish spending on infrastructure like airports and high-speed trains.

Most independent observers say the high youth unemployment rate is a consequence of an inflexible labour market. It is a two-tier system. The “protected” employees work on permanent contracts. Employers pay a steep penalty by way of severance costs for laying them off. Gayle Allard, a U.S.-born business professor in Madrid, tells me that if you were an employer who “wanted to fire somebody who had a permanent contract, it could cost you 45 days per year worked, up to a 42-month maximum.”

Bosses, reluctant to hire workers they cannot fire, engage the young in short-term, “garbage” contracts. A Spaniard might work well into his 30s before finding a stable job. Young workers are here today and gone tomorrow, so employers are loath to invest in their training.

Recent governments have tried to reform the system by reducing severance pay. More flexibility would eventually benefit the young. But ironically, Spanish youth see the reform as an assault on their dream of reaching permanent status. They aspire to be protected - and resent the already protected.

In 2011, a youth-led protest movement called los indignados (“the outraged”) held demonstrations. One protester’s placard read “Civil Servants, it’s not your corruption I mind, it’s your mediocrity. I have a four-year degree and an MA and will never have a job or a pension.”

The overall unemployment rate in Spain is 25 per cent, the youth unemployment rate more than double that. There is a growing divide between young and old workers.

But it is not all intergenerational conflict. Nora, 52, lost her job three years ago. She lives paycheque to paycheque, raising her 21-year-old daughter, Brenda, and two grandchildren from an older daughter. Nora is a domestic for a retired senior civil servant. The family pays her under the table to avoid their legal obligation to fund her benefits.

“It’s always like, ‘Oh Nora, we haven’t got the money, we haven’t got the money.’ Then they buy shoes for 500 euros or pants for 329 euros.”

It is Nora’s hopes for Brenda that keep her going.

“She studies a lot because she knows that we’re making a lot of sacrifices for her . . . She helps me with the (grand)kids. When they’re sick she will sit up all night with them because she knows that I have to go to work at 4 a.m.”

Nora never discusses Spain’s or the family’s desperate finances with Brenda, not wanting to distract her from her studies. But Brenda is not fooled. One day she gives her mother her 3,200-euro scholarship money as a rainy-day fund. It breaks Nora’s heart to take it.

When Brenda graduates, she hopes to become a teacher of special-needs children. Nora trusts that her prospects for finding work will be better than most.

She wants Brenda to leave home once she graduates. “I always say to her, ‘I want absolutely nothing else from you,’ ” Nora tells me. “ ‘I’m young, I can keep on working. It’s not a problem.’ She always says, ‘No, I’m going to stay with you. I’m going to help you bring up the little ones’ and I say, ‘No, no, no. You’ve got to do whatever you want because I really don’t approve of this idea that you bring up children so that when they’re older you make use of them.’ ”

It takes a moment for this to sink in. I grope for the right words.

“In a way, you want to set Brenda free.”

She nods. “Si.”

With research from Vicky Hayward
Skills shortage a self-inflicted wound

Employers fail to train new staff, then complain prospects are unskilled

When my colleague Laurence Stevenson retired a few years ago, CBC Radio lost one of a kind. He was a pioneer in the use of digital audio, a technical wizard with an unbridled imagination. As a sound engineer, and then as a documentary producer, he carted home an immodest number of international awards.

Laurence started in the CBC mailroom in the early 1980s. A year later, he landed a job in “tape reclaim,” which involved spooling through used quarter-inch recording tape, cutting out sections with too many splices, and erasing the rest for reuse. It was drudgery, but Laurence used it as a stepping stone.

For its part, the CBC trained him so that he could take on more demanding roles.

Today Laurence’s career path is as much of a relic as the analogue tape he once recycled. CBC has not employed mailroom staff for years. It outsources mail, printing, building maintenance and even some production to other companies, as does the rest of corporate Canada. There have been savings gained from outsourcing, no doubt. But something has been lost as well.

Chief executives in Canada consistently report that the country has a skills shortage. And the suggestion is that many young people can’t find work because they lack appropriate training. That may be true sometimes, but it is not the whole story. Corporate hiring practices are at least partly to blame for the skills shortage. It is a self-inflicted wound.

A GENERATION AGO, companies used to hire entry-level employees and advance them with training. That has changed.

According to a 2011 study by the Conference Board of Canada, spending per employee for on-the-job training peaked in 1993, and has declined 40 per cent since then.

