



VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS FOR TEENS*

In 2012, as few as 27% of working age teens in Massachusetts were employed, as compared with 54% in 1999. Nationally, the same trend occurred. While 45% of U.S. teens were employed in 1999, the proportion fell to 26% in the last decade. During this time, teens have been replaced in entry level occupations by workers aged 55 and older. Employers need to learn that contemporary teen employment is not just putting a few dollars in their pockets, but frequently making a contribution to family incomes and always contributing to their future success in employment and education. Research has shown that students who work for a limited number of hours for several weeks while in school are more likely to go on to earn a bachelor's degree. Work is an investment in human capital, which provides: the ability to acquire knowledge to engage in a productive activity; skills that facilitate the rapid acquisition of knowledge; learning a set body of principles, facts and methods that pertain to a job; and an increase in problem solving and decision making skills.

In 2012, The Commonwealth Corporation conducted a study among mainly Massachusetts employers in typically teen entry level occupations in retail, fast food, grocery stores, community banks, long term care and educational organizations. They found that while teens performed as well as adults hired in these occupations in terms of math, reading and technology skills, teens did not know *how* to work and were not schooled in *how* to apply for a job.

- The most significant barriers to hiring teens were their lack of appropriate work behaviors, which were considered inferior to those of adults or college students. In particular, these included poor attendance, punctuality and quit rates; poor grooming; texting and use of other social media during interviews and at work; obvious tattoos and body piercings in customer relations work; work shirking behavior and having friends hang around the workplace; lack of awareness about expected productivity; and inability to interview successfully. These are inappropriate work behaviors that can be rectified by "soft skills" training.
- Teens do not seem to understand that they are always "on" with regard to employers. When they stop by to pick up a job application, it is just as important to dress and act appropriately as it is for the interview itself. Teens dress and act too casually and cast a poor image, an image of someone who isn't respectful of the job application process or working itself. They are not coached for the hiring process. Responses to the Consumer Satisfaction surveys at the MRC are testimony to the helpfulness of the Job Clubs and job search skills activities which help consumers with mock interviewing situations. These are especially important for teens.
- Online applications with personality testing are also a barrier to hiring for teens. Once again, teens are not prepared for these situations. In many cases they are not even aware that they are being given a personality test upon which the success of their application rests. Research has shown that applicants do better when they are aware they are being assessed by personality tests. Results from current use with teens may be biased.
- Teens would do well to provide references from individuals who are familiar with the firm or have some relationship with it: current employees, relatives, teachers or staff in youth serving organizations. They could be helped in finding this type of reference. However, employers reported that it was difficult to get in touch with teachers or guidance counselors in high schools, with the exception of career and technical schools.
- Teens should emphasize their days/hours of availability rather than the days/times they cannot work. Teens have busy schedules that are difficult for employers to accommodate. Social life and homework does not fit well into shifts, and it can be seen as a reason not to hire. Some employers, such as those in retail, do not hire teens under the age of 18 because of employment legislation limiting the number of hours teens are permitted to work.

*Commonwealth Corporation. "Signaling Success: Boosting Teen Employment Prospects". April, 2013.