Rather than develop their own talent, companies now recruit already trained, experienced employees on a just-in-time basis. This shift has stymied young people trying to get a start in the workplace.

Gracen Johnson, a 23-year-old with a bachelor’s degree in international development from the University of Guelph, told me “entering the job market is really disheartening for someone who doesn’t have a lot of tangible skills - something that you can only really pick up by having the job for three years already.”

It is a lament of the young and the jobless: employers want experience, but how can I get experience without a job?

To be sure, there is a shortage in some sectors and in some places.

A 2012 survey of the Greater Toronto region found that for every seven engineering and IT jobs, there was only one qualified recent graduate of a related post-secondary program. The booming economies of Alberta and Saskatchewan are experiencing shortfalls in skilled labour, too.

The boom has forced employers to recruit beyond their borders. So, yes, there are real shortages.

But in his recent book, Why Good People Can’t Get Jobs: The Skills Gap and What Companies Can Do About It, Peter Cappelli debunks the skills shortages as reported by executives.

Cappelli, a professor of management and the director of the Wharton Center for Human Resources at the University of Pennsylvania, cites an employer survey by ManpowerGroup, the international staffing agency. “When pressed for more evidence,” Cappelli writes, “roughly 10 per cent of employers admit that the problem is really that the candidates they want won’t accept the positions at the wage level being offered.

“That’s not a skill shortage; it’s simply
being unwilling to pay the going price.”

The labour market operates like a well, a marketplace. If I am willing to pay only 50 cents for a kilo of lobster or an hour of labour, and no one will sell it to me for that, I can hardly complain of a shortage. If farm labourers were paid like doctors, we would never hear about the unwillingness of some to fill those jobs.

Wages, benefits, incentives and security are always part of the picture when it comes to scarcity or abundance of labour.

Cappelli goes further. He accuses employers of being too picky, of not filling a position for a year because they are waiting for just the perfect fit.

This arises from a historical change in hiring practices. In recent years, human resources departments have been downsized, their role outsourced to recruiting agencies.

The agencies encourage employers to pile on a wish list of qualifications. Then they post the jobs online, which casts a wide net. This leaves employers dazzled by the array of candidates. Cappelli likens executives to the teenager who thinks he has many possible dates for the prom and keeps delaying inviting one of them.

Online recruiting has another unintended consequence. Many firms rely on software to filter the high volume of applicants. Resumés that don’t fill every qualification get shunted aside, even if some of the qualifications are non-essential.

Cappelli says the skills gap is really a training gap.

On in-house training, Canada’s record is dismal. According to the 2010 World Competitiveness Yearbook, Canada had slipped to 25th place among 59 countries ranked on the importance organizations placed on workforce training. It was a drop of five places in just one year.

For every dollar American organizations spend on learning and development, Canadian counterparts spent an average of 64 cents.

**THE REASONS** for lower investment in training? Canadian employers report cost, lack of government assistance in training, and the conviction that training is the responsibility of the education system. Employers are also afraid of training employees and losing them to a competitor, a practice known as “poaching.”

But according to Andrew Cardozo, executive director of The Alliance of Sector Councils, an umbrella group for employers for all sectors of the Canadian economy, “If there is a critical mass of employers who are training, then they’ll poach from each other and it will cancel out and they’ll stop poaching.

“But we certainly haven’t got there yet.” Cardozo says he’s slowly bringing employers around to the idea that training is not solely the job of the education system.

Cappelli writes that “to keep good people, employers need to take a bit of a risk on them by giving them jobs that they haven’t already done. The employer should be able to take that risk; first, because they should have inside knowledge about who is promising and, second, because if they are right, the bet pays off by filling jobs more cheaply than outside hiring. The end result is that companies would be able to retain talented employees who are more committed to the organization.”

In an interview, Cardozo invokes an old saying: “The only thing worse than training your staff and having them leave is not training your staff and having them stay.”

In other words, a business pays a price for untrained staff.

“Some employers are getting that.”

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**Lack of a national strategy thwarts young job seekers**

*Co-op programs, good counsellors, career courses and workplace training are all part of solution*

What is to be done?

When it comes to youth unemployment, that is a daunting question.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Youth unemployment is a multidimensional issue that requires an arsenal of solutions.

We really are good at reinventing the wheel in Canada. It is in our constitutional DNA. Too bad for the young and jobless.

Here’s why:

Many of the answers to youth unemployment are found in education and labour policy. These are provincial responsibilities.

Take, for example, apprenticeships. British Columbia has its own way of organizing things, its own priorities, pilot projects and tax incentives. So do Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, Nunavut and Northwest Territories.

Did I really need to recite every province and territory?

Yes, to make a point.

We have 13 different systems for everything that relates to education and labour (not to mention health). For youth, that means 13 different systems for apprenticeships, career counselling, anti-dropout strategies, job-finding services and a long list of financial incentives for everything from tool allowances to starting a business. It is a fragmented and redundant way of doing business.

Mind you, it is not without merits. Local authorities are more in tune with local needs. B.C. and Nova Scotia are training their workforces to fill the jobs created by federal shipbuilding contracts.

Our decentralized system also provides breathing room for social innovations such as medicare, born in Saskatchewan. At best, the provinces are laboratories for experimentation.

The problem is that there is not much co-ordination between the 13 systems. For example, an apprentice often requires three to four years to qualify as a journeyperson. But if an apprentice wants to transfer from one province to another mid-training, that usually means starting from scratch.

Another problem is that the focus on local interests can work against national interests. Consider the training of skilled workers for shipbuilding. At first blush, it’s unclear why that should concern Saskatchewan.
But if other provinces only train workers to suit their narrow interests, that also hurts Saskatchewan. The province is trying to lure skilled labour from other provinces to power its booming resource economy. It could use a little training help from the rest of Canada, except that it’s not in the narrow interests of other provinces to spend money training people to work in Saskatoon. Yet it may be in the interests of their youth.

So what to do, short of rewriting the Constitution?

For starters, we need to do a better job of co-operating and sharing research and best practices. There are models of interprovincial co-operation worth emulating.

The Red Seal Program, in place for more than 50 years, is a national certification program for 59 trades. It means that an electrician qualified in one province can work in another. Similarly, the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum marshals research and co-ordinates practice across the country.

We need more of the same in most education and labour policy.

That requires leadership from Ottawa. It means creating institutions that co-ordinate policy. It mean supporting, not cutting, the funding for institutions that are already doing the job. For example, the Alliance of Sector Councils plays a key role in gathering labour market information, promoting training to employers and dealing with the shortage of skilled labour. But it loses its federal funding in March.

So does the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum. Both groups are scrambling to find money from other sources, perhaps mindful of the fate of the Canadian Council on Learning, a national education policy think tank. Two years ago Ottawa cut its grant. This spring the CCL closed its doors forever.

HOW DO WE KNOW?

Ottawa, the provinces, municipalities and non-profit agencies offer hundreds of youth employment programs. They include internships, training allowances, tax credits for apprenticeships and career development for marginalized groups. The question is not so much, do we need more programs but, rather, are the existing ones effective? Do they deliver value for money?

This problem is not unique to Canada. In London, England, Project Oracle is devoted to just such probing questions. The initiative comes after the blunt assessment of a select committee: “We find that many services are unable or unwilling to measure the improvements they make in the outcomes for young people.”

Here in Canada, in 2008, the United Way of Toronto published a comprehensive study entitled “Youth Policy: What Works and What Doesn’t.” In a nutshell, it found that youth services go begging for money year to year. This hamstring their long-term planning. They also struggle to evaluate whether they are doing their job.

Evaluation is a must. Feel-good testimonials from former clients warm the heart, but they are, by their nature, selective. They say little about a program’s overall effectiveness. The questions we need to ask: What difference is youth policy making? How do we know?

Answering these questions is not easy. It costs money. It requires choosing fair and appropriate measures of performance, and tracking the lives of clients for two or three years. Yet evaluation should be critically important for those writing the cheques, especially given current fiscal restraints.

Mind you, raising the issue of evaluation is politically risky. It means some pet projects may be shown to be less than effective. Those who favour smaller government may take “we don’t know” as justification for funding cuts. So let me be clear. “We don’t know” should drive us to find out, not bail out.

Here is my call to action. Let us rigorously evaluate youth services to ensure value for money and better outcomes for young people. The funders and the agencies that deliver the services should share this responsibility. Where needed, the government should help community agencies with expertise and resources. They should commit to evaluating a percentage of youth programs every year. Evaluation should be ongoing.

Organizations such as Pathways to Education Canada and Calgary’s Family and Community Support Services use a tool called “social return on investment.” This assigns a monetary value to savings from social services not used because of successful interventions. It also calculates the economic returns, such as taxes paid, from clients who get on the right track.

Proper evaluation gives service providers the information they need to refine their programs. It allows them to leverage greater resources from all sectors - private and public, non-profit and corporate - because they can show value.

Let’s back the winners based on the evidence. Give the best practitioners a sustained commitment for funding. For those that are underperforming, provide guidance and set benchmarks. If there is no improvement, let’s consider not funding them.

Finally, let’s dust off and implement the thoughtful findings of the 2008 United Way of Toronto report. Chief among its recommendations was that youth agencies work collaboratively with a shared vision - not in competition or in isolation as they do today. The goal should be a “comprehensive outcomes-based approach to youth development.” That may seem like heavy lifting, but our youth deserve no less.

Now to some specifics that will ease youth unemployment and underemployment.

CAREER EDUCATION

1. Experience in the workplace is critical for students to make good choices about their
careers. It also teaches the “soft skills” employers require. Right now, co-ops in high school are optional.

- Recommendation: make co-op education a mandatory credit in high school, to be phased in over a few years.

2. Ontario’s Passport to Prosperity program helps educators and employers develop experiential and workplace learning. Its $1.5-million grant was cut in the 2012 Ontario budget.

- Recommendation: Restore funding.

3. There is no standard or certification for high school guidance counsellors working on career development with students. Some professionals in the field describe the quality of service in high school as “dabbling.”

- Recommendation: to ensure quality, require high school guidance counsellors to train and certify as career-development professionals.

4. Teenagers turn first to their parents for career advice. Parents need better information and more support from schools to help their offspring make good decisions.

- Recommendation: ministers of education should set targets for schools to deliver career education to parents.

5. Career studies courses help teenagers consider their working future.

- Recommendation: in provinces where they are optional, make career studies mandatory. Ensure the courses are taught by well-trained teachers.

6. Evidence suggests that career counselling after high school helps young people hone their job search skills and find work more quickly.

- Recommendation: make consultations with a career professional an entitlement for young people.

**COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

1. Co-ops lead to better outcomes in the labour market because they give students work experience and help them develop their networks.

- Recommendation: provincial governments should reward colleges and universities that offer co-op education as part of the course requirements.

2. Countries that align colleges and vocational education with the needs of the labour market have lower youth unemployment rates. Ministries of education do track college graduates’ success in the labour market, but it’s not enough.

- Recommendation: enforce a stricter correspondence between the level of admissions and the labour market’s demand for graduates. If that means limiting admissions, so be it. University programs that are pathways to professions such as education and law must also move in this direction.

**TRAINING IN THE WORKPLACE**

Canadian employers lag behind their international peers in on-the-job training. Employers used to train entry-level employees, allowing them to gain experience and climb the career ladder. Today, employers favour outside hires with ready-to-go experience. This change has hurt young job-seekers.

- Recommendation: reward employers who invest in on-the-job training with tax credits.

- Recommendation: restore funding to The Alliance of Sector Councils, which promotes in-house training among its member companies.

**APPrenticeships**

1. Our apprenticeship systems need fixing. There are still barriers to groups such as women and First Nations people. Though the number of young people entering apprenticeships has increased, too many never complete their training. Not enough employers view hiring an apprentice as an attractive investment. Federal incentives grants for apprentices go unclaimed. The good news is that apprenticeship is on the radar of federal and provincial authorities. They see boosting apprenticeship as a key strategy for reducing the skilled labour shortage. Now they need to translate that concern into urgent action.

- Recommendation: the federal government should restore funding to the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, which plays an important role in sharing best practices and co-ordinating research.

2. To increase the number of apprenticeships, educators need to sell students on the trades more than they do. Some experts believe teachers don’t do this because working in the trades is outside their experience.

- Recommendation: offer teachers and guidance counsellors short co-op placements in the trades so that they appreciate their value relative to college and university.

**YOUTH EMPLOYMENT SERVICES**

1. Community agencies train people with barriers to employment and find them jobs. However, agencies often work in isolation or in competition with each other. This creates an obstacle for would-be employers. The system needs a rethink in order to make it easier for employers to hire people trained by agencies.

Social Capital Partners is a non-profit social enterprise that helps people with barriers to employment find work. It is an innovator with a big-picture vision. Drawing on its-well considered ideas:

- Recommendation: link skills training with employer and industry needs.

- Recommendation: involve business in the design of employment and training programs. Businesses would commit to hiring graduates of training programs, and they would track outcomes in order to create a feedback loop to improve the program design.

2. A few years ago, the Ontario government merged its employment services into a one-size-fits-all agency called Employment Ontario. The evidence suggests that the number of youth using the service has declined since the change.

- Recommendation: return to a youth-friendly model.

**DEVELOPING ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Young entrepreneurs need mentorship, coaching and networks to build job-creating businesses. Business leaders need to foster a culture of mentorship.

- Recommendation: public recognition of mentors, through peer recognition or awards, may encourage others to step forward. Mentors should be celebrated.
Surprising lessons on the job crisis

*Turns out it’s not always what you think.*

Here’s how it goes. The Atkinson Foundation hands you the gift of a lifetime: a year to immerse yourself in a social issue, figure it out and write about it in the Star.

You dive into the research and read the literature until your eyes bleed.

After a while, you think you’ve got a handle on things. You head out into the world and start talking to people. They tell you things that prompt new questions.

Certainties melt in the face of facts.

And suddenly what seemed so clear a few weeks ago is a muddle. You regroup, and weigh the evidence.

I came to call these “it’s-not-what-you-think” moments. Here are three of them.

**COMPASSION IS NOT ON THE CURRICULUM**

I am sitting in the office of Lorne Belmore, then the principal of Children of the Earth High School in Winnipeg. I am here to learn how the school is tackling the alarming dropout rate among aboriginal youth. The student body is 80 per cent First Nations.

Belmore speaks in the kind of quiet baritone that would have made him a radio voice in another era. He is thoughtful, passionate and committed.

He describes the school’s efforts to create a comfort zone for learning. The school embraces traditional culture. Students are required to learn an aboriginal language.

The curriculum blends the teaching of traditions with conventional course material.

The school has received an additional boost from an entrepreneurship program funded by the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative. The faculty also sets high academic expectations, in contrast with so many programs which, in Belmore’s judgment, set the bar low for First Nations students.

All these measures make sense. But the story that lingers months later has nothing to do with mission statements or curriculum design.

Belmore is describing the challenges his students face. He tells me about a Grade 11 girl, a bright light who buses across town to attend Children of the Earth’s medical specialty program. At the age of 16, she works at two jobs to support her 15-year-old sister and her mother, who is battling an addiction.

One day word drifts back to Belmore that family members sleep on air mattresses in a house with no heating. The furnace has broken down.

“She didn’t come and ask us for help, but she would tell people her story and seek advice,” he recalls. “We just sort of said, ‘What is it we can do for this young lady?’”

The staff rallied behind her. They donated mattresses from their own homes and delivered them to the girl’s house. Someone arranged for a plumbing company to fix the furnace on payment terms she could manage.

“Her goal,” says Belmore, “was to hang on to this house because she viewed it as the only thing holding her family together.”

Had the family broken apart, one can only speculate what calamity might have unfolded. Foster care? Young sisters separated? Homelessness? Two more teenagers abandoning their education?

At a critical moment, what this 16-year-old needed from her school had nothing to do with learning or curriculum guides.

“As educators we have to go beyond what’s the traditional definition of our roles,” says Belmore (who became principal of another Winnipeg school this fall).

Does he have the freedom to intervene like that?

“You make that freedom.”

The lesson: policy makers may think long and hard about how to keep kids from leaving school early. Dropping out dramatically increases their chances of joining the ranks of the unemployed. But when it gets down to individual cases, sometimes educators need to throw away the manual. Sometimes, it just comes down to the quality of the people on the ground.

**HOLLAND’S GOT IT ACED**

On a February morning, I am sitting in the office of J.C. “Cok” Vrooman. We are in The Hague, a city rich in historical charm, made richer still as the seat of government and diplomacy. I have come here to learn why the Netherlands has one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in Europe.

Vrooman is the research head of the Institute of Social Research, an independent advisory body to the Dutch government. He has been studying youth policy since the early 1990s.

Vrooman reminds me of the social scientists at Statistics Canada - meticulous, scholarly, beholden only to the evidence. He is not given to bald pronouncements. Except that this is exactly what he is about to do.

Hours earlier, in another glass office tower, a phalanx of officials had briefed me on the government’s crisis response to the recession - a €250-million program for youth. Now I sit across from Vrooman, expecting him to elaborate on its apparent success. But here’s what he says:

“Why is unemployment so low among youngsters in the Netherlands? The main explanation is, very bluntly, youth unemployment is low because unemployment is low.”

That’s it? Not quite.

It turns out that in the 20 years since the last recession, the Netherlands embarked on a series of reforms in the youth labour market: more work placements for students, lower minimum wages for younger workers in order to encourage employers to hire them, a major effort to reduce the number of high school dropouts, and the obligation to seek training or work if you are collecting social assistance.

Collectively, these measures seem to have worked. But Vrooman can’t say with certainty. He points out there has been no research to untangle the individual effects of each of these policies.

Therefore, the only easy answer was the obvious one. Fuelled by natural gas revenues and aided by the growth of its trading
partner, Germany, a buoyant economy has created jobs. Youth have reaped the benefit. And what of the €250-million crisis spending? That night I curled up with a Dutch government document called Evaluation of the Youth Unemployment Plan. It states that “the majority of the parties look back on the implementation and the results with satisfaction.”

And why wouldn’t they? They had co-operated, exchanged information, created social infrastructure and decentralized spending. In other words, they had held a great many meetings.

Was the spending worth it? They couldn’t say. There had been no cost-benefit evaluation. Did the action plan change the youth unemployment rate? They couldn’t say whether it had created or saved jobs. The authors wrote, “It was not feasible to establish a quantitative link between these results (of the plan) and the movements in youth unemployment.”

The lessons: a well-intentioned spending program without performance targets can be gobbled up by bureaucratic process. And never forget that a robust economy smiles on job-seekers.

EXIT BOOMERS, STAGE RIGHT

Conventional wisdom holds that if only baby boomers would retire, things would get better for the young and jobless. Think of all the job openings, right?

Wrong. It turns out that the evidence doesn’t support this “if only” scenario.

Kevin Milligan, an economist at the University of British Columbia, has written about the relationship between retirement and youth employment, examining case histories in 12 countries.

It turns out that in the 1970s and ‘80s, European governments created early retirement schemes using their public pension systems in an attempt to relieve youth unemployment. In 1979 in Denmark, workers between 61 and 65 were offered an incentive to retire. One-quarter of them took the incentive within one year and stopped working.

“What happened in the youth labour market?” says Milligan. “Employment actually went down. It didn’t help them at all.”

Why? There are three factors.

First, the number of jobs in an economy is not fixed. It can grow or shrink depending on economic activity. A generation ago, when women entered the workforce in large numbers, it didn’t mean they crowded out large numbers of men. In fact, they displaced relatively few men.

Rather, the economy grew and employed more people.

Second, the unemployed young person might not have the right skills to fill the retiree’s job. The job may go unfilled until a qualified candidate is found.

Third, when older employees stay in the workforce, they spend more than when they retire. Senior employees are usually salaried at the peak of their earning level. Their retirement income is usually less, which means collectively, they spend less and generate less economic activity. That costs jobs somewhere in the economy.

According to the evidence, the net effect of early retirement on the employment prospects of the young is negligible.

The lesson: Early retirement of older workers is not the answer.

Profiles

Chesco Rodriguez Simon, 31
Madrid

TV actor, part-time waiter

• On finding restaurant work: “Not being an actor doesn’t worry me. What worries me is that I can’t get a contract as a full-time waiter. I’ve worked in a five-star hotel in Majorca as the No. 2 to the maitre d’. I’ve worked in Barcelona in really smart cocktail bars, running the room. And now I can’t get a basic job as a waiter. I distributed over 160 CVs. Out of those 160 CVs, I got one telephone call for a summer job on the patios.”

• On the stress of tough times on his relationship with his girlfriend: “We’ve got a proverb in Spain, ‘When money walks out of the door, love leaps out the window.’ Luckily it hasn’t been like that for us, but I think that’s because we’re both in the same boat. We’re both struggling to get jobs.”

Eleanor Edgar, 29
Toronto

York University, Master of Social Work, working at two part-time jobs in social work

• On graduating: “It turns out that there are about five Master of Social Work programs feeding into Toronto that are all expanding. So over the past several years, Toronto has suddenly been over-loaded with recent Master of Social Work grads.”

• On rethinking work: “I’ve kind of come to this idea where I don’t want to be a full-time social worker. My ideal situation would be to have these two (part-time) positions be permanent right now. Two days a week, each of them. That would be great. That would leave me three other days to focus on music, which is something that I am putting a lot of energy into right now.